

Abs-100

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Key words, pivotal words and leading words in "Harry Potter"

In one of his less familiar papers, Firth (1956) set out very clear guidelines for the study of collocations in restricted languages. Collocation is "the study of key-words, pivotal words, leading words, by presenting them in the company they usually keep" (ibid: 106), and best investigated in restricted languages rather than the general language. Although restricted languages now tend to be interpreted as being particular genres or types of discourse, Firth specifically included within his definition the works of an individual author, and single books. This paper investigates the collocations of key words in the "Harry Potter" epic to illustrate how shifts in collocational patternings turn key words into pivotal words, and how these pivotal words and their collocations become leading words in a narrative thread.

This corpus-driven study offers a novel view of keyness in text. Rather than look for words which are key for the text as a whole ("absolute keyness"), the emphasis here is on keyness as a dynamic phenomenon. As the text proceeds, layers of text patterns accumulate, consolidating, elaborating and modifying the patterns that have gone before. The key words in any single chapter ("local keyness") are the ones which reveal how the narrative is proceeding.

It is the collocations of key words which build up and sustain a narrative. This paper will show how major shifts in the collocational patternings signal twists in the tale, the new patternings forming around "Harry", "Dumbledore" and "Snape" generating uncertainty and suspense for the reader.

References

Firth, J.R. 1956. Descriptive linguistics and the study of English. In F.R: Palmer (ed.) 1968. Selected Papers of J.R. Firth 1952-59, 96-113. London and Harlow: Longmans.