Corpus Stylistics in China: Progress, Problems and Prospect

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Abstract: This review attempts to examine the current trends in corpus stylistics in China. It is conducted on corpus stylistics articles in five Chinese journals, from 2008 to 2021. These 42 articles are sorted out by the publishing journals, years, research aspects and research methods. Results show that the research depth so far is not as deep, thus there should be more studies in the next few years; the research aspects are not completely covered, with pragmatic stylistics being on top; the research method is heading from non-empirical to quantitative, and then to qualitative.

Keywords: Corpus Stylistics, Research Fields, Problems, Future Development

1. Introduction

Corpus stylistics is a research paradigm born from the combination of corpus method and stylistic research. It is the inheritance and development of traditional quantitative stylistics research, aiming at quantitative analysis of various texts including literary works, and exploring the author's style, individual characteristics of works or common characteristics of specific types of texts.

The research of corpus stylistics in China started relatively late compared with the western countries, which dates back to approximately the beginning of the 21st century. It is generally recognized that the paper *Corpus Linguistics and Machine Translation* published by Yang (1993) marked the beginning of corpus linguistics research in China. However, it was not until 2002 that researches which combined corpus and literary studies appeared. Zhang (2002) reviewed Baker's method and results of using corpus to study translators' style in *Using Corpus for Investigating the Style of a Literary Translator—Introducing and Commenting on Baker's New Research Method*, a paper published on one of the Chinese kernel journals. This is the first time that corpus has been applied to literary studies in China, which provides important guidance for future generations in this field. Since then, domestic scholars have begun to use corpus as tools to study literary texts, translation, non-literary texts and teaching.

After years' development, the research field of corpus stylistics has gradually expanded from literature to philology, pedagogy and other related disciplines, and the stylistic indicators used have expanded from word and word level to sentence and paragraph level. The analysis method has expanded from descriptive statistics to inferential statistics, and gradually introduced new technologies such as data mining and machine learning, showing great vitality.

However, through researching in CNKI, the number of representative high-quality papers in this field in China is still not as large. In order to first roughly understand the publication trend and determine the time span for this study, the author used Corpus Stylistics as the keyword to search in CNKI. As a result, 355 studies related were found in total. According to its published time, the result can be sorted out as such in figure 1.

Combining the development of corpus stylistics in foreign countries and the above figure, it is not difficult to find that the research of corpus stylistics in China develops later than that in foreign countries, and the number of literatures fluctuates greatly. At present, corpus linguistics research is in the ascendant, and corpus method has been widely used in linguistics, literature, information science and other fields. Since 2008, the number of papers has shown an overall upward trend and reached its peak in 2016.

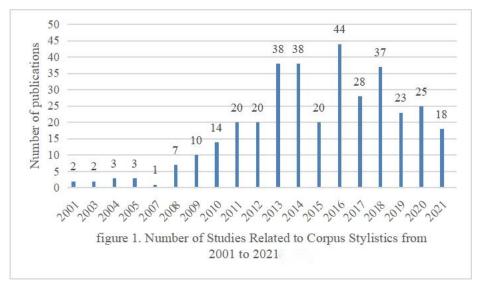


Figure 1: Number of relevant publications in CNKI

Thus, this paper aims to systematically sort out the existing achievements, summarize the present situation, analyze the problems and look forward to the future, in order to provide beneficial enlightenment for the development of related research in China, by looking into selected papers from 2008, where the study of corpus stylistics began to thrive, to 2021.

2. Research Paradigm of Corpus Stylistics

Corpus stylistics is stylistic study based on corpus method. The so-called corpus method refers to the method of confirming or falsifying relevant theoretical assumptions based on corpus application after investigating a large number of corpus and making relevant data statistics (Hu and Zeng 2010).

Humanities and social sciences rely more and more on modern science and technology. Using big data to study classical literature will bring great influence and changes to the paradigm, method and perspective of literary research. In Chinese academia, stylistic research using big data lags behind, but some scholars have begun to try. The "style" here mainly refers to style. In recent years, Professor Liu of Tsinghua University presided over the major bidding project of the National Social Science Fund, "Analysis and Research of Classical Texts of Ancient Literature Based on Big Data Technology", which has a sub-topic of "Stylistic Research Based on Deep Text Mining", and clearly put forward the direction of stylistic research based on database earlier. They raised some important questions: how to distinguish between classical styles; How to judge a style by quantitative data; How to find the influence and evolution between different styles through feature analysis. These research assumptions are worth looking forward to. Using big data to study stylistics can certainly not solve all the problems of stylistics, but it can provide more accurate and rich examples, more intuitively reflect the classification and morphological differences of ancient styles, and provide more specific and reliable information for summarizing the evolution and laws of styles.

Lu and Xia (2010) believe that corpus stylistics mainly involves the corpus study of literary stylistics in a narrow sense, and it usually emphasizes the use of corpus. On the basis of processing and labeling corpus, it studies the theme, the shaping of characters, the development of narrative and the writer's style in literary works by means of word frequency statistics, subject word retrieval, index, part of speech distribution and manual labeling and retrieval statistics of special structures. Mahlberg and Stockwell (2015) also hold similar views.

With the development in recent years, domestic academy has increasingly respected quantitative research methods represented by corpus linguistics. The technology of computer automatic word segmentation and automatic tagging of parts of speech and sentence components is improving day by day. With the help of new technologies such as data mining and machine learning, the study of corpus stylistics, in fact, has gradually overflowed specific disciplines, developing into a research paradigm, that is, using corpus method to quantitatively analyze literary works and non-literary works, collecting stylistic indicators at the level of morphemes, words, sentences and paragraphs including etymology (and the proportion of Chinese words, loanwords and mixed words), part-of-speech distribution (the

proportion of nouns, verbs, etc.), MVR ((number of adjectives + number of descriptive verbs + number of adverbs + number of conjoined words)/number of verbs \times 100), N-gram, sentence length, characteristic words and sentence cohesion. Nevertheless, this paradigm also provides support for the related research of literature, pedagogy, political science, business and other disciplines.

3. Methodology

3.1 Journals Reviewed

Research papers were searched using search terms such as corpus, style, stylistics, and computational stylistics from CNKI, WanFang Data and Chaoxing. First, a list with all articles that matched the search terms were compiled. Second, the author narrowed down the selection of research articles for inclusion in this present review. To this end, the first list of articles were screened through the following criteria to guide the selection: (1) studies that were written in Chinese; (2) studies that were published between 2008 and 2021 (November); (3) studies with a focus on literary stylistic research using corpus, and (4) studies that were published as full text in the following top 10 journals that are recognized as kernel journals in the field of foreign linguistics and applied linguistics in PRC and were indexed in Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI): Foreign Language Teaching and Research(FLTR, Waiyu Jiaoxue yu Yanjiu), Foreign Language Education(FLE, Waiyu Jiaoxue), Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education(TEFLE, Waiyu Dianhua Jiaoxue), Modern Foreign Languages(MFL, Xiandai Waiyu), Journal of Foreign Languages(JFL, Waiguoyu), Foreign Languages in China(FLC, Zhongguo Waiyu), Language Teaching and Linguistic Studies(LTLS, Yuyan Jiaoxue yu Yanjiu), Studies in Language and Linguistics(SLL, Yuyan Yanjiu), Foreign Languages and Their Teaching(FLTT, Waiyu yu Waiyu Jiaoxue), and Chinese Translators Journal(CTJ, Zhongguo Fanyi). This research focused on journal articles, so that other types of publications were excluded from this review.

After filtering the first list based on the above criteria, a total of 42 articles from above 10 journals made up the major data source for this study.

3.2 Procedure

The reviewed journal articles were organized into three different dimensions that address (a) the number of articles published by journals and year, (b) research aspects and (c) research methods. These categories provided a visualized progress of how corpus stylistics develops in China.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Number of Articles Published By Journals and Year

Table 1 shows the number of papers published by selected journals in specific years. The highest number of articles were published in Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education (n=11) and the lowest number was zero in five selected journals. This result showed that corpus stylistic research in China is still in process and it hasn't been widely applied. As the most authoritative journals in Chinese linguistics, CSSCI hasn't focused that much on corpus stylistics. Thus, the Chinese research trend of corpus shall continue to grow in the next 5 to 10 years.

2014 2015 Total FLTR FLE TEFLE MFL JFL FLC LTLS SLL FLTT CTJ Total

Table 1: Studies on corpus stylistics in CSSCI from 2008 to 2021

According to the table 1, the highest number of papers was published in 2010 (n=9) and the lowest in 2016 (n=0). It's worth noticing that according to figure 1, in 2016, researches regarding corpus

stylistics has hit the highest number (n=44) in a wide range of Chinese journals. However, while the author narrowed the scale down to kernel linguistic journals, the number on the contrary dropped to 0. This result implied that many of our researches in China is not deep enough for kernel journals. Our researching depth is still superficial and not as mature.

4.2 Research Aspects

It has been questioned before that stylistics is neither authentic literature nor authentic linguistics. Liu (2018) gave a scientific and convincing answer: corpus stylistics has its own research routine. As an interdisciplinary research, stylistics has been involved in the following seven aspects: literary stylistics, pragmatic stylistics, theoretical development, cognitive stylistics, functional stylistics, multimodal stylistics and ecological stylistics (Liu 2018).

Table 2 presents the research aspects of 42 reviewed papers. It can be seen that the most common research aspect was on pragmatic stylistics, where n=12, and on literary stylistics, where n=9. The least common research focus was on ecological stylistics with only one related research. As to multimodal stylistics, out of the 42 papers reviewed in this study, no related research was found.

Research aspects	Publications number	
Literary stylistics	9	
Pragmatic stylistics	12	
Theoretical development	8	
Cognitive stylistics	4	
Functional stylistics	8	
Multimodal stylistics	0	
Ecological stylistics	1	

Table 2: Research aspects

Since that stylistics is derived from literary studies, it is pretty obvious that the research paradigm of corpus stylistics can be put into use in literary stylistics. Using corpus tools such Antconc and Claws to examine a particular writer's style or to extract the gist of a certain literary work has been the most popular type of research in the 42 papers. But all 9 researches on this subject have chosen novels as the object, no other forms of literature were studied with corpus stylistics. It is for sure that, to understand literature from a scientific and computational level has, in a sense, made literary study less sensible and more reasonable. The promotion of corpus stylistics will also gain more acknowledgement for literary research.

Researches regarding pragmatic stylistics mostly focus on the causes of a particular language phenomena and its translation strategies from the perspective of pragmatics. In many literary works and writing systems, reasonable application of language is an essential and important requirement. The use of different words can bring different effects. Among them, some literary works present distinctive features in language application because of its unique expression and deduction. Therefore, the development of pragmatics in modern society is a necessary research project for researchers of stylistics. In recent years, with the new development of pragmatic concepts, the public has a deeper understanding of pragmatics.

Papers on theoretical development are not as much, however, they all conducted detailed analysis of the stylistic features of certain texts by means of demonstration. From the perspective of corpus stylistics, and based on the theories of functional linguistics and such, these studies applied data to prove or somehow further complete linguistic theories, which highly reduced the subjective arbitrariness and circular argumentation in stylistic research.

Corpus-based cognitive stylistic studies used corpus retrieval software, such as Word Smith, with a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, presented cognitive interpretation of the stylistic features and themes of chosen texts. It is worth noticing that among these 4 studies, not only literary texts were targeted as objects, but also non-literary texts.

According to the table above, functional stylistics is also booming in Chinese corpus stylistics' field. Using corpus tools and data to present stylistic functions of ideography, representation and expression was found in many of these studies, though their tendencies are slightly different.

Multimodal stylistics is a relatively new field of corpus stylistics. With the diversification of the literary creation and the expansion of the research scope of stylistics from literary discourses to non-literary ones, it is crucial to explore and develop an analytical framework by integrating stylistic theories with multimodal semiotic theories in order to study the role of different semiotic modes in

discourse meaning-making and the intersemiotic relations. Multimodal stylistics is the result of such integration. However, among all 42 papers reviewed, not one of them is related to this field.

One research was found linked to ecological stylistics. This was an unexpected result since that ecotranslatology has actually been a hot issue in China's translation studies. Therefore, ecological stylistics is also an aspect that requires deep and insightful studies in China.

4.3 Research Methods

Table 3 illustrates methodology of reviewed studies. According to the result, qualitative studies (n=17) were the most common type of research, and non-empirical studies (n=10) were the least common type. Since table 3 is arranged chronologically, it can be viewed that in the first few years, most of the studies were non-empirical, and they tended to fixate more on theories. Such phenomena is possibly caused because that Chinese scholars lack recognition about corpus stylistics, and they were still studying theories that were generated in other regions.

Then in the next stage, quantitative studies emerged into research trend. The number of argumentative essays has dropped greatly since 2010. A more scientific research method—experimental design—started to take place of non-empirical. And the research object started to vary from literary works to monographs and to journal papers.

The third stage came as qualitative studies began to bloom. Text analysis has gained the domain status of corpus stylistic field in China. A large number of literary works were studied using corpus stylistics during this period. Studies involve experimental designs still held a great portion, but the study of literary works gradually became the mainstream of corpus stylistics.

Table 3: Methodology

Reference	Research Object	Methodology
Wang & Huang (2008)	Theory and implication	Non-Empirical
Li & Wang (2009)	Theory and implication	Non-Empirical
Xiao & Dai (2010)	Experimental design	Quantitative
Lu & Xia (2010)	Theory and implication	Non-Empirical
Li & Yu (2010)	Journal papers	Non-Empirical
Qin (2010)	Literary work (novel)	Qualitative
Li & Lang (2010)	Theory and implication	Non-Empirical
Liu & Huang (2010)	Monograph	Non-Empirical
Hu & Zeng (2010)	Experimental design	Quantitative
Yang & Bai (2010)	Journal Papers	Quantitative
Sun & Ye (2010)	Theory and implication	Quantitative
Liu et al. (2011)	Literary work (novel)	Qualitative
Pei & Zhou (2011)	Monograph	Non-Empirical
Huang (2011)	Literary work (novel)	Qualitative
Huang & Wang (2011)	Theory and implication	Non-Empirical
Wang & Xiong (2011)	Experimental design	Quantitative
Wu (2012)	Journal papers	Qualitative
Shao (2012)	Journal papers	Qualitative
Wang & Gao (2013)	Monograph	Qualitative
Lu (2013)	Literary work (novel)	Qualitative
Yang & Zhu (2013)	Literary work (novel)	Qualitative
Shen (2014)	Monograph	Qualitative
Si & Huo (2014)	Literary work (novel)	Quantitative
Lu (2014)	Literary work (novel)	Qualitative
Wang & Huang (2015)	Literary work (novel)	Qualitative
Li & Tang (2015)	Tourism text	Qualitative
Liu (2015)	Experimental design	Quantitative
Hu & Zeng (2017)	Experimental design	Quantitative
Liu & Wang (2017)	Literary work (novel)	Qualitative
Wang (2017)	Journal papers	Qualitative
Wang & Liu (2017)	Experimental design	Quantitative
Song & Yang (2018)	Contract English	Qualitative
Wang & Liu (2018)	Experimental design	Quantitative
Li (2019)	Theory and implication	Non-Empirical
Liu & Wang (2020)	Experimental design	Quantitative
Hu & Hei (2020)	Theory and implication	Quantitative
Hu et al. (2020)	Experimental design	Quantitative
Wang (2020)	Tourism text	Qualitative
Xu & Jiang (2021)	Experimental design	Quantitative
Yang & Yu (2021)	Monograph	Qualitative
Liu (2021)	Experimental design	Quantitative
Mao (2021)	Theory and implication	Non-Empirical

This result suggests that corpus stylistic research in China is heading from non-empirical study toward empirical direction, with qualitative particularly on the rise.

Meanwhile, texts chosen for research were mostly literary texts (n=9), while non-literary texts also made their way into researches, but the number cannot compete with literary ones. The second most common types of texts were journal papers (n=5) and monographs (n=5). It demonstrated that corpus stylistics has been applied to non-literary texts widely, instead of limiting itself to literary field only. It is also worth noticing that among all literary works (n=9) chosen for research, all of which were novels, leaving no room for drama or poem etc.

5. Current Problems and Future Prospect

Corpus stylistics, as a new subject integrating corpus linguistics and stylistics, provides a scientific and brand-new perspective for the study of various types of text features with the help of objective and accurate statistical and analytical methods of corpus linguistics. With the continuous development of research, corpus stylistics has gradually shifted from the traditional analysis of literary works to the analysis of non-literary works, translation and teaching, and its research focus has developed into a wider direction. In the author's opinion, the application of corpus stylistics in non-literary texts and teaching will be the main trend of corpus stylistics in the future.

Looking at the existing achievements from contents above, the research on corpus stylistics in China has made the following accomplishments:

(A) The research objects are constantly and gradually enriched.

The research object of corpus stylistics is no longer limited to literary works, but extends to non-literary texts such as academic papers, monographs, tourism texts or contract English. The relevant achievements enrich the content of stylistic research, and also put forward new requirements for index selection and data analysis, which effectively feeds back the research in related fields.

(B) The research field has been expanded.

The research content in this field has gradually expanded from the study of author identification to the study of writer style, writing time inference, stylistic features and text classification, which provides a new perspective and method for the study of writers' works, schools and literary history. On this basis, scholars have also applied this method to philology, political science, business science and many other disciplines, showing high application value.

(C) The stylistic indicators are becoming increasingly diversified.

Restricted by research ideas and technical means, early studies mostly take the proportion of auxiliary words, auxiliary verbs, etymology, part-of-speech distribution, MVR and sentence length as the main indicators. In recent years, researchers have gradually explored the inclusion of N-gram, character position, feature words, TTR, lexical echo relationship, lexical relevance, etc., which has richer indicators and more comprehensive perspectives.

(D) The analysis methods are constantly innovating.

Early studies mostly used descriptive statistics. The researcher investigates the stylistic features of the target text by statistics and comparison of the proportion, mean and standard deviation of stylistic indicators. After that, the researchers gradually introduced inference statistical methods such as principal component analysis, cluster analysis and factor analysis. After entering the 21st century, we began to try new algorithms and technologies of data mining and machine learning, such as AdaBoost, high-order discrimination analysis, logical model tree, support vector machine and random forest, which effectively improved the ability of data analysis.

In addition to all that, although corpus stylistics has developed well in China, there are still some shortcomings: (1) Researchers are more likely to use corpus stylistics to study the style of novels, whereas not so much in poetry and drama, making the literary types too typical and monotonous, so the research scope needs to be expanded; (2) The theoretical system used to support corpus stylistics is solidified; (3) Corpus stylistics in translation involves more studies on the faithfulness of the translated text to the original text, the stylistic style of the translated text, the translator's style and the comparison of the translated texts, but little on the theoretical level of corpus stylistics in translation, which is in urgent need of theoretical innovation; (4) Corpus stylistics in teaching is limited to literary works (mostly English and American literature teaching), but rarely involved in other aspects of teaching.

In the future, researchers should closely follow and learn from relevant research results and methods, fully explore the application value of stylistic research in the fields of writer research, work research, genre research, narrative research, etc., actively explore the application path of this paradigm in other disciplines, and constantly broaden the research horizon and expand the research territory.

Besides, researchers should focus on the stylistic significance of these indicators, focus on the relationship between the level of each indicator and expression style, explore how to choose indicators reasonably according to the research objects and research objectives, and try to reveal the hidden information such as the theme, image and plot advancement of the text according to stylistic indicators. Scholars should further strengthen scientific research cooperation, innovate the collection, aggregation and sharing mechanism of academic resources, get rid of the shackles of copyright in a reasonable way, rapidly expand the scale of basic data with new technologies and new models, improve the quality of basic data, and constantly consolidate the research foundation.

At present, the development of corpus stylistics puts forward higher requirements for researchers' knowledge structure and skills. First of all, neither statistical methods nor data mining techniques were developed for the needs of linguistic or stylistic research at first. Only by mastering its mechanism thoroughly and being familiar with its application mode and scope can researchers scientifically choose appropriate methods and techniques and improve the depth, reliability and validity of research. Secondly, there is no boundary mark between words in Chinese language. In order to count the etymological proportion, part of speech distribution and other indicators, it is necessary to use Chasen, Mecab and other more advanced automatic word segmentation. Sometimes, CaboCha and others are used to complete the automatic analysis of word modification relations. However, these tools cannot be used directly under the Windows graphical interface. Researchers must be familiar with basic DOS instructions or have certain programming skills. Nowadays, corpus stylistics researchers are mostly from liberal arts background, and their technical ability needs to be improved urgently. This restricts the rapid development of research in this field to a certain extent. In the future, researchers should not only update their knowledge structure in time and continuously improve their skills, but also actively carry out arts and sciences collaboration and invite researchers from computer science, statistics and other related disciplines to jointly tackle key problems. This is also the proper meaning of promoting the construction of "new liberal arts".

6. Conclusion

Due to the development of corpus stylistics, its method of using corpus and other statistical tools to analyze objective data has also attracted the attention of scholars and has been applied to many fields. By going through 42 relevant papers on Chinese kernel journals, this paper reviewed the research achievements of corpus stylistics in China, introduced the main research fields and development, and explored the shortcomings and future trends of this field, so as to enhance the understanding of corpus stylistics and help its future development.

For a long time, qualitative research has been the main focus of literary research. Introducing the quantitative research method of corpus stylistics is helpful to promote the development of literary studies in the direction of combining qualitative and quantitative research, expand research methods, enrich argumentation basis, and enhance the positivism and persuasiveness of research. The further application of relevant research methods in pedagogy, political science, business science and other fields, and the expansion of the research territory of corpus stylistics with new topics will surely promote the interdisciplinary integration and realize the mutual support and linkage development of multiple disciplines.

At present, the corpus stylistics research abroad has made great achievements, while the related research in China is still relatively rare. Regarding the superordinate of corpus stylistics—corpus linguistics—from 2001 to 2021, there were 680 related studies on HowNet, with only a few researchers paid attention to corpus stylistics and applied this research paradigm. The author expects more researchers to devote themselves to the theoretical construction and practical exploration of such new paradigm, and promote the continuous development of linguistics, literature, philology and other related disciplines in China.

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