ROBERT FROST'S POEMS: SOME LIGHT FROM CORPUS ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Linguistics and literature seem distant fields, but they can be related. This study aims at doing a discourse analysis of Robert Frost's poems using a corpus to investigate the most frequent semantic domain in his poetry. This analysis should also allow us to make connections with his personal life. A corpus composed by 35 poems of Frost (3,725 words) was investigated focusing on nouns. The corpus was tagged by CLAWS 7 and AntConc was the software used to generate the frequency lists and concordance lines for the analysis. Results of this research indicate that 26% of the nouns are related to nature. A connection between people and the nature elements was verified in 91% of the poems, which suggests that human experiences are portrayed through this relation. Furthermore, nature nouns may be found in different linguistic environment, affecting how they are portrayed: 31% is positive (e.g. *bright flowers*), 32% is negative (e.g. *heavy sky*) and 37% is neutral (e.g *mowing field*). Therefore, nature nouns can also be understood by their semantic prosody. If nature is depicted positively, negatively or neutrally, it is where "man finds himself" (LYNEN, 1962, p. 177). Frost's poems consider all the conflicts that surround a man's life.

Key words: Robert Frost, literature, corpus linguistics, nouns, nature.

INTRODUCTION

Corpus linguistics and literature are often considered very distant fields. Corpus linguistics is the empirical study of natural language as literature is the subjective study of written art. However, both fields deal with language and both deal

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with the importance of each word or expression in a certain linguistic environment. Regarding that, this study shows that both fields can complement each other by using corpus linguistics tools to provide new angles of literary analyses. Other literature studies were already developed using methods from corpus linguistics. McIntyre and Walker (2010) compared the words and semantic domains of two collection of poems by William Blake, Songs of Innocence (SoI) and Songs of Experience (SoE). They used the software Wmatrix to generate key domains or semantic categories of words of each collection, for example, *happy, angry, fear*. Then, the same software generated frequency lists of the words belonging to each category, for example, the word *joy* was the most frequent in the *happy* category. After that, they could establish the differences between SoI and SoE through the categories and their word frequency. This perspective of joining linguistics and literature fields is here applied to the poetry of one of the most famous North American poets of twentieth century, Robert Frost.

The growth of corpus linguistics came together with technological development that allowed the compilation of huge amount of data. In the case of this study, the corpus used is considered small. However, a small corpus can also be considered of great value:

> Small, carefully targeted corpora (by which we commonly mean corpora of fewer than a million words of running text) have proved to be a powerful tool for the investigation of special uses of language, where the linguist can 'drill down' into the data in immense detail using a full armoury of software and shed light on particular uses of language. (MCCARTHY; O'KEEFFE, 2010, p. 35)

In order to investigate some specificities in Frost's poetry, this study focuses on the analyses of nature elements because his poetry is known by a prominence of them. Interpreting nature elements in context aims at understanding their general tendency, if they are surrounded by a positive, negative or neutral environment and if there is a pattern of use. Such analyses provides an overview of nature elements as a group, but the behavior of individual items can also be interpreted by the identification of their semantic prosody. According to Hunston

(2007, p. 250), based on Sinclair (2004) and Partington (2004), "meaning belongs to a unit that is larger than the word". In the case of this article, nature nouns are on the core of a sentence, being surrounded by words that will dictate their discourse function. Before describing the methodology used in this research, it is important present the poetry background that is the basis of this study.

1   ROBERT FROST'S POETRY BACKGROUND

Many studies about Frost's poetry have been presented (e.g., LYNEN, 1962; MONTGOMERY, 1962; SHARMA, 2011) but none of them have used corpus linguistics as a tool. This paper can show that "generalizations made by previous analysts are supported by corpus-based generalizations" (MCINTYRE; WALKER, 2010, p. 517). Hence, it is relevant to present the studies that have addressed Frost's treatment of nature elements related to Wordsworth, to man's 20th century conflicts and to human's limitations.

1.1 FROST VS. WORDSWORTH AND THEIR TREATMENT OF NATURE ELEMENTS

For those who study Frost, the comparison of his poetry with Wordsworth's texts seems to be inevitable in order to locate the former on a different time of the latter. It is also important to capture the use of nature elements by Frost since it is so frequent and clearly contrasted with Wordsworth's treatment. Sharma (2011) states that Robert Frost is not a new version of Wordsworth in the twentieth century because they deal with nature in a different way. While Wordsworth treats nature emotionally, Frost has a pragmatic way of dealing with it. In other words, for the latter nature is a means of living and those elements are tools for his daily actions. He does not have a contemplative view, idealizing and glorifying them, as Wordsworth did. According to

Sharma (2011, p. 56), "his attitude towards nature is more 'realistic' than 'romantic'". For Mary Montgomery (1962), Frost's treatment of nature is not romantic at all. Reinforcing that Frost's poetry does not intend to end in nature's description Lynen (1962) highlights its pragmatic character stating that nature reflects the entire world and man is part of it. Considering Lynens' (1962) work and the point of nature as "the world of circumstances", this study takes the same perspective, intending to investigate and to discuss this practical relation between nature elements and human beings.

1.2 FROST AS THE POET OF THE NEW-ENGLAND COUNTRY SIDE

Frost enjoyed life among nature, so in 1900 when he was sick and looking for a healthier life, he moved to a farm in New Hampshire, New England (U.S.A.). He moved to Old England intending to establish a life as poet and there he saw his first book accepted and published. However, Frost had problems to deal with fame, and then, he went back to New England where he bought a small farm in order to escape the spotlights. He used to move through different places inside New England, for example, in 1919 when he moved to Vermont, one of the most rural state of USA[2]. He liked farming and would do that whenever possible. Every time he needed to move, he found a farm to live in (THOMPSON, 1960).

Even when Frost was out of New England he "never really left the [place] into which his poetic imagination drew him" (COX, 1962, p. 3). It is possible to identify many of Frost's poems related to the environment of New England, such as "Stop by Woods", (SHARMA, 2011, p. 57) "After Apple-Picking" and "Two Tramps in Mud-Time". However, it is important to point out that Frost's treatment of New England rural

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[2] According to the 2010 census results, Vermont and Maine were the most rural U.S. states. The former has 61.3 percent of its populations residing in rural areas and the later 61.1 percent. <http://www.vermontbiz.com/news/march/growth-us-urban-population-outpaces-rest-nation-vermont-second-most-rural>

scenario is not a scape from modern life problems, but one way to approach it indirectly (LYNEN, 1962).

1.3 FROST AS A MODERN POET TO PORTRAY THE CONFLICTS OF 20TH CENTURY MAN

According to Lynen (1962), the twentieth century was marked by the materialism of science. Great discoveries, such as the general relativity theory, produced not only a more scientific based world view, but also a senseless and meaningless world, in which everything seemed to be reduced to the brute matter. These changes represented a challenge to poets that desired to represent human's feelings, emotions and sensations among that new moment of the world.

Lynen (1962) shows that Frost has a place in modern literature since he could combine the requirements of science and human's problems. First, he divides nature and pastoral poems as two different kinds of Frost's poetry that were developed in parallel. Then, he explains how these two kinds were developed as a response to the new world's scientific model:

> (...) his special way of depicting nature is a means of dealing with the problem which science posed for the modern poet. It is that of preserving within the disorganized world created by science the sense of order and unity a meaningful life requires. In his pastorals, Frost's dominant motive is to reassert the value of individual perception against the fragmenting of experience resulting from modern technology ... Frost does not depict the outward events and condition, but the central facts of twentieth century experience, the uncertainty and painful sense of loss. (Lynen, 1962, p. 183 and 190)

For this research, in order to identify the linguistic environment of the nouns present in Frost's poetry, pastoral and nature elements will be considered belonging to the same group of "nature elements".

1.4 HUMAN'S LIMITATION

Sharma (2011) states that in Frost's poems it is not possible to find happiness through nature. Corroborating this thought, Montgomery (1962) introduces the concept of barrier that means there is a boundary between man and nature that cannot be transposed. Man cannot understand some nature actions, which seem to be often against him. As a response to that, Frost thinks it is fair to address different kinds of feelings towards nature and he does it through his poems, addressing sometimes good, sometimes bad, sometimes neutral feelings. Therefore, Frost recognizes the barrier between his world and nature. Although he talks directly and humorously to animals and plants, he recognizes their non-human character instead of personifying them. Wordsworth and all the romantic tradition used to adhere human values to nature and to consider the existence of a common spirit in man and nature (LYNEN, 1962).

It is important to state that even when Frost describes nature it ends in some human conflict (SHARMA, 2011). There are those men that just accept the barriers and do not try to struggle with them. However, there are some men who accept the challenge sometimes failing, sometimes winning. Regarding the winners, we can highlight that "Nature's laws are inexorable", the barrier is not destroyed and man can just make some allowances (Montgomery, 1962, p.146). Montgomery (1962) also states that even when Frost compares some "motion of natural objects" with human's actions, it does not mean a sharing of emotions, but "human simile". Hence, nature can be somehow inside man, but the opposite is not true.

Although Montgomery (1962) also deals with the barrier of mystery and the barriers among men, this study will focus on the barrier between man and nature. In other words, it will verify the connections between men and nature elements. First, it will be verified the frequency of nouns of nature elements in Robert Frost´s poems. Second, the contexts in which nature nouns are located will be categorized as positive, negative or neutral. Third, knowing that nature words may carry different semantic

prosody, the most frequent nouns of nature elements will be classified as having a more or less favorable prosody. Fourth, it is verified if there is a connection between people and the natural elements. Finally, this study allows comprehending how nature elements are connected to men's life: in a positive, negative or neutral way.

2 METHODOLOGY

Intending to check the context that surrounds a word, concordance lines are essential tools in corpus linguistics. They provide all the occurrences of the target word (node) organized in a list in which the word studied appears centralized, enabling the researcher to see the words that come before and after this node. Therefore, the concordance lines are essential to determine the semantic prosody of a lexical item. The frequency list is also an important tool because it determines the number of occurrences of a word in a corpus, indicating a tendency that may be an important object of analyses. For McIntyre and Walker (2010), for example, the frequency list was crucial to determine how the two collections of poems differed. For example, "*Joy, merriment and laughter* occur more in SoI than they do in SoE, while SoE seems to be filled with *anger, wrath, fear* and *terror*" (MCINTYRE & WALKER, 2010, p. 518). In the case of this study, checking the frequency was useful to determine the most commonly used nouns of nature elements by Frost before analyzing their prosody.

Thirty-five poems (3,725 words) by Robert Frost were randomly chosen from the website http://www.poemhunter.com/. In order to_investigate the most frequent semantic domain in his poetry, a part-of-speech tagger (CLAWS7), a freeware concordance program (AntConc) and Microsoft Word tools (find, replace and word counter) were used as auxiliary tools.

The poems were put together in a .txt file (plain text) and the software CLAWS7 was used to identify the nouns tagging them as "NN". Then, the .txt file was uploaded into AntConc so that it would find all the occurrences of "NN". After that, a

list of nouns was created in order to analyze which of them were related to nature. They were tagged as "[NNE]", a symbol that means "Nouns of Nature Elements". At this point, it was possible to calculate the percentage of nature nouns compared to the total of nouns previously identified.

Using the find/replace tool of Microsoft Word, the tag [NNE] was included in the .txt file in which all the poems were put together. For example, the word "snow_NN1[3]" was found and replaced by "snow[NNE]_NN1". After that, the file was opened in AntConc and the program provided all the recurrences of [NNE] in the concordance lines. Consequently, it was possible to see the words that came together with the "Nouns of Nature Elements" and, then, to verify the context in which they were used. The manual process of seeing the value of nature elements derived from the linguistic environment could be added to the analysis as we used the software Wmatrix. This software provides the semantic categories of words in the uploaded text. Nevertheless, this is not be enough since the software does not provide semantic categories directly related to NNE, but it returns the categories of the text as a whole. Therefore, the semantic prosody of the most frequent NNE was investigated in order to go deeper into the characteristics of NNEs.

Semantic prosody refers to the underlying attitude that can usually be related to a word due to its most common phraseology (HUNSTON, 2007[4]). A word may have 'more or less' favorable or unfavorable prosody depending on how frequently it occurs in good, bad or neutral contexts. First, it was identified the most frequent NNE using AntConc to organize the nouns ranked by frequency. Then, the program provided the concordance lines of each of the three most frequent words. This last procedure allowed the identification of lexical items that surround the NNE itens and their prosody.

The next step was to analyze the co-occurrences of words related to human being and words related to nature. First, each poem was skimmed separately. Second,

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[3] NN1 is the symbol provided by CLAWS7 that indicates a singular common noun.

[4] Hunston (2007) warns researchers for the oversimplification of such definition. Her points are very relevant; however, the scope of this paper does not allow room for this discussion.

personal pronouns, people's name and words such as *man/men, woman/women, boy/girl, child/ children, human* etc were identified. Third, we detected the number of poems that carried [NNE] related to the words previously identified. Hence, it was verified the poems that deal with a connection between people and nature elements.

Following the procedures described, this investigation aimed to answer the questions below about Robert Frost's poems:

1- What is the frequency of nouns related to nature elements?

2- What is the linguistic environment of the nature words?

3- What is the semantic prosody of the most frequent NNE?

4- What is the co-occurrence of human beings and nature elements?

3 RESULTS

Based on the compiled corpus, this study found that 23% of the nouns are related to nature. The number may not seem very high, but it can be interpreted as relevant. It is important to emphasize that each different noun was counted once. The counts refer to types not tokens. For example, the noun *night* occurred fourteen times (tokens), but it was counted just once, as one type.

Nature words may occur in different linguistic environment according to the words they are surrounded by: 31% is in a positive linguistic environment (e.g. *bright flowers; beauteous garden*), 32% is in a negative one (e.g. *heavy sky; heavy dew*) and 37% is in a neutral one (e.g. *mowing field; straight, narrow pathway*).

Table 1

Nature Noun Linguistic Environment

Linguistic environment	Frequency	Examples
Positive	31%	*bright flowers*
Negative	32%	*heavy sky*
Neutral	37%	*mowing field*

Figure 1

Nature nouns in context – Concordance lines

It is important to state that, despite the fact that examples above show just adjectives connected to the nature nouns (see Figure 1), verbs and other nouns were also taken in consideration to detect the semantic prosody of nature nouns. This issue will be addressed when we answer the following research question.

The third question is an extension of the second one, because it also intends to verify the linguistic environment in which nature nouns occur. As table 2 shows the three most frequent nouns are *night, woods* and *flowers.* The other two most frequent nouns occur nine times.

Table 2

Nature noun frequency

Word	Frequency
night	14
wood	12
flowers	11
stars	9
snow	9

Regarding the three most frequent words, it was noticed that t*he* word *night* is mostly related to negative words, so it has an unfavorable prosody (e.g. *dark night, winter night*). The word *woods* does not carry a clearly identifiable prosody. For example, in *lovely dark woods* the words *lovely* and *dark* constitute a paradox: *lovely* has a positive connotation while *dark* is usually associated with a negative meaning. In other lines, however, the word *wood(s)* seems to be inserted in a neutral atmosphere (e.g. *stop to watch the woods, wet woods, wood is crushed*). In the case of the word *flowers* (Figure 2)*, it* carries an explicit more favorable prosody (e.g. *lovely, gold, bright(ly), dancing flowers*).

Figure 2

Flowers in context – Concordance lines


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1    away_AV0 ._SENT  -----_PUN  The_AT0 roadside_NN1 flowers[NNE]_NN1 ,_PUN too_AV0 wet_AJ0 for_PRP  th
2    XX0 a_AT0 question_NN1 For_PRP the_AT0  faded_AJ0 flowers[NNE]_AJ0 gay_AJ0 That_CJT could_VM0 take_V
3    beatous_AJ0  garden[NNE]_NN1 With_PRP lovely_AJ0 flowers[NNE]_AJ0  strown_NN1 ,_PUN But_CJC one_PNI
4    N my_DPS children_NN2 ,_PUN These_DT0 lovely_AJ0  flowers[NNE]_NN1 I_PNP give_VVB ._SENT -----_PUN
5    ted_VVN on_PRP the_AT0  pathway[NNE]_AJ0 Gold_AJ0 flowers[NNE]_NN1  for_PRP them_PNP to_TO0 find_VVI
6    N  And_CJC mankind_NN1 saw_VVD the_AT0 bright_AJ0 flowers[NNE]_NN1  ,_PUN That_DT0 ,_PUN glitt'ring_
7    They_PNP still_AV0 were_VBD  seeking_VVG gold_AJ0 flowers[NNE]_NN1 ,_PUN Lost_VVD  ,_PUN helpless_AJ
8    T0 sun[NNE]_NN1 shines_VVZ brightly_AV0  Tend_VVB flowers[NNE]_VVB that_CJT God_NP0 has_VHZ given_VV
9    _PUN  They_PNP must_VM0 be_VBI pierced_VVN by_PRP flowers[NNE]_NN1 and_CJC  put_VVN Beneath_PRP the_
10   Beneath_PRP the_AT0 feet_NN2 of_PRF dancing_VVG  flowers[NNE]_NN1 ._SENT -----_PUN  However_AVQ it_
11   utterfly[NNE]_NN1 Thine_DPS emulous_AJ0 fond_AJ0 flowers[NNE]_NN1 are_VBB dead_AJ0 ,_PUN too_AV0 ,_
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Frost (1962) never considered himself as simply a nature poem. Most of the poems in our corpus present a connection between people and nature elements. Ninety seven percent (97%) of the poems show that connection. Only Just *Fireflies in the Garden* among the thirty-five poems of the corpus does not have a human being in it. This result reflects Frost´s view of nature: "For Frost, nature is really an image of the whole world of circumstances within which man finds himself." (LYNEN, 1962, p. 177). Frost did not report just nature, but men in relation to that. Montgomery (1962) analyzes this relation and states that "his best poetry is concerned with the drama of man in nature". Nature is the setting of most Frost's poems, "[his] treatment of nature is pragmatic" (SHARMA, 2011, p. 56). In other words, his poems reveal the practical relationship between man and nature elements.

4 DISCUSSION

Some inferences can be made from the results presented. First, it was noticed that nature elements carry different values, being more or less positive, according to the linguistic environment that they are inserted in. This shows that the semantic prosody is determined by the context in which the words are portrayed. Second, most of the poems present a connection between nature elements and human beings that may show Frost´s consideration of the positive, the negative and the neutral moments experienced by men. An example of a positive human experience is shown in *Carpe Diem* (e.g. *Age saw two quiet children / Go loving by at twilight_[NNE] – Except taken from Carpe Diem*). The positive connotation of *twilight* is expressed as the word *loving* is a close collocate. The *children*, then, are the humans that establish this positive experience with nature.

Frost's life was spent mostly in farms and, although he was a teacher and poet, he used to farm during his vacations. When he became famous, he also found in farms a place to relax and to avoid public coaxing (THOMPSON, 1960). Most of his

poems were written when he lived in a farm in New Hampshire - New England, a place where he could be inspired by an extensive contact with nature. Furthermore, even when he was not in New Hampshire he was inspired by that environment.

The poet, as everyone, went through different moments in his life, mainly regarding his work. There was a time he was strongly criticized because of the lack of innovation in his poetry. Although most of his poem were written during modern times, it is difficult to place Frost among the modern poets. Sometimes he was criticized as being too conservative and, occasionally, he was just ignored. At other times he was contemplated as a poet of himself. Frost used to base his works on his own life experiences intending to deal with the psychological conflicts inside 20th century man (SHARMA, 2011).

> Poet's language personifies his region, making it an extension of himself and converting what was mere geographical space to personal property. (COX, 1962, p. 2)

Through transporting his own conflict and the setting of his life to his words, Frost attributed to his work a propriety of being easily related to readers' experiences. Hence, Frost did not intend to contemplate nature when he added a positive value to it, neither he intended to depreciate it when he placed nature nouns in a negative context. In his poems, Frost intended to relate nature elements to humans' lives and experiences showing the search of men to find a solution to their lives as part of nature. Ezra Pound (1954) stated that "[he] knows more of farm life that [he] did before [he] had read his poems. That means [he] knows more of 'life'". Frost found in nature a solution for the difficulties that the poet of the 20th century faced to portray human's feeling among the new discovering of science that announced a more material way of thinking. Even when it was a problem connected to the new modern era and the urban life, nature was the place where Frost used as a mean to lead man to reach knowledge about himself.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study reported in this article was to recognize the semantic domains of Robert Frost´s poetry by analyzing the frequency and prosody of nature nouns. The previous research on Frost's poetry that were not based on corpus analysis shows that nature and pastoral elements are the most important ones in Frost's poetry. Their use is based on the author's life, who lived in farms, and some circumstances that surrounded the poets of the 20th century. The conflicts and experiences of man is also another very highlighted issue in every study that also deny that Frost's poetry deals with nature as Wordsworth deals, contemplating it.

The present study, based on corpus linguistics tools, shows that nature elements are frequent in Frost's poetry, which justifies the fact that most investigations on Frost's work deal with them. Two specific findings need to be emphasized. First, only one of the poems in the corpus did not show a connection between man and a nature element. The corpus tools helped us confirm this connection revealing new semantic prosody issues. Second, in some cases the study identified that there are words that carry a positive, a negative or a neutral characteristic according to the collocates that surround them.

Above all, this research corroborates the idea of a non-contemplative poetry about nature and also reaffirms that every kind of feeling, different moments and experiences lived by humans, are expressed by Frost. If nature is portrayed in a more negative way, it may indicates a bad experience lived by the persona in the poem, instead of a simple description of a less attractive environment.

Using the tools of corpus linguistics can be helpful to analyze how language is used by writers. It allowed us to make good inferences about the most frequent semantic domains of Robert Frost's poetry based on his word choices. As the previous studies match the findings and inferences of this one, it is possible to conclude that corpus linguistics can contribute to important reasoning on writer's texts. Besides that,

it is relevant to state that the process described here does not intend to substitute the close reading of Frost's poetry in order to go deep into his work. Hence, corpus linguistic methodology can be interpreted as a robust process that can shed light on particular literary issues.

RESUMO

Linguística e literatura parecem, por vezes, campos muito diferentes, mas elas podem ser relacionadas. Este estudo tem por objetivo fazer uma análise do discurso dos poemas de Robert Frost usando um corpus para investigar o domínio semântico mais frequente em sua poesia. Esta análise deve também nos permitir fazer conexões com sua vida pessoal. Um corpus composto por 35 poemas de Frost (3.725 palavras) foi investigado com foco nos substantivos. O corpus foi etiquetado com CLAWS 7 e AntConc foi o software utilizado para gerar as listas de frequência e linhas de concordância para a análise. Os resultados desta pesquisa indicam que 26% dos substantivos estão relacionados com a natureza. Verificou-se uma ligação entre pessoas e elementos da natureza em 91% dos poemas, o que sugere que as experiências humanas são retratadas por meio dessa relação. Além disso, os substantivos que se referem à natureza podem estar em diferentes ambientes linguísticos que afetam como eles são apresentados: 31% é positivo (e.g, *flores de cores vivas*), 32% é negativo (e.g., *céu pesado*) e 37% é neutro (e.g., *campo roçado*). Consequentemente, esses substantivos podem carregar uma prosódia semântica mais ou menos positiva. Assim, se a natureza é retratada de forma positiva, negativa ou neutra, é o local onde "o homem se encontra" (LYNEN, 1962, p. 177). Os poemas de Frost consideram todos os conflitos que envolvem a vida do homem.

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