EasyChair Preprint

№ 6064

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July 13, 2021

Hercule Poirot, Mon (Faux) Ami:

A Corpus Study on Agatha Christie's Use of Language to Develop Character

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The author declares that there no conflicts of interest with respect to this preprint.

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Abstract

This corpus analysis investigates Agatha Christie's use of discourse in the person of her fictional Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot. By focusing on a specific linguistic trait – false friends – it presents evidence of how Christie used this trait to develop Poirot's character across his thirty-three novels. Moreover, it shows that this trait is almost completely absent from the four novels featuring Poirot written by Sophie Hannah, who was chosen by Christie's estate to continue his adventures.

Keywords: discourse analysis, corpus stylistics, false friends, Agatha Christie

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Corpora have been used to analyze various text types and targets, including discourse analysis (Baker & McEnery, 2015), corpus stylistics of speech presentation (Semino & Short, 2004), corpus stylistics of popular fiction (Mahlberg & McIntyre, 2011) and the process of characterization in fiction (Mahlberg, 2012). My research uses discourse analysis and corpus stylistics to study the character development of one of the most famous fictional sleuths – Christie's Belgian detective Hercule Poirot – by focusing on a specific linguistic trait.

'False friends' (known as 'faux ami' in French) are words or expressions that sound or look similar in two languages but whose meaning differs. (False friends are distinct from 'false cognates', which both sound or look similar and have similar meaning in two languages but have different etymologies.) Given this deceptive similarity, false friends present a problem for language learners as well as for humans and machines involved in translating and interpreting. However, when written into the fictional mouth of characters from foreign language backgrounds, they can provide linguistic color to bolster characterization.

Method

Between 1920 and her death in 1976, Christie published thirty-three full length novels featuring Poirot. (She also published over fifty Poirot short stories, but these are excluded from my corpus). In 2013, Christie's literary estate approved the continuation of Poirot's adventures in novels penned by Sophie Hannah, of which four have been published.

While twenty-two of the Christie novels use a third-person omniscient subjective narrative point of view, ten employ first-person narration – be it the recurrent perspective of Arthur Hastings in eight novels or the one-off narration by James Sheppard (1926/2010), or Amy Leatheran, (1936/2016) – and one novel switches between third-person omniscient subjective narration and the first-person perspective of Colin Lamb (1963/2015). By contrast, the Hannah novels all shift between first-person narration by Scotland Yard detective Edward Catchpool, who is putatively recording Poirot's adventures for posterity, and third-person omniscient subjective narration when Catchpool is absent. Among these various narrative modes, no novel has first-person narration by Poirot himself, meaning that direct speech provides the vast majority of the access to his thoughts, supplemented by very occasional insights from the omniscient third-person narrator.

In this study, I isolated and analyzed only Poirot's direct speech acts. Table 1 shows that Christie's thirty-three Poirot novels average 62,669 words, of which Poirot's direct speech comprises an average of 12,909 (21%) words. By comparison, although the Hannah novels are significantly longer, probably due to changes in publishing norms (Lea, 2015), Poirot's direct speech accounts for approximately the same percentage (24%).

Table 1

Agatha Christie's and Sophie Hannah's Poirot novels

	Agatha Christie	**Sophie Hannah**
Publication dates	1920—1975	2014—2020
Hercule Poirot (HP) novels	33	4
Average word count	62,669	90,698
Average HP direct discourse	12,909 (21%)	21,860 (24%)
Distinct false friends (FF)	51	4
Total FF	359	6
FF per novel	10.9	1.5

Within these direct speech acts, I identified in the Christie novels fifty-one distinct false friends voiced by Poirot on a total of 359 occasions. By contrast, the longer Hannah novels contain far fewer false friends: only six total occurrences of four of Christie's fifty-one distinct examples and I have not identified any false friends in the Hannah novels that did not also appear in Christie's novels.

Results

This study has revealed four key results. The first finding relates to the frequency distribution of false friends compared to Poirot's speech acts. The frequency and length of Poirot's direct discourse tends to increase towards the end of the novels, often due to a denouement scene common to classic detective fiction in which Poirot gathers the suspects and explains his reasoning before dramatically revealing the culprit(s). However, the occurrence of false friends is weighted towards the beginning of the novels, when Christie is establishing Poirot's character through discourse markers such as using brief French language phrases (presumed to be) sufficiently familiar to English language readers as to not impede understanding.

The second key finding relates to the fictional audience for these false friends since Poirot is more likely to use false friends when speaking with the murderer than with other suspects. This may be a technique used by Christie and/or Poirot to disarm a suspect by implying Poirot's linguistic weakness may be symptomatic of a weakness in reasoning thus lulling the suspect into a false sense of security.

To illustrate both these key findings, I can cite the example of one of Poirot's most (in)famous cases: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926/2010). Narrated by Dr James Sheppard (spoiler alert – the murderer!), Poirot does not appear until chapter 3, when Dr Sheppard has a conversation with his (as yet unnamed and unidentified) next-door neighbor, who has retired to the country and rented a cottage in whose garden he is attempting to grow vegetable marrows. In the space of six of Poirot's speech acts he uses five false friends. However, it should be noted that this initial conversation occurs before the death of the eponymous Roger Ackroyd, although after the suicide of Mrs Ferrars, whom Dr Sheppard had been blackmailing.

The third key finding is that Poirot is not unaware of his false friends and sometimes corrects himself. For example, this occurs twice in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*: first in chapter 8 – "He does not attend the courses—I should say the running of the horses?" [my emphasis] – and again in chapter 19: "*Mais oui, mais oui*. I heard. I am not deaf—or stupid, thank the good God! But you see, you approach the matter from the wrong—the wrong—premises, is not that the word?" [my emphasis]. Since the novel is narrated by the murderer, these examples also illustrate the second key finding and again, this (purported) demonstration of linguistic weakness may be deliberate on Poirot's part to disarm a suspect.

The fourth finding is that the frequency of false friends trends down over time across the thirty-three Christie novels. From my analysis, it could be argued that the novels fall into two groups: the seventeen published before the 1939 start of World War 2, then the sixteen published during and after WW2. As it happens, this chronological split reflects changes within the genre, with the pre-WW2 period referred to as the Golden Age of detective fiction. As **Table *2*** shows, while the average word count remains similar across all the novels (perhaps due to stable publishing norms for detective fiction during Christie's lifetime), the average number of false friends per novel reduces from 15.9 in the pre-WW2 group to 5.6 in the later group. Although Poirot speaks fewer words in the later novels, this reduction alone does not fully account for the fewer false friends: the incidence of false friends per 1000 words spoken by Poirot is also lower in the later novels.

Table 2

Two groups of Hercule Poirot novels

Publication date	Number of novels	Average word count	Average HP direct speech	HP / total WC	Average false friends (FF)	FF / 1000 HP words
1920—1938	17	62 508	15 838	25%	15.9	0.998
1940—1975	16	62 841	9 797	16%	5.6	0.605

Discussion

There are several possible explanations for the change over time in the number of false friends. In this discussion, I move from explanations at the micro level of individual novels to macro societal level explanations.

Firstly, the change may be intrinsic to the series of novels and related to how the need to develop character changed over time. Given both Poirot's popularity and Christie's status as the world's best-selling fiction author (Guinness World Records, 2018), it is possible that, over time, she could assume that Poirot's character was already well developed in a reader's mind before they opened his next installment so did not require the same degree of in-novel development. This conjecture is perhaps supported by (para)textual observations about two novels. For example, the twenty-second novel, *The Hollow* (1946/2015), has the lowest HP direct discourse word count and the third lowest rate of false friends. By this time, Christie had come to find Poirot 'insufferable' and wrote in her autobiography that *The Hollow* had been "ruined by the introduction of Poirot" (1977/2010, p. 471), going so far as to write him out of the 1951 stage version (Gill, 1990/2016). In another instance, the final novel, *Curtain: Poirot's last case* (1975/2010) – published a year before Christie's death but written in the early 1940s and the manuscript locked away as insurance in case she were unable to write (Morgan, 1984/2017) – has a higher frequency of twelve false friends, more akin to the pre-WW2 novels written at approximately the same time. This change in character development may also explain the almost complete absence of false friends in the four Hannah novels, since this author is faced with breathing new life into a much-loved character whose personality would be almost impossible to alter without inciting howls of protest from readers.

Secondly, the decrease in false friends may be due to changes the author herself was experiencing. Although not diagnosed, Agatha Christie is suspected to have developed Alzheimer's disease in a decline that accelerated over her last decade. Recent computational studies (for example, Le et al., 2011; Hirst & Wei Feng, 2012; van Velzen et al., 2014) suggest this had a lexical and syntactic impact on her novels, including reducing the richness of her vocabulary, perhaps including false friends.

Thirdly, the change may be due to a shift within the crime fiction genre, from the plot driven whodunnits of pre-WW2 Golden Age detective fiction to psychologically driven crime fiction post-WW2, a move mirrored by the focus shifting from the character (and characterization) of the detective to that of victims, suspects and culprits.

Finally, the change may reflect broader societal changes in attitudes of Anglophone readers to the French language and its speakers. French's role as the language of diplomacy was challenged in 1919 with the Paris Peace conference and the Treaty of Versailles and then further diminished after WW2 (Lord Brimelow, 1976). This decline parallels a fall in the value for an Anglophone of the social and/or cultural capital associated with speaking French, meaning that, over time, fewer of Christie's readers would have the linguistic competence to recognize false friends. As a result, Poirot's French-flavored linguistic tics, rather than making a reader feel smart for recognizing the in-joke, would instead be misunderstood as simple language mistakes and call into question the quality of Poirot's little gray cells.

In conclusion, the words authors put in their characters' mouths contribute to how they are perceived by other fictional characters and real-world readers. This research summary presents key findings and speculates on possible explanations for a specific linguistic trait Christie employed in fleshing out Poirot.

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