"In the wake of the Terror":
Phraseological Tools of Time Setting in the Narrative of History

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Abstract

The role played by time setting in the discourse of history can be easily recognized (Martin 2003), but little attention has been paid to the variety of tools employed to designate time periods and their evaluative implications. The paper intends to explore the variety of phraseological tools employed on the basis of a corpus of academic journal articles.

The methodology adopted combines a corpus and a discourse perspective. A preliminary analysis of frequency data (wordlists and keywords) offers an overview of quantitative variation. Attention is paid both to "chrononyms", nominalizations of the time period (e.g. *the twenties, the middle ages, the Empire era*), and to adverbial patterns (e.g. *on the eve of, in the late nineteenth century*). Chrononyms function both as proper nouns and as general denominations in ways that can be more or less definite (e.g. *the inter-war period, the post-war period*); adverbial patterns isolate segments in chronological time and determine a framework for textual time. Both forms can also be shown to suggest an evaluation of the period itself (*the roaring twenties, the age of anxiety*). The study is based on the analysis of concordances; the co-text of the nodes is analyzed with a view to their: a) syntactic structure: scope and patterns of pre/post-modification; b) lexico-semantic patterns: collocation and semantic preference, i.e. "entities" and "relations" involved; c) textual patterns: pragmatic (and argumentative) moves involved.

Frequencies and patterns are then interpreted in the light of factors characterizing academic discourse and specific disciplinary values. Adverbials are shown to highlight the significance of the data or the conclusions produced, thus becoming resources by which the author negotiates the his/her position with the reader. Lexical choices and patterns are also related to the epistemology of history with its emphasis on causal sequences and narrative interpretation of factual data.

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