

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEORY AND METHOD IN CORPUS LINGUISTICS

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Abstract

This article examines the theoretical and methodological foundations of corpus linguistics, with particular attention to the ongoing debate regarding its scientific status. The study explores the Neo-Firthian perspective, which views corpus linguistics as an independent theoretical paradigm, and contrasts it with approaches that regard corpora primarily as empirical tools for linguistic investigation. Furthermore, the paper analyzes the distinctive characteristics of corpus-based and corpus-driven research and discusses their contribution to discourse analysis and contemporary linguistic studies. The findings suggest that corpus linguistics occupies a unique position at the intersection of theory and methodology, serving both as a source of empirical evidence and as a framework for developing linguistic insights.

Keywords: *corpus linguistics, corpus-based research, corpus-driven research, Neo-Firthian approach, discourse analysis, linguistic theory, linguistic methodology.*

Introduction

The rapid advancement of information technologies has significantly transformed linguistic research by enabling access to extensive electronic text databases. These developments have contributed to the emergence and expansion of corpus linguistics as one of the most influential areas of modern language studies. Unlike traditional linguistic approaches that often rely on constructed examples and introspective judgments, corpus linguistics investigates language through authentic texts produced in naturally occurring communicative contexts. Consequently, the empirical foundation of linguistic inquiry has been considerably strengthened.

Today, corpus linguistics is widely recognized as a dynamic and rapidly developing field. Nevertheless, scholars continue to debate its scientific status and theoretical orientation. While some researchers consider corpus linguistics an independent theoretical framework capable of generating linguistic explanations, others view it primarily as a methodological instrument designed to collect, organize, and analyze language data. This debate has become central to understanding the epistemological foundations of contemporary corpus studies.

The purpose of this article is to examine corpus linguistics from both theoretical and methodological perspectives and to analyze the distinctions between corpus-based and corpus-driven approaches. Through this discussion, the paper aims to clarify the role of corpora in linguistic theory construction and empirical language research. The Emergence and Development of Corpus Linguistics. The origins of corpus linguistics can be traced back to the mid-twentieth century. Early corpus studies relied on manually compiled collections of texts, which limited the scope and efficiency of linguistic analysis. However, the development of computer technologies revolutionized corpus research by making it possible to store, process, and analyze vast amounts of textual data electronically. As a result, large-scale corpora containing millions of words became available for linguistic investigation.

The development of prominent corpora such as the British National Corpus (BNC), the Bank of English, and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) played a crucial role in establishing corpus linguistics as a major research discipline. These resources enabled scholars to examine authentic language use across different genres, registers, and communicative settings. Corpus-based investigations have proven particularly valuable in the study of collocations, phraseology, discourse patterns, semantic relationships, and language variation. In recent decades, corpus linguistics has expanded beyond theoretical research and has become an essential component of lexicography, translation studies, language teaching, discourse analysis, and natural language processing. Its interdisciplinary applications continue to grow as digital technologies evolve.

The Neo-Firthian Perspective and the Theoretical Status of Corpus Linguistics. One of the most influential theoretical perspectives within corpus

linguistics is the Neo-Firthian approach. Scholars associated with this tradition argue that corpus linguistics should be regarded not merely as a methodological tool but as a theoretical paradigm for understanding language. According to this view, linguistic knowledge should emerge directly from empirical observations of language use represented in corpora.

The Neo-Firthian tradition is heavily influenced by the ideas of John Firth, particularly his well-known statement: “You shall know a word by the company it keeps.” This principle emphasizes the importance of contextual associations and collocational patterns in determining linguistic meaning. Consequently, Neo-Firthian scholars prioritize the analysis of naturally occurring language data over abstract theoretical assumptions.

Researchers such as Sinclair, Stubbs, and Teubert argue that linguistic theories should be grounded in corpus evidence rather than imposed upon it. From this perspective, corpora are not simply repositories of linguistic data but constitute the primary source of linguistic knowledge. Theoretical generalizations should emerge inductively from recurring patterns observed within authentic discourse. This position, however, remains controversial. Critics argue that empirical observations alone cannot constitute a complete theory of language. They maintain that a conceptual distinction must be preserved between data and explanation. While corpora provide valuable evidence about language use, theoretical interpretation remains necessary to account for the mechanisms underlying observed linguistic phenomena.

Corpus Linguistics as Methodology. In contrast to the Neo Firthian perspective, many scholars regard corpus linguistics primarily as a methodological framework. According to this view, corpora function as sources of empirical evidence that can be used to test, refine, or challenge existing linguistic theories.

This methodological approach can be integrated with a wide range of theoretical traditions, including generative grammar, functional linguistics, cognitive linguistics, and sociolinguistics. Researchers typically formulate theoretical hypotheses and subsequently evaluate them using corpus data. Thus,

corpora serve as tools for empirical validation rather than as independent theoretical constructs.

A notable example can be found in conceptual metaphor theory within cognitive linguistics. Although the theory itself was developed independently of corpus linguistics, corpus-based studies have been used extensively to examine metaphorical expressions in authentic language use. Such analyses have helped researchers refine theoretical claims and identify patterns that were previously overlooked.

From this perspective, corpus linguistics preserves the traditional distinction between theory and data. Theoretical models provide explanations of linguistic phenomena, whereas corpora offer empirical evidence through which these explanations can be evaluated and improved.

Corpus-Based and Corpus-Driven Research. One of the most influential distinctions within corpus linguistics was proposed by Tognini-Bonelli, who differentiated between corpus-based and corpus-driven approaches.

Corpus-based research begins with an existing theoretical framework and employs corpus data to test or illustrate theoretical claims. This approach is generally deductive in nature, moving from theoretical assumptions toward empirical verification.

Corpus-driven research, on the other hand, seeks to derive theoretical insights directly from corpus observations. Researchers working within this framework attempt to minimize the influence of pre-existing theoretical categories and allow linguistic patterns to emerge from the data itself. Consequently, the approach is largely inductive, moving from empirical observation toward theoretical generalization.

Despite this distinction, the boundary between corpus-based and corpus-driven research is often less rigid in practice. Many studies combine elements of both approaches. Researchers may begin with theoretical assumptions but subsequently modify or refine them in response to corpus evidence. As a result, linguistic inquiry frequently involves a cyclical interaction between theory and empirical observation.

Corpus Methods in Discourse Analysis. Discourse analysis represents one of the most productive areas of corpus linguistic application. In particular, the integration of corpus methods into Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has enhanced the empirical reliability of discourse research.

Traditional discourse analysis often relies on relatively small collections of texts, making it difficult to identify broader linguistic patterns. Corpus techniques, however, allow researchers to examine large quantities of textual data and uncover recurring lexical, grammatical, and semantic structures. Through frequency analysis, concordance examination, and collocational investigation, scholars can identify systematic tendencies that may not be visible in smaller datasets.

Research conducted by Baker and colleagues has demonstrated the effectiveness of combining corpus linguistics with Critical Discourse Analysis. Corpus methods provide quantitative support for qualitative interpretations, thereby strengthening the analytical rigor of discourse studies. Neo-Firthian scholars approach discourse somewhat differently. Rather than applying externally imposed analytical categories, they argue that discourse itself should provide the categories and classifications necessary for linguistic investigation. This perspective reinforces the corpus-driven principle that linguistic patterns should emerge from authentic language use.

The Role of Corpus Linguistics in Contemporary Linguistics

In contemporary linguistic research, corpus linguistics has become deeply integrated into numerous academic disciplines. Its applications extend to lexicography, translation studies, language pedagogy, sociolinguistics, computational linguistics, and artificial intelligence.

Corpus technologies play a particularly important role in natural language processing, machine translation, automatic speech recognition, and text mining. The availability of large electronic corpora has significantly contributed to advances in language technologies and data-driven linguistic research.

Moreover, corpus linguistics has become an essential component of the digital humanities, facilitating interdisciplinary investigations that combine linguistic

analysis with computational methodologies. As digital resources continue to expand, the significance of corpus-based approaches is expected to increase further.

Conclusion

The theoretical status of corpus linguistics remains one of the most important methodological issues in contemporary linguistics. While the Neo-Firthian tradition regards corpus linguistics as a theoretical paradigm capable of generating linguistic explanations, other scholars emphasize its role as a methodological framework for empirical investigation.

The discussion presented in this article suggests that neither perspective alone adequately captures the full potential of corpus linguistics. In practice, linguistic theory and corpus evidence interact continuously, shaping and refining one another. Consequently, corpus linguistics should be viewed as an integrative field that combines theoretical inquiry with empirical analysis.

As corpus technologies continue to develop, their contribution to linguistic research is likely to become even more significant. Corpus linguistics will remain a vital instrument for investigating language structure, usage, and variation within both theoretical and applied contexts.

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