
EDGAR ALLAN POE

REVIEWS A BOOK ON SEMANTIC PROSODY

I had been visiting – much against my better judgement – my erstwhile friend and boon companion in boyhood, Roderick, in his crumbling Gothic pile, the House of Utter. Roderick and his sister having both withdrawn to spend quality time with their ancestors in the ossarium, I had nothing better to do than begin a book review.

So, during the whole of an unutterably dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung utterly low in the heavens, I had been reading alone, in my room, an utterly dreary tract on the tendency of semantic prosodies to express utterly negative evaluative connotations, and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy last few pages, an Appendix in which lurked one after another, scrupulously alphabetized, examples of such negativity – and I give here only a few examples out of many hundreds – that a sense of utterly insufferable gloom accosted my spirit:

the cause of the crime
the cause of the destruction
the cause of the disorder
the cause of the hatred

the cause of the heartache
the cause of the injustice
the cause of the problem
the cause of the revilement

The vast extent of the author's data and his peculiar analytical ability to penetrate the mysteries of these regions could not alleviate the stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom which hung over the repeated collocation of these words, and the order of their arrangement was pervaded by the prosodic fungi which loitered around them. The result, lurking empirically behind those concordance lines, was that silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of our language. Such opinions need no comment, and I will make none, other than to say that the black and lurid linguistic evidence lay there in unruffled lustre, symptomatic of the nervous agitation and social disorder expressed in the unconscious and repetitive phraseology.

I looked back over the pages before me – upon this model of hidden but unavoidable meanings, the detritus left by the diachronic upon the synchronic, as if bent on a consequent and undeviating transmission. And I gazed at the simple features of its domain – upon the bleak negativity of its implied semantics – upon the vacant nodes of an empty lexicon – and upon a few rank trunks of decayed syntactic trees – irrelevant as they were to the meaning of the unit – with an utter

depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of someone having read – how many years is it since then? – a tract on the failure of natural language processing

There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart – an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it – I paused to think – what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of this model? Beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple semantic objects, such as individual words, which have the power of thus affecting us, but was it possible – I reflected – that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to alleviate or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression? Acting upon this idea, I reined my imagination to such intuitive examples as I could muster. I thought to have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which made its way down my imagination in a zigzag direction, until it became a faint gleam of positive prosodies:

*the cause of the bursting out of spring
the cause of the gleeful anticipation
the cause of the happiness of all people*

But these were indeed only the figments of a fevered introversion, far from the empirical world, and a long search for such examples in corpora of many millions of words brought nothing but utter failure, and all the statistical tests at my command could not budge their probability of occurrence.

Perverted introspection, in general, is a great stumbling block in the way of that class of thinkers who have been educated to know nothing of the theory of probabilities – that theory to which the most glorious objects of human research are indebted for the most glorious of illustration. For although there is no analogy whatever between the operations of the human analyst and those of the calculating machine of Mr Babbage, we must be prepared to admit that this pure machine is, beyond all comparison, the most wonderful of the inventions of mankind.

My failure merely brought me again to the utterly precipitous brink of utter despair – ... Then, having written this sentence I saw that – influenced by the utterly morbid and oppressive atmosphere of the House of Utter itself – but also driven by unconscious habits, like the ghosts of buried centuries – my own phraseology was trapped within the patterns listed in Appendix 3.2, where I read of the high probability of such phraseology as:

<i>to the brink of utter chaos</i>	<i>to the brink of utter horror</i>
<i>to the brink of utter despair</i>	<i>to the brink of utter hysteria</i>
<i>to the brink of utter devastation</i>	<i>to the brink of utter madness</i>
<i>to the brink of utter distraction</i>	<i>to the brink of utter terror</i>

I recognized that in reading some books we occupy ourselves chiefly with the thoughts of the author; in perusing others, exclusively with our own. Noticing these things, I fled – utterly utterly aghast. Making my way out of the House of Utter, I cast the book into the abyss of a deep and dank tarn – which lay conveniently on my path – and the waters closed sullenly and silently over its pages, now utterly invisible to the naked eye, yet leaving it lurking in the depths.