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**DIGITAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF ROBERT BURNS'
LETTERS**

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Abstract

The use of computer programs in language-learning environment manifests the teacher's professional competences and helps enhance students' language proficiency and research skills. Literary and linguistic studies often lack objectivity. Computer programs for linguistic data processing help teachers view their activity from a different angle and promote student-oriented learning. The significance of Robert Burns' letters for language learning has been generally overlooked and underestimated. The corpus of 280 letters written by Robert Burns was compiled. It has been suggested that in the learning environment corpus material may be used by both teachers and students for making language exercises, conducting research and verification of data found in scientific studies. The possible uses of the data elicited from Sketch Engine Tool have been suggested. The results of the present study would be helpful to teachers of English, students willing to research literary works, as well as to experienced researchers involved in the study of Robert Burns' legacy.

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Keywords: Data-driven learning, corpus pedagogy, Robert Burns, student-oriented teaching



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1. Introduction

What seemed to be personal teaching findings that make everyday practice easier and more entertaining has recently turned into indispensable highly demanded teachers' activity.

This article will give a brief overview of the areas of application of a Sketch Engine, which is nowadays a leading corpus management and corpus query tool, to teaching language and carrying out linguistic research. The means by which computer-aided learning can best be integrated into the language-learning environment have been considered in a number of studies (Bernardini, 2004; Boulton, 2009; Chambers, 2005; Gabrielatos, 2005; Gavioli, 2005; Johns, 1991).

It goes without saying that the use of student-centered methods in language teaching is to be put into practice by teachers in language classrooms (Gavioli & Aston, 2001; Meunier, 2002; Sinclair, 2004; Tsui, 2004; Yoon & Hirvela, 2004). Such methods can create an atmosphere of excitement for the students because they make them active participants of the educational process. It is suggested that students discover word meanings, collocations, grammatical and lexical patterns, and other aspects of language through receiving small tips from the teacher. Student-centered learning correlates with data-driven learning (DDL) which implies that samples of authentic language are taken from linguistic corpora to be presented to language learners for improving language proficiency. This approach empowers both students and teachers to develop competences highly valued in today's academic environment. It was Johns (1991) who was the first to advocate the advantages of data-driven learning, calling «every student a Sherlock Holmes». According to this approach the teacher does not transmit the information to the class explicitly and directly, but takes up a role of a collaborator and facilitator leaving space for student's investigation skills. "In this framework, the teacher acts as a learning expert rather than a language expert" (Bernardini, 2004, p. 28). Johns (1991) argues that "at the heart of the approach there is the use of the machine not as a surrogate teacher or tutor, but as a rather special type of informant" (p. 1).

It is not generally known that the prose of Robert Burns exceeds in quantity his verse. He is remembered as a poet but his talent of a letter-writer is commonly overlooked and neglected. As Dugald Stewart noted «His letters are objects of wonder scarcely less than his poetry». Five hundred forty of letters written by Robert Burns have been published so far. Burns' personality was so intense as to colour the smallest fragment of his correspondence. Burns' letters reveal a nuanced and self-conscious response to the language of sentiment and its concurrent epistolary tropes. At the same time there was in him an imperative to defend his particular genius and to express his opinions and feelings in the ways he chose. Robert Burns' letters pose a fine example of an eloquent vibrant language and could be used in the learning environment. In the present article the possible ways of using the Sketch Engine tool will be considered and samples of possible task will be suggested. A corpus containing 280 letters (11,520 items with total frequency 139,621) has been compiled.

2. Problem Statement

The use of authentic language, metalinguistic knowledge and learner autonomy are mandatory in contemporary communicative language instruction. The advantages of corpora for language learning are widely reported in scientific literature, though it is still not practiced enough. For the practicing teacher, the

direct use of concordance data in language teaching poses a number of challenges: technical, linguistic, logistic, pedagogical. Students find it exciting to make grammar rule generalization on their own. They develop the ability to read the data and classify them.

It is necessary to point out that corpora provide data, but do not interpret them. Corpora offer facts of actual language usage and it is up for the learners to interpret them correctly and evaluate the information found. Once the informant answered the question, students have to make an effort in order to «make sense of that response (possibly asking other questions in order to do so) and to integrate it with what is already known» (Johns, 1991).

The students involved in corpus-based activities declare that they find it useful and relatively easy to work with the concordancer and with authentic data. They appreciate the new approach compared to traditional teaching methods; they find it useful to be able to work on their own, under the guidance of the teacher and using the software to explore the language and to learn in a way different from the traditional lessons. Although some students might be reluctant to apply the data-driven approach to practice as it is more demanding for a student and is out of tune with traditional approaches to learning they are used to.

3. Research Questions

It can be assumed that the major applications of data-driven approach to language teaching are as follows:

- 1) preparation of tasks and exercises;
- 2) organization of independent research work of students;
- 3) verification of data found in dictionaries, text-books, scientific articles.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present article is to suggest possible ways of using Sketch Engine Tool in language learning and literary studies which would contribute to both teachers' and students' competences and skills.

5. Research Methods

A corpus containing 280 letters written by Robert Burns has been compiled. Different options of Sketch Engine Tool have been applied for processing the texts of the letters and composing a variety of language tasks.

6. Findings

The applications of Sketch Engine Tool mentioned above should be clarified.

1) The main advantage of the corpus as a source of exercises is a huge amount of authentic linguistic data and the speed of selecting examples. The teacher can find the necessary illustrative material or create the necessary exercise within the seconds. When composing tasks based on the material of the Corpus, the teacher remains within the most traditional model of teaching, in which the student is assigned the passive

role of the consumer of the educational product. Meanwhile, almost immediately it becomes obvious that the student's relationship with the Corpus can be more creative: many teachers suggest that students compose exercises on their own, that is, not just analyze the material already selected, but first find it in the corpus.

2) The most interesting part of working with the corpus begins when the teacher sets research tasks for the students. The possible uses and value of student-conducted research were considered in a number of studies (Chambers, 2005; Cheng et al., 2003; Gavioli, 2001; Granath, 2009). The student gets the opportunity to carry out a research of their own. They appreciate interactive resources. With the help of the computer-based programs and tools, students understand that they can collect material and interpret it, they become independent researchers.

3) Many linguistic and especially literary studies lack objectivism. Quite often the researchers review scattered individual examples and make rash statements and conclusions. The use of corpora makes the research more veracious and accurate.

6.1. Preparation of tasks and exercises

Prepositions are considered to be a rather complicated topic of English grammar. So the following exercise might be suggested.

Task 1. Choose a correct preposition out of the list:

against, above, within, of, to, before, with, about, by

1. I hate the language ... complaint.
2. I shall never endeavour to gain your favour ... such detestable practices.
3. I often look up to the Divine disposer of events ... an eye of gratitude for the blessing which I hope He intends to bestow on me
4. A mathematician ... religion is a probable character; an irreligious poet is a monster.
5. Indeed my heart sinks me at the idea of applying to any other of the great who have honoured me with their countenance
6. My damned star wheeled ... to the zenith, by whose baleful rays Fortune took the alarm
7. Seeming distrust where you know you may confide is a cruel sin ... sensibility.
8. Therefore are they ... the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple.
9. I often think it is owing ... lucky chance, more than to good management, that there are not more unhappy marriages than usually are.
10. I marked with my pencil as I went along, every passage that pleased me ... the rest.

The exercises intended to check the student's knowledge of word-building process could be suggested.

Task 2. Fill in the correct word derived from the word in bold.

1. In my infant and ... days, too, I owed much to an old woman who resided in the family (**boy**).
2. Present my ... respects to my mother (**duty**).
3. It is not easy to imagine a more ... state than his whose poetic fancy unfits him for the world (**help**).

4. Can I be ... to the fate of a man to whom I owe so much—a man whom I not only esteem, but venerate? (**differ**).

5. I see the consequence is ... and am prepared for it (**avoid**).

The corpus of Robert Burns's letters provides a fine base for grammar exercises. All in all in the analyzed corpus of letter there were 1036 cases of the use of modal verbs with may being the most frequently used modal verb. The statistics of the use of modal verbs is the following: ought to – 19, need – 23, might – 64, should – 145, must – 147, could – 155, can – 231, may – 252. So the following exercise might be suggested:

Task 3. Fill in the gap with the correct modal verb from the list:

Should, could, can, need, ought to, might, may, must

1. ... His grace be with her and bless her in all her future life!

2. Believe me, my dear, it is love like this alone which... render the marriage state happy.

3. The obscure bard, when any of the great condescend to take notice of him,
... heap the altar with the incense of flattery.

4. I ... make a long preface of apologies for the freedom I am going to take.

5. If they are really poets of nature's making, their feelings ... be finer and their taste more delicate than most of the world.

6. There is nothing on earth I so ardently wish for, or that ... possibly give me so much happiness, as one day to see you mine.

7. I wish to God I was a great man that my correspondence ... throw light upon you, to let the world see what you really are.

8. ... I make any apology for this trouble, to a gentleman who has treated me with such marked benevolence and peculiar kindness?

6.2. Organization of independent research work of students

As has been stated above the corpus and data-driven approach provide excellent material and basis for the development of student's research skills and competences. The students might be asked to conduct research of their own basing on the corpus of letters on different lexical and grammar topics. For example: «Make up a synonymous row of adjectives describing a friend».

The following adjectives can be found with the help of Sketch Engine. Then the student might be asked to define the semes that distinguish the synonyms. The same task could work well with other key nouns in Robert Burns's works (love, man, life, heart, day, world).

The student-centered learning suggests that by eliciting some information from the text and deducing the rule out of it, the students understand and memorize the material better. This could be applied to both grammar and lexical material. For instance, instead of providing the students with a given answer the teacher may ask student to elicit the meaning of modal verbs from the contexts. For example:

Task 1. Define the meaning of the modal verb *may* from the context:

1. What you *may* think of this letter when you see the name that subscribes it I cannot know.

2. I sincerely wish that He *may* bless my endeavours to make your life as comfortable and happy as possible.

3. I know what I *may* expect from the world, by-and-bye—illiberal abuse, and perhaps contemptuous neglect.

4. «Lord, grant that we *may* lead a good life; for a good life makes a good end!»

5. *May* she be as happy as she deserves!

The Sketch Engine's tool Word Sketch Difference allows the research to view the grammar and syntactic patterns which differentiate the synonyms. The difference between *friend* and *fellow* is demonstrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The difference between *friend* and *fellow*

It goes without saying that collocation contribute to learner's language proficiency. With the help of Word List tool the researcher may find lemmas belonging to different parts of speech and then view different patterns in which this word occurs (see Figure 2 for the verb *take*).

The knowledge and correct use of collocation makes the learners' speech eloquent and more similar to the speech of a native speaker. The tool which might help enhance language proficiency by compiling translation glossaries is the «Multi-word terms» section in Key Words. The following collocation could be

derived from Robert Burns's letters: *humble servant, worthy friend, bosom friend, old acquaintance, ewe-milk cheese, beaten way, keen sensibility, celebrated author, everlasting life, contumelious greatness, damned star, tender endearment, exalted mind, ingenuous mind, trifling affair, worthless creature, amiable woman, common acquaintance, decent share*, etc.

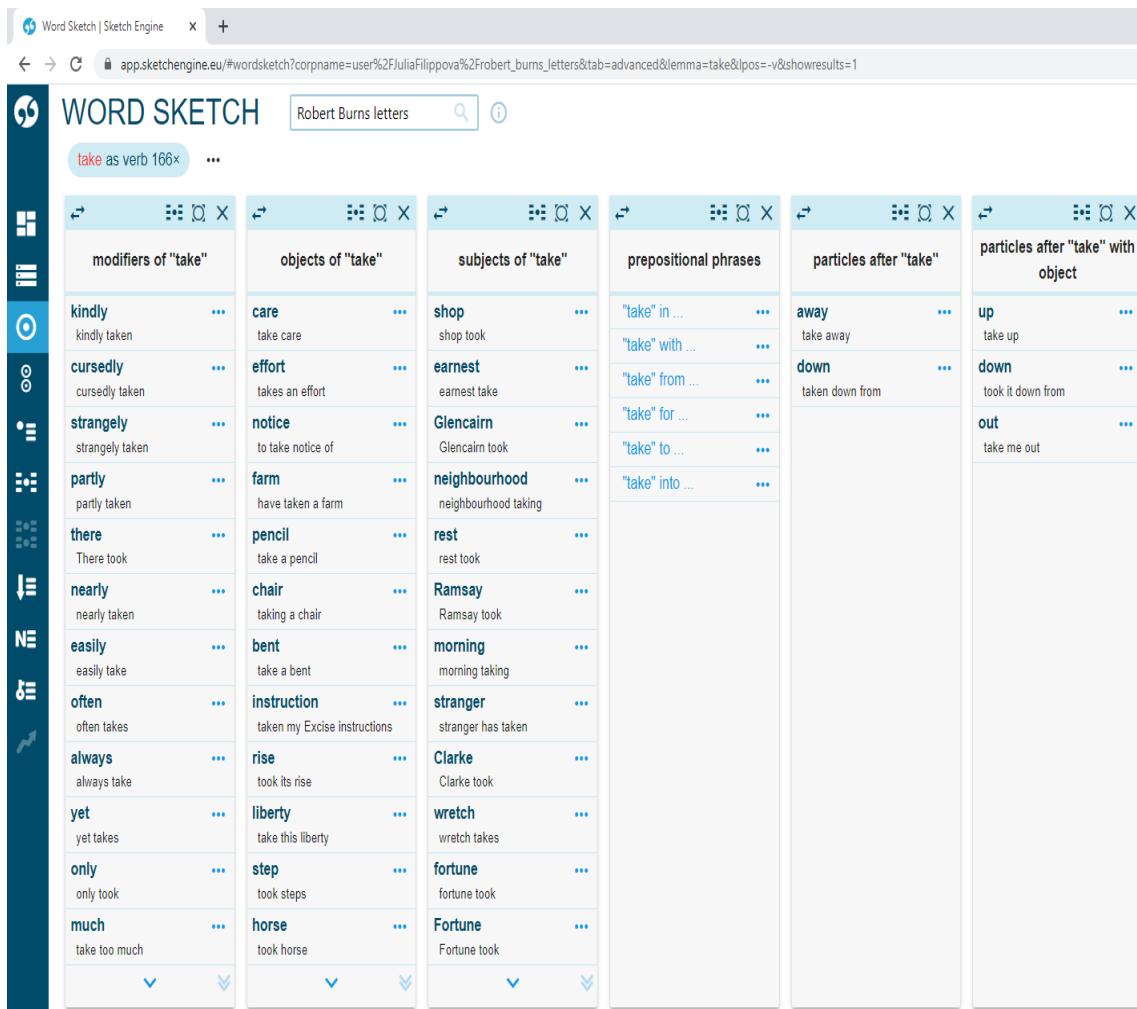


Figure 2. The word sketch for the verb *take*

6.3. Verification of data found in dictionaries, text-books, scientific articles

Linguistic and especially literary studies tend to be subjective and require data verification.

For instance, it's widely known that the main topics Robert Burns was concerned about are love, friendship, nature, human relations. The Sketch Engine helps to verify this idea with statistics. Among the first hundred nouns, most frequently used by Robert Burns in his letters, are the following: man (310 hits), life (239 hits), heart (184 hits), world (153 hits), honour (127 hits), soul (114 hits), country (99 hits), love (90 hits), friendship (80 hits), nature (77 hits).

Lately it has been suggested that Robert Burns might have had dramatic mood swings caused by a bipolar disorder which could explain his intense creativity and unstable love life. The year 1793 is seen to be a dramatic one in Burns's biography. That was the period when he suffered from severe depression one of the reasons of which was the illness of his daughter. With the help of Key Words Tool in his letters

written during this period we find emotional expressions with negative meaning such as: *hard drinking, last lugubrious sheet, curst revenue, vile jaundice, unmeaning folly, heavy malice of savage stupidity, unoffending wretch, unlucky corner, malicious devil, distressing matter, contemptuous scorn, destructive demon, insignificant existence, precarious world, serious distress.*

7. Conclusion

Summing it up, it can be concluded that by employing data driven learning, teachers and researchers can view traditional material from a different angle and students are able to lead their awareness and learning autonomy in guiding their language discovery tasks.

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