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Kieran O'Halloran

Open University, UK

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Abstract

A by-product of new social media platforms is an abundant textual record of engagements - billions of words across the world-wide-web in, for example, discussion forums, blogs and wiki discussion tabs. Many of these engagements consist of commentary on a particular text and can thus be regarded as supplements to these texts. The larger purpose of this article is to flag the utility value of this electronic supplementarity for critical reading by highlighting how it can reveal particular meanings that the text being responded to can reasonably be said to marginalise and / or repress. Given the potentially very large size of social media textual product, knowing how to explore these supplements with electronic text analysis software is essential.

To illustrate the above, I focus on how the content of online discussion forums, explored through electronic text analysis software, can be used to assist critical reading of the texts which initiate them. The paper takes its theoretical orientations from the textual intervention work of Rob Pope together with themes in the work of the philosopher, Jacques Derrida.

Keywords:

Corpus linguistics, critical discourse analysis, critical reading; electronic supplementarity, intervention, Jacques Derrida, lexical cohesion, Rob Pope, text absences, text margins

Introduction

Electronic supplementarity and critical reading

A consequence of new social media platforms is a profuse textual record of engagements—billions of words across the world-wide-web in, for example, discussion forums, blogs and wiki discussion tabs. Many of these engagements constitute commentary on a particular text and can thus be regarded as supplements to these texts. The larger aim of this article is to highlight the utility value of this electronic supplementarity for critical reading by flagging how it can reveal particular meanings that the text being responded to can be reasonably said to marginalise and / or repress.

Let me say why this is important in critical reading. All texts place certain concepts, persons, places, times, issues, perceptions etc at the centre of attention, which means ignoring and marginalising others. While the centre of a text may appear natural, this can almost always be thrown into question once marginalised and / or repressed elements are foregrounded and the previous centre is marginalised. *Decentring* texts is an important component of critical reading in helping to resist how texts set up naturalised reader positions. However, it can be difficult to avoid accusations of arbitrariness in detecting active repression of meanings from a text particularly if one is not so familiar with its topic; there are, after all, a potentially infinite number of absences from any text and not every absence is a candidate for repression. For similar reasons, it can be difficult to avoid accusation of arbitrariness in deciding that something which is marginal in a text can be considered to be marginalised.

A key argument of this article is as follows. Should certain repeated concepts be salient in an electronic supplement as a whole but absent from, or at best marginal in the text that is being responded to, this can offer insights into what the text might be said to repress or marginalise. Furthermore, in employing the electronic supplement in this way, arbitrariness is reduced in deciding on marginalised / repressed meanings in the original text. Given the potentially very large size of social media textual product, I contend that knowing how to explore such supplements with electronic text analysis software is essential.

Discussion forums as electronic supplements in critical reading

In the last few years, one technological innovation has been the appending of electronic discussion forum facilities to online texts such as in online versions of newspapers. The discussion forum facility allows readers to post responses to a text and to debate issues raised in it. To illustrate my argument for the utility of electronic supplementarity, I focus in this paper on how an online discussion forum can be productively explored to assist critical reading of the texts which initiated these forums. With the help of electronic text analysis software, I isolate the most salient repeated concepts in a discussion forum. I then compare these with concepts in the original text. In so doing, I am in a less arbitrary position to highlight if the text is marginalising or repressing certain concepts. Furthermore, by going on to intervene in the text with its repressed / marginalised concepts, I show how the text's original structure is dependent, in part, on a repression / marginalisation which leaves traces in the centre of the argument. Once the traces are highlighted, the text is shown to be unstable. The critical reading method I devise takes its initial theoretical and practical orientations from the textual intervention work of Rob Pope and themes in the work of the philosopher, Jacques Derrida, particularly how he conceives of the notion of the "supplement".

Structure of the article

In the next section, I outline my initial theoretical and practical orientation: Pope's critical textual intervention approach, as well as those Derridean orientations which help inspire Pope's approach. I then highlight a use of a Derridean perspective not found in Pope (1995): how a discussion forum can be treated as a "supplement" in a sense related to that used in Derrida (1976[1967]). Afterwards, I outline how large amounts of data can be analysed using electronic text analysis software; I show how this software can be used to establish salient repeated concepts in a discussion forum which, in turn, can potentially shed light on marginalisation and repression in the text which originated the discussion. The text I focus on is an argument which featured in the online version of a newspaper. The discussion forum which is appended to the argument is around 70, 000 words. I include the argument as well as the results for the most salient concepts in the discussion forum. After this, I explore the relationships between uses of these salient concepts in the forum and flag how certain salient concepts in the forum which are absent or marginal from the argument are good candidates for being considered marginalised or repressed from it. In the final section, I show how the argument's structure can be seen as dependent on the suppression of these salient concepts; in intervening in the argument with these concepts, I show it to be unstable.

Pope's textual intervention

Pope's (1995) essential argument is that to intervene in a text and rewrite it is to achieve a better appreciation of how that text is constructed than could be done solely through its analysis. In other words, in appreciating the differences between the original and the re-written text, one becomes sensitised to the preferences of the former. Pope offers a range of strategies in which readers are encouraged to engage in structured yet playful re-writing. Such "textual interventions" include de/re-centring and re-genring, the generation of "parallel" / "alternative" texts, as well as exercises in paraphrase, imitation, parody, adaptation, hybridisation and collage. While Pope uses some examples of non-literary texts such as adverts, most of the texts he focuses on are literary. Perhaps, for this reason, the method of Pope (1995) is not as well known in rhetoric studies / critical text analysis / critical discourse analysis as it deserves to be.¹

In this article, I want to enhance and develop, for an interactive social media age, one of Pope's critical rewriting strategies: de-centring and re-centring of texts. This strategy of Pope's involves fastening on some marginal or repressed element of a text and, by bringing this to the text's centre, re-writing it. In so doing, muted and marginalised voices are unsuppressed and the essential arbitrariness of a centre is highlighted. Let me illustrate Pope's approach to de/re-centring with an example from Pope (1995) which he used in class discussion. The class was presented with text from an advert for Peugeot cars whose emblem is a lion:

PEUGOT: the lion goes from strength to strength

In discussion, it was decided to bring the absence, 'female', into the 'male' centre of the text via a morphological intervention:

PEUGOT: the lion~~ess~~ goes from strength to strength

Here is Pope (1995, p. 8) on this intervention/re-writing:

Here, with just one tweak of its symbolic whiskers, a whole network of cultural convention was thrown into relief...through discussion it gradually became obvious that the implied identification of "Peugot" with "lions" (a metaphoric identity which had already been established over several campaigns) did not depend simply on the stereotypical associations of "lions" with "strength", "courage", "wildness", "regality" and "exoticism" etc. The "car / lion" conflation also depended on a specific and equally conventional image of masculinity.

In making the morphological change to lion~~ess~~, reasons for the original lexical preference of "lion" become apparent and, in turn, that the 'centre' of attention and valuation in this text is not the only one possible.

A key orientation for Pope's de/re-centring operations on texts is the work of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). For Derrida, the construction of a text creates a centre of order and structure. Logically, this structuring entails there are margins in the text, meanings which are less foregrounded, and are thus less privileged than those at the centre. Derrida intervenes in texts to overturn this hierarchy and, in so doing, shows the arbitrariness of centre / margin relations (Derrida, 1978[1966]). He also does this to highlight how the appearance of a stable centre in a text is dependent on how this centre marginalises and / or represses meanings. Once the margins and repressions are brought to the centre, any text can be revealed to be inherently unstable.

Derrida's textual interventions have not been without their critics, however. For example, Rorty (1998, p. 339) has argued that Derrida's identification of repressed meanings from a text often gives the impression of arbitrariness. Like Rorty, Pope (1995, p. 14) is aware of the problem of potential arbitrariness in de-centring and re-centring texts:

... if the exposure of differences and the expression of preferences is not to be an utterly arbitrary, haphazard or capricious affair we clearly need to go about it systematically and responsibly. What's more, even when we have escaped the comfort or tyranny of a single 'centre' and the illusion of a single problematic, how exactly do we go about re-centring and re-problematising the text?...In short, how *should* we **de-**and **re-centre** texts?

Inevitably, reducing arbitrariness in judgements of repressed absences and marginalisations from a text is easier if the options for what these can be considered to be are limited (e.g. where the centre / margin can be construed as a binary category such as male / female in the Peugeot advert example above) or the analyst possesses detailed knowledge of a particular topic. But, what if knowledge is not possessed of a complex area? I wish to argue that one way of reducing the arbitrariness of judgements of repressions and marginalisations of meaning in a text—and which, echoing Pope above, is both “systematic and responsible”—is to use the following: the content of an online discussion forum which is appended to this text and to employ this as a “supplement” in something akin to the Derridean sense of the term. I explain what I mean in the next section.

Before I do, I should say that my focus differs from Pope's insofar as I am concerned with revealing *traces* of marginalisation / repression at the centre of a text through exploration of a text's online discussion forum supplement. How I intervene in the text is through throwing into relief these traces which, in turn, highlights the instability of the text's structure.

Locating repression and marginalisation via the discussion forum as supplement

The supplement

We normally think of the word 'supplement' as meaning something extra. For Derrida, the notion of the supplement is more subtle and indeed “maddening”. Derrida (1976[1967], pp. 144-5) writes that every supplement:

...harbours within itself two significations whose cohabitation is as strange as it is necessary... [The supplement] ...adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*. The supplement is then an undecidable “inside-outside” relation.

Take, for example, a shop sign emblazoned outside a bicycle shop. It is outside the shop not part of the inside. It is an add-on, an extra, signalling the nature of the shop. The bicycle that a customer is interested in buying is inside the shop as are the shop assistants. The shop sign cannot, of course, sell the bicycle. And, yet without the sign outside, could the bicycle shop really function? For the shop to operate, customers have to be attracted to the inside of the shop from the outside. How would anybody find it easily without a sign? The shop sign is thus both an addition and an essential part of the shop—it is both outside and oddly somehow inside the shop as well. In the same way, vitamin supplements simultaneously provide additional vitamins (outside the diet) and essential vitamins (inside the diet). As Derrida (1976[1967]), p. 154) puts it: “The supplement is maddening, because it is neither presence nor absence.” And

once the weird ambiguity of supplementarity is grasped, a realisation comes that all borders are unsettled.

Discussion forums as Derridean supplements

One way of looking at an online discussion forum appended to a text, such as a newspaper text, is to see it as an extra, an add-on, outside the text. Then again, would the particularities of the discussion forum content exist without the newspaper text as stimulus in the first place? Posters of comments usually make explicit references to parts of the original text and indeed reproduce parts of it. The discussion forum content is dependent to a large extent on the original text.

While the quality of argument can be variable in a discussion forum, and the interpersonal dimension can vary from polite to abusive, nevertheless the *anonymity* of online response offers participants, in this 'community of interest', great freedom and room to manoeuvre conceptually. Given this, a discussion forum—should it be sufficiently large—is likely to have wider conceptual contours than those of the text which initiates the discussion. This is especially so if the discussion forum includes debate between different posters since, in a dialectical atmosphere, conceptual territory is likely to be opened up (see pages 219-220). A discussion forum thus *transtextualises* the original text in showing its wider connections with a set of other related texts and meanings circulating in a particular moment. Should certain concepts be salient in the forum as a whole but absent from, or at best marginal in, the original text, this can offer insights into what the text might be said to repress or marginalise. Taking this further, the discussion forum can potentially help to reveal *traces* of repression and marginalisation in the original text. Conversely, since the original text potentially carries traces of meanings which explicitly occur in the discussion forum, then the discussion forum can be considered, in a way, a part of this text. It is a 'Derridean supplement'; it is both "maddeningly" outside and inside the original text.²

A discussion forum can consist of many thousands of words. How do we get a general sense of what the original text can be said to marginalise or represses without the burden of reading many thousands of words of its supplement? I will show how this can be done using electronic text analysis software.

Using electronic text analysis software

Orientation

A collection of electronic texts is usually referred to as a corpus. Electronic text analysis software enables researchers to find, amongst other things, salient words / concepts in a corpus. Such software has great advantages over performing this procedure manually since, aside from the time and effort involved, manual analysis would run a much higher risk of error. Also, notice that I say 'salient' and not 'frequent' words / concepts. The word 'the', for example, is likely to be frequent in almost *any* corpus of texts; it does not necessarily mean that it would stand out as salient. To understand what is salient in a corpus, we need to compare with a much larger corpus, one we take to be some kind of standard of English usage. Imagine a comparison of a corpus of a few thousand words of mobile phone text messages in English with a large corpus of English consisting of a million words from a variety of different genres, both formal such as academic English and informal such as everyday conversation. It is likely that the grammatical word 'da' (a short version of the definite article) would not only be frequent in the text message corpus, but be salient in comparison with the large corpus. This is because 'da' is much less likely to be frequent in the large corpus. 'Da' would then be what is known as a statistically

frequent word or a *keyword*. Keywords are established through the statistical measure, log likelihood (see Dunning, 1993). A log likelihood value of ≥ 7 ($p < 0.01$)³ confers keyness on a word. The larger the log likelihood value, the greater the salience of the keyword. By ‘salience’, then, I really mean proportional statistical frequency. Importantly, the log likelihood value, as a statistical measure, reduces arbitrariness in what is selected as salient.

Comparing keywords in a discussion forum with the original text

A discussion forum can be treated as a corpus made up of individual posts and its keywords revealed relative to a larger corpus. Comparison of keywords in the forum with words in the original text can be illuminating. For this comparison, the following types of keywords are worth dwelling upon:

- keywords in the forum which are absent from the original text. These are candidates for the status of *repressed* concepts from the text.
- keywords in the forum which are used infrequently in the original text. These are candidates for the status of *marginalised* concepts from the text.

Keyword analysis is not purely quantitative. They also need to be qualitatively explored to understand how they are being used. Qualitative exploration of keywords in the discussion forum can, in turn, strengthen judgements as to their marginalised / repressed candidacy in the original text. Finally, there is a third type of keyword which is worth considering:

- keywords which are repeatedly contested in the discussion forum as being misrepresentative in the original text. In turn, this contestation can signal that these keywords may be acting as *repressors* in the original text, i.e., repressors of more representative terms.

Later in the article, on the basis of the highest keywords in a discussion forum appended to an argument in an online version of a newspaper, I will reveal the following: what can reasonably be regarded as repressor, repressed and marginalised meanings in the argument. On this basis, I will show in the final section how the argument is dependent on suppressed meanings which leave traces at the centre of the argument. Once these traces are revealed, I show how the argument’s lexical cohesive structure—how a text sticks together through repetition of related vocabulary—is undone. In the next section, I lay out the argument together with information about its supplement—its discussion forum.

The Data

The online argument: “The New Atheism”

The following is an argument, written by Brendan O’Neill, which appeared in *The Guardian* on December 30th 2007 on the topic of the so-called ‘new atheism’. O’Neill uses this expression to capture a number of books published by prominent intellectuals, such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, which set out atheistic arguments. The argument totals 926 words.⁴ It is laid out below in accordance with its original paragraph structure; underlining indicates a hyperlink in the original; I have numbered all sentences.

1. [headline] The New Atheism (by Brendan O'Neill)
2. [sub-headline] There is more humanity in the 'superhuman' delusions of the devout than there is in the realism of the hectoring atheists
3. [Introductory paragraph] "New atheism" was the surprise political hit of 2007.
4. God-bashing books by Hitchens, Dawkins and other thinkers who come out in a rash when they hear the word "religion" flew out of the bookshops.
5. Philip Pullman's anti-divine Golden Compass hit the big screen.
6. Everywhere, God was exposed as a fraud and God botherers were given an intellectual lashing.
7. I am as atheistic as it gets.
8. But I will not be signing up to this shrill hectoring of the religious.
9. The new atheists have given atheism a bad name.
10. History's greatest atheists, or the "old atheists" as we are now forced to call them, were humanistic and progressive, critical of religion because it expressed man's sense of higher moral purpose in a deeply flawed fashion.
11. The new atheists are screechy and intolerant; they see religion merely as an expression of mass ignorance and delusion.
12. Their aim seems to be, not only to bring God crashing back down to earth, but also to downgrade mankind itself.
13. There's something bitterly ironic in the fact that the new atheists pose as the successors to Darwin.
14. Darwin himself had little interest in baiting the devout.
15. In the early 1880s, he was asked by the radical atheist Edward Aveling to endorse a new book on evolutionary theory.
16. Darwin, caring little for Aveling's "anti-religious militancy", refused. He wrote to Aveling: "It appears to me ... that direct arguments against Christianity and theism produce hardly any effect on the public; and freedom of thought is best promoted by the gradual illumination of men's minds which follows from the advance of science. It has, therefore, been always my object to avoid writing on religion...".
17. Marx, too, believed that direct assaults on religion were pointless.
18. He argued that religion existed as spiritual compensation for social alienation, and believed that once the true nature of religion as a comfort blanket in an alienated society had been revealed, it would become clear that religion is merely a secondary phenomenon dependent for its existence on socioeconomic circumstances.
19. Radical critics should focus their intellectual ire on the degraded society that sustains religion rather than on attacking religion itself: "The criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics".
20. Old atheists sought to "illuminate men's minds", through advancing science or deepening our understanding of capitalist society.
21. New atheists take exactly the opposite approach.

22. They expend all of their energy on attacking the institution of religion and its ridiculous adherents.
23. Consider their bizarre and fevered obsession with religious symbols, such as crucifixes worn around the neck, or statements of religious belief by public figures like Tony Blair or Nick Clegg: their distaste for anything that looks or sounds vaguely religious exposes the shallow anti-intellectualism of their new atheism.
24. Their opposition to religion is not driven by a profound or radical vision, as was Darwin's and Marx's, but rather by a dinner-party disdain and moral revulsion for the stupidity of the religious.
25. Where old atheism was driven by a passionate belief in progress, new atheism springs from today's crisis of secularism.
26. It is because new atheists have lost their own belief in progress and Enlightenment that they turn harshly against those who still cling to visions of a better society or "kingdom".
27. The inhumanity of the new atheism is best illustrated by its move from the world of social critique into the realm of sociobiology.
28. Some new atheists believe humans must be genetically predisposed to believing in a higher being.
29. Marx and others saw religion as the product of socioeconomic circumstances, and thus believed that religion would wither away as humanity proceeded along the path of progress.
30. New atheists see religious belief as a kind of animalistic instinct, driven by DNA.
31. Where Marx viewed people's turn towards religion as an understandable response to the harsh reality of alienation in capitalist society, new atheists see it as the product of mankind's twisted genetic makeup.
32. So what is their solution?
33. Mass genetic therapy?
34. Compulsory injections of the correct DNA - you know, the kind possessed by intelligent and well-bred people who can see through religious delusion?
35. The new atheists' abandonment of a social outlook leads them to adopt some very grim, anti-human views.
36. The key difference between the old and new atheism is in their views of mankind.
37. For atheists like Marx, religion expressed, in a backward and limited form, human aspirations to greatness: "Man ... looked for a superhuman being in the fantastic reality of heaven and found nothing there but the reflection of himself".
38. He continued: "The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that man is the highest being for man, hence with the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being ..."
39. Today, Hitchens says of religion's destructive impact: "What else was to be expected of something that was produced by the close cousins of chimpanzees?"
40. For Marx, religion had to be abolished because it made man despicable; for new atheists religion exists precisely because man is despicable, little more than a monkey.
41. New atheists will continue to ridicule the religious in 2008.

belief, beliefs, believe, believers, catholic, catholics, christian, christianity, christians, faith, god, islam, metaphysical, religion, religions, religious, spiritual, spirituality, supernatural, theists.

Keyword Set (c) *Terms used in relation to a rational-atheist point of view:*

argument, arguments, (new) atheism, atheist, atheists, enlightenment, Darwin, Dawkins, delusion, evolutionary, Grayling, Hitchens, ideas, intellectual, Marx, (ir)rational, reason, Richard_Dawkins, science, scientific, secular.

I have inspected how these terms are used in the forum to help place them in the appropriate set. So, for example, I have placed “intellectual” in Keyword Set (c) because it is used mainly in relation to new atheists such as Dawkins; my placing of “argument” in the same set is because, in the main, it is used in relation to the “evidence-based” rational arguments of atheists. I place “irrational” and “delusion” also in keyword set (c) since these are terms which are habitually used by posters (who seem in the main to be atheists) to describe those who have a religious belief; indeed, delusion is mostly an intertextual echo of the title of Dawkins (2006), *The God Delusion*.

In the next section, I show how keyword set (a) is contested in the forum as being misrepresentative of new atheists. I also show how use of keyword set (b) relates to use of keyword set (c).

The keyword sets in the discussion forum

Contesting keyword set (a) for being misrepresentative

For many posters, O’Neill’s use of “hectoring”, “shrill” etc. is used to misrepresent the reasoned arguments of the new atheists. Crucially, often evidence is provided of this perceived misrepresentation, as can be seen in these examples (the set in which a keyword features is indicated in the examples below):

Post 33 Why this insistence on constantly stereotyping Dawkins (and by implication all other expositors of the absurdity of **faith (b)**) as **hectoring (a)** / strident / browbeating / ranting / **shrill (a)** etc. Have any of these people read a word of what he has written? Interestingly enough, on the third page of the preface of *The God Delusion* [Dawkins, 2006: 3], the man himself writes:

“Book critics or theatre critics can be derisively negative and gain delighted praise for the trenchant wit of their review. But in criticisms of **religion (b)** even clarity ceases to be a virtue and sounds like aggressive hostility...let a soberly **reasoning (c)** critic of **religion (b)** employ what in other contexts would sound merely direct or forthright, and it will be described as a ‘rant’”. [emphasis added]

Post 150 The article states:

“Old atheists sought to ‘illuminate men’s minds’, through advancing **science (c)** or deepening our understanding of capitalist society. **New atheists** take exactly the opposite approach”.

So that will be why **Richard Dawkins (c)** is the Charles Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of **Science (c)** at Oxford University, then. Pointing out the difference between evidence-based **argument (c)** and **belief (b)** systems based on **faith (b)** does not strike me as being **hectoring (a)** or **shrill (a)**...[emphasis added]

There would seem, then, on the basis of these examples and others, to be a pre-existing strategy by critics of new atheism, which O'Neill echoes, of re-describing “reasoned criticisms” and “sober reasoning” as a “rant”. Further evidence for this strategy is available.⁸

Contesting keyword set (b) via keyword set (c)

Another common feature of the forum is general discussion and explanation of why atheism is currently prominent. In these explanations, posters commonly contest keyword set (b) via keyword set (c). Here are two examples:

Post 102 In context, this “**new atheism (c)**” is entirely understandable. We have leaders of the world's most powerful nation—the US—rushing to proclaim their “**faith (b)**” instead of talking about issues, policies and solutions. Also in the US there is a movement to erode the church/state separation, as if the example provided by Iran isn't enough to convince us this separation is vital. We have **religious (b)** people declaring war and committing acts of terrorism—9/11/01 was a **faith (b)** based initiative, Bush invaded Iraq because **God (b)** told him to. We have a sustained undermining of **science (c)**, both in teaching—as creation mythology/“intelligent design theory” is pushed in schools—and in research—as there is tremendous opposition to stem-cell research based on profound misunderstanding...I could go on and on. This is the context of this “**new atheism (c)**” ...I don't think **atheism's (c)** purpose is to eradicate **religion (b)**, but nor should it lay down in front of this advancing **irrational (c)** tide of barbarism.

Post 195 There is absolutely nothing **new** about the so-called **new atheism (c)**. **Atheism (c)** has always been resistant to accept the existence of a **supernatural (b)**. **Atheists (c)** have always preferred to attribute a natural cause to events not yet explained by **science (c)**...In a world at peace, **atheists (c)** would be content to simply live and let live...So why are people listening now? It is the current context within which **atheists (c)** are honor bound to speak out. **Religion (b)** has declared war on **reason (c)**. In this context, yes, we do get in the faces of those who would like to erode our civil liberties in the name of obedience to a moral code that controls through fear. [emphasis added]

Having discussed how the three keyword sets are broadly used in the forum, let me return to O'Neill's argument to examine to what degree there are repressor, repressed and marginalised meanings. In doing so, I begin to highlight how the lexical preferences of the argument are dependent, in part, on repression and marginalisation of meaning.

Repression and marginalisation in the argument

Repression of new atheist rationalism; inclusion of old atheist rationalism

Having discerned that rationalism, in the form of keyword set (c), is a centre in the forum in relation to descriptions of new atheism, it is revealing to find there are no descriptions of new atheists in O'Neill's argument which reflect this rationalism. On this comparative basis, it can be

construed that O'Neill's argument, via the repressor "hectoring and strident centre", is suppressing descriptions of new atheists as rational in how it attributes irrationalism to their engagements with religion. At other times, O'Neill uses terms which do not signal a higher order of rationality to describe the cognitive processes of new atheists. For example, the verb "see", a perceptual process rather than a thought process involving reason, is used 3 times:

11. The new atheists are screechy and intolerant; they **see** religion merely as an expression of mass ignorance and delusion. [emphasis added]

30-31. New atheists **see** religious belief as a kind of animalistic instinct, driven by DNA...new atheists **see** it as the product of mankind's twisted genetic makeup. [emphasis added]

In stark contrast, O'Neill has a different set of lexical preferences for describing the thought processes of the old atheists. He attributes higher order thinking (processes) to old atheists via terms that can be found in keyword set (c) (as well as through other expressions). This is done via "argue" and "(advancing) science":

18. [Marx] **argued** that religion existed as spiritual compensation for social alienation,... [emphasis added]

20. Old atheists sought to "illuminate men's minds", through advancing **science** or deepening our understanding of capitalist society. [emphasis added]

See also sentence 16. The attribution of higher order thinking to old atheists is also done via the term "critical":

10. History's greatest atheists, or the "old atheists" as we are now forced to call them, were humanistic and progressive, **critical** of religion because it expressed man's sense of higher moral purpose in a deeply flawed fashion. [emphasis added]

See also sentences 19 and 38.

It is, of course, possible to spot these differences in descriptions of the thought processes of new atheists and old atheists in the text itself, irrespective of knowing the highest keywords in the discussion forum. But, for an analyst without much knowledge of new atheism, it would be less easy to discern that these differences are likely to relate to repressions, rather than just absences, of rationalism in descriptions of new atheism.

Repression of "faith" and marginalisation of "belief"

"(Religious) faith" is a significant keyword in the forum but is absent from the argument. The semantically close, "(religious) belief", is also a significant keyword in the forum as are its cognates, "beliefs", "believe" and "believers" (see Posts 33, 102 and 150 on pages 219-220 as examples of posts which include "faith" and / or "belief"); in contrast, "belief" is mentioned only twice in O'Neill's argument. In sum: both (religious) "faith" and "belief(s)" / "believe" are centres in the discussion forum but absent or marginal from the argument.

At certain points in examining keywords, it can be productive to consult reference material to understand better how terms which are absent or marginal from a text relate to centres in its electronic supplement. Here is an excerpt from a definition of 'religion' from

www.wikipedia.org⁹ which I choose since its collaborative authorship makes it less likely to be narrow and selective than a dictionary entry written by one person:

A religion is a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe,...and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.

Aspects of religion include narrative, symbolism, beliefs...religion is commonly identified by the practitioner's prayer, ritual, meditation, music and art, among other things, and is often interwoven with society and politics...Religion also encompasses ancestral or cultural traditions, writings, history, and mythology, as well as personal **faith** and religious experience...

...“Religion” is sometimes used interchangeably with “**faith**” or “**belief system**,” but it is more socially defined than personal convictions, and it entails specific behaviors, respectively.’ [emphasis added]

The first and rather obvious comment on this definition is that “religion” is a complex general category which includes many things. The second is that “belief system” and “faith” can be synonyms of religion. The latter is intriguing in light of the sheer repetition of the category of “religion” in the argument. While “religion” appears 21 times in the argument (sometimes in quotations), O’Neill chooses not to use “belief system” / “faith” as synonyms in order to reduce this lexical repetition where this is possible. This is even more intriguing given that recent bestselling books written by prominent new atheists have as their main focus a critique of belief / faith in a supernatural power. This is reflected in their book titles: Richard Dawkins’ (2006) *God Delusion*, Christopher Hitchens’ (2007) *God is not Great*, Anthony Grayling’s (2007) *Against all Gods*, Sam Harris’ (2006) *The End of Faith*. Given all this, we have grounds for supposing that ‘faith’ is not only absent from the argument but is, in fact, repressed and, furthermore, that ‘religious belief’ is not only marginal in O’Neill’s argument but is, in fact, marginalised.

To sum up so far: on the basis of keyword evidence in the forum, I have a better appreciation of the argument’s lexical preferences since it would appear that these are designed not only to contribute to the argument’s content but simultaneously to the repression and marginalisation of certain meanings. In the remainder of this article, on the basis of what have been revealed as repressions and marginalisations in the supplement, I perform an intervention in the argument. In doing so, I show how the argument’s lexical cohesive structure is founded, in part, on suppressed meanings which leave a trace at the centre of the argument; once these traces are revealed, the argument’s lexical cohesive structure is undone.

Why do I call this process ‘intervention’? On the one hand, the process can be seen as an intervention into the text, i.e., on the basis of the discussion forum supplement as outside the text. On the other hand, it is an ‘intravention’, a bringing out of meanings that already exist as traces within the text, i.e., on the basis of the discussion forum supplement as inside the text. In being both an intervention and an ‘intravention’, the procedure is thus an ‘intervention’.

Traces and interventions

The procedure

My critical reading procedure is as follows:

a) I probe the argument for lexis which can be interpreted as carrying traces of repression or marginalisation of keywords in the supplement and then interavene accordingly. I signal my interventions via an upward/downward arrow \updownarrow to reflect the “undecidable ‘inside-outside’ relation”; if the interavention involves substituting a word in the argument for a repressed / marginal word, I cross through the original term;

b) Post-intervention, I ascertain any tensions between the lexical cohesive structure of the original text and the interavened version which, in turn, reveal how the argument unravels relative to the keywords of the discussion forum.

Intervention with the keywords “belief” and “faith”

We saw in the previous section that there is evidence for viewing “belief” as marginalised in the argument since, as a keyword, it is part of the centre of the forum. One of the most common expressions in the forum which contains either of the keywords “belief” or “believe” is ‘belief/ve+in+supernatural being’ such as “belief in God”, “God” being another keyword in the supplement (see Figure 1). Out of 439 instances of “belief/ve” in the forum, a quarter (113 instances) are realised in this expression. Given the salience of the expression in the supplement, this creates a justification for supposing that “God” in the argument—realised always metaphorically—is a trace of the suppression of “belief/ve [in]”.¹⁰ Let me then interavene in the argument with this expression and pursue its effects on the lexical cohesive structure. Consider, for example, an intervention of “belief [in]” before “God” in sentence 12:

12. [THE NEW ATHEISTS’] aim seems to be, not only to bring \updownarrow **belief [in]** God crashing back down to earth, but also to downgrade mankind itself. [emphasis added]

Having interavened, what we realise is that for sentences 11 and 12 now to have effective lexical cohesion, “religion” in sentence 11 must really mean “religious belief” or “faith”, i.e., terms which are marginalised / repressed. This is also because, from sentence 11, “delusion”, as a mental state, links semantically to the interavened mental state of “belief” in sentence 12. Or put another way, the presence of the mental state, “delusion”, can be seen to be a trace of the suppression of the mental states “faith” or “religious belief”. I thus cross out “religion” in sentence 11 and substitute with the repressed term “faith”:

11. The new atheists are screechy and intolerant; they see ~~religion~~ \updownarrow **faith** merely as an expression of mass ignorance and delusion. [emphasis added]

12. Their aim seems to be, not only to bring \updownarrow **belief [in]** God crashing back down to earth, but also to downgrade mankind itself. [emphasis added]

Cohesion in sentence 11 itself is troubled through this intervention since a tension is now created between “faith” and “screechy and intolerant”. I say this on the basis that it is difficult to imagine how new atheists as intellectuals could be successfully intolerant about the mental states of religious believers. (Even an extreme totalitarian government would be limited to being successfully intolerant of religious *practices* it deemed unacceptable rather than religious mental states). The argument’s instabilities on an interventive perspective, thus, start to become apparent.

The binary opposition—new atheism versus old atheism—is first mentioned in paragraph 2, which consists of sentences 7-12. While both sentences 11 and 12 refer to new atheism, old atheism is first mentioned in sentence 10:

10. History's greatest atheists, or the “old atheists” as we are now forced to call them, were humanistic and progressive, critical of religion because it expressed man’s sense of higher moral purpose in a deeply flawed fashion.

The original sentences 10 and 11 linked lexically through the common category, “religion”. However, we have just seen that the interavention in sentence 11 highlights “religion” as the more specific category “faith”. In turn, this means sentence 11 no longer links effectively to sentence 10. (The latter’s focus is criticism by old atheists of a different part of “religion”—“religious ethics”, i.e., old atheists criticise religion because of how it relates to mankind’s higher *moral* purpose). The interavened cohesive structure of sentences 10-12, thus, vibrates with instability which, in turn, reveals instability in the use of the binary opposition of old atheism / new atheism.

Via my interaventions, I am able to clarify how the category of “religion”, at 21 instances, works in organising a centre in O’Neill’s argument. It does this through being strategically vague in its generality. As the definition from Wikipedia shows, the complex general category, “religion”—which includes religious ethics, morality, art, narratives, symbols, practices, music, rituals, metaphysics—cannot logically be equivalent to delusion. So, one possible implication of O’Neill’s sentence 11 is that “new atheist” arguments are scatter-gun and unreasonable which, in turn, would link to his general construal of them as “ranters”. Interestingly, the interavention reveals the argument’s repressed “subconscious”: it shows that new atheists regard “belief” or “faith” as delusional. In other words, a semantically more exacting proposition is revealed than that which O’Neill would seem to wish to attribute to new atheists.¹¹

Interavention with the keyword “reason”

Another place where the mental processes of new atheists are described is in the verb phrase, “turn harshly against”, in sentence 26. “Turn harshly”, again, is part of the “hectoring and strident” centre of the argument which, in turn, would seem to act as a repressor of references to ‘new atheist’ rationalism. By interavening with a term from keyword set (c) which O’Neill would seem to wish to repress via keyword set (a), authorial preferences for “turn harshly” rather than “reason”, “argue” etc. become apparent:

25. Where old atheism was driven by a passionate belief in progress, new atheism springs from today's crisis of secularism.
26. It is because new atheists have lost their own belief in progress and *Enlightenment* that they ~~turn harshly~~ **↑ reason** against those who still cling to visions of a better society or "kingdom". [emphasis added]

Via this interavention a contradiction emerges. Reason is the cornerstone of the Enlightenment. Given this, it does not make sense to lose belief in the Enlightenment, and thus lose belief in reason, whilst simultaneously reasoning against faith. Interaventions such as this provide further evidence that the “hectoring and strident” centre of the argument can be seen as repressing descriptions which flag the rationalism of new atheists. Let us examine more of this suppression.

“Delusion” is a keyword in the forum, an intertextual echo of *The God Delusion*, the book where Richard Dawkins sets out arguments for the non-existence of a supernatural power, and thus, for him, that believers are “deluded”. Given “delusion” is associated with critique by new atheists, when O’Neill includes the term it is as though he wishes to neutralise it via use of “hectoring” and “intolerant” (words contested in the discussion forum—see keyword set (a)—and italicised below) as well as “screechy”:

2. [sub-headline] There is more humanity in the ‘superhuman’ **delusions** of the devout than there is in the realism of the *hectoring* atheists [emphasis added]

11. The new atheists are *screechy and intolerant*; they see religion merely as an expression of mass ignorance and **delusion**. [emphasis added]

42. But there is more humanity in the “superhuman” **delusions** of the devout—in their yearning for a sense of purpose and greatness—than there is in the monkeyman realism of the *hectoring* atheists. [emphasis added]

The exception is in sentence 34:

32. So what is their solution?

33. Mass genetic therapy?

34. Compulsory injections of the correct DNA—you know, the kind possessed by intelligent and well-bred people who can see through religious **delusion**? [emphasis added]

By sentence 34, O’Neill’s text, now in its last quarter, marshals a sub-argument that alleges new atheists hold that religious belief is genetically endowed, i.e., a sub-argument which is outside the ‘hectoring and strident’ centre of the argument. This alleged viewpoint does not logically entail criticism of the religious by new atheists. O’Neill is constrained, then, from describing new atheists as hectoring at this point in the argument. This means he cannot use keyword set (a) as repressors to conceal evidence of reasoning. And since he cannot do this, interestingly, sentence 34 is a place where O’Neill’s seeming attempt to obscure new atheist rationalism—this time via hyperbole and sarcasm—is more obviously unsuccessful. This is because one cannot actually “see through a delusion”—this is tautological. Instead, when one realises that a proposition which was previously entertained as true is in fact false (e.g there is a tooth fairy), one reasons that one’s previous state of mind was delusional. In other words, sentence 34 betrays a conclusion which is *reasoned* to. This stray thread in the argument could potentially be spotted by a critical reader who has an intimate knowledge of ‘new atheism’ (regardless of knowing the keywords in the discussion forum). However, for the reader who is less acquainted with new atheism, knowing:

i) that the “hectoring and strident” centre of the argument can be reasonably construed as a repressor of the rationalism of new atheists;

ii) that point i) is supported through interavention via terms such as “reason”

means the following: the reader is usefully guided to look for places in the argument where new atheists are *not* referred to as “hectoring” etc. so as to inspect whether or not there is evidence of new atheist rationalism.

Conclusion

I have exploited, in this article, the utility value of an electronic supplement to the text which originated it in order to offer insights into what meanings the text can be reasonably said to repress and marginalise. I also showed how these repressions and marginalisations remain as traces in the text's centre. Once these traces were revealed, I showed how the text's lexical cohesive structure became undone. Demonstration of this undoing could be provided for other portions of the text which have not been discussed. It should be stressed, though, that how a text is shown to undo itself is relative to the supplement used and, in turn, to the keywords generated. Given that many websites carry the facility to respond online to a text, finding texts with appended discussion forums is not so onerous. Consultation of websites such as www.digg.com can reveal which texts have appended discussion forums consisting of large numbers of comments; these are more likely to yield a larger number of keywords.

Because the procedure for locating salient concepts in the forum is statistically informed, it reduces arbitrariness in making judgements of repressions and marginalisations as well as in selecting interventive points into the argument. However, notice I say 'reduces'. Inevitably, I have to make some arbitrary choices, e.g. of the number of keywords to examine so as to make my use of the supplement manageable. Indeed, I have not exhausted the potential number of repressions and marginalisations since there are other keywords in Figure 1. which I did not explore. Exploring more keywords could well have led to further revelation of instabilities in the argument relative to the supplement used.

Online discussion forums appended to texts are just one form of electronic supplement for use in the kind of critical reading I have outlined. There are other possible electronic supplements for this use that have appeared as part of developments in social media in the last few years. For example, the content of Wikipedia discussion tabs—should this be large enough—could be used to reveal potential instabilities in a Wikipedia entry; a series of blogs commenting on a key global event could be assembled as a corpus to reveal possible structural tensions in a news article reporting on that event. And so on. As platforms for social engagement on the web develop, so the possibilities for electronic supplementarity and thus for critical intervention increase.

Notes

¹ This is in spite of the fact that Pope (1995, p. 45) sees his book as "in part a contribution" to the critical linguistics / critical discourse analysis of, for example, Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew (1979) and Fairclough (1992).

² In this article, I accord with certain themes in Derrida's work, i.e. his discussion of centres and margins and his take on the supplement. This does not, however, necessarily mean I accord with everything in Derrida's output.

³ In reporting statistical significance, $p < 0.01$ indicates a 1 in 100 likelihood that the result could occur purely by chance.

⁴ I have not used WMatrix to analyse the argument itself since, given the size of the text, judgements of relative frequency and salience of lexis are straightforward.

⁵ *The Guardian* had a policy of closing a forum after 3 days at the time of publication of O'Neill's argument.

⁶ The procedure for preparing the corpus is simple. WMatrix works with text files. I copied and pasted the whole of the discussion forum into Microsoft 'Notepad' and saved as a text file. I then loaded up into WMatrix.

⁷ WMatrix has online access to one reference corpus—the British National Corpus (BNC) Sampler. This consists of around 1 million words each of the BNC Sampler spoken corpus and the BNC Sampler written corpus (the whole of the BNC consists of 10 million words of spoken and 90 million words of written English). On the rule of thumb that “we should at least try to obtain reference corpora which reflect some aspect of the smaller corpus or text sample we are studying” (Baker, 2006, p. 43), I chose to compare the argument with the BNC Sampler *written* corpus. This contains material from books, periodicals and other sources covering a range of domains including fiction, science, social science, world affairs, commerce, arts, religion and leisure. This corpus is based on the original design of the BNC and is thus a ‘balanced’ corpus, representing a wide cross-section of written British English. The variety and balance of the corpus make it useful for my purposes since, in being fairly representative of written discourse, it will likely reveal special features of the discussion forum. More information can be obtained on the composition of the BNC Sampler written corpus at

<http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/bnc2sampler/sampler.htm>

⁸ For example, Daniel Dennett, another ‘new atheist’, says the following: “Today one of the most insistent forces arrayed in opposition to us vocal atheists is the “I’m an atheist *but*” crowd, who publicly deplore our ‘hostility’, our ‘rudeness’ (which is actually just candour), while privately admitting that we’re right”. (July 16th 2009)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2009/jul/16/daniel-dennett-belief-atheism>

⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion> [Accessed May 13th 2010.]

¹⁰ It is interesting that where “God” is referred to in the argument it i) is in relation to new atheists, and ii) involves metaphor:

4. **God**-bashing books by Hitchens, Dawkins and other thinkers who come out in a rash when they hear the word "religion" flew out of the bookshops.

6. Everywhere, **God** was exposed as a fraud and **God** botherers were given an intellectual lashing.

12. Their aim seems to be, not only to bring **God** crashing back down to earth, but also to downgrade mankind itself.[emphasis added]

These metaphors enable an articulation in relation to ‘new atheists’ which avoids mention of “belief”.

¹¹ One can only speculate why O’Neill seems to seek to repress the specific category, “faith”, or marginalise the specific category, “religious belief”, via use of the general category, “religion”. One possibility is that since he professes to be “as atheist as it gets”, it would not serve his argument to mention too often the more specific categories “religious belief”, “faith”, “belief system”. Since these elements of religion are the most vulnerable to attack from atheists—i.e., including O’Neill—it would be better to (attempt to) repress or marginalise these concepts in the argument in order to help avoid contradicting himself.

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Biographical Statement

Kieran O'Halloran is a Senior Lecturer in Linguistics in the Centre for Language and Communication at the Open University, UK. He is interested in the application of corpus linguistics to discourse analysis—specifically to critical discourse analysis, literary stylistics and argumentation—as well as cognitive issues in critical discourse analysis.

Publications include *Critical Discourse Analysis and Language Cognition* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003), *Applying English Grammar: Functional and Corpus Approaches* (Hodder Arnold, 2004 with Coffin and Hewings), *The Art of English: Literary Creativity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006 with Goodman), 'Researching argumentation in educational contexts: new directions, new methods' (Special Issue) *International Journal of Research and Method in Education*, 2008, 31(3) (guest edited with Coffin), and *Applied Linguistics Methods: A Reader* (Routledge, 2009 with Coffin and Lillis).

Email: k.a.ohalloran@open.ac.uk

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Appendix

The 100 highest keywords, including frequency ('Freq') and log likelihood values ('LL'), in the discussion forum.

Keyword	Freq	LL	Keyword	Freq	LL
religion	336	1665.17	argument	42	117.73
atheists	227	1249.02	O'Neill	21	115.55
religious	264	1127.97	supernatural	27	114.91
god	200	1100.46	christian	45	113.10
atheism	141	764.05	are	561	110.79
atheist	117	632.37	@	20	110.05
belief	141	604.86	reason	63	107.19
i	1093	545.37	intellectual	29	105.08
that	1232	525.72	theists	19	104.54
Dawkins	90	495.21	Brendan_O'Neill	18	99.04
n't	445	463.60	spirituality	18	99.04
you	707	384.81	their	323	98.59
science	84	363.00	they	425	96.08
faith	86	339.49	as	562	94.48
beliefs	77	337.06	or	387	94.46
think	188	316.27	Grayling	17	93.54
do	365	310.95	those	154	90.70
is	1195	304.30	agree	38	88.74
what	327	249.59	metaphysical	16	88.04
Brendan	47	249.02	your	200	85.10
article	77	246.86	christianity	26	82.71
believe	114	232.50	spiritual	26	82.71
'm	142	222.99	arguments	32	82.43
religions	44	220.18	point	61	80.24
Hitchens	40	220.09	silly	26	78.35
Marx	44	210.46	've	75	76.02
people	239	207.66	have	432	75.98
Darwin	37	203.58	islam	19	75.18
not	569	197.82	rational	19	75.18
intolerant	36	189.02	secular	19	75.18
cif	34	187.08	thinking	44	72.89
folks	34	187.08	morality	18	72.84
does	146	185.47	--	13	71.53
delusion	32	167.24	Richard_Dawkins	13	71.53
believers	34	166.65	hardtimethinking	13	71.53
christians	44	165.24	enlightenment	17	70.62
humanity	31	161.80	ignorance	19	70.57
hectoring	29	159.57	irrational	15	70.48
universe	34	150.52	ideas	42	70.15
it	884	146.14	exist	30	68.31
read	71	146.01	so	201	67.76
just	187	145.03	new	180	66.73
catholic	45	142.57	intolerance	15	66.71
scientific	41	136.10	attacking	19	66.57
why	117	130.57	faustroll	12	66.03
shrill	25	129.21	trying	47	65.78
human	57	125.86	evolutionary	14	65.24
actually	61	122.95	but	453	64.65
moral	40	122.48	say	91	64.01
about	230	120.18	catholics	16	63