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## Revealing the Colour and Personality in Texts: Putting the "Person" Back into our Results

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show how the colour and personality contained in texts can be derived and analysed. This colour and personality indicates something important about the respondents' thinking which is lost using normal analytical techniques. The method used to extract the meaningful words was largely intuitive. That is, I selected the words which seemed to me to indicate something about the thoughts of the respondents and provide colour and personality to the text. These words show how the subject under discussion is seen by the respondent. I would suggest that the method described in this paper is of great value since it allows us to understand better the responses of our respondents. It puts the "person" back into the analysis, showing that the respondents are real people not simply abstract figures.

### Keywords

People, Figurative Language, Texts, Quantitative Research, Qualitative Research

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### Introduction and some background

I’m going to talk briefly about some aspects of my research and then look at an interesting phenomenon which arose from my experience with figurative language and what it tells us about the people we research.

In my research I’m using metaphors to show me doctoral students’ conceptions. I am using a method called MIP, the Metaphor Identification Procedure devised by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) to find the metaphors. While dealing with qualitative data MIP uses a quantitative approach to producing the result. MIP works to isolate the metaphors in the text by comparing all the words, one by one, with the definitions in a dictionary. Once the metaphors have been isolated that data can then be used quantitatively or qualitatively. Isolating the metaphors using MIP has caused me to think about the relationship between quantitative and qualitative analysis.

For instance if a quantitative result is required the number of metaphors found can be used to derive the frequency of metaphor usage as it relates to demographic factors such as gender or education. This result can then be analysed statistically and expressed as graphs, tables or pie charts in the usual quantitative manner.

If a qualitative result is required the metaphors found using MIP can be interpreted for their meanings as they relate to the participants’ conceptions of whatever was discussed in the interviews while gathering the data. These results can be then expressed as statements about how the person or group see their place in the world in the form of tables, charts and descriptions of the participants’ conceptions.

There is no reason why both a quantitative and qualitative approach cannot be taken with the same data. Once the metaphors are isolated with MIP, the choice of which method to use to further the analysis is open to the researcher’s choice. There is no reason why the further analysis cannot use both approaches. There is no need to limit the further work to just one approach. Thus using the data for both a qualitative and quantitative result makes its use much more efficient, since it will result in a more comprehensive analysis of the data. By

considering both the qualitative and quantitative results much more in the way of results will be produced.

However, I want to go beyond a quantitative or qualitative result and consider the people who provided the data. From my work with MIP I have come to the conclusion that in analysing a text, either quantitatively or qualitatively, a lot of valuable and useful data is thrown away by ignoring words and phrases that are used figuratively, such as metaphors, exaggerations and pictorials. These words express something about the “person” in a text. This is often considered unimportant. I want to argue that that data is not unimportant, that it can add another dimension to the analysis, by putting the “person as an individual” back into the results.

Quantitative analysis throws away the core of the information that you need to put the “person” back into the data. Qualitative analysis uses some of that data, but, I would argue, still doesn’t use a lot of it. Using the words that I shall describe opens up another level of possibilities for analysis by bringing out the people in the text.

Each of the people we interview to gather our research data has his or her own personality. Unfortunately, a lot of the personality and the colour in the person’s response tends to disappear in the analysis. People often come across in the results as lifeless and lacking in personality. In generalising the response of a group of people to find the average or range of responses to the interview questions the individuals become lost. Where extracts from individual responses are cited they tend only to illustrate how the conceptions of the particular group members illuminate and support the conclusions rather than the individual understanding of any one person. The respondents to the interviews are not treated as individuals but as parts of groups. The individual respondent as a person tends to disappear in the analysis.

I am going to suggest a way of bringing the colour and personality representing the individual back into your results. I will show you a way of getting the metaphors and other figurative words and phrases from the text to provide that colour and personality. The method is inevitably subjective, but since it is impossible to remove all subjectivity from our analysis, why not use it creatively to add colour and personality to the nature of the results. Let your subjectivity work for you.

As examples of material that might be encountered I use my own data derived from an on-line survey of the PhD students at the ANU. Fifty-nine PhD students responded positively by taking the survey. Of the respondents 25 were male and 34 female, 45 were domestic students and 14 were international students, 27 were studying in the sciences and 32 in the arts.

In the survey the students were asked to discuss, in their own words, their conceptions of the work involved in their PhDs. Their responses were printed out and analysed using MIP to find the metaphors as described above. The results of this analysis were reported in Pitcher 2010; Pitcher 2011.

In interpreting the metaphors in the responses I was struck by the colour and personality shown by some of the students. Once I took the analysis beyond those metaphors and considered the other figuratively used words and phrases in the responses the colour and personality in the responses and of the respondents became enhanced. It was an important advance in my analysis of the responses since it drew my attention even more to how the students appeared in the texts as people rather than merely statistics. It was at this point that the worth of my work really became apparent to me.

## **Method: Gathering the texts with which to work**

While the results of my previous investigation were interesting and useful, I had the constant feeling that I was not getting everything out of the responses that it was possible to obtain. I had the feeling that there was more that could be usefully extracted from the responses which would tell me something about the students as people involved with research.

The data I used was obtained from an on-line survey of PhD students at an Australian research intensive university. The students were asked to describe their experiences as PhD students as though they were telling someone who is thinking of doing a PhD in the same field as themselves. The questions were phrased in the form of an email letter from a friend who was contemplating doing a PhD. Fifty-nine PhD students responded positively by filling in the survey.

For this paper the responses were again examined. This time instead of extracting only the metaphors, I looked for any other useful words that would tell me something about the respondents as people and their reactions to their situation as students. As interesting looking words were found they were highlighted so that they could easily be seen in the rest of the text. This examination was, of course, very subjective since I picked out words that were meaningful to me. However, since I was looking for the subjective reactions of the students to my questions I considered that this approach was justified.

I found that reading these words gave me an insight into what the respondents were thinking when they filled out the survey. They also expressed some of the personality of the respondents and added colour to their responses. In this way, I found that I was getting more insight into the thoughts of the respondents. I considered that this was an important and useful addition to my analysis of the responses.

The effect of finding these words was to add colour and personality to the responses. I consider that this is a worthwhile gain and worth the work of finding the words.

For the purposes of drawing out the colour and personality from the texts the best way of determining what is and is not a useful word or phrase is to use your intuition. Although using your intuition to find the words is very subjective, I don't see that as a problem. You want to find out how you can experience the colour and personality in a text, which is, after all, a subjective experience.

Begin by reading each transcript through thoroughly. The aim is partly to familiarise yourself with the material, but you should also be looking for anything that looks interesting. As you find interesting and useful words or phrases you should highlight them to make them easier to pick out from the remainder of the text.

The next step is to read the transcripts again looking for more metaphors and other figurative words and phrases. For best effect you should read the transcript more than once. It is necessary to read the transcripts a number of times over a period of time to ensure that all the metaphors and figurative words and phrases are found.

Once a reading produces no more new words or phrases it can be assumed that all have been found. As you read each transcript every word and phrase has to be considered, and its context taken into account. The question to be answered is "Is the word or phrase used literally or figuratively?". The terms have to be considered as to whether they are used figuratively or not in the context of the rest of the transcript.

The best guide to which words are used figuratively is your intuition. If you feel that a word or phrase has more meaning attached to it than its meaning in the context of the text then it is a word for which you are looking. Think about the meanings of the word as you read it.

Does the word mean more, taken literally, than it does in the text? Does it conjure up a picture in your mind? Does it express an idea that goes beyond the text? If the answer to any of these questions is “Yes”, then highlight the word.

Once you have all the interesting words in the text highlighted, look at it again, reading only the highlighted words. Think about the images produced in your mind. Don’t try to be objective. Using your intuition to find the words and phrases is subjective. Use your subjective responses to the words and phrases to try to find out what they mean to the respondent. Let your imagination run wild for a time and see what happens.

Next we shall look at what the words we have found mean and how they can be used to illustrate the thoughts of the people we are researching.

### **The material with which to work: The words and phrases**

There are three types of words and phrases that are particularly useful for providing colour and personality. They are metaphors, exaggerations and pictorials. These types of words and phrases are usually ignored in the analysis of a text since they are not used literally. I shall first describe the useful types of words and then consider how they might be extracted from a text.

#### ***Metaphors***

Metaphors are a way of expressing ideas in such a way as to provide a comparison that enables the reader to understand the subject under discussion better. They can also be used to add colour and personality to a description.

Metaphors represent the subject under discussion as something else. Although the subject is not really as described, the metaphor adds to the view of it by adding colour and depth to the description. For instance, in the phrase “life is a journey of discovery” extra meaning is added to the idea of “life.” Life is not really a journey; it is not really a movement from one place to another, although some journeys may take place in one’s life. But describing “life” as a “journey of discovery” adds colour to the word “life.” It expresses an idea that life is movement and experience of movement and excitement. It suggests that going through one’s life is like moving from place to place experiencing different things, even if one stays in the same place. “Life” is given some of the characteristics of a journey which helps us to understand its meaning to the user better. It can be seen that saying “life is a journey of discovery” adds meaning to the word “life.” It increases the impact of the simple word “life.”

The choice of the metaphor which describes “life” will depend to some extent on the attitude of the speaker or writer. For instance “life is a drag” expresses a very different view of life from “life is a journey of discovery.” This difference will reflect the different view of the speaker or writer. As noted below, this difference will also be reflected in the attitude of the person using it. The person who says “life is a journey of discovery” will tend to have a more positive attitude to life than one who says that “life is a drag.” Thus there will be a relationship between the metaphors a person uses and their behaviour.

## ***Exaggerations***

Exaggerations are the forms of adjectives and adverbs that are meant to express extreme or superior values, but are used in ordinary speech to just mean a large amount or degree. Such words as “countless,” “always” and “terrific” are found in texts. These words perform the act of emphasis rather than taking on their original meanings.

When we say that something is “countless,” we don’t mean literally that it can’t be counted. Rather we mean “a large amount of something.” When we say something is “terrific” we don’t mean that it literally inspires terror. We mean that it is interesting and exciting. “Always” doesn’t mean forever, it just means “for a long time.”

In one response “countless” and “always” appeared. These are not words to be taken literally; they are not to be taken as their literal meaning implies but are an attempt to achieve emphasis and lend an aura of credibility to a statement. They are exaggerations for effect. The reference to “countless hours” does not mean that the hours are of a countless number but that there are a lot of them. Similarly, “always,” in the phrases “I’ve always had” and “have always fascinated me,” doesn’t strictly mean “all the time” it simply means “for a long time.”

A similar case occurred in another response where “perfectly” was used in a non-literal sense in the phrase “you know perfectly well.” It was obviously not meant literally, since it does not mean that something is in a state of perfection, but only for the effect it produces on the reader.

Further, in another response the word “incredible” is used in the phrase “incredibly difficult.” The word, as used here, does not mean that the difficulty is truly incredible and can’t be credited, but that it is very difficult.

Another example occurs in a response where the phrase “fully dedicate yourself to a single idea” occurs. I suggest that it is not possible to “fully” dedicate oneself to anything since there is the need to pay attention to other matters either in the PhD or in normal life. Thus the word “fully” is here used as an exaggeration rather than being purely descriptive.

It is apparent that this type of usage is common in ordinary speech where the effect is more important than the (mis-)use of the word. It is also obvious that the word is meant to have *less* than its literal meaning rather than *more* as would be the case if it was meant metaphorically.

However, that is not to suggest that words like “countless” are metaphors. They are only used for effect not to represent one thing as another as they would if they were used metaphorically.

## ***Pictorials***

Pictorial are words that conjure up a picture in the readers’ minds.

Pictorials include such words as “fruitful” in reference to the PhD experience in one response. The word is not defined as a metaphor by MIP since it has the literal meaning of “conducive to productivity.” However, it conjures up visions of apples and pears in the reader’s mind, so has some features of a metaphor. These types of words occur in everyday speech where they appear as metaphor-like words without, in this case, actually inferring a comparison as such.

Obviously when “fruitful” is applied to research it does not mean “producing apples and pears” but that the research produces some other useful result. In other words, the word “fruitful” is not used literally when describing research, even though it is used to conjure up a picture of something useful and worthwhile being produced.

Another example of a pictorial is saying that “everything is rosy” with one’s research. This phrase conjures up the idea of the research being like the rosy red perfection of an apple ready for eating. The research is seen as being “perfect” and ready for some further application.

Pictorials appear to be further examples of words that have lost their original meanings and become merely parts of speech, similar to the exaggerations described above. In fact they have further similarities to the exaggerations in that both are used for their effect in the sentence rather than for any literal meanings that might still be attached to the words.

### **Examples: The words at work**

Now for an example of how the words work. Here are two sample sentences from my transcripts. I have removed the colourful words and substituted plain ordinary ones.

My experience so far as a  
PhD student has been  
productive.  
Where else could you,  
most of the time, be  
learning so much.

This text makes its point quite well. It is clear and unambiguous. But it is also colourless. It has little in the way of personality.

Now look at this text. Here are the same sentences in their original form. Take particular note of the words I’ve underlined.

My experience so far as a  
PhD student has been  
fruitful.  
Where else could you  
constantly be  
learning so much.

Isn’t this wording more colourful? I think so. I think that the use of “fruitful” and “constantly” adds to the colour and personality of the text. Those words bring out some of the images in the mind of the person.

“Constantly” is an exaggeration since it really means “most of the time” not “all the time,” as it would if taken literally. “Fruitful” is a pictorial with its images of fruit and trees.

That’s what this is all about – producing images in your mind. Words that do that are the ones we are looking for.

The words are often emotionally-charged, sensually provocative or implication-filled. They appear to often be unconsciously used, thus revealing how the person was thinking at the time of answering the survey questions.



Those are the words that we want – the ones that give us an opening into the person's mind, revealing his or her thoughts, conceptions and feelings.

The question now is "How do we find them?"

I shall attempt to answer that question then I shall give some justification for doing so by suggesting some meanings for the words and answering the question "Why do it?"

### **Results: What the words mean**

Any response to the figurative words and phrases is going to be subjective. Therefore I can only give you my version of what they mean and my interpretation of what they mean to the respondents. Your version might be different. That doesn't mean that either of us is wrong, just that we have different subjective responses to the words.

To me, metaphors mean that the person likes to think in comparisons. The subject under discussion is compared to something else to give it a wider meaning. Some of the characteristics of the metaphorical object are transferred to the text to give it a wider meaning. For instance, referring to the PhD as a "marathon" brings out the idea of the long time and persistence required to complete a PhD. The word immediately brings to mind the image of a PhD student working hard for long hours, overcoming the boredom and tediousness, struggling to keep going to complete the race and win the prize of the degree. Expressing the same idea in non-metaphors would not be so graphic nor so colourful.

I think that the person who uses superlatives is used to thinking widely. S/he expresses a wider and broader aspect than occurs naturally to most people in referring to the subject. This type of person has large ideas and feels expansively about his or her work. I get the impression that this person likes to tell other people how his or her research is progress in a big way, broadly emphasising the wider aspects of it and how much use it will be.

The person who uses pictorials, to me, seems to be saying that s/he sees things as more picturesque and colourful than most other people. Pictorial, like "fruitful" express a feeling of growing and developing. I feel that this type of person is interested in how her or his research will broaden out into its useful aspect and maybe change the world. As well, the person seems to have a feeling for nature in its aspect of growing and developing as fruit grows and develops on trees.

The question now is "Why do it?" I shall attempt to answer that question.

### **Conclusions: Why do it?**

Why do it? Why look for the figurative words and phrases in a text and treat them as data?

Because the respondents are telling you something about themselves. Looking at the figurative words and phrases will tell you something about your respondents' attitudes and conceptions. It will put the "person" back into your analysis by revealing the colour and personality in the text. The person writing or speaking has put those words and phrases in the text, probably more unconsciously than consciously, to add colour to the plain words. The respondents are telling you something about themselves.

The respondents are revealing their inner thoughts and emotions. They are adding meaning to the text. That is data that you should use in your analysis rather than discarding it as merely subjective.

The words are adding meaning to the text and your results. When writing up the results of your analysis make use of any quotations from the response which show the personality of the respondent by citing sentences that you have found to be colourful and image-provoking. These can support your objective results and put colour into them. It may

also be possible to use text containing colourful words and phrases as part of your description of the group response to the questions.

Use the colour and personality in the text to put the “person” back into your results. This information is important and useful as it tells us a lot about the participants as people. Why not allow the people to come out in your results? It can help to make the reports of your research more useful and interesting by showing how people respond to the questions as people rather than as abstract figures on a chart.

Our research is very person-oriented so let us put the people back into our research and keep them there. Don’t throw away useful information. Don’t just represent the participants as merely members of a group or numbers on a chart. Use the colour and personality in your texts to put the “person as an individual” back into your results.

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Rod Pitcher is a PhD candidate in Education at The Centre for Higher Education, Learning and Teaching at the Australian National University, Canberra, Australia. The focus of his study is the metaphors that researchers use when describing their work. He uses metaphor analysis to arrive at an understanding of the conceptions.

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