RESTORING THE HISTORY OF THE SUBALTERN: A CORPUS-INFORMED STUDY OF THE NARRATIVE OF MARY PRINCE

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1 Introduction

This paper uses corpus methods to carry out a systemic functional analysis of Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave* (1831). I have two main research objectives. The first objective is to propose a method of linguistic analysis, which can be used to critically examine the voice of the female subaltern subject. The second objective relates more generally to the role of corpus linguistics in the field of literary discourse. Using the narrative of Prince as a case study, this paper illustrates how computational methods of analysis might contribute to the study of literature and stylistics. The word 'contribute' is important here as I am not proposing an overturn of current methods of literary research; rather I view corpus linguistics as a field of empirical inquiry which can complement existing techniques of analysis. Taking *know* as an example, it is suggested that the use of verbs in *The History of Mary Prince* can not only reveal something about how Prince construed events and perceived the world, but can also reveal something about the social and ideological systems which, through discourse, helped to construct those experiences. Section 2 begins by defining what is meant (specifically in postcolonial studies) by the term *subaltern*, and discusses some of the methodological problems there are in attempting to recover the history of the female subaltern subject. Section 3 outlines the linguistic approach I use to examine the voice of the subaltern, and Section 4 discusses the findings of my study. In this paper I only focus on the use of verbs in the narrative of Prince; however, I would argue that this initial investigation shows the benefits of using corpus methods of analysis.

2 Gramsci, Hegemony and the Subaltern Subject

The work of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) has been employed by postcolonial historians and literary critics to analyse colonialism. Gramsci's concept of hegemony, a term used to describe the way in which the dominant classes gain and maintain power over the subordinated, or subaltern, classes through a combination of coercion and consent, has been applied in theories of colonial discourses to explore the role language plays in "getting colonised people to accept their lower ranking in the colonial order of things" (McLeod 18).

Ransome explains how for Gramsci, in order for a particular social group to gain (and maintain) power, they must establish "a form of social and political 'control' which combines physical force or *coercion* with intellectual, moral and cultural persuasion or *consent*" (Ransome 135). In Gramsci's work, coercive social control typically operates through the State; that is, the legal and political constitutions which enforce discipline within a society. Consensual social control derives from those institutions and practices associated with civil society, for example the Church, education, and political parties – provided those parties are not attached to the government. Although it should be stressed that 'State' and 'civil society' do not always operate exclusively, and coercive and consensual forms of social control can be found in both spheres, the term *hegemony* is essentially used to refer to the intellectual, moral and cultural unity, or shared ideological world-view, which any group must establish if it is to gain (and maintain) power. The subaltern classes are those individuals or groups that are subjugated by hegemony, subordinated by the dominant world-view, and excluded from having any meaningful position from which to speak.

The term 'subaltern' was used by Gramsci to refer specifically to workers. In postcolonial studies the term has been used to refer to those individuals or groups dominated or oppressed by a more powerful 'other,' within a colonised society. That said, it is generally recognised by postcolonial critics that the relationship between the powerful and the powerless is not always a straightforward dichotomy (Greenstein 231) and within a colonised peoples there will be "several different discourses of power and of resistance" (Loomba 239). Indeed, subaltern studies scholar O'Hanlon argues that one of the problems with orthodox historiographies is that they do not allow the experiences and oppositional consciousness of the individual to be heard: "In trying to write a history from below [that is from the perspective of the subaltern subject], the subaltern historian repeatedly constructs an essential . . . identity, not fractured by difference of gender, class or location" (O'Hanlon qtd. in Loomba 241). In O'Hanlon's view, therefore, the subaltern should be analysed as an autonomous subject (ibid.); however, what exactly should the postcolonial historian, or literary critic, examine?

For J. W. Scott, the experiences of the subaltern can provide "evidence for a world of alternative values and practices whose existence gives the lie to hegemonic constructions of social worlds" (24). Experience can reveal an alternative history – a different perspective; however, J. W. Scott argues that rather than simply being "evidence for the fact of difference" (ibid.), experience should be explored in terms of how that difference was established in the first place. One of the main ways in which subjects are constituted as different is through language (J. W. Scott gives the example of categories of representation such as man/woman, black/white [25]). As such, one way of exploring the experiences of the subaltern would be to try to understand "the

operations of the complex changing and discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced" (J. W. Scott 33) and through which subjects are positioned and experience is produced. To put it simply, language can not only reveal something about how the subaltern construed his/her experiences, but it can also reveal something about the ideological and social systems which (through discourse) constructed those experiences to begin with. What J. W. Scott does not appear to set out, however, is a critical method of analysis which would allow for the language of the subaltern to be analysed in the way that she is proposing. Here I would like to suggest drawing on the systemic functional approach (see Halliday and Matthiessens' *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*).

3 Systemic Functional Grammar

Systemic functional grammar views language as being made up of a network of systems. In a very general sense we can say that a network of systems represents a network of choices and that each choice represents the "underlying potential of language" (Halliday and Matthiessen 26) – "what *could go instead of* what" (Halliday and Matthiessen 22). So, for example, a clause can be either declarative or interrogative. If it is interrogative the Finite can come before the Subject (as with closed yes/no questions: *have you been out?*), or the Finite can come after the 'Wh' question word (as with open ended questions: *where have you been?*). Two points should be made here. First, it is not being suggested that a speaker makes conscious choices; rather, these are "analytic steps in the grammar's construal of meaning" (Halliday and Matthiessen 24). Second, in any situation only some of those choices will be available as the speaker is constrained by two aspects of language: 1) what the language makes them do (for example, in English, certain verbs (such as *raining*) are restricted in their use of subject pronoun); and 2) register (in certain contexts the speaker will be required to adopt a specific use of language).

Meaning is found in the selections that are made at each point in the network of systems, and these selections (or systemic choices) are, in turn, realised through the lexicogrammar. Halliday suggests that the way in which a person construes their world experiences, therefore, will be both organised by and reflected in the grammar (170). For Halliday, experience can be described as consisting of " . . . a flow of events, or 'goings-on'" (ibid.) which the grammar of a clause organises into participants (the things or people that are involved in the event); processes (the verbal group which tells us about the event); and circumstances (the adverbial or prepositional group which provides more detail about when and where the event took place) (Halliday and Matthiessen 86-88). The grammar of a text, therefore, not only will reveal something about how the individual construes events and interprets reality, but will also uncover something about

the discursive processes which position subjects and construct experiences (J. W. Scott 25). (See Fairclough [2001] for a more detailed discussion on critical discourse analysis).

Before continuing, I would like to add a brief note about the benefits of using computer assisted methods for literary analysis. In attempting to restore histories from the perspective of the subaltern, J. W. Scott (34) calls for a critical method of analysis with which to examine and explain the language used to talk about experience. Systemic functional grammar certainly provides the critical tools which would enable this type of analysis; however, as with any linguistic or literary investigation, the analyst must first select which features of the text to study. It is this element of subjectivity that is problematic for J. W. Scott as the experiences, beliefs, and world-view of the analyst will influence the way in which a text is studied. I am not proposing that it is possible to completely remove the subjectivity that J. W. Scott is concerned with; however, in using corpus methods to study the language of the subaltern it is the data (rather than the analyst) that leads the investigation. I did not approach *The History of Mary Prince* with a preconceived set of hypotheses; instead the data alerted me to a numerical discrepancy which directed the rest of my study.

4 Methods and Findings

In this paper I am interested in exploring the voice of the female subaltern subject. To do this I will be comparing two sets of data: the narrative of Mary Prince – a female slave from the West Indies, and the narrative of Ashton Warner – a male slave also from the West Indies (both narratives were first published in 1831). Comparing Prince's text against that of a male counterpart will enable me to ascertain the more salient features of Prince's narrative.[1] Using Wordsmith 4 (M. Scott 2007), a set of corpus analysis tools, I began my investigation by running a search to find the most frequent verbs in both corpora. As discussed in Section 3, in systemic functional grammar the verb of a clause can reveal something about the type of events taking place, and as such provides a good starting point.

Prince Corpus

Verb	Raw Frequency	Normalised per 1000	Type of process*
go	34	2.3	Material
get	19	1.3	Material
come	19	1.3	Material
think	18	1.2	Mental: cognition
say	19	1.3	Verbal
know	19	1.3	Mental: cognition
take	16	1.1	Material
give	15	1	Material
see	11	0.7	Mental: perception
keep	11	0.7	Material

Warner Corpus

Verb	Raw Frequency	Normalised per 1000	Type of process*
get	15	1.6	Material
take	13	1.4	Material
make	13	1.4	Material
work	12	1.3	Material
go	11	1.2	Material
give	10	1.1	Material
see	8	0.9	Mental: perception
bring	7	0.8	Material
put	6	0.6	Material
say	6	0.6	Verbal

Fig. 1: Ten most frequent verbs (base form only) in both corpora

* The categorisation of process type is taken from Halliday and Matthiessen (2004)

From the above tables it appears that verbs relating to cognition are more important in the Prince narrative than in the Warner narrative. Of the ten most frequent verbs three realise mental processes in the Prince narrative compared with one in the Warner narrative. The fourth most frequent verb in the Prince corpus realises a mental process – *think*, whereas we have to go down to the seventh most frequent verb in the Warner corpus to find a mental process – *see*. These initial results are, in themselves, quite revealing as they suggest a certain amount of cognitive awareness, reflection and introspection on the part of Prince.[2]

Having carried out this preliminary investigation I realised that my search had only produced the base form of the verbs. It was therefore necessary to carry out a new search, but this time using the lemma (so that all forms of the verb could be identified: *take*, *takes*, *taken*, *took*, *taking*, for example). The results were as follows:[3]

Prince Corpus

Verb	Raw Frequency	Normalised per 1000	Type of process*
GO	106	7.18	Material
COME	70	4.74	Material
SAY	70	4.74	Verbal
GET	50	3.39	Material
GIVE	50	3.39	Material
TAKE	45	3.05	Material
THINK	41	2.78	Mental: Cognition
SEE	39	2.64	Mental: Perception
TELL	36	2.44	Verbal
KNOW	34	2.3	Mental: Cognition

Warner Corpus

Verb	Raw Frequency	Normalised per 1000	Type of process*
SAY	51	5.54	Verbal
GO	47	5.11	Material
TAKE	37	4.02	Material
GET	29	3.15	Material
MAKE	28	3.04	Material
TELL	28	3.04	Verbal
COME	24	2.61	Material
KNOW	24	2.61	Mental: Cognition
SEE	24	2.61	Mental: Perception
GIVE	23	2.5	Material

Fig. 2: Ten most frequent verbs (all forms) in both corpora

* The categorisation of process type is taken from Halliday and Matthiessen (2004)

What was interesting about this second search was that several of the verbs which appeared to have a high frequency in their base form in the Prince corpus (when compared with the Warner corpus), did not show the same high frequency when a search of the lemma was carried out. KNOW, for example, although used more frequently by Prince in its base form, has roughly the same overall frequency in both corpora. This is perhaps more clearly highlighted by the following table:

KNOW	Prince		Warner		
	Raw Frequency	Normalised per 1000	Raw Frequency	Normalised per 1000	Difference in %
Base Form	19	1.3	4	0.4	225
All Forms	34	2.3	24	2.6	13

Fig. 3: Frequency of KNOW in both corpora

There is only a 13% difference in the frequency with which both Prince and Warner use KNOW (in all of its forms); however there is a 225% difference in the number of times that KNOW is used in its base form. In total Prince uses the base form 19 times compared with Warner who only uses it four times.

These findings raised the question of why some verbs are used more frequently in their base form by one writer, and not by the other. I decided to investigate further those verbs which are marked in terms of similarity and difference (i.e. those which have a similar overall frequency in both corpora (a difference of less than 50%), but which have significantly different counts in their base form (a difference of more than 200%). KNOW and KEEP both met these criteria in the Prince corpus. In what follows I will focus on KNOW in more detail.

3.1 KNOW

I began by searching for all occurrences of KNOW in both corpora. Instances of KNOW being used to mean acquaintance (as in, *I once knew an old slave*) were discounted and I focused on instances of KNOW meaning knowledge of something. The results have been summarised in the following table:

	Prince (34)	Warner (24)
Negative structures	14 (10 of which refer to Prince herself not knowing)	6 (3 of which refer to Warner himself not knowing)
Positive structures	11 (6 of which refer to Prince herself knowing)	14 (8 of which refer to Warner himself knowing)
Causative structures	4 (in 2 of these instances it is Prince who is *made* or *caused* to know)	1 (in this instance it is Warner who *causes* the people of England to know)

Fig. 4: Summary of the uses of KNOW in both corpora

In the Prince corpus approximately half of all instances of KNOW are used in negative statements (14 out of 34 occurrences); in contrast only a quarter of all instances of KNOW are used in negative structures in the Warner corpus (six out of 24 occurrences). Warner appears to use KNOW in positive statements more frequently than Prince (approximately half of all instances of KNOW are used in positive statements in the Warner corpus compared with just under a third in the Prince corpus). Finally, Prince more often uses what I have described as causative structures (*noun + made/caused + to know + noun*) than Warner (there are four instances in the Prince corpus compared with just one in the Warner corpus).

The large number of negative statements in the Prince corpus (when compared with the Warner corpus) would, in part, account for the high frequency of base forms in Prince's narrative, as negative structures often follow the pattern: *do/does/did + not + base form*. There are five instances of the structure *noun + did/do + not + know* in the Prince corpus and in all of these occurrences it is Prince herself that is in the position of Senser (the participant undergoing, or experiencing, the mental process):

1 and did what she could for me: I don't know what I should have done, or what would have become
2 who took me to my new home.   I did not know where I was going, or what my new Master would do
3 I was free in England, but   I did not know where to go, or how to get my living; and
4 before I could answer, for   I did not know well what to do. I knew that I was free in
5 But I was a stranger, and   did not know one door in the street from another, and was

The Phenomenon (the thing which is " . . . felt, thought, wanted or perceived" [Halliday and Matthiessen 203]) in each of these occurrences can be categorised into two main groups: action and location. In lines 1 and 4 Prince describes a situation in which she did not know what she should do or what action she should take. There is a sense of powerlessness and passivity in these lines; lack of knowledge and a lack of clarity prevent Prince from being able to act. In lines 2, 3 and 5 Prince describes a situation in which she either did not know where to go or where she was, revealing a sense of isolation and a feeling of uncertainty. Prince experiences frustration and fear as she tries to negotiate strange and unfamiliar environments.

In the remaining negative statements, in which Prince is positioned as Senser, the Phenomena of the processes are:

a) I went home again, not knowing what else to do
b) but the hand of that God whom then I knew not
c) I knew nothing rightly about death then
d) I never knew rightly that I had much sin till I went there

In occurrence (a) Prince is again describing a situation in which she does not know what action to take. In the remaining three occurrences (b, c, and d) the Phenomena can be broadly categorised under the theme of religion. In (b) Prince is describing a time in her life before conversion; in (c) she talks about not understanding the meaning and religious significance of death; and in (d) Prince describes how she did not realise that she was a "great sinner" (Prince 17) until she attended church. In all three occurrences (b, c, and d) KNOW is used in the past tense. Prince is reflecting on her life prior to discovering Methodism and there is a clear sense of life before and life after conversion.

Religion, for Prince, "aids acceptance" (Ferguson 284); it brings knowledge, enlightenment and a position from which to speak.

To summarise the findings so far, the data showed that Prince uses KNOW in negative statements almost as frequently as she uses KNOW in positive statements (a ratio of approximately 1:1 positive/negative). A typical utterance from Prince is: *I did not know where/what*, whereas a typical utterance from Warner is: *I knew of/that/it/where*. This in itself may not seem particularly significant; however a study by Halliday (2), which investigated the probabilities associated with certain grammatical choices, revealed that a speaker of English is 90% more likely to choose a positive statement than a negative one (a ratio of 9:1 positive/negative). This would suggest that Prince is using KNOW in negative structures proportionally more than one would expect, as illustrated by the following chart:
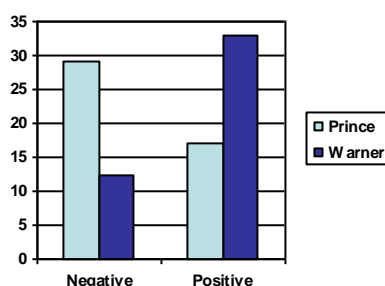

Fig. 5: Positive and negative counts of KNOW in both corpora

Turning now to the use of KNOW in positive statements, the data showed that in the Prince corpus only a third of all occurrences of KNOW (11 instances out of a total of 34 occurrences) are used in positive structures and out of these there are only six instances where Prince is in the position of Senser:

11 I have been a slave myself--   I know what slaves feel--I can tell by myself what other slaves .
12 felt what a slave feels, and   I know what a slave knows; and I would have all the good
13 their yams and Indian corn.   It is very wrong, I know, to work on Sunday or go to market; but
14 did not know well what to do. I knew that I was free in England, but I did not know where to go,
15 according to my strength.   I knew that Mrs. Williams could no longer maintain me; that she was
16 tell my Mistress about it; for   I knew that she would not give me leave to go. But I felt I must

In lines 14, 15 and 16 KNOW is being used to project another clause (described as the "idea clause" in systemic functional grammar – the content of what is being thought or felt). What is noticeable in lines 15 and 16 is that the idea clause being projected is a negative statement:

- I knew that <u>Mrs. Williams could no longer maintain me</u>
- I knew that <u>she would not give me leave to go</u>

In both of these occurrences Prince is showing an awareness of what her Mistress is not able to do or will not do. In line 16 although the idea clause that is being projected is a positive statement: "I was free," it is immediately followed by a negative statement: "but I did not know where to go," suggesting that Prince has only a partial understanding of her environment:

- I knew that <u>I was free in England</u>, *but I did not know where to go*

What I would like to suggest here is that even when KNOW is used in positive statements, the clause the follows is often something negative.

Lines 11, 12 and 13 are worth attention as these are the only instances in which Prince appears to be assertively claiming knowledge of something. The Phenomenon in each of these occurrences is not a thing, or a physical act (something which " . . . can be seen, heard [or] perceived" [Halliday and Matthiessen 205]), but it is, what is described in systemic functional linguistics as, a fact (something which is " . . . construed as existing in its own right in the semiotic realm" [ibid.]). In other words, what Prince is claiming knowledge of is not something which can be explained on a material or physical level, it is something much more abstract than that – a universal truth:

a) I know what slaves feel
b) I know what a slave knows
c) It is very wrong, I know, (to work on Sundays)

What is interesting about occurrences (a) and (b) is that Prince appears to make no distinction in terms of gender. This is an inclusive and powerful voice whereby Prince is aligning herself with, and speaking on behalf of, all slaves.

Occurrence (c) requires more context:

It is very wrong, I know, to work on Sunday or go to market; but will not God call the Buckra men to answer for this on the great day of judgment – since they will give the slaves no other day.

Here Prince is claiming knowledge of what is right and wrong. This is quite a strong and defiant use of KNOW as Prince seems to be criticising the religious convictions of her oppressors, who force her to work on the Sabbath. Religion, it would seem, not only brings her acceptance but also gives Prince the language with which to challenge her oppressors. At the same time, however, there appears to be an acknowledgement of a

hierarchy and there is no obvious anger towards either God or her oppressors. Although religion "may win her [Prince] access into the master discourse . . . she is still pinioned in the discourse of her violators" (Ferguson 284).

Finally, I would like to comment briefly on the use of KNOW in what I have described as causative structures:

22 to God to change my heart, and make me to know the truth, and the truth will make me free.
23 more things than these; she   caused me to know the exact difference between the smart of the
24 This is slavery. I tell it,   to let English people know the truth; and I hope they will never
25 what a slave knows; and I would have all the good people in England to know it too, that they may

In lines 22 and 23 Prince is either *made* to know something or is *caused* to know something. Although it could be argued that in line 22 Prince is in fact asking for this knowledge, the grammar of the clause in both occurrences suggests that she has no choice – knowledge is something which is given to or forced upon Prince by a more powerful other.

4 Conclusion

Language, as a form of hegemonic control, operates in subtle and pervasive ways; its power lies in its ability to go unnoticed by those being suppressed. An example of this might be the way in which power and control is expressed through verbs. The high frequency of KNOW in negative statements in the Prince corpus (when compared with the Warner corpus) would suggest that Prince often finds herself in situations where knowledge is not available to her. The actions of a third party prevent Prince from acting herself, so in the same way that she is prevented from going hungry by well meaning abolitionists, she is prevented from resting by her master. Prince's perception of the world, her sense of self, seems to centre on what she does not understand or what she cannot do.

I would argue that this initial investigation shows the benefits of carrying out this type of analysis. Taking as a starting point a simple numerical discrepancy, of no ideological interest, I was able to move into representations of experience and how these experiences might reflect in some way the ideological and social systems which operated to suppress Prince. This early analysis of the two bodies of writing indicates clear differences in process usage; however, there is too little data at this stage to make a positive statement and I would need to extend my analysis to a greater selection of process types. Even then, my research would only reveal something about Prince's own unique experiences and perception of the world. In order to situate Prince's narrative as belonging to a wider discourse, and in order to make any claims about the voice of the subjugated female subject, I would need to carry out similar studies on narratives written

by other female slaves to see if there are any commonalities. However, to return to O'Hanlon's argument, in attempting to write histories from the perspective of the subaltern, the starting point must always be the individual subject.

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Notes

[1] It should be noted, however, that in order to situate Prince's narrative as belonging to a wider discourse, and in order to make any claims about the voice of the subjugated *female* subject, I would need to carry out similar studies on narratives written by other female slaves to see if there are any commonalities. A further study would also be to compare my findings with a corpus of 19th century non-fictional narratives to see how Prince's use of language differs from narratives in general.

[2] This early investigation only provides the starting point from which a more detailed study can develop. These initial findings certainly cannot be said to provide an accurate picture of Prince's narrative. Verbs can have very different meanings - the verb *see*, for example, has both literal and metaphorical meanings (*I see the house* would be categorised, in systemic terms, as a verb of perception, whereas *I see what you mean* would be categorised as a verb of cognition, as in *I understand*). It is only through a more detailed investigation of each individual lemma that the analyst can begin to draw any conclusions.

[3] References to lemmas are capitalised and references to verbs are italicised.