

Reader response on the tense choice in fiction

[short paper]

Introduction

The present tense has become a common stylistic technique of modern fiction writers. Miyahara (2009) points out that the use of the present tense has been part of fiction writers' repertoire for at least two or three decades. However, readers of fiction do not always realise that this stylistic choice can have an impact on their perception of literature: as previous research (Tereshko et al, 2024, in press) has shown, readers are 1.5 times more likely to write a review of a literary fiction book written in the present tense than a book written predominantly in the past tense. This research was conducted on a set of 2876 books thanks to access to the collection of the National Library in The Hague. Through further collaboration with the library, we were able to expand the available data to 18,000 books of various genres. With this volume of texts available, we repeated the analysis that had been carried out and verified and specified our findings, taking in account the differences between genres and the use of perfective tenses. For example, for each genre we have identified a marked tense' and checked if the books with this main narrative tense get significantly more reviews.

Background

Research on the use of the present tense in fiction has mainly focused on literature published in English (Fludernik 2003, Harvey 2006, Ikee 2019). However, understanding trends in national literatures would help us to gain a more diverse and fine-tuned understanding of the impact of literature, which can, for example, contribute to the educational challenges in the development of reading literacy that have been highlighted both in academia (Fleischman, 1990; Knul & Kraaykamp, 1997; Kendeou et al., 2014) and in social initiative groups (Heijkoop, 2023). Therefore, we conduct our research on literary works published in the Dutch language.

The question of the use of the present tense in fiction, and a broader focus on tense choice in general, can be considered under-researched in the Netherlands. Moreover, when tense choice in Dutch fiction has received attention, it has been analysed in only one book (Daalder & Verghagen 1993, Fagel-deWerd 2016) or in a modest selection of books (Fagel-de Werd 2015, Verhagen 2019), whereas the availability of large amounts of digital texts would be beneficial for a more balanced perspective on tense in fiction. Therefore, in this study we use all available book texts from the National Library collection and collected online book reviews (Boot, 2017) to show how certain tense choices can influence readers.

Aim of the study

The main questions we focused on were the following: How can the relationship between the choice of tense and other linguistic features in the text and the reader's response to that text be revealed? How are simple and perfect tenses distributed within a book and/or genre and how can we interpret this distribution? Is the distinction between books with the present or the past tense as the main tense of a story genre dependent?

The previous study has already shown that present and past tense fiction are well established in the world of Dutch literature (see Fig. 1) and that there are characteristic linguistic features, e.g. we found that as the present tense ratio increases, more pronouns, adverbs and nouns are used. In the repeated study, we pay more attention to the latter two features as they require more detailed investigation. Specifically,

we want to find out whether the adverbs used in Dutch present tense fiction tend to be intensifiers or modal adverbs, and what might be the reason for the increase in nouns with the increase in present tense ratio. Furthermore, the study on the larger dataset implies the distinction between simple and perfect tenses in literary works published in Dutch, which enables us to understand the specific functions of the four tenses: present simple, past simple, present perfect and past perfect, and to detect the connection between the choice of tenses, other linguistic features and reader responses. To do so, we combined the statistical data extracted from the literary texts with the online book reviews collected from different platforms, using the Online Dutch Book Response (ODBR) corpus (Boot, 2017), to which we added more recent reviews.

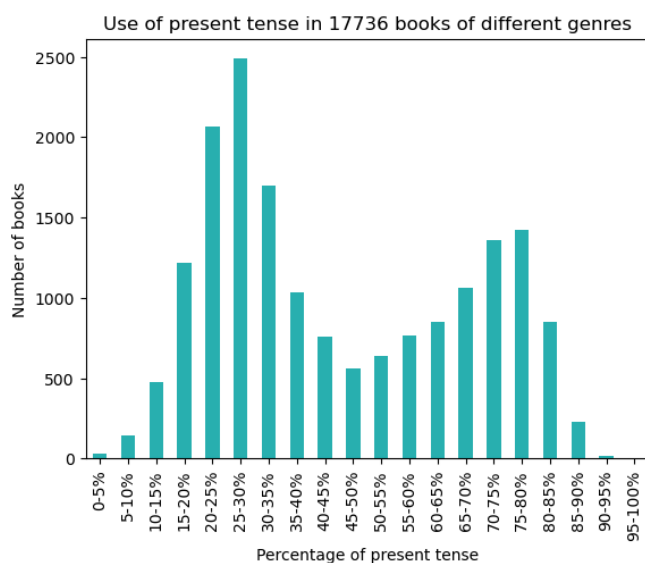


Figure 1. The ratio of present tense in books of different genres

In addition, the larger dataset of books allows us to repeat the analysis with more balanced data regarding the genres included, which would clarify whether the use of a particular tense depends on the genre and specify some genre conventions regarding the tense of the narrative. For example, we know from the previous study that literary thrillers and suspense books are predominantly written in the past tense, whereas for romance and non-fiction books there is a different distribution (see Fig. 2): on the one hand, most books in these genres contain a significant number of sentences in the present tense (right side on the plots), but at the same time quite a large number of such books are also in the "grey zone" (in the middle of the plot), i.e. it is difficult to determine in which tense the main narrative takes place. We can speculate that the reason for this may be the large number of present-tense dialogues in romantic novels, or the more informative style with many general facts in non-fiction books, but this does not explain the whole picture, which we try to understand by appealing to a more balanced corpus. In addition, the choice of the main narrative tense in children's literature seems to be either present or past tense, as there are very few books that fall outside these two categories.

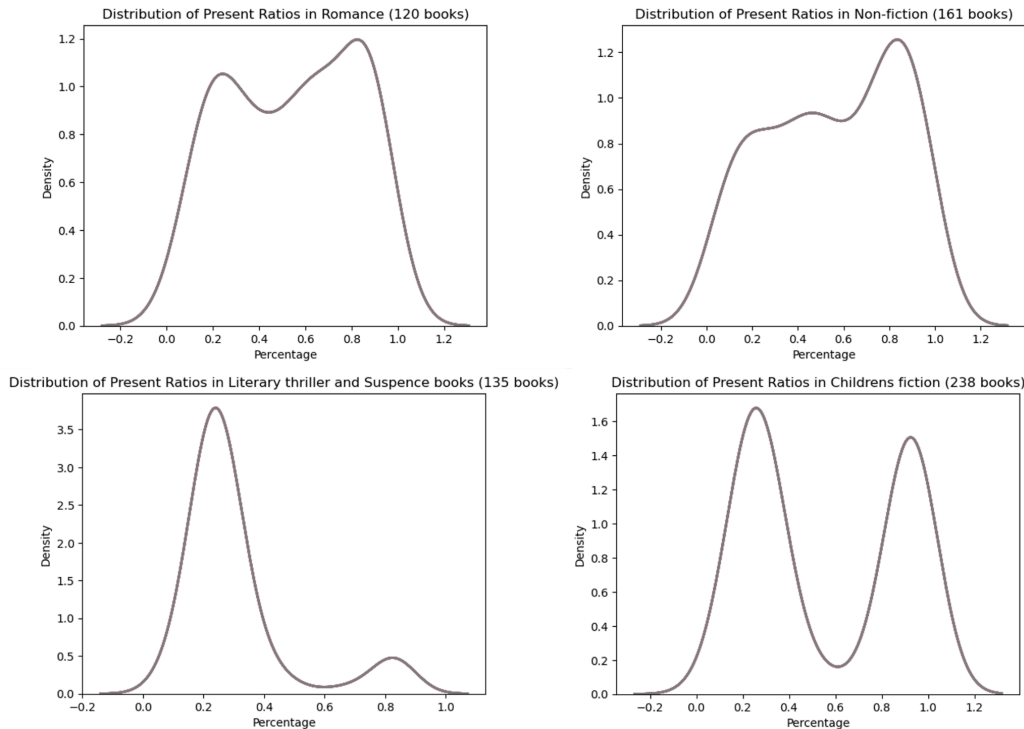


Figure 2. Distribution of Present Ratios by Genre (KDE plots)

This difference between genres can be explained by existing genre-conventions. For instance, Fleischman (1990) notices that it has often been observed that the use of tenses in narrative differs from the normal (spoken) discourse. However, scholars such as Harald Weinrich (2001, first edition in 1964) and others have sought to interpret narrative tenses not as irregular but as part of a distinct tense system that operates alongside non-narrative language. This observation supports Labov's (1972) broader claim that narratives have a less complicated linguistic structure than everyday conversation, which we try to reveal in our work.

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