



Title	THE GRANDEUR OF BEOWULF-A Statistical Survey-
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Citation	明治大学教養論集, 216: 113-133
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10291/8885">http://hdl.handle.net/10291/8885</a>
Rights	
Issue Date	1989-03-01
Text version	publisher
Type	Departmental Bulletin Paper
DOI	

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# THE GRANDEUR OF *BEOWULF*

—A Statistical Survey—

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### I. 1. The Grandeur of *Beowulf*

As is often pointed out, *Beowulf* is one of the most valuable, and the most remarkable of the now existing works of Old English literature. B. Ifor Evans says, in his 'A Short History of English Literature', "Nothing in Old English literature can compare with *Beowulf*; it has the size and dignity of a classical epic."

Indeed, it is not too much to say that, in the long series of *Beowulf's* verse, we find a typical relief of Anglo-Saxon mentality, along with a detailed description of the social conditions at that time, an extremely good depiction of the court and courtiers with the king as the central point.

Together with the magnitude of its scale, the nobleness of its philosophy and the grandeur of its style, *Beowulf* is in a sense a consummation of all the Germanic epics, a supreme peak which commands the literary world of the Old English period.

Quite noticeable is the life criticism as it appears in the epic. The

keynote is, one might say, an overwhelming sincerity and severeness, valour and bravery; it is a product of Germanic heroism and Christian humanism amalgamated, an incarnation of a lofty spirit underlying the European moral ground.

Moreover, from the standpoint of philology, it is a rich source of informations about the language; originally written in the dialect of the Angles, it is, in fact, a mixture of linguistic specialities, so that we could call it an unexhaustible fountain of knowledge for phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics of the earliest stage of English.

## I. 2. Text, Method and Aim

So much for the outstanding qualities of *Beowulf*, and now allow me to make some remarks about the aim I intend to achieve in the present paper. First of all, I want to examine the vocabulary and the syntactical features of the epic by means of arithmetical calculation of the concerned items in the verse, and then, based on the results of the survey, to deduce some general principles, which determine the characteristics of the style in literary works, including *Beowulf*. In other words, I'll try to give a statistical ground to the popular impression of the 'grandeur of *Beowulf*', especially in respect of its style, thereby demonstrating its distinctive features in the form of concise indices.

As regards the text to be adopted in the survey, I met with some difficulty in deciding the appropriate one, for the only existing manuscript, hundreds of years distant from the Original, has a lot of deficiencies owing to the damages by fire and unsatisfactory preservation. Scholars disagree about the restoration of the missing words, so that we don't have yet an 'authorized version' of the epic.

After all, I came to the conclusion that I should turn to the authenticity

and orthodoxy, i. e. to the third edition of Fr. Klaeber's *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, which still enjoys a high reputation and popularity such as the Globe edition does in Shakespearian study.

In fact, it is three decades of years ago that I first conceived the idea of the present paper. At that time I scribbled out my poor speculations in even poorer English for the dissertation of master's degree. Now, after thirty years, I took up the theme again, and presented it in quite a new garment, cutting off minor details. I am not sure whether the trial is worth the trouble or not, but anyway it is underway. God only knows where it will lead to.

.....fæder alwalda  
mid ārstafum eowic gehēalde  
siða gesunde!

(May the Almighty Father keep you safe  
in your adventures by His grace!) *Beowulf* 316~18

## II. FUNDAMENTAL DATA

### II. 1. Words and Syllables per line in *Beowulf*

According to Klaeber's edition, the total number of words used in 3,182 lines of *Beowulf* is 17,163. This means five to six words per 'line'. The words contained in a single line of the epic are comparatively fewer than those of the poetical works in the later periods. For instance, Such eminent poets as Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Wordsworth have seven to nine words in a single line. This comes from the fact that the English language, since the Middle Ages, has gradually lost its inflectional forms, and resorted to the analytic way of expression rather than to synthetic one. This tendency appears in English very strong, and it has given up almost all the inflectional or synthetic devices, i. e. case-distinctions and

personal-temporal-modal conjugations, which are still fairly well preserved in modern German.

Words consist of syllables, and so I went further to count up the syllables per line in the works of the above-mentioned poets in order to be more exact about the matter concerned. I took up several pages at random from the said poets with the result following:

Chaucer.....	10 to 11
Shakespeare.....	10 to 11
Wordsworth.....	9 to 10

Now, in *Beowulf*, the figure is a little over 9, which is to say that the average number of syllables *per word* is also larger than any other of those poets.

This is supposedly because the original text abounds in such compound words as *heard-hicgende*, *helm-bērend*, *gryre-geatwe* and so on. Moreover, when we consider that the reporting verbs, which appear in modern English usually monosyllabic, are mostly polysyllabic in *Beowulf*, we may expect an exhaustive survey to confirm this tendency more prominent.

## II. 2. Distribution of Word-Classes in *Beowulf*

Our next concern is the distribution of the words employed as regards to their parts of speech. Depending upon the informations supplied by Klaeber in his third edition, and applying my own method of classifying, where he is not so definite, I made up the table below:

Noun .....	5,264	30.7%
Proper Noun .....	634	3.7%
Pronoun .....	2,290	13.3%
Adjective .....	1,660	9.7%

Numeral .....	152	0.9%
Verb .....	3,502	20.4%
Adverb .....	1,445	8.4%
Preposition .....	1,237	7.2%
Conjunction .....	980	5.7%
Interjection .....	9	0.0% (below the unit)
<hr/>		
Total	17,163	100.0%

### II. 3. Distribution of Word-Classes in the Works of Eminent Writers

Let us now go further to examine the said distribution in the works of some eminent writers classical and modern.

- a. Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1340—1400)  
 (the first 100 lines of the Prologue,  
*the Canterbury Tales*)

Noun & proper noun.....	154	21%
Pronoun.....	101	14%
Adjective.....	113	15%
Numeral.....	6	1%
Verb.....	112	17%
Adverb.....	55	7%
Preposition.....	111	15%
Conjunction.....	77	10%
Interjection.....	0	0%
<hr/>		
Total	739	100%

- b. William Shakespeare (1564—1616)  
 (the first 50 lines of *Hamlet*)

Noun.....	68	19%
Pronoun.....	74	21%
Adjective.....	35	10%
Numeral.....	3	1%
Verb.....	90	25%
Adverb.....	33	10%
Preposition.....	30	8%
Conjunction.....	15	4%
Interjection.....	5	2%

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Total	353	100%
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c. William Wordsworth (1770—1850)

(the first 45 lines of *Prelude*)

Noun.....	76	22%
Pronoun.....	51	15%
Adjective.....	65	19%
Numeral.....	1	0% (below the unit)
Verb.....	63	18%
Adverb.....	21	6%
Preposition.....	47	14%
Conjunction.....	20	6%
Interjection.....	1	0% (below the unit)

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Total	345	100%
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d. Aldous Huxley (1894—1963)

(the full text of “the Rest is Silence”  
in *the Music at Night*)

Noun.....	156	22%
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Pronoun.....	71	10%
Adjective .....	149	21%
Numeral .....	3	0% (below the unit)
Verb .....	132	18%
Adverb .....	65	9%
Preposition .....	101	14%
Conjunction .....	45	6%
Interjection .....	0	0%
.....		
Total	702	100%

e. Earnest Hemingway (1899—1961)

(the full text of “the Killers”  
in *Men without Women*)

Noun .....	633	21%
Pronoun .....	536	18%
Adjective .....	435	16%
Numeral .....	21	1%
Verb .....	707	24%
Adverb .....	211	7%
Preposition .....	307	10%
Conjunction .....	76	3%
Interjection .....	7	0% (below the unit)
.....		
Total	3,123	100%

Of course, there is a great difference in style as well as in the use of various kinds of words between verse and prose. So one might raise a question as to the necessity of referring to the modern prose writers in



comparison with *Beowulf*. But, besides elucidating stylistic traits of the epic, I intended to deduce general principles, which govern different genres of literature to make them clear-cut from one another, by means of statistical data.

### III. STATIC INDEX

#### III. 1. Statistical Approach to the Study of Literary Works

Based upon the fundamental data obtained above, we shall now proceed to examine the style of *Beowulf* from the lexical standpoint. Generally speaking, the impression we get from some literary work comes chiefly from two sources, subjective and objective. The first cannot be expressed in the form of exact numerical data, because it concerns the personal philosophy, life and worldview, individual esthetical and ethical stance and other incalculable factors of the critic. The second limits itself only to the visible, ascertainable features of the object considered, and aims to attain the results established, which leave little room for intervention of personal inclination.

In the latter field of study, we have a number of predecessors, like Caroline Spurgeon in Shakespearology. She counted up the the image-words of frequent appearance in Shakespeare's plays, and acquired fairly convincing results about the personal predilections and private life of the playwright, which had long been a matter of mere inference.

In spite of the critical remarks against her argumentation, it is to be admitted that she opened a new perspective in the field of Shakespeare study, and the present paper aims to corroborate, after her example, the impression of 'grandeur', which *Beowulf* gives to the reader, with 'objective data' gained from 'calculation'.

### III. 2. 'Thing-words' and 'Action-words'

One of the decisive factors that characterise the style of a literary work is the balance of the words for 'things' and those for 'actions'. The former are the words which function in the utterance as subjects, and compliments, i. e. speaking in terms of parts of speech, as nouns, pronouns and their equivalents. The latter are the words which describe about the state or performance of the former, i. e. so-called verbs and their equivalents.

'Thing-words, are, so to say, the 'cores' of the utterance, where the thoughts or ideas in our mind take concrete shapes in articulate units. Psychology teaches us, that our vague senses or perceptions, produced in response to some object or event in the real world, concentrate into a definite visible form when we give them specific nomenclature. Hence 'names' are the means by which we realize our mental activities in comprehensible phonetic symbols.

On the other hand, 'action-words' are dynamic in nature, as compared with the static nature of 'thing-words'. They give the utterance a 'movement', cause the reader's flow of thoughts ever up and down, combine and communicate with one another the thoughts and ideas expressed in 'thing-words', which are otherwise apt to remain isolated and don't serve any more than a mere enumeration of dispersed and disconnected pieces of notions.

Therefore, when we discuss the stylistic features of a literary work, we have to pay sufficient attention to these two contradictory forces; the fixing, centripetal, and static force, and the fluid, centrifugal, and dynamic one, and their interrelation as well.

Indeed, it is to the delicate equilibrium of these two forces, that we should resort when we determine the stylistic specialities of a written document in general.

### III. 3. Static Indices of *Beowulf*

Now, the above mentioned being kept in mind, let us examine the 'balance of powers' of these two forces in *Beowulf*.

- In the following table, 'Verb' includes not only finites, but also auxiliaries and participles, except when they are judged to belong distinctly to other parts of speech.

Here is the percentage of Nouns and their equivalents and that of Verbs in *Beowulf*

Noun .....	30.3%	
Pronoun .....	13.3%	Verb .....
Proper Noun ...	3.7%	.....B
<hr/>		
Total	47.7%	.....A

It is clear, from the table above, that in *Beowulf* the static force is very dominant over the dynamic.

The Rate of A : B is 2.3.

Moreover, adjectives and numerals belong to the similar inflectional group as nouns, i.e. declensional, and are often employed nominally. They usually function to modify nouns and their equivalents, the cores of the utterance, sometimes going so far as to increase the static effect of the words qualified by them.

These circumstances being taken in consideration, we might add to the above table adjectives and numerals in favour of the static forces. Then, we get the result as below;

Noun etc. ....	47.7%
Adjective .....	9.7%

Numeral ..... 0.9%

Total 58.3%.....A'

As the result, A' : B is 2.8.

Thus we know the overwhelming weight, in *Beowulf*, of nouns and their equivalents over verbs and their equivalents. And the fact just explains why the epic gives the reader the impression of stability, steadiness, and majestic ambulation, or in a word, "grandeur". Nouns follow one after another in abundance of appositional usage, which present us a series of still pictures rather than a fluid stream of consecutive movie-film without little interruption. So the contrasts above-mentioned of A : B and A' : B have much importance, as they offer an objective, statistical base to the appraisal of the style of a literary work. We might call them STATIC INDICES 1 and 2, or S 1 and S 2 shortly.

### III. 4. Static Indices in the Works of Eminent Writers

Here below are shown the concerned numerical values about the writers so far referred to in comparison with those of *Beowulf* ;

	Beowulf	Chaucer	Shakespeare	Wordsworth	Huxley	Hemingway
A	47.7%	35%	40%	37%	32%	39%
A'	53.8%	51%	51%	50%	56%	56%
B	20.4%	17%	25%	18%	18%	24%
A : B	2.3	2.1	1.6	2.1	1.5	1.6
A' : B	2.8	3.0	2.0	3.1	2.9	2.3

What we can deduce from the above table might be as follows;

1. **Chaucer** His style is said to be very descriptive and picturesque, to which his S 1(A:B) and S 2(A':B) make an endorsement. Compared with *Beowulf*, he resorts to less nouns and more adjectives, and rather poor in action-words. Although the static indices are almost the same as those of *Beowulf*, an aspect of Chaucer's features is clearly seen in the figures of the table.

2. **Shakespeare** Both S 1 and S 2 are very low. The reason apparently lies in the nature of his dramas, usually written in conversational style except stage directions, so that interrogative and imperative sentences often appear, which naturally require a lot of verbs. We may notice the high percentage of verbs (B), that explains the fluid and active character of his plays.

3. **Wordsworth** The two indices are considerably high, nearly the same as in *Beowulf* and Chaucer. It may be because of the meditative tone of *the Prelude*, chosen for data. Generally, we could say a static inclination in style characterizes the verse as introspective, contemplative, and philosophical. Of course, Wordsworth is a poet of grand scale and versatility, and so he has different traits of style in his other works, but anyway here we have at least one important evidence of his style in a visible form.

4. **Huxley** Here is quite another genre of literature, an article or an essay. As a matter of fact, we may expect a dissimilar bent of style, and our anticipation proves to be right. The great gap between A and A' suggests rather long sentences with epithets modifying nouns, while the relatively low value of B gives the whole narrative not so much an animated fluency as a logical and intellectual secureness.

**5. Hemingway** We take up another example of literary work, a novel. Among others, Hemingway is remarkable for his peculiar way of writing, so-called "hard-boiled" style. Short sentences follow one another in staccato-like manner. As a rule, they all need some verb(s), hence the high value of B in Hemingway. It is interesting to see that the S 1 and S 2 approaches to those of Shakespeare in spite of the difference of genres, which also testifies the quick and light-stepped pace of the novelist.

Lastly, for summing up, we may make the following remarks:

"A literary work which shows a high degree of S 1 and S 2 is felt to be 'logical or meditative', or 'heavy and grandiose'. On the other hand, that which has a low degree of those indices does impress us as 'active, fluent, and vivacious'. We may call the former 'static', and the latter 'dynamic'.

### **III. 5. Other Factors in Favor of the Static Effect of *Beowulf***

The S 1 and S 2 of *Beowulf* are 2.3 and 2.8 respectively, which means that it is the highest of the writers referred to as to the S 1, but not so high, against our anticipation, in respect of S 2. This comes, in my opinion, from the 'Einfeltigkeit', simplicity or unsophisticated-ness of the style of *Beowulf*. With the clauses juxtaposed without little connective devices, abundance of nouns and pronouns giving the effect of detaining the thoughts, scarcity of adjectives and the like to decorate the object in point, the consequent result is somewhat 'primitive', reminding us the stubborn, 'rough-hewn' heroes of the period of Vikings, to which the story of the epic is related.

In this respect, quite persuasive sound the remarks of Klaeber;

“The preponderance of the nominal over the verbal element, one of the outstanding features of the ancient diction, runs parallel to the favorite practice of stating merely the result of an action and of dwelling on a state or situation when a straightforward account would seem to be called for.” (Klaeber, 3rd edition, pp. lxx—lxxvi)

Also very noticeable in *Beowulf* is the frequent use of synonymous words, i. e. ‘kennings’. One and the same object or event is described in a lot of ways over and over again, which is presumably an inevitable technique to ascertain the comprehension of the audience in oral transmission. This is also the case with adjectives. Series of synonymous majestic epithets serve to increase stability and ‘grandeur’ of the epic. Besides, exuberance of pronouns is to be mentioned. We have very numerous examples of reflective pronouns, pronominal particles, combinations of personal pronoun and relative pronoun etc. in *Beowulf*, which, in Modern English, are obsolete or utterly replaced by other ways of expression.

All these factors together with others join hands in increasing the static effect of the style of *Beowulf*.

#### IV. PARATACTICAL INDEX

##### IV. 1. Scarcity of Connectives and Loose Construction in *Beowulf*

So much for the Static Indices of *Beowulf*, which are related to the lexical side of the epic, and now we go further to inquire into its syntactical specialities, namely the Parataxis of *Beowulf*.

As is well known among the scholars of the Anglo-Saxon literature, *Beowulf* is very poor in connecting devices of clauses and phrases. In other words, it employs far less conjunctions than in the modern language.

In many cases clauses are simply put aside one beside another without explicit elements, which manifest the logical relation between themselves. This is called 'parataxis', etymologically: 'putting in order side by side (for battle)'.

The most striking feature of parataxis is, as already said, scarcity of connectives, i. e. prepositions and conjunctions. Lacking these devices, paratactical construction relies upon the context or some simple particles of ambiguous or yet unspecified function, for showing the semantic interrelationship between the adjunct clauses.

For instance, the 'monotonous' *þa*, originally an adverb and sometimes used as a relative, plays, in *Beowulf*, the role of various conjunctions of the modern language. Furthermore, we find in the epic a lot of cases, where quite a new topic (a clause not much related to the preceding parts) is abruptly introduced to the effect that the reader is often at a loss about the consequentality of the story.

All these circumstances combine to give the epic the impression of a primitive terseness, which is rarely to be seen in modern poetry.

#### IV. 2. 'Substantials' and 'Formals'

Now, our next task is to examine another prominent feature of *Beowulf*, parataxis, on the basis of statistical survey as applied before to the vocabulary of the epic.

From the syntactical point of view, we can divide all the words in speech into two categories: one is 'concrete' and the other is 'abstract'. The former includes those words, which have anyway their 'objects' (things, notions and actions) either material or immaterial, in the real world, to stand for. To this category belong nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs and verbs. They are, so to say, 'SUBSTANTIALS'.



Meanwhile the latter doesn't have such 'objects' to point to; it merely indicates the logical or semantic relationship between the words, or in other words it expresses the subjective attitude the speaker takes towards the objects he perceives or cogitates. Such are e. g. prepositions, conjunctions and interjections. We may call them 'FORMALS'.

Both 'substantials' and 'formals' have a function of their own in a given work. The richness of the content generally depends upon the multiplicity and diversity of substantials, while the clarity and exactitude of the argument relies upon the abundance and proper usage of formals. So, in a sense, the 'balance of powers' of these two forces has a great influence on the style of a literary work in general.

From this point of view, we might have another possibility of explaining the 'grandeur' of *Beowulf*, contrasting the number of substantials with that of formals in the epic.

#### IV. 3. Paratactical Index in *Beowulf*

By simply counting up the concerned items arranged in order in the Glossary at the end of Klaeber's third edition, We can get the following table:

Substantials	14, 949	87.1%.....C
Formals	2, 214	12.9%.....D
<hr/>		
Total	17, 163	100.0%

(the total number of lines in *Beowulf* 3, 182)

C : D = 6.75.....Paratactical Index

We can easily see that here the formals are very sparingly employed, almost 2 in 3 lines. In fact, in the epic, we find many lines without a single connective, or, as it is the same thing, there are many lines, where

nouns, and adjectives of nominal use are put side by side with nothing to show their mutual relation. Even the clauses (unit utterances with subject (s) and verb(s)) often lack connective devices between themselves, so that we have to probe the contextual situations to determine causal, temporal, or consecutive relation of the segments in question.

As to the parataxis of the epic, Klaeber says that the undertone of *Beowulf* is "the jerky movement and lack of a steady flow in narrative". The paratactical index 6.75 above is enough to prove the truth of his remarks, if we compare the same index in the works of the writers referred to before.

#### IV. 4. Paratactical Index in the Works of Eminent Writers

Based upon the data as mentioned in II. 3., we can compile the result of our survey in the table following:

	Substantials		Formals		Parat. Index
Chaucer	541	75%	188	25%	3.0
Shakespeare	303	86%	50	14%	6.2
Wordsworth	277	80%	68	20%	4.0
Huxley	576	80%	146	20%	4.0
Hemingway	2543	87%	390	13%	6.7

After all considerations, in terms of paratactical index, *Beowulf* is nearest to Shakespeare and most distant to Chaucer as a verse. The fact seems to reflect, even though partially, the course of vicissitude that English poetry has gone through from the ancient heavy and jerky style to the

medieval light and fluent one and then again to the style of the pseudo-antiquities. However, in the case of Shakespeare, the nature of the genre, i. e. drama, excludes too much use of connectives, and so the problem here is not the restoration of the ancient style, but the development of a new category of literature prosperous at that time.

Wordsworth and Huxley represent, in spite of the insufficient quantity of the data, the bent of the epoch and the genre. They are anyway the sons of modern times, the era of Reason and Logic. It means the use of connectives syntactically for making clear their statement by necessary steps of presentation. Especially remarkable is the tendency in prose, which tries to convince the reader to the purport of the author chiefly by displaying his argument in logical order.

Hemingway is an exception, for he engages in a different kind of literary work, i. e. novels and mostly short ones. As mentioned before, the peculiarity of his 'hard-boiled' style, i. e. staccato series of short sentences, limits the use of connectives to the minimum, and so the paratactical index reaches the highest, almost the same as that of *Beowulf*.

#### IV. 5. Conclusive Remarks

Thus, after calculations, comparisons, and formulations, we have come to a certain conclusion that the impression we get from a literary work has much to do with the way various kinds of words are used and the amount of connective devices. It is said that style is man, but here we might say, in a sense, that style is figures. And I hope this posture will serve to prevent an intervention of personal likes and dislikes in literary criticism to some extent, and found our appraisal of the style of a literary work on a firmer footing.

## POSTSCRIPT

Now back to the main theme, have we attained the original aim of the present paper to give the endorsement to the general impression of *Beowulf*, "Grandeur", on the basis of statistical survey?

Not so fully, I'm afraid. But I believe that at least our two clues to the elucidation of the stylistic features of *Beowulf* have proved to be effective to some extent, and served to render visible and tangible in numerical value the so far unsettled, obscure 'inkling' of something solemn, grandiose and magnificent in *Beowulf*.

Lastly I would like to repeat the purport of the present paper; "The Static Indices and the Paratactical Index are two important keys to the solution of the syntactic problems in *Beowulf*". Their high values indicate, in verse, the weighty pace and jerky progress of the work, characteristic of the literary pieces of the olden times.

I don't know that the present paper originally conceived thirty years ago might be still worthy of scholars' attention. Meanwhile better and more detailed studies might have appeared. So anyway, let it be a modest tombstone dedicated to the memory of those days at college that are gone for ever.

Gæð ā wyrd, swā hio scel!

(Fate goes ever as it must!) *Beowulf*, 455

—FINIS—

(Dec, 23, 1988)

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『ベーオウルフ』の荘嚴

——統計的研究——

水野義明

古英語期の最も重要な叙事詩『ベーオウルフ』は、その深遠な内容とともに、荘重、重厚な独特の文体をもって知られている。小論では、その文体の与える印象の所以を、統計的な手法を用いて解明しようとした。すなわち、「静的指数」(名詞・形容詞類と動詞類との比率)と「並列指数」(実質詞と形式詞との比率)を設定し、英文学史上各時代の代表的作家と『ベーオウルフ』について両指数の値を比較し、上記の印象の由来を数値をもって明示した。指数が高ければ、文体も古式の「荘嚴」に近づくという論旨である。