

AN ANALYSIS OF SURPRISE ADJECTIVES IN JANE AUSTEN'S PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

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Abstract: This article explores the use of surprise adjectives in *Pride and Prejudice* by analyzing their frequency and context. It focuses on five adjectives: *surprised*, *astonished*, *bewildered*, *shocked*, and *startled* – words that explicitly denote surprise or confusion. The aim is to quantify their occurrences and interpret their usage patterns in the novel's dialogue and narration.

Keywords: linguistics, surprise adjectives, *Pride and prejudice*, emotion, corpus

Introduction

In linguistics and psychology, surprise is acknowledged as a basic emotional reaction to unexpected events. According to Ekman (1992), surprise is one of the six fundamental human emotions that are always produced when an occurrence deviates from a person's preconceived notions. Linguistically, surprise is encoded not only by interjections and exclamatives but also by adjectives that nuance intensity, valence, and speaker stance (Bednarek, 2008; Ortony et al., 1988). According to literary theory, surprise can operate as a catalyst for character development as well as a means of drawing readers in. In linguistics, the words “*surprised*”, “*astonished*” and “*amazed*”, as well as their synonyms, are frequently used to express surprise. For instance, a dictionary definition mentions *astonished* and *shocked* as similar synonyms and states that one feels “*surprised*” when “taken unawares by something unexpected.” These adjectives express the author's viewpoint on events and can indicate a character's emotional response to plot twists or social disclosures in narrative fiction.

The precise function of surprise adjectives in classic literature has not been thoroughly examined, despite the fact that surprise is fundamental to human cognition. Because of its abundance of character interactions and social subtleties, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a perfect example to study how surprise is lexically marked.

Methods

A digital version of *Pride and Prejudice* that is accessible to the general public (Austen, 2003) was used to conduct the analysis. A keyword search (corpus concordance) was conducted to find the adjectives “*astonished*”, “*surprised*”, “*bewildered*”, “*shocked*”, and “*startled*” in the text. Definitions of each word were obtained from authoritative sources: Cambridge Dictionary (Cambridge University Press) and Merriam-Webster, Dictionary.com which provide precise explanations and usage notes.

Results

| Adjective | Count | Percent of set |
|------------|-------|----------------|
| Surprised | 32 | 58.2% |
| astonished | 12 | 21.8% |
| shocked | 8 | 14.5% |
| startled | 2 | 3.6% |
| bewildered | 1 | 1.8% |
| Total | 55 | 100% |

According to the corpus data analyzed, surprised emerges as the most frequently used adjective to convey the emotion of surprise, followed by astonished and shocked. In contrast, adjectives such as startled and bewildered appear far less commonly, suggesting a narrower contextual or semantic range. The extracted sentences illustrate the typical usage patterns of each adjective, highlighting both their syntactic environments and the varying degrees of intensity or formality they convey. This frequency distribution aligns with previous findings that emphasize the prototypical status of surprised in everyday and academic discourse, while also pointing to the nuanced expressive potential of less frequent adjectives.

Characters who experience heightened or repeated surprise often prefer the adjective *astonished*, which conveys a stronger emotional intensity and a more formal or dramatic tone compared to the more commonly used *surprised*.

'I have received a letter this morning that has astonished me exceedingly' (p99).

'I am astonished, my dear,' said Mrs. Bennet, 'that you should be so ready to think your own children silly. If I wished to think slightly of anybody's children, it should not be of my own, however.' (p39)

'I am astonished,' said Miss Bingley, 'that my father should have left so small a collection of books. What a delightful library you have at Pemberley, Mr. Darcy!' (51)

Surprised appears in various dialogues: Miss Bingley remarks, *'I am no longer surprised at your knowing ONLY six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing ANY.'* (p54) and Sir William and Mr. Bennet discuss being surprised by Lady Catherine's hospitality. Mrs. Lucas asks Elizabeth, *"Why should you be surprised, my dear Eliza? Do you think it incredible that Mr. Collins should be able to procure any woman's good opinion, because he was not so happy as to succeed with you?"* (p178), showing moderate surprise.

Shocked is used in stronger reactions:

'Miss Bennet I am shocked and astonished. I expected to find a more reasonable young woman (p493).

The adjective *startled* appears only twice in the dataset, both instances occurring in narrative contexts. This limited frequency suggests that *startled* is primarily used as a descriptive tool by narrators rather than as an expressive term in character dialogue:

"This information, however, startled Mrs. Bennet after hearing unexpected news (p156).

The lone *bewildered* appears in Lydia's panicked letter: *'By this time, my dearest sister, you have received my hurried letter; I wish this may be more intelligible, but though not confined for time, my head is so bewildered that I cannot answer for being coherent. Dearest Lizzy, I hardly know what I would write, but I have bad news for you, and it cannot be delayed (p372).*

Discussion

The information demonstrates that Austen's characters select surprising adjectives based on their emotional significance and meanings. Dictionaries clarify the distinctions between intensity and nuance. Merriam-Webster and Cambridge Dictionary define "*astonished*" as "*very surprise*", implying an almost inconceivable astonishment. This enhanced sense is supported by Austen's usage of the word "*astonished*" for significant revelations (e.g., Mr. Bennet reading Darcy's letter). Even for moderate astonishment, however, the word *surprised* is used more widely and frequently (e.g., Miss Lucas's question, "*Why should you be surprised?*"). This supports the idea that the general term in the synonym set is *surprise*. *Astonished* frequently accompanies *shocked*, enhancing surprise with disapproval. *Shock*, according to Cambridge, is a "*large, unpleasant surprise*". In keeping with the historical use of the word "*shock*" (originally to offend or disgust), Lady Catherine's remark, "*shocked and astonished*," conveys a moral horror beyond simple surprise. In a similar vein, Dictionary.com emphasises suddenness when defining *startled* as "*disturbed or agitated suddenly, as by surprise or alarm*." In contrast to astonishment, the word "*bewilder*" implies confusion or perplexity. These definitions demonstrate how the intensity and subtlety of synonyms for surprise differ.

In conclusion, our research demonstrates that *Pride and Prejudice* uses a variety of adjectives to describe astonishment, each of which reflects a distinct nuance of meaning. In keeping with its function as the fundamental term for unexpectedness, *surprised* is the most often used word. According to dictionary definitions, the rarer adjectives (*astonished*, *shocked*, *startled*, *bewildered*) are saved for more extreme or particular reactions. Understanding these differences improves our comprehension of the language used in the book and the responses of the characters. These adjectives successfully dramatise the novel's social and psychological turning points by

punctuating important conversations and epiphanies. According to the current research, even everyday adjectives of surprise have a big impact on literary narratives.

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