

Measuring the 'Epification' of Drama

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This paper is a quantitative research on the evolution of dramatic texts since 1740-es to the first quarter of the XX century. Using our [TEI-encoded corpus of plays](#) [Fischer et al. 2017], we analyze the changes in length and linguistic composition of stage directions. These changes, in our view, reflect the general 'epification' of drama – a process that later culminates with the emergence of Brecht's 'epic theatre'.

"A stage direction can be detailed and evocative <...> More typically, however, is direction that lacks specific details but instead invokes a formula where the implementation of the onstage effect is left to the players or to the imagination of a reader" [Dessen 2011]. When one reads a play from the XVIII or early XIX century, she or he may not even notice stage directions at all. They are usually short and purely technical: 'characters A and B', 'enter character A', 'leave character B' etc. However, as new types of drama evolve, stage directions become more elaborate (see fig. 1) and content-rich, turning into a significant part of the dramatic narrative. Some examples from our corpus include 'The Puppet Show' by Blok, 'Gondla' by Gumilev and 'Jubilee' by Chekhov.

Much like Moretti in his study on the evolution of novelistic titles [Moretti 2009], we made an attempt to quantify and measure these changes in dramatic texts. We implemented some simple measures, such as the overall ratio of stage directions (in words) to the total length of the play, the share of verbs in stage directions (a marker of narrative text), and the total number of unique verbs in them.

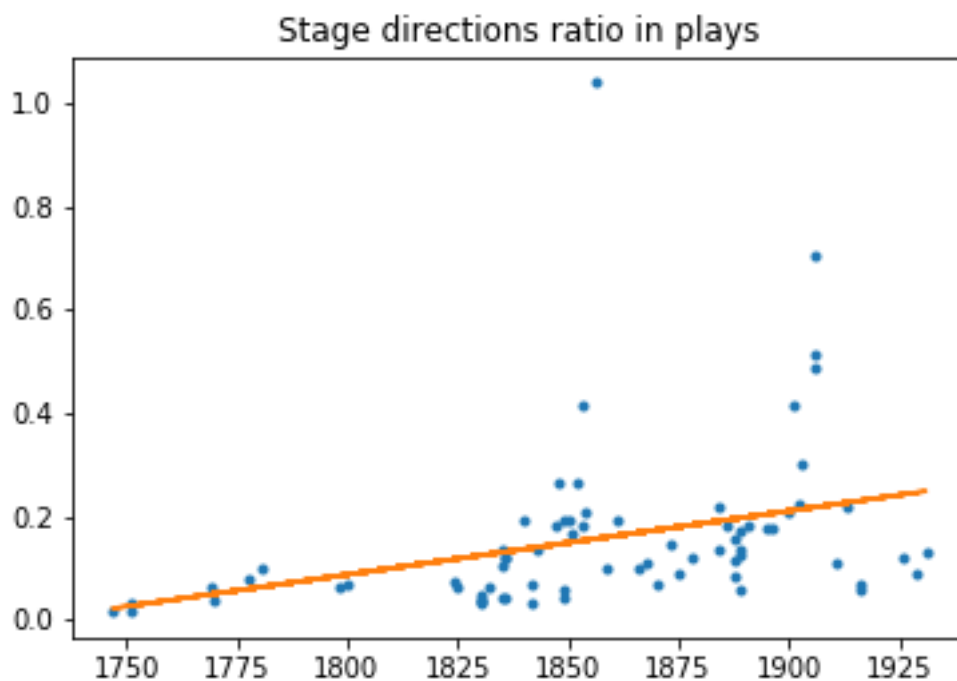


Figure 1

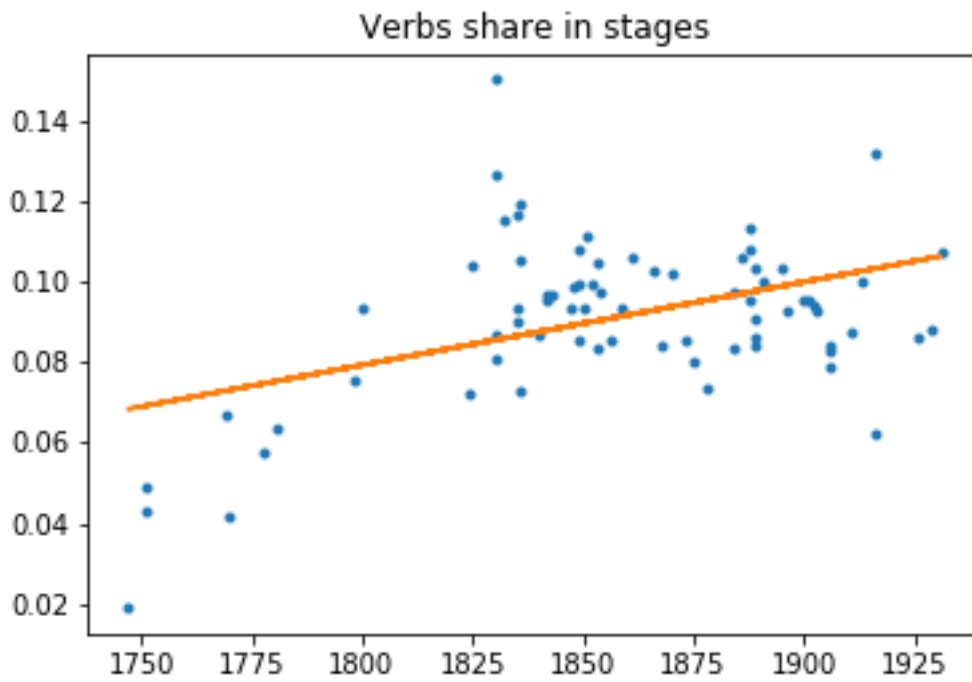


Figure 2

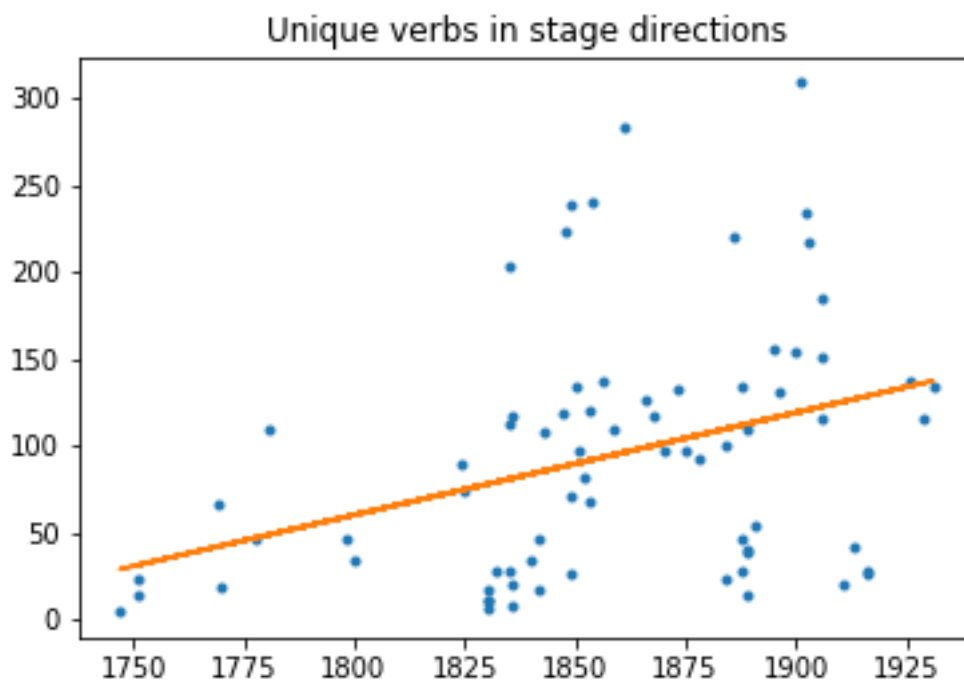


Figure 3

As one can see from figures 1-3, all measures show steady increase over time. And though the dependency is not strictly linear, we can certainly claim that no play in XVIII or early XIX century has traits of 'epification' in it.

References

Dessen A. (2011). Stage Directions and the Theater Historian. In *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theatre*. Oxford University Press.

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Moretti F. (2009). Style, Inc. Reflections on Seven Thousand Titles (British Novels, 1740–1850). In: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Autumn 2009), pp. 134-158.