

Chapter 16. Language Policing to Language Curiosity: Using Corpus Analysis to Foreground Linguistic Diversity

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Language Acknowledgment. The author acknowledges that this chapter uses English, a language brought to North America and used to overshadow or eclipse hundreds of Native American languages, including ones still used today such as Navajo and Ojibwe and many now extinct such as Yahi and Natchez. This chapter specifically uses standardized written academic English, a dialect of English that has been used, particularly since the 18th century, to establish and maintain racial, socioeconomic, educational, and other forms of inequity by privileging the usage criteria and preferences of a small number of language users at the expense of other dialects which are equally systematic (rule-governed) and meaningful. By offering this language acknowledgment, I strive to raise awareness about and acknowledge my own participation in the linguistic homogeneity of U.S. research and teaching, even as I also hope that the ideas in this chapter offer some alternatives to this long-standing and limiting homogeneity.

The Contradiction

Most college writing courses represent a clear contradiction between theory and practice. In theory, writing instructors believe in diversity and inclusion. We believe diversity extends the limits of what we know and helps us see those very limits. We believe diversity is not only inevitable in higher education but that it makes it stronger, which means that linguistic diversity is inevitable and positive for higher education. For decades, rhetoric and writing scholarship has stressed that supporting students' language diversity supports students' identities and cultures (CCCC "Students' Right to Their Own Language"; CCCC "This Ain't Another Statement! This Is a Demand for Black Linguistic Justice!"; Horner et al.; Inoue; Perryman-Clark "African American Language, Rhetoric, and Students' Writing: New Directions for Srtol"; Smitherman "Students' Right to Their Own Language': A Retrospective"), and linguistics research has likewise long underscored that all languages consist of multiple, equally systematic dialects (Curzan; McWhorter *Word on the Street: Debunking the Myth of a Pure Standard English*).

From these, we can define linguistic diversity accordingly: the condition of human language as composed of different registers and dialects, which are all linguistically equal but socially differentiated, in other words, equally rule-governed and responsive to community needs but valued differently according to socially constructed hierarchies. This definition highlights that language difference is inherent in language—difference, and dissonance, are common ground (Gonzales). It follows, too, that such linguistic diversity merits critical language awareness, or descriptive analysis informed by awareness of linguistic equity and socially constructed value across different uses of language (see, for example, Shapiro 2022).

In practice, we teach classes and work in educational institutions in which language difference is punished rather than celebrated: language difference is common ground, but the social value attached to different language use is not. Our writing courses almost invariably assess students based on the norms of a single dialect, standardized written academic English (SWAE). Writing instructors and scholars are likewise held to these norms. After their use of SWAE in their own schooling, they write applications, funding proposals, instructional materials, and scholarship in SWAE. It is possible for writing instructors to feature diverse voices in a course reading list and to expect students to write in a homogeneous way in student papers. It is possible for writing instructors to do this without understanding or discussing this contradiction with students. In short, it is common to find writing pedagogies that support diversity in theory while maintaining linguistic homogeneity in practice, a contradiction I have repeatedly participated in and reified myself, first unwittingly and later in the name of access, and still as I write this in SWAE and struggle with the narrow constraints of my ability to express these ideas. Building on the definition of linguistic diversity above, we can define linguistic homogeneity as the privileging of a single register and dialect of human language. At its most common and problematic, linguistic homogeneity suggests a single dialect is linguistically superior without accompanying critical language awareness, or without descriptive analysis with acknowledgment of linguistic equity and socially constructed difference.

There are many reasons for linguistic diversity in theory and linguistic homogeneity in practice. One is that much related scholarship has to date focused more on theory rather than practical strategies for classrooms; another is that many writing courses are taught by instructors trained in English literary studies rather than currently descriptive traditions like linguistics (Hasty et al.; Aull). A related reason is writing instructor and/ or programmatic training that insists that offering access to discourses of power means only assigning and offering feedback on SWAE in conventional genres, rather than a fuller range of student meaning-making strategies (Martín et al.). Even for those who believe in diversity and inclusion, it can be hard to determine how to *do* linguistic diversity in writing classrooms.

This chapter proposes that linguistic analysis helps us escape this contradiction by enacting a paradigm shift from language policing to language curiosity, or a paradigm in which language is a site for descriptive exploration rather than

for dialect hierarchies and mastery. The essence of this idea is not new; research reviewed in the next section makes language a subject of critical, reflective inquiry, for instance, in literacy narrative assignment tasks. But this chapter turns to digital approaches to make an additional proposal: that corpus linguistic analysis offers not only a mindset but a methodology for centering our pedagogies on linguistic diversity. It is a method that makes diverse language use an object of analysis versus evaluation. The next section provides context for understanding why this matters, followed by sample corpus tools for use in writing classrooms.

Responses to the Contradiction

Research in rhetoric and writing shows clear concern over the ways that writing classrooms maintain discourses of power while aiming to offer access to them. Two responses include calls for better understanding and acknowledgment of language difference and calls for better understanding of standardized language expectations. Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Royster, and John Trimbur call for translingual writing classrooms that critically analyze a range of language choices (Horner et al). Mike Duncan and Star Vanguri call for style studies that “move beyond impressionistic language that is rooted in value judgments and toward specific language that names those features of writing we value” (xiii). Both approaches call for what Horner et al. describe as “*more*, not less, conscious and critical attention to how writers deploy diction, syntax, and style, as well as form, register, and media” (304).

Calls for alternative discourses suggest that including both standardizing and non-standardizing language will help rhetoric and composition studies explore new methods and reach broader publics (Bizzell 12). Geneva Smitherman has for decades drawn on multiple dialects in her scholarly writing (a pertinent example: “See, when you lambast the home language that kids bring to school, you ain just dissent dem, you talking about they mommas!” [Smitherman “Ebonics, King, and Oakland” 99]). Suresh Canagarajah builds on Bruce Horner and John Trimbur’s call for multiple languages in composition classrooms by making a case for “think[ing] of English as a plural language that embodies multiple norms and standards” through consideration of multimodal and multilingual literacy traditions (Canagarajah 589, 600). Laura Gonzales underscores translation as multimodal practice, inherent to language fluidity valuable in academic and professional contexts and evidence of the power of instability and constant flux (112).

Michael MacDonald and William DeGenaro outline a basic writing program model that supports a “transcultural ethos” for writing classrooms by making various language practices a subject of critical, reflective inquiry in literacy narrative assignment tasks, joining others who similarly point to literacy narratives as sites for inviting and supporting linguistic diversity in composition classrooms (Lovejoy et al.). Staci Perryman Clark’s “African American Language, Rhetoric, and Students’ Writing” uses a linguistically informed approach to show how three

African American composition students successfully use phonological and syntactical features of Ebonics alongside SWAE to analyze genres and achieve rhetorical goals, including conveying specific cultural ideas and codeswitching for communicative situations.

Calls for fostering awareness focus more on critical analysis of SWAE. Keith Gilyard suggests that “the ascension toward a more perfect democracy” depends on students’ ability to “comprehend as completely as possible how discourse operates, which means understanding how the dominant or most powerful discourse serves to regulate and reproduce patterns of privilege” (266). Rhetorical genre studies support this approach by advocating genre awareness, including students’ critical analysis of the interplay of constraint and choice in written academic discourse (Devitt *Writing Genres*). Rhetorical genre theory builds specifically on Lloyd Bitzer’s notion of rhetorical situations that recur, through which “a form of discourse is not only established but comes to have a power of its own” (13). Genres help reveal students’ apprenticeship and socialization through norms of discourse (Miller); a current threshold concept in composition is that genres are enacted by writers and readers through habitual responses to rhetorical situations (Hart-Davidson 39). These ideas theoretically evoke the primacy of discourse or at least a mutually informative relationship between discourse choices (used by individuals and across many individuals) and genre; they suggest that genres not only produce discourse but also socialize attendant ways of thinking and being through recurring discourse (Bawarshi).

Even this brief outline shows that these two responses—calling for alternative discourses and calling for critical awareness—overlap in important ways. They share the goal of fostering students’ ability to recognize dominant discourses. They share the idea that there are no innately superior discourses, only discourses that are more and less socially and economically powerful. And they place language at the center of Carol Severino’s question for composition courses—*Is the purpose of a composition course to help students fit into society or to convince them to change it?* (74). Too, these responses throw into sharp contrast disjuncture between the freedom we preach and the practices we maintain, a double dealing I participate in by writing this essay in SWAE. With exceptions like Perryman Clark’s study, these two responses are also primarily ideological, in that they concern how we think about standardizing English, and they are sociocultural, in that they focus on the social value and implications for its use. These albeit important conversations in composition, in other words, rarely draw systematic attention to language—to the linguistic characteristics of standardizing and non-standardizing language use.

There are some calls for more linguistically informed approaches, not least because assessment usually does focus on language, intentionally or otherwise, by enforcing conventional grammatical and mechanical rules about SWAE. Indeed, many instructors feel very concerned about prescribed mechanical correctness even as research suggests that student success does not depend on it as much as

instructors think (Crossley et al.; Freedman; Matsuda). Scholars working in both composition and applied linguistics like Paul Matsuda and Jerry Won Lee emphasize the need for more attention to language and more training in how learners acquire and use it. Matsuda, after calling for an updated understanding of applied linguistics in composition, recommends grammar feedback with metalinguistic commentary based on studies showing the clear value of such feedback for students (Matsuda). To move beyond current discussions about translingual writing, Lee argues we need to “recognize the necessary limitations to any universal assessment criterion” and to support linguistic social justice by “confronting the inequitable discursive economies that afford disproportionate amounts of social capital to certain language practices over others” (184, 177).

In practice, however, it is rare to see systematic attention to language in rhetoric and writing studies because decades of genre-based analysis of student writing has “largely . . . set aside” language or form (Devitt “Re-Fusing Form in Genre Study” 27). Since the “social turn,” rhetoric and writing studies have focused especially on individual texts and contexts even as applied linguistics research has examined genre-based discourse patterns (see e.g., Johns; Nesi and Gardner; Staples et al.; Swales). For example, social turn research has examined assignment descriptions and writing habits of small groups of first-year students (e.g., Downs and Wardle; Sullivan), the genre knowledge of students in first-year courses (Rounsaville et al.), or the transfer experiences of a single student or a handful of students throughout undergraduate coursework (e.g., Beaufort; Driscoll and Powell). These studies primarily examine student responses to writing assignments via qualitative and ethnographic methods, focusing on “the interactions of people with texts” in individual cases and contexts (Russell 226), rather than linguistic choices that appear meaningful across contexts and individuals.

These historical developments mean that since the social turn in rhetoric and composition studies, we have gained a more critical and nuanced understanding of individual students and contexts and the myriad challenges associated with transfer across different discourse communities. It means that, research focused on composition classrooms has made the important theoretical case that discourse is a constitutive force in academic genres. It means that many U.S. instructors trained to teach composition have learned the crucial point that language ideologies are embedded and persistent in schooling, and thus those important interventions such as literacy narrative assignments can help students recognize and reflect on those ideologies.

It also means that, while important exceptions appear in research on rhetorical grammar, style, discourse analysis, second language writing, and corpus analysis, contemporary rhetoric and composition largely reflects what Robert Connors called the “erasure of the sentence,” what Susan Peck MacDonald called the “erasure of language,” and what Matsuda described as “the dismissal of various insights from language studies that can inform the study and teaching of writing” (Matsuda “Let’s Face It” 150). It means that pedagogically, we lack a clear frame-

work for discussing language-level choices with students (Butler); and methodologically, analytic approaches that examine language-level patterns across texts and contexts are rarely used in U.S. writing studies (Lancaster “Academics”; Aull).

Most relevant to the discussion here is that a lack of systematic attention to language in rhetoric and composition studies has left us without a sophisticated understanding of the discursive conditions of SWAE, even as our students and our scholarship are overwhelmingly bound to them. For many instructors, this lack of linguistic understanding can perpetuate standard language ideologies, including that SWAE is normal, natural, non-interfering, and widely accessible for students (Davila). Many rhetoric and writing instructors who are already convinced by ideological critiques of SWAE—convinced that multiple discourses and ways of knowing are valuable—still do not have the tools to make the case that SWAE is not linguistically superior to any other dialect.

In this chapter, I want to suggest that a lack of linguistic understanding makes it harder to recognize what we have internalized and what we value and elide when we use and assign SWAE. It makes it harder to show students what it looks like to approach all language as territory for exploration rather than hierarchies and regulation. Alternatively, I suggest that corpus linguistic analysis helps us shift to a descriptive, critical approach to language use—focused on what language is doing versus what it “should” do—with the help of digital tools. In sum, the social turn and sociocultural emphasis have been invaluable; needed now is a turn in which language itself is seen as a constitutive force and object for analysis. Linguistic analysis, the analysis of word-, phrase-, and sentence-level patterns across examples of language use, supports this turn.

From Language Policing to Language Curiosity

Linguistic analysis of diverse language use with students helps us shift from language policing to exploration in three ways. First, by offering evidence of language use in academic and other registers, it exposes patterns associated with SWAE that help us characterize and challenge its primacy. Second, it allows us to identify patterns in widely circulating alternative uses of English, including in global web-based Englishes, so that there is concerted attention to the linguistic diversity that already characterizes our world and our students’ lives. Third, in the very process of inviting students to use linguistic analysis to examine and describe academic and other language use, we shift the focus from evaluation to systematic inquiry. Language becomes a site for exploring what is valued in different contexts, the problems and possibilities of all kinds of language, and students’ existing knowledge and curiosity regarding language.

In sum, linguistic analysis across different kinds of writing supports linguistic diversity in practice and in theory. It positions students as analysts of two overlapping ideas: language use is situated and diverse language is correct. These are supported in theory in rhetoric and writing studies, but they are manifest unde-

niably in practice in corpus linguistic analysis like the following examples which illustrate that language use is social, genre-specific, and responsive to context, purpose, and audience and that students already have language knowledge that is correct, or appropriate, for a variety of rhetorical situations. In the next section, I describe corpus linguistic analysis and example activities that place linguistic diversity at the center of our pedagogies.

Using Corpus Analysis to Explore Registers, Genres, Disciplines

Corpus analysis can be defined as the examination of textual patterns in a selected body of naturally produced texts, usually via computer-aided tools that facilitate searching, sorting, and calculating large-scale textual patterns (Bowker and Pearson). This definition emphasizes textual patterns, which can be lexical or grammatical and are often comparative (e.g., between one corpus and another). The definition also emphasizes naturally produced texts: corpus analysis explores language produced for authentic, real-world purposes. Corpus linguistic analysis offers a way to “zoom out” and look for meaningful patterns—patterns that make authentic language used for genres what it is.

Most writing instructors and students, by contrast, are trained to “zoom in”—to read one text at a time, considering each one vis-à-vis the context of the text such as the purpose, genre, and audience. We learn a great deal this way about the strategies, ideas, and revisions of individual writers or small collections of texts. Informed by a descriptive, non-hierarchical lens, this “zoomed in” way of reading can likewise support linguistic diversity.

Systematic attention to language patterns with the help of corpus analysis can complement this common way of reading, by using the power of digital methods to expose choices that persist across many texts—and in turn, by highlighting the systematicity and sociality of all language use. Since the mid to late-20th century, corpus analysis has commonly served to “support learners’ awareness of the textual features of their own writing relative to target (i.e., successful) models” (Hardy and Römer 205). But it can also be a way to descriptively understand different registers, genres, and disciplines, rendering them objects of analysis with knowable patterns that students can explore and making choices about. In other words, corpus analysis employs a set of digital tools—e.g., software and online texts—that allow us to acknowledge and explore linguistic diversity in ways impossible with traditional reading methods alone.

By this I mean that corpus analysis is not only different in terms of quantity, or scale, of analysis. It is also different in quality: corpus analysis does not stop with our intuitions about language use. This is crucial for writing classrooms because it reveals tacit expectations that can remain beneath their conscious awareness (Biber and Gray). It can confirm or disrupt even very popular writing instruction by exposing patterns in actual language use (Lancaster). In other words, it can help us, and our students, see that our perceptions about language can be a lot like

stereotypes—ideas based on what we have heard and witnessed in a few examples, but not which we have corroborated by witnessing hundreds or thousands of representations.

Below, I offer two initial activities to illustrate some free corpus tools. These activities likewise provide basic examples of how corpus analysis can help us focus writing courses on exploring language descriptively, positioning students as critical analysts of language use around them. The two examples are organized according to a brief description, steps and reading students do as part of the process, online corpus tools students might use (and what the interface looks like), and observations from exploring language in this way with students.

Slang Analysis

Brief Description and Goals

This slang analysis asks students to explore a slang word or phrase that interests them. They explore the slang expression based on reading about slang and use of the expression by family and friends, in current dictionaries, and in a global corpus of web-based English. The process foregrounds student knowledge of and interest in language and draws explicit attention to language diversity in their lives and across the world. The use of the global English corpus is crucial: it is a digital tool that compiles and facilitates exploration of language use, not according to prescriptive rules but according to authentic uses organized by geographic, cultural spaces—i.e., it offers a tool for meeting the linguistic diversity inherent in language with critical language awareness. As part of those explorations, the process invites critical questions about the role of community, reclamation, and appropriation in language use.

Example Reading

Reading about slang leads to important discussion that inform students' own analyses before they begin. For instance, the first two sources below address issues related to English language usage and rules, as well as their evolution over time. The subsequent sources highlight the important role of non-standardized language vis-à-vis formation, inclusion, and exclusion in social groups, generations, and other communities. The final two sources discuss language appropriation and highlight the role of linguistic capital in different social contexts. All the sources support discussions about how the class can thoughtfully approach the upcoming slang analysis and the slang expressions that students choose to investigate.

- Chapters 1 and 2 of *How English Works* by Anne Curzan and Michael Adams
- New York Times essay “Slang for the Ages” by Kory Stamper
- Chapter 3 from *The Life of Slang* by Julie Coleman

- Chapter 1 from *Slang: The People's Poetry* by Michael Adams
- Academic article "Appropriation of African American Slang by Asian American Youth" by Angela Reyes
- Atlantic essay "It Wasn't 'Verbal Blackface.' AOC Was Code-Switching" by John McWhorter¹

Example Steps

After reading about slang, students decide on a slang word or phrase to investigate. This becomes their slang expression, which they will explore with the help of dictionaries, social media, a web-based corpus, and the student's own community. Students begin their explorations with the origin and definition(s) of their expression, if possible, with the help of the online Oxford English Dictionary (OED). They additionally explore its definition and uses in at least two edited dictionaries (e.g., *American Heritage*, *Merriam-Webster*) and at least one user-driven dictionary (e.g., *Urban Dictionary*), as well as on at least two of their own social media accounts or other online platforms. These steps in the process already send an important message: digital tools we use reinforce linguistic diversity all the time, as well as beliefs about linguistic diversity. We can approach dictionaries as they are, a record of human language use and language expectations at any given time, rather than as a single source for upholding or shaming certain language use.

Students tell ten or more people they know, preferably from a range of ages, about their assignment, asking them each to define the slang expression and use it in an example sentence as well as note where they are from, their age, languages they speak, and dialects they speak if they can name them. Students look for patterns or differences in their respondents' example sentences: how is the expression used, and in what contexts? What is its grammatical environment—how does it usually function syntactically (e.g., subject or object? action? description?) and socially (does it signal familiarity? does it show a conversational turn? is it negative or positive? does it describe one gender or group more than others?). They consider whether there is agreement about the term and what kind (e.g., is it based on generations of social group?).

Through this first part of the process of exploring online uses and survey responses, students thus select a slang expression and begin to identify relevant descriptive details about its definition, formation, history, and use. The next step is for students to explore their slang expression more globally, which corpus tools allow them to do. To introduce any new corpus tool in class, I have students try

1. For an audio-visual option, John McWhorter's interview on NPR about the use of "thug" is also useful for highlighting questions about the use and appropriation of slang words (<https://www.npr.org/2015/04/30/403362626/the-racially-charged-meaning-behind-the-word-thug>).

using it together in groups first, e.g., with one computer to every 2-4 students. In this case, they come to class having begun their slang analysis and perused the overview of the GloWbE corpus described below. In class, groups form and decide on which student's slang expression to begin with first.

Example Online Corpus Tools

The Corpus of Global Web-based English (GloWbE: <http://corpus.byu.edu/glowbe/>) was developed under the leadership of Mark Davies, emeritus professor of Linguistics at Brigham Young University (BYU) whose work has especially focused on development and use of corpora of Spanish, Portuguese, and English across genres to facilitate analysis of historical, syntactic, and other patterns within and across languages. GloWbE is a digital tool that displays global linguistic diversity and makes exploring it possible, by capturing English on public-facing websites (including blogs) across 20 countries with large populations of English speakers.² As a first step before or in class, students can read the overview and its embedded links by clicking on the “overview” tab in the upper-right corner of the screen.

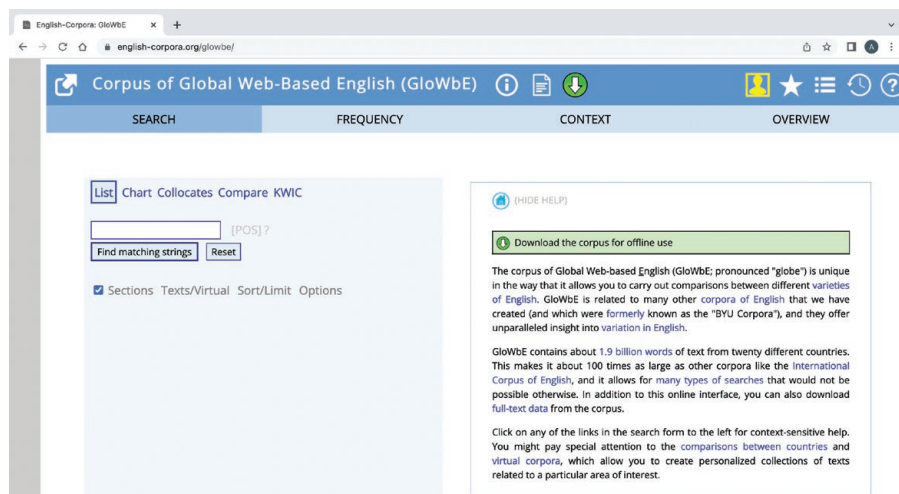


Figure 16.1. GloWbE Corpus Interface, Overview

When students are ready to begin their first query, they can click on the “search” tab in the upper-left corner of the screen. For instance, in the screen capture of the GloWbE interface in Figure 16.2, I have selected the “chart” tool and entered the slang word *swag* into the query box.

2. The web corpus (<https://www.english-corpora.org/iweb/>), linked to the same page, offers millions of examples used across the internet if students are interested in even more examples. Mark Davies' web page provides additional information about corpus compilation and collaborators: mark-davies.info.

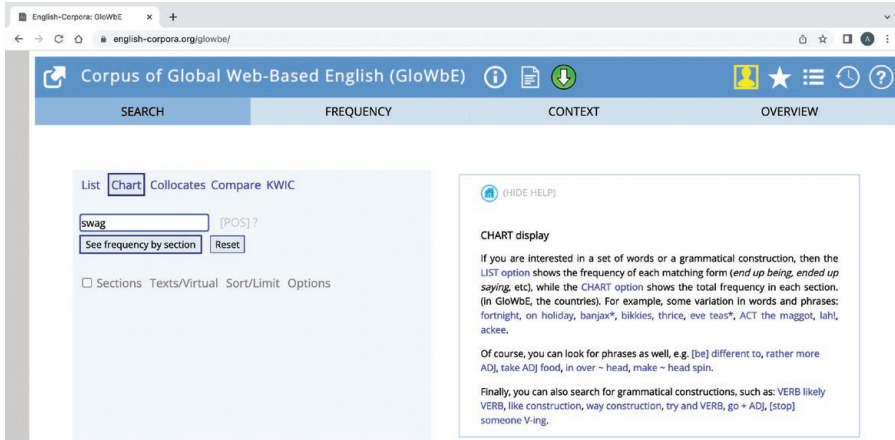


Figure 16.2. GloWbE Corpus Interface, Search Bar

As seen in the screen capture in Figure 16.3, the results show that while *swag* is regularly used in Jamaica (JM) and Nigeria (NG), it is used most frequently on web postings in Ghana (GH). Uses in the United States (US) are outpaced by these three countries as well as Singapore, Australia, and (slightly) Canada.

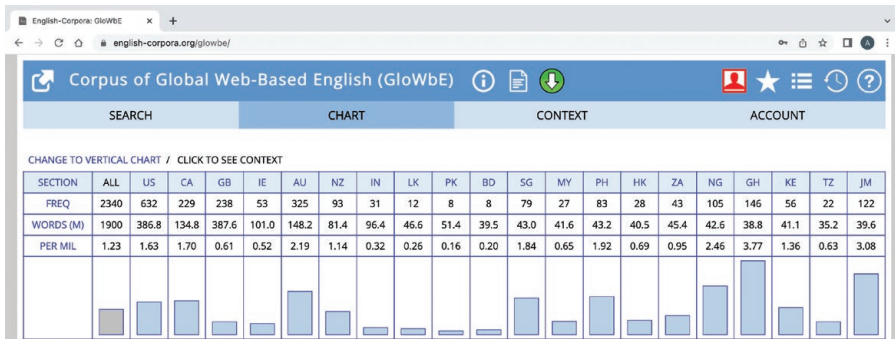


Figure 16.3. GloWbE Chart Results, Use of Swag

To get a sense of how the slang expression is used, we can look to see the word in context by selecting the “Keyword in Context” (KWIC) tool (rather than the “chart” tool) on the main search page. As shown in the screen capture in Figure 16.4, the KWIC tool includes a range of co-text, or the number of words highlighted on either side, below the search term. Here, I have chosen three words to the left (L) and three words to the right (R).

Clicking on the “Keyword in Context (KWIC)” button will generate a *concordance*, or the list of all instances of a search item in the corpus, under the “context” tab. A concordance includes co-text surrounding the search item, as we can see in the results of the KWIC *swag* search in Figure 16.5.

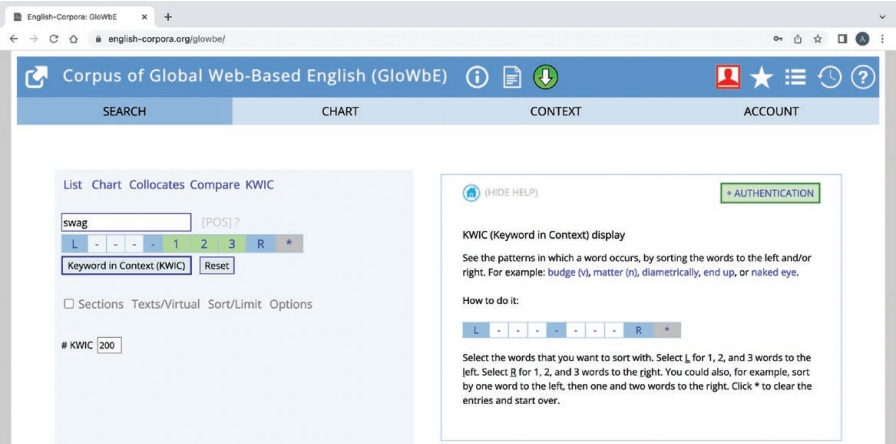


Figure 16.4. GloWbE Search Query, Use of Swag in Context

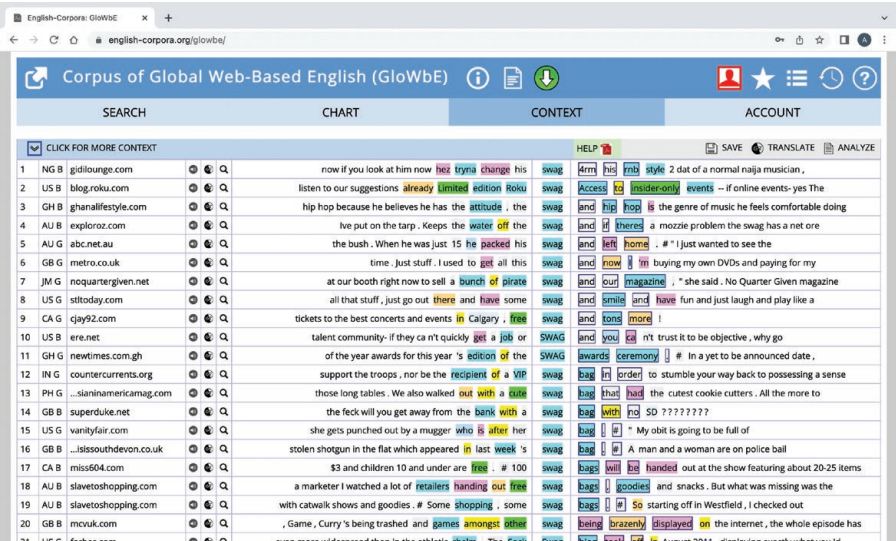


Figure 16.5. GloWbE KWIC Results, Use of Swag

Even this initial concordance shows some patterns across Canadian (CA), Australian (AU), Singaporean (SG), Great Britain (GB), and other uses of *swag*: it is especially used to label a noun, to refer to a style or possession. It is also used as a verb (e.g., *to swag away*), a use my U.S. students find less familiar. To continue to explore syntactic patterns in the use of *swag* (and later, other slang), students can explore *swag* + using the part of speech (POS) tool that appears to the right of the search box in Figure 16.4. Students can look for patterns of use that draw on and challenge their intuitions about language, beginning with such searches of their own and other slang expressions.

Example Observations

This project and its associated tasks invite students to see and think deeply about the social, intersubjective nature of language—the ways that it can, for better and worse, foster and signify group belonging and exclusion and group empowerment and appropriation. The contemporary appropriation of slang from minoritized groups into majority white, heterosexual U.S. culture can often be traced thanks to social media (e.g., *bae* and *spilling tea* to Black vernacular English, *throwing shade* to drag culture), and so student's first step when they are interested in a slang expression is to determine its origin and use. Because their peer discussions and written analysis include context for their slang expression, students must think about how to discuss these details thoughtfully.

This project often highlights the limitations of students' understanding based on their own social lived experiences. Two examples come up regularly. One is that students—and often their parents and instructors—have fallen prey to what lexicographer Kory Stamper calls the “recency illusion,” or the belief that because a word is slang, it is new and/ or invented by contemporary youth. Another is some students' assumption that the U.S. is the center of language and/ or slang, which corpus analysis of global language use quickly disrupts. For instance, I have had students come to class surprised—and quick to share their new knowledge with their peers—that the word *bling* had much more widespread use and earlier in Jamaica than in the U.S.; in other examples, students have been surprised by several slang expressions used more in Singapore than in the U.S. A third is that students' notice their lexical knowledge more than their syntactic knowledge, but they possess and can consciously cultivate both. When they look through example uses, they can look for how words tend to be used, as a descriptive tool for honing grammatical knowledge. These kinds of discoveries offer an evidence-driven way into discussions about language use, language assumptions, and language appropriation.

SWAE Analysis

Brief Description and Goals

Corpus analysis is well suited to first-year writing goals focused on supporting genre analysis and awareness, because it allows students to explore language patterns as a constitutive part of genres and disciplines and their corresponding audience expectations. A first-year project described below specifically asks students to explore a genre and/ or discipline that interests them based on a pattern they have read about in corpus studies of academic writing in English. The process foregrounds students' interests, and it draws explicit attention to diversity and homogeneity in SWAE.

As part of those explorations, the process invites critical questions about accessibility and the constitutive nature of SWAE, or the ways that SWAE language

patterns reflect and reify values in different academic discourse communities. For instance, in his article noted below, Ken Hyland shows how different frequencies and uses of first-person pronouns constitute differences between disciplines. He traces first person pronoun use, which he labels *self-mentions*, to the emphasis on interpretive reasoning in humanistic writing versus the emphasis on experimental processes in scientific writing.

Example Reading

Depending on student and instructor interest, individual students or the class can read studies that focus more on writing of genres or across genres or fields. Some possibilities include excerpts from any of the following texts, which I've listed according to the focal genre(s) and level(s) in the studies.

- Stance and engagement features in published academic articles across disciplines (Hyland)
- Dialogue with other sources in published academic writing and first-year and upper-level student writing (Lancaster)
- Genre patterns and variation in the MBA "Thought Essay" written by first-year MBA students (Loudermilk)
- Genre-specific patterns in argumentative essays and rhetorical analyses written by multilingual first-year students (Staples and Reppen)
- Level-specific patterns in argumentative essays by first-year students compared to writing by upper-level students and published academic writers (Aull *How Students Write*)
- Genre-specific patterns in argumentative essays versus explanatory reports written by first-year students (Aull *First-Year*)

In the following texts, students can read specific studies that use the corpus I discuss below, the Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Student Papers (MICUSP):

- Background information about MICUSP (Römer and O'Donnell)
- Description of how to use MICUSP to study disciplinary variation (Römer and Wulff)
- Disciplinary variation in student writing using MICUSP (Hardy and Römer)
- Genre variation in student writing using MICUSP (Hardy and Friginal)

Example Steps

Students begin by reading some of the above studies and the description of how to use MICUSP (Römer and Wulff). They come to class with a discipline, genre, and/or language pattern they read about that they are interested in analyzing. Students form groups, e.g., with one computer to every 2-4 students, and they begin by discussing these patterns of interest. Together, based on

what seems most interesting or manageable, they decide on an initial analysis for exploring MICUS. For instance, students are often interested in uses of the first person (or what Hyland discusses as *self-mentions*); student groups interested in these patterns use the search bar to look for first-person pronouns in MICUSP. They then look for patterns in first-person pronouns in GloWbe, the corpus they used in the slang analysis, beginning to talk through rhetorical effects of patterns, such as “emphasizes experiences,” “emphasizes processes,” etc. Descriptive framing for these discussions, even informal discussion of initial observations, is an important part of this process. Students are often accustomed to saying “proper” or “correct” when describing academic writing, and instead can use more descriptive framing such as “website English” and “academic English” to underscore the linguistic equity and different purposes for different uses.

Even in a 60-minute activity (including searches, analysis, and discussion), students can identify initial, exploratory usage patterns—what disciplines use what first-person pronouns the most, and what tends to appear on either side of the pronouns in example uses. Students’ initial observations lead to interesting discussions about disciplinary differences. Writing in mechanical engineering, for instance, includes the highest relative use of the plural first-persons *our* and *we*, followed by physics and philosophy, while writing in English includes the highest relative use of the singular first persons *my* and *I*. I caution students against extrapolating beyond their specific observations (and the number thereof), but in dialogue with Hyland’s study, these patterns already speak to possible discipline-specific values, such as the importance of collaborative research processes in physical sciences, and the importance of individual reasoning in humanistic fields like English. Philosophy challenges this neat dichotomy but shows the pattern of using *our* and *we* to consider broad human behaviors and beliefs. Groups and the full class can share these initial writing observations and gain familiarity with MICUSP before using it on their own.

After this group work and further reading of studies noted above, students can conduct their own corpus analysis using MICUSP, analyzing patterns in a genre and/ or discipline of interest to them. Another popular selection for my students is analysis of stance features discussed by Hyland and me, especially, the use of hedges (e.g., *might*, *perhaps*) and boosters (e.g., *must*, *definitely*). Hyland shows that published academic writers tend to use a balance of these features; but authors also show that first-year writers tend to use more boosters. Students can analyze patterns in hedge and booster use to see how writers craft their stance in a discipline they might major in. In group discussions or presentations, students can compare their findings and begin to draw inferences about similarities and differences across academic writing expectations.

Students can also apply the findings from a study above to analyze their own writing, by hand or with the help of corpus tools. For a study that is informed by corpus research but is qualitative, students can select a pattern or

two of interest discussed in a study listed above. Then, by hand, they can analyze a paper or two of their own to see whether the same patterns appear. For a study that uses corpus analysis, students can begin by compiling a corpus of writing by the class, by saving students' papers in plain text files. Then, individual students or groups can select patterns of interest from a study of academic writing listed above. To analyze these patterns in the class corpus, they can use free concordance software such as AntConc (Anthony), which my students tend to find user-friendly and straightforward. Students and instructors can find steps for using AntConc on their own writing in chapter three of (Aull *First-Year*).

Example Online Corpus Tools

The Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Student Papers (MICUSP) consists of over 800 A-graded papers written by students across seven paper genres, sixteen disciplines, and final year of undergraduate through the first three years of graduate school. As you can see from the left side of the screen capture below, the interface allows you to restrict by student level, nativeness (or what students identified as their “native language” when submitting papers), paper types, disciplines, and overall textual features such as a literature review section or methodology section. (See Römer and O'Donnell for a description of these interface options and the process of designing them.) To the right of these options, we can see visual displays of the disciplines and their relative representation in terms of student paper numbers (in the bar graph) and in terms of paper types (in the pie chart).

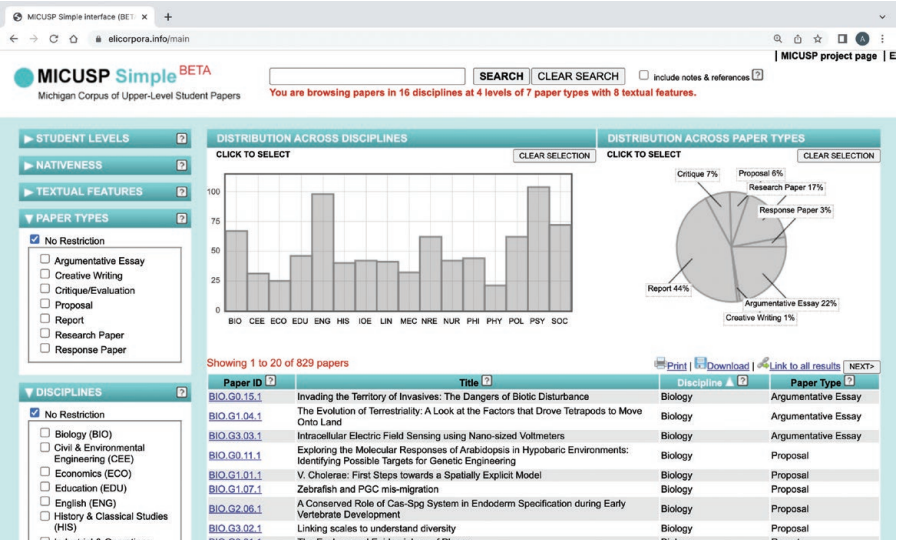


Figure 16.6. MICUSP Interface

Fortunately, once you have typed in a search word or phrase, the interface also allows you to search for uses “per 10,000 words,” which allows students to see relative (or normalized) uses across disciplines. The bar graph is interactive, so students can use it to look at uses in a specific discipline. Likewise, the pie chart representing paper types is interactive. Once you enter a search word or phrase and/or restrict by discipline (or student level, etc.), the bar graph and pie chart will update to reflect the new discipline based and genre-based distributions.

Below these two interactive graphics, you can see and click on individual papers, which are tagged according to discipline, level, and number of papers for the student submitting. For instance, in the screen capture in Figure 16.6, BIO.Go.15.1 refers to: a biology paper submitted by a final-year undergraduate student (Go), the fifteenth paper in the corpus at that discipline and level, and the first (and/or only) paper submitted by that student.

Let’s consider a brief example query, one I use with students after they have read Hyland’s “Stance and Engagement” article. When we search for the plural first person possessive pronoun *our* and select “per 10,000 uses” (above the bar graph), the interface adapts, as shown in the screen capture in Figure 16.7. This query shows that uses of *our* are salient in the discipline of mechanical engineering (as seen in the bar graph) and in the paper genre of reports (as seen in the pie chart). Below this overall glimpse, we see example uses in the concordance.

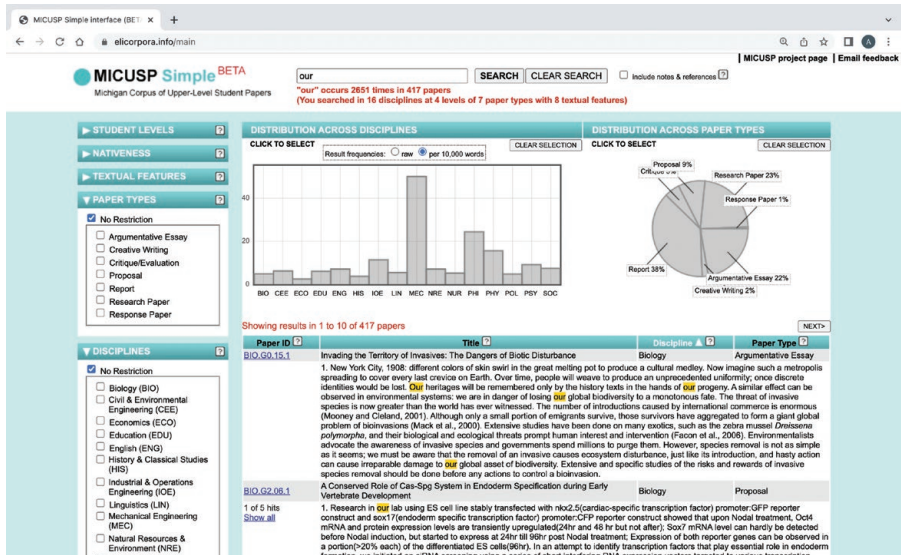


Figure 16.7. MICUSP Search Results, Use of *Our*

In this case, the start of the concordance shows example uses of *our* in a biology argumentative essay; these uses emphasize collective human needs. Below that example, we can see uses of *our* in a biology report; these uses emphasize the work of a research team. Biology appears first alphabetically, but clicking on any

of the discipline bar graphs, or clicking ‘next’ in the concordance, will bring up the uses from other disciplines. For instance, if we click on the bar representing mechanical engineering (MEC), we can see uses of *our* appear in genres common to this discipline: reports, research papers, and proposals.

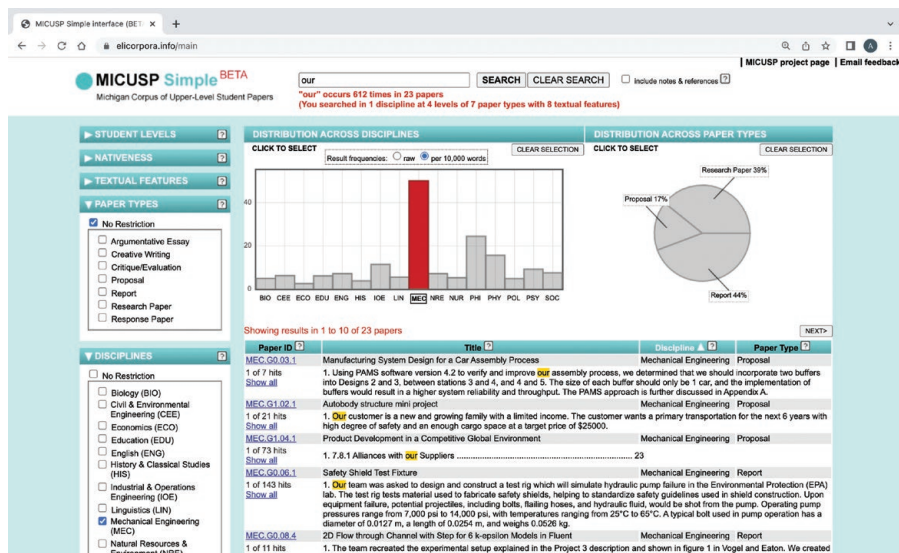


Figure 16.8. MICUSP Search Results, Use of *Our* in Mechanical Engineering

As is true in the concordance in the screen capture in Figure 16.8, mechanical engineering uses of *our* describe experiments and objectives of a research team, often in the subject (noun) phrase of a sentence (e.g., “*Our* experiments have allowed us to create a mathematical model. . .”; “*Our* objective is to use a MEMS accelerometer. . .”). These rhetorical and syntactic uses also appear in the concordance examples in other disciplines such as biology (e.g., “Research in *our* lab using ES cell line. . .”; “*Our* case analysis focused on. . .”), but biology, a natural science, and English, a humanistic field, also include uses of *our* to emphasize broader needs and understanding; e.g., in English, “It is *our* responsibility. . .” and “*Our* aphorisms include. . .”; in biology, “*Our* understanding of flu”; “*Our* understanding of evolutionary convergence. . .”).

Finally, should students wish to analyze similar patterns beyond academic writing and/or in published academic writing, they can return to an interface connected to the GloWbe corpus noted in the previous section. The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA: <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>) allows students to analyze English use across spoken language, television and movie scripts, and fiction, newspaper, magazine, and academic writing since 1990. (For more than a few queries, students will need to set up a free account.) To continue the above example and compare across these registers, we can go to the corpus interface, select “chart,” and enter *our* into the main search box.

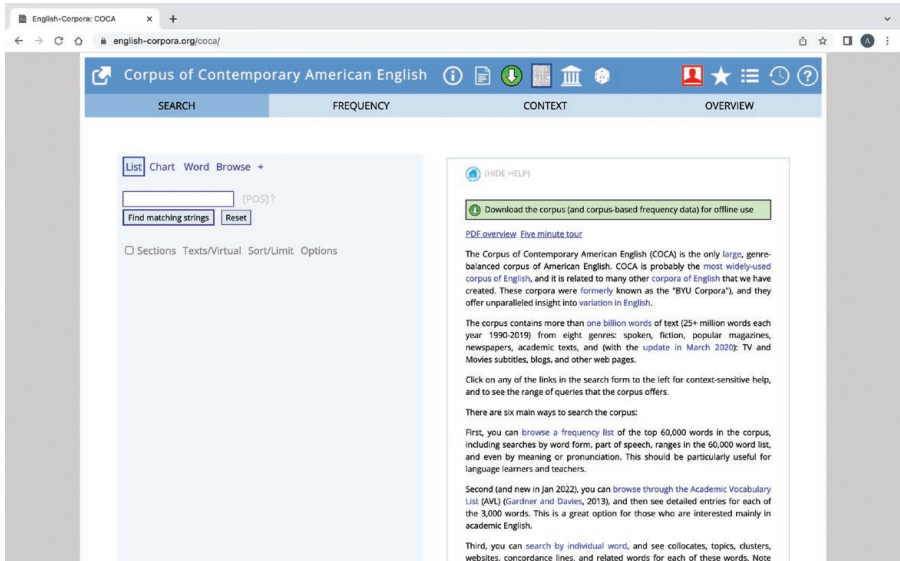


Figure 16.9. COCA Interface

The resulting “chart” patterns displayed in Figure 16.10 show that *our* is especially salient in spoken language (SPOK) and blog writing, followed by website writing (WEB). It is stable over time from 1990 to 2019, and it is used least in newspaper (NEWS) and academic writing (ACAD), two registers considered relatively informational.

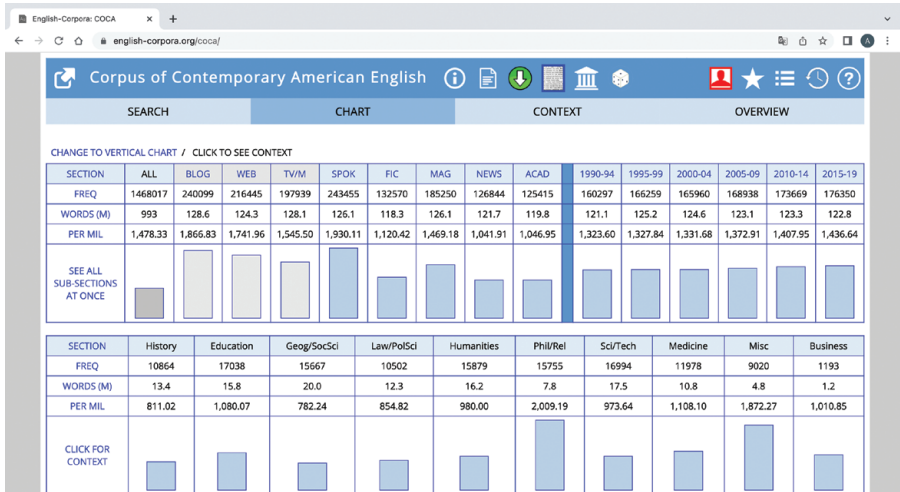


Figure 16.10. COCA Results, Use of Our Across Registers and Academic Disciplines

If we click on the “ACAD” link above the first bar graph, a bar graph representing disciplines will appear below it, as it does in the screen capture displayed in

Figure 16.10. Slightly different discipline groups appear in this corpus, though we can see that the overlapping disciplines confirm uses of *our* that also appeared in the upper-level writing in MICUSP: writing in philosophy/religion contains many uses of *our*, and in this case, medicine follows. Uses of *our* in academic writing appear most salient in the “miscellaneous” (MISC) category, which contains academic writing for a general audience, such as in academic essays in *American Scholar*. We can see these uses by clicking on the “context” tab above the chart results.

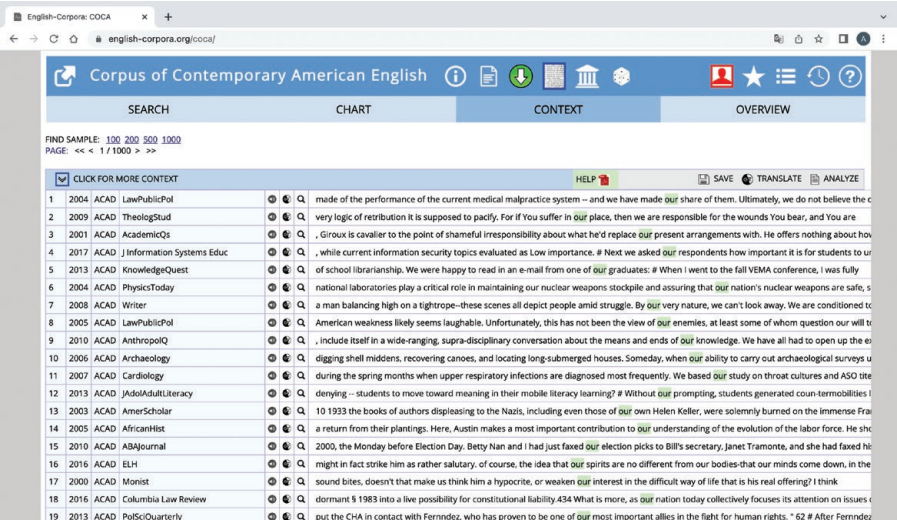


Figure 16.11. COCA Results, Use of *Our* in Context

These examples show that uses of *our* in writing for general academic audiences focus less on research processes and more on personal and collective ideas and behaviors. As in the last example, even this initial search reveals possible disciplinary and genre-based differences in uses of *our*, which students can explore in more depth.

A parallel initial analysis of *my* offers an interestingly different picture. Going back to the main COCA search box, again selecting “chart,” and entering *my* will pull up the corresponding results. As displayed in Figure 16.12, this singular possessive pronoun is used especially in television and movie scripts, followed by fiction writing. Like *our*, the use of *my* is stable over time from 1990 to 2019. But in this case, *my* is clearly used the least in the academic writing in the corpus.

If we again click on the “ACAD” link above the first bar graph, another bar graph appears that shows that writing in philosophy/religion again contains the most relative uses vis-à-vis disciplines, as in the case of *our*, but the singular *my* is used about half as often. In another parallel to uses of *our*, *my* appears most in the “miscellaneous” category, which contains more essays written for a general audience. In this category, use of *my*, in individual, personalized narratives and reflections, is more frequent than the use of *our* in shared, collective ones.

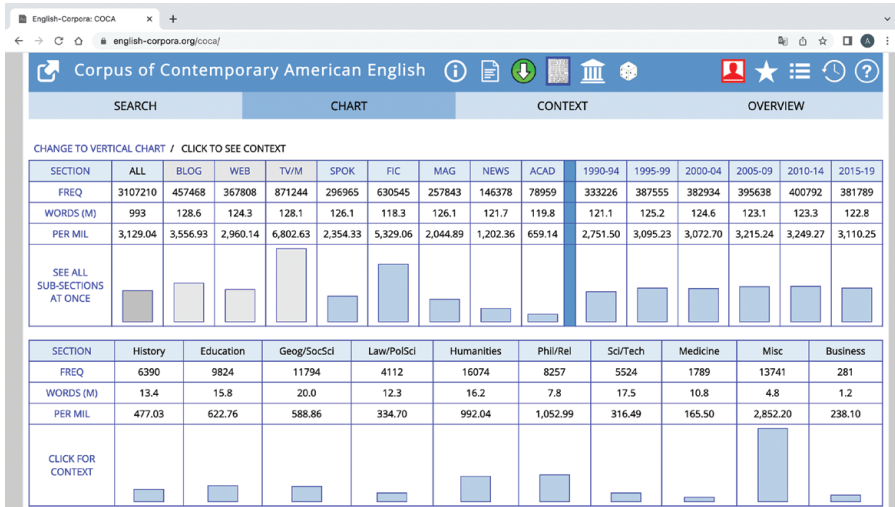


Figure 16.12. COCA Results, Use of My Across Registers and Academic Disciplines

Example Observations

In my experience, having students begin with slang analysis before analysis of academic writing facilitates a descriptive approach to language. This sequence helps prime students to see that like slang and other informal language use, academic writing is social. It is informed by communal values and norms; it is learned. It is not impenetrable, and it is not the result of some people being born “better writers” than others. Like other language use, SWAE can include and exclude, according to who uses it and practices it. Even after basic analyses focused on first person pronouns, for instance, we can discuss the reasons and consequences for emphasizing or deemphasizing individuals and collective groups in SWAE, and why that rhetorical choice is more frequent in academic writing for a general audience than for discipline-specific audiences. Students can find exceptions and consider how and why they might challenge or follow these norms.

Analysis of SWAE also helps students explore things they have heard about language use that may not be true. For instance, many students have heard that academic writers, or certain kinds of academic writers such as scientists, do not use first person pronouns to be more objective. Even initial analyses, facilitated by steps outlined above, shows that this is clearly not true. In turn, corpus analysis activities help highlight that even pervasive beliefs about language use and language rules are not necessarily accurate. Such activities lead us to discuss how we might explore language use according to what it does—not what we have heard it should do. In this way, corpus analytics provides evidence that challenges our intuitions and reminds us that without digital tools, our view is limited to a smaller view.

Conclusion

Just as language policing takes years of conscious and unconscious practice, language curiosity will take practice and support for new instructors who are trained for the opposite. Like all embedded, socially constructed value system, language hierarchies run deep, sometimes willfully, and sometimes covertly. When I went north for college after growing up in a small town in Georgia, I was teased so much for the slow pace of my speech that for years, I practiced speaking faster and stopped leaving voice messages. Yet when I first became a teacher, I imposed just the same linguistic hierarchies on students, never thinking how I might be shaming the language(s) most familiar to them. On some level, I felt I had “made it,” without knowing really what the “it” was, or its cost. Now, as a teacher, researcher, and writing program administrator (WPA), I am striving for what Staci Perryman-Clark describes, for “my role as a [WPA]” to become “a social justice role that challenges racial and linguistic biases and interrogates institutional structures, so that all students have the same opportunities for success” (“Who” 206). For me, that demands reflection, learning, and unlearning that I am still working to identify and pursue.

Even as it will take ongoing reflection on socially constructed hierarchies that are real and subtle, as well as openness to linguistic training or at least linguistic findings, this paradigm shift to language curiosity is necessary and valuable. It supports student diversity and inclusion, and it supports related goals of our writing courses, including awareness of writing in registers, genres, and disciplines pertinent in student lives. Shifting how we approach language in writing classrooms helps us invite students into what we are valuing—what discursive realities we are constituting—in patterns of SWAE and its alternatives.

Corpus analysis offers a method, a set of actions and activities, for this work. It makes language something we explore, describe, and discover, including discoveries that disrupt things we have heard or internalized in a conventional paradigm that approaches language in terms of rules and intuitions. In these ways, corpus analysis can help us center our pedagogies on linguistic diversity and escape the contradiction in writing classrooms between belief in diversity and homogeneity in practice. It is one way we might empower our students to do a better job than we have in these efforts.

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Appendix: Additional Corpora

The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), at <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/> also links to the following:

- The Corpus of Historical American English (COHA, <http://corpus.byu.edu/coha/>) allows us to track changes in American English over the 19th and 20th centuries.
- The Time Magazine Corpus (<http://corpus.byu.edu/time/>) can provide interesting data about changes in written, edited American English in Time since the 1920s.
- Note: There are several videos about using COCA on YouTube; I recommend the one (and the other resources) on David West Brown's page [the-grammarlab.com](http://www.grammarlab.com): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCLgRTlxGoY>

The Google Books Ngram Viewer, at <https://books.google.com/ngrams/>, allows us to explore language use in books in several languages since the beginning of the 19th century. If you hover over the right end of the query box, you will also see links to additional information and advanced search options (also available at <https://books.google.com/ngrams/info>).