

COPYEDITING AND CORPUS LINGUISTICS

Jonathon Owen

ACES 2016



What is a corpus?

- A corpus (plural *corpora*) is a collection of electronic text compiled for research purposes
- Like other researchers, linguists need data, and digitizing a whole bunch of text is a good way to get some
- The words are usually tagged by part of speech to make searching easy



A brief history of corpora

- Corpora were originally created and used primarily by researchers, and early corpora were typically only a few million words at best
- In the '60s, the first *American Heritage Dictionary* used a corpus to give it a solid empirical basis
- In the early 2000s, BYU's Mark Davies started making publicly available corpora in the 400–500 million word range
- In 2010 Google published the Ngrams Viewer with 155 billion words



How are corpora used?

- Linguistics: researching word frequency, concordances and collocations (which words occur together), and variation and change
- Language teaching: seeing how natives actually say it, seeing which words are the most common
- Translation: comparing equivalent constructions in different languages
- Lexicography: seeing how words are used in context, discovering collocates, examining different senses
- <https://youtu.be/4frDdDyyJsQ?t=37>



Why should an editor care about corpus linguistics?

- Because usage dictionaries and style guides aren't always up to date, and they can't cover every issue
- Because even the issues that they do cover might not be accurate if they're not based on empirical evidence
- Because sometimes it's hard to see past our own biases, and sometimes our intuitions are not reliable
- Because science!

STAND BACK



**I'M GOING TO TRY
SCIENCE**

Image by Randall Munroe, xkcd.com



Don't worry—this isn't “anything goes”

- Most corpora are based on published materials, which means that the text has generally been edited
- Like dictionaries, corpora can provide facts, but you'll still have to exercise your own judgment in the end
- And anyway, if the fact that everybody does it doesn't make it right, what *does* make it right?



What are some popular corpora?

- Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)
- Corpus of Historical American English (COHA)
- Google Books Ngrams Viewer



Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)

- <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca>
- 520 million words
- 1990–present (text is continually added)
- organized by genre
 - spoken
 - fiction
 - magazines
 - newspapers
 - academic



Corpus of Historical American English (COHA)

- <http://corpus.byu.edu/coha>
- 450 million words
- 1800–present (text is continually added)
- organized by genre
 - fiction
 - magazines
 - newspapers
 - nonfiction
 - academic



Google Books Ngrams Viewer

- <http://books.google.com/ngrams>
- 155 billion words
- 1800–present* (text is occasionally added)

*technically 1500s–present, but the 1500–1800 data is mostly garbage



Corpus comparison

- COCA/COHA

- powerful but unintuitive interface
- data can be copied and pasted into spreadsheet (but not exported directly)
- text is balanced across years and genres

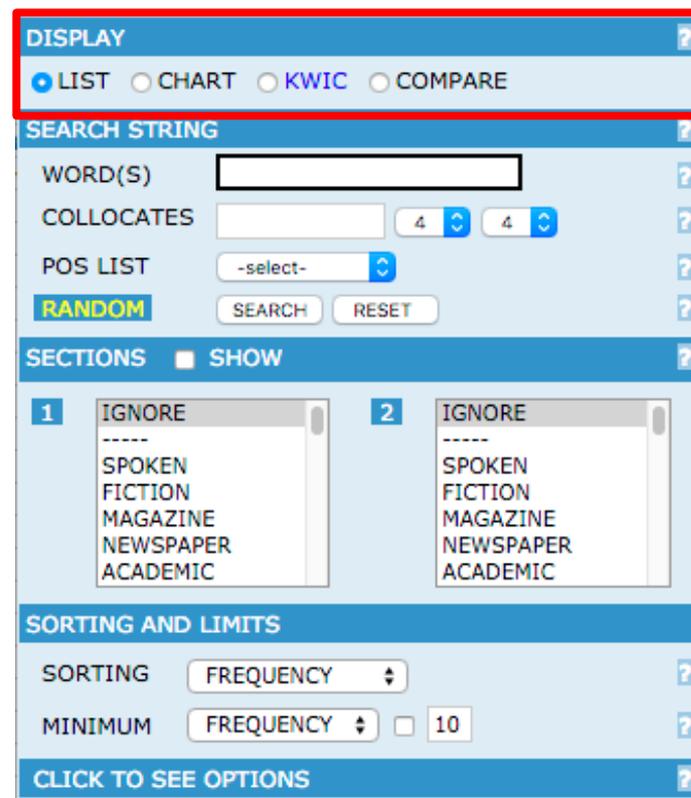
- Google Books

- super-simple but less-powerful interface, a lot of features are buried
- data can be viewed but not copied or exported
- text is not balanced across years and genres



Searching in COCA & COHA: display

- List
 - not always the most useful—just lists all the search results with their frequencies
 - can be useful for comparing all the results of searches with wildcards or part-of-speech tags
- Chart
 - creates bar graphs showing the frequencies by genre and by year range
 - great for quickly comparing usage in different genres or change across time
- KWIC (keyword in context)
 - great for highlighting which words or parts of speech typically follow the search term
 - shows 100 random hits
- Compare
 - I'm not gonna lie—I don't use this one because I can never seem to get it to work



The screenshot shows the search interface for COCA & COHA. The 'DISPLAY' section is highlighted with a red box and contains four radio buttons: 'LIST' (selected), 'CHART', 'KWIC', and 'COMPARE'. Below this is the 'SEARCH STRING' section with input fields for 'WORD(S)', 'COLLOCATES' (set to 4), and 'POS LIST' (set to '-select-'). There are 'RANDOM', 'SEARCH', and 'RESET' buttons. The 'SECTIONS' section is currently collapsed. The 'SORTING AND LIMITS' section shows 'SORTING' set to 'FREQUENCY' and 'MINIMUM' set to 'FREQUENCY' with a value of 10. A 'CLICK TO SEE OPTIONS' link is at the bottom.



Searching in COCA & COHA: search string

- Word(s)
 - the main term or terms you're searching for (**not** case sensitive)
 - can be one or more words, including wildcards and part-of-speech tags
- Collocates
 - search for words that occur within a certain range of the main search term
 - the two drop-downs search before and after the main search term—by default it looks 4 words before and 4 words after
- POS List
 - no, it stands for “part of speech,” not the other thing
 - lets you search by part of speech and some subcategories (different verb forms, plural vs. singular nouns, positive, comparative, and superlative adjs., etc.)

The screenshot displays the search interface for COCA & COHA. The 'SEARCH STRING' section is highlighted with a red border. It includes a 'WORD(S)' input field, 'COLLOCATES' with two dropdown menus (both set to '4'), and a 'POS LIST' dropdown menu (set to '-select-'). Below these are buttons for 'RANDOM', 'SEARCH', and 'RESET'. The 'DISPLAY' section at the top has radio buttons for 'LIST' (selected), 'CHART', 'KWIC', and 'COMPARE'. The 'SECTIONS' section shows two columns, each with a list of categories: 'IGNORE', 'SPOKEN', 'FICTION', 'MAGAZINE', 'NEWSPAPER', and 'ACADEMIC'. The 'SORTING AND LIMITS' section has 'SORTING' set to 'FREQUENCY' and 'MINIMUM' set to 'FREQUENCY' with a value of '10'. A 'CLICK TO SEE OPTIONS' link is at the bottom.



Searching in COCA & COHA: search query syntax

- all inflected forms of a word: put it in brackets—[word]
- a word only as a particular part of speech: put a POS tag after it—word.[v*]
 - mind the period—it's necessary to apply the tag to that word
- synonyms of a word: [=word]
- or: separate terms with vertical bar—word | term | phrase
- wildcards: * for any number of letters or a whole word, ? for exactly one letter
- not: minus sign followed by search term

The screenshot displays the search interface for COCA & COHA. It features several sections:

- DISPLAY:** Includes radio buttons for LIST (selected), CHART, KWIC, and COMPARE.
- SEARCH STRING:** Contains input fields for WORD(S), COLLOCATES (with a value of 4), and POS LIST (set to -select-). It also has buttons for RANDOM, SEARCH, and RESET.
- SECTIONS:** A 'SHOW' button is present. Below it are two columns, labeled 1 and 2, each containing a list of categories: IGNORE, SPOKEN, FICTION, MAGAZINE, NEWSPAPER, and ACADEMIC.
- SORTING AND LIMITS:** Includes dropdown menus for SORTING (set to FREQUENCY) and MINIMUM (set to FREQUENCY with a value of 10).
- CLICK TO SEE OPTIONS:** A button at the bottom of the interface.



Searching in Google Books

- Put your search term or terms in the box
- Specify a date range if you don't want the default 1800–2000
- Choose a corpus (you'll probably want English or American English)

Graph these comma-separated phrases: case-insensitive

between and from the corpus with smoothing of [Search lots of books](#)



Searching in Google Books: search query syntax

- Wildcards: *
 - Only searches words, not parts of words, and only lists top 10 results
- Inflected forms: _INF
 - Example: walk_INF = walks, walking, walked
- Part-of-speech tags
 - Can be combined with _INF tag
 - Can stand alone or be appended to a word
- **Note:** you cannot mix wildcards and inflection or part-of-speech tags in one search term
- Start or end of sentence: _START_ and _END_
- A word as a modifier: word=>modifier
- Search by a particular corpus: colon followed by tag for corpus (eng_us_2009, eng_2012, etc.)



Searching in Google Books: doing math with search queries

- You can add, subtract, multiply, and divide search queries—just use +, -, *, and /, and use parentheses as necessary to group
 - composed of, comprised of
 - comprised of/(composed of + comprised of)



Researching editing questions



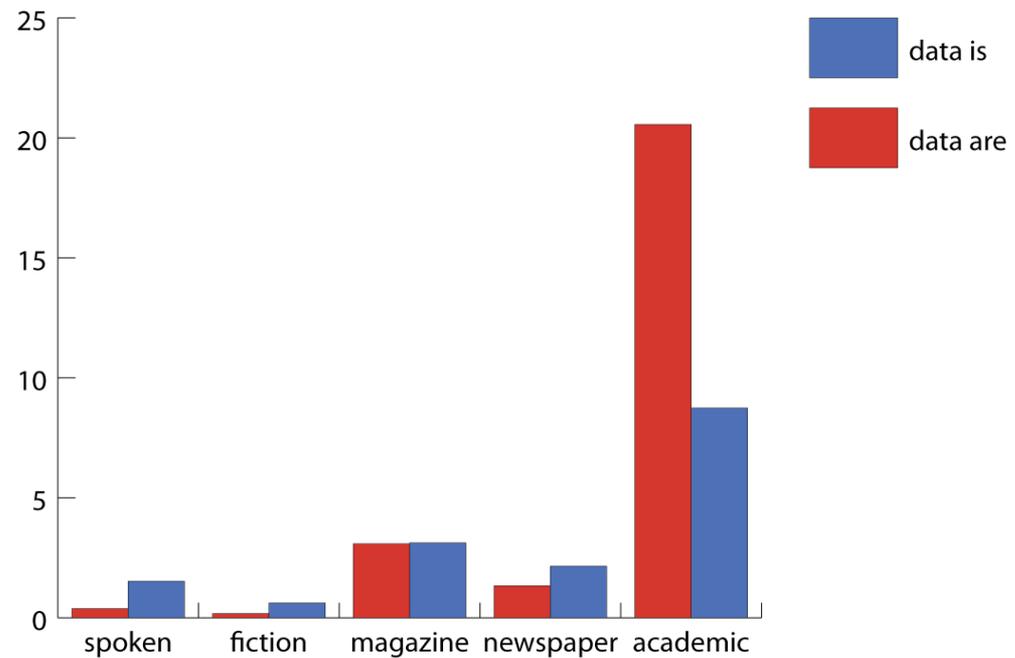
all right / alright

- Google Books
- COHA
- COCA



data is/data are

- Google Books
- COHA
- COCA



e-mail/email

- Google Books
- COHA
- COCA



Internet/internet

- [Google Books](#)



less / fewer

- less [plural noun] COHA
- fewer [plural noun] COHA
- less than [number] [plural noun] COHA
- fewer than [plural noun] COHA
- less than [number], fewer than [number] Google Books
- [noun] or less, [noun] or fewer Google Books



regardless/irregardless

- Google Books
- COHA
- COCA



sneaked / snuck

- Google Books
- COCA



that/which

- that/which Google Books American
- that/which Google Books British



toward/towards

- Google Books
- COCA



who/whom

- Google Books
- COHA
- COCA



Journalese

- Temblor
- Oust/Ouster
- Garner
- Woes
- Lambaste



Some pitfalls of corpus searches

- A corpus search only tells you about the nature of the corpus
- Sometimes the data is skewed or unreliable in some way—you may have to dig deeper to see if it holds up
- Data can't tell you what you should or should not do
- A couple of examples of misleading results:
 - e-mail, email
 - the poop spike



Results from my master's thesis

- The two most popular usage changes made by editors:
 - *which* > *that*
 - *towards* > *toward*
- It's really easy to get caught in feedback loops between our work and what lexicographers do—sometimes we drift away from what everyone else is doing



Conclusion

- While corpora won't ever replace traditional references, they can supplement them in some really great ways
- Corpus data can help you combine the best aspects of prescriptivism and descriptivism
- Good editing is **informed** editing



Questions or comments?

- On Twitter: [@ArrantPedantry](https://twitter.com/ArrantPedantry)
- On the web: www.arrantpedantry.com
- Email: jonathon@arrantpedantry.com

