Enthusiasm and Condescension

Abstract

A central question for computational lexicography is whether word meanings can be identified empirically. Corpus analysis encourages the view that norms of usage can be identified for each word, and that these norms of usage can be associated with norms of word meaning and belief. But this is an over-simplified account. One problem is that no generally accepted criteria exist (yet) for distinguishing norms of usage from exploitations, such as metaphors and uses with negatives. Another problem is that norms themselves change over time. Comparison of a modern corpus with a historical corpus will show how norms of meaning and use have changed, deepening our understanding of texts of the past. The paper contains a case study of the noun enthusiasm and the adjective condescending.

Preamble

On the walls of Exeter Cathedral in the south-west of England stand a number of monumental inscriptions. One of them is sacred to the memory of James Lavington, an 18th-century Bishop of Exeter (Figure 1). (See Appendix for Figures.)

To a modern reader, at least two phrases in this inscription seem odd. Why should the worthy bishop be praised for being "a successful exposer of enthusiasm"? And why is he praised for his "condescending deportment"? In today’s world, condescending behaviour and a condescending attitude are bad things, while enthusiasm is a good thing. So much is common knowledge. Or is it?

Lexicographers are masters of the unsubstantiated assertion. Definitions in dictionaries are hypotheses, which owe more to art than to science (Hanks 1979). Moreover, Atkins and Levin (1991) showed that the assertions of each lexicographer are rarely commensurable with those of others. There is no way of mapping the sense divisions of one dictionary onto another. This implies that there is no simple, 'correct' way of analysing and defining the meaning of any given word. It is all a matter of literary taste and judgement. Even if we appeal to a principle such as that of substitutability salva veritate (i.e. substituting the definition for the target word 'without affecting the truth value'), the accuracy of the substitution still calls for an element of judgement.

That, at any rate, is the status quo. Nevertheless, dictionary makers and dictionary users persist in speaking as if word meanings are entities with a real existence which can be captured scientifically. How can this be done? One line of investigation is to seek to link beliefs about word meanings with traces of patterns of word use. This is the line that underlies the belief that a dictionary based on a large body of evidence is likely to be better than one based on pure introspection. In pursuit of this line of thought, it is incumbent on us to show how the evidence should be used. What principles guide us in distinguishing one meaning from another? By what principles do we select one citation as a good example of a particular sense or usage, and reject another as being marginal or eccentric?
Linguistic Norms: Prototypes of Meaning and Use

A good starting point for lexical analysis of corpus data is to distinguish norms from exploitations. Norms are prototypes of usage, associated with prototypical syntactic behaviour and prototypical beliefs about presupposition and entailment. Exploitations include metaphors and puns, but also a large class of other noncentral uses.

After looking at the evidence for enthusiasm in the British National Corpus (a selection of which is given in Figure 2), we can begin to postulate norms for the present-day use of this word. These include the statements listed in Figure 3.

These "prototypical" statements about the usage of enthusiasm are based on statistical analyses of the British National Corpus (BNC). We ask the computer, "What words are most associated with the word enthusiasm?" The results are then selected and arranged partly by syntactic structures and partly by groups of collocates. Not all significant collocates are included: there is an element of 'noise' which has been judged irrelevant. And some simplification has been allowed, principally on the strength of the hierarchical nature of lexical semantics. For example demonstrate enthusiasm and convey enthusiasm are significant collocations, but since demonstrate and convey are hyponyms of show they are not listed separately.

It is possible that, as additional corpus evidence accrues, additional norms of usage in modern English will be identified. However, the whole point of a norm is that it represents a statistically significant recurring pattern of behaviour, not a particular individual event, so if the BNC is (as it claims) 'representative' of modern English, then it is unlikely that many additional norms for this word in general English will accrue. If they do, they will probably be much weaker (i.e. less strongly supported by evidence) than the norms already identified.

A further step at this point would be to look for norms of usage associated with particular genres, by studying genre-specific corpora. We would certainly need to do this to get a better understanding of norm 13 (religious enthusiasm), for example. However, contrastive genre analysis is a whole new topic and I shall say no more about it here.

In Figure 3 the prototypical patterns have been expressed informally, for human readers. They can also be expressed in more formal terms, as in Figure 4, to satisfy the requirements of grammarians and machines.

Notice that, although they represent norms of usage as observed in a corpus, some of these prototypical statements can also be read as norms of belief.

The most salient beliefs associated indirectly with norms 1 – 11 may be summarized as in Figure 5.

Exploitations

Having identified the more obvious norms in a corpus, the next stage in a lexical analysis is to decide what counts as an "exploitation" of the norm. Other observed usages can then be
classified, on the one hand as examples of the norms (and subclasses of norms), and on the other as exploitations.

The most typical form of exploitation of a norm is metaphor. However, being an abstract noun, enthusiasm has fewer metaphorical uses than, say, a verb or a concrete noun. The greatest profusion of exploitations are found with concrete nouns, especially those denoting functional body parts: hand, finger, head, eye, ear, mouth, etc. There are hardly any metaphorical uses of enthusiasm. There are, however, plenty of examples of other kinds of exploitation.

First among these is metonymy (transferring the emotion to the object of the emotion), which is standard for many abstract nouns denoting attitudes and emotions, e.g.:

Nietzsche's main enthusiasm was no longer Schopenhauer, but the composer [Wagner].

Another kind of exploitation is exemplified in the following sentence from Kurt Vonnegut's *Fates Worse than Death*:

It seems prudent to say that I was and remain unsympathetic to the enthusiasms of the Nazi War machine.

The point here is that the norm says that enthusiasm is an emotion experienced by people, and "the Nazi war machine" is not a person. It would of course be quite wrong to add another norm to the effect that institutions can also have enthusiasm. The correct analysis is that this sentence is an exploitation of norm 3 (Enthusiasm is a quality which people have), and that in this context "Nazi war machine" is an honorary person. It is an absolutely standard exploitation (metonymy) for human emotions and actions to be attributed to institutions (the state, the government, football teams, learned societies, etc.).

Another major class of standard exploitations of norms is use with negatives and questions. Negative adjectives are of particular interest. All the adjectives in the set of prototypical uses in norm 11 pick out types of enthusiasm. In other words, the answer to the question, "Is this really a case of enthusiasm?" is "Yes". But there is another set of adjectives for which the answer is "No". The important thing about feigned enthusiasm, false enthusiasm, and apparent enthusiasm is that, like no enthusiasm and little enthusiasm, they identify cases in which enthusiasm is explicitly denied. There are plenty of negatives with enthusiasm in the corpus: people say things without enthusiasm, they lack enthusiasm, and so on.

Enthusiasm in the following citation is likewise classed as an exploitation:

For years, Bulent Ersoy has been a source of confusion to music-loving Turkish Muslims. They adore her as the queen of their traditional music, and then revile her, with equal enthusiasm, as a moral obscenity.

The reason for classing this as an exploitation is as follows. The norms for enthusiasm imply positive semantic prosody: enthusiasm is a good thing. (The term "semantic prosody" was coined by John Sinclair in conversation with Bill Louw; see Louw 1993). In the sentence
about Bulent Ersoy, the terms *revile* and *moral obscenity* generate negative prosody. Here, therefore, the term *enthusiasm* is being used ironically. Irony is another class of exploitation.

**Norms Change over Time**

So much by way of summarizing norms and illustrating a few types of exploitation. We must now ask, how stable is a norm? The answer is, *not very.* Words change their meanings in unpredictable and sometimes dramatic ways.

When we read the literature of the past, we are liable to be misled by the influence of the modern senses of words. How can we know what a writer in the past really meant by a particular word? It is of course fashionable these days to argue that the original writer's intentions are irrelevant: a reader deconstructs a text, creating his or her own interpretation, which is satisfactory in its own terms. But however much sympathy we may have with this view, it is the first step on the road leading to Humpty Dumpty's position:

"When I use 'glory'," said Humpty Dumpty, "I use it to mean 'a nice knock-down argument'."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can use words to mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master. That's all."

If we allow ourselves to be free to impose our own interpretations on a text without considering the linguistic norms of the time and the language in which it was written, we consign ourselves to a solipsistic universe like Humpty Dumpty's, in which other minds, other worlds, learning, and scholarship all count for nothing.

It is, therefore, valid to ask ourselves questions such as, "Was Jane Austen's understanding of the word *enthusiasm* any different from our own?" even if we cannot guarantee ourselves an exhaustively accurate answer. Jane Austen used the word quite often, as we can see in Figure 7.

These uses are indistinguishable from modern usage, given the context of the romantic novel. However, when we look at uses of *enthusiasm* in texts written in the century before Jane Austen's time (Figure 8), with at least some of which she must have been familiar, a rather different picture emerges.

The word *enthusiasm* had a negative prosody for at least some writers. It was at the heart of the religious and philosophical controversy between those who believed that only the power of reason distinguishes us from the beasts, and those who gave priority to the divine or poetic inspiration of the human spirit. Alongside these uses, the word was also used in military and political contexts to refer to people getting carried away (beyond reason) with patriotic fervour or berserk fury. In short, enthusiasm was contrasted with reason.

The Oxford Historical Corpus is still in an early stage of development. It is hoped that in years to come, part of the value of the historical corpus will be that it will help us to distinguish the idiosyncrasies of great writers from the norms of their times, even when those norms are now obsolete and therefore seem strange to modern readers. It must, of course, be
acknowledged that a collection of admired literary works does not necessarily show the language in its most ordinary form. A high literary style may indeed prove a distraction for those attempting the empirical identification of something as unglamorous as norms of usage. But even great writers, especially prose writers, use language in an ordinary way much of the time.

It is, then, already possible to use the historical corpus to attempt a partial, tentative analysis of 18th-century norms for *enthusiasm*, illustrating what sort of beliefs were associated with it in the years just before Jane Austen's time. We may tentatively extrapolate the norms listed in Figure 9.

OED indicates that the English word *enthusiasm* is first found in 17th-century writings describing religious or prophetic frenzy among the ancient Greeks: the Greek word *enthousiazēin* means literally, 'to be possessed by a God', and is based on *en + theos* 'a god inside'. In Nonconformist Christian circles in the 17th century, *enthusiasm* was adopted to mean "possession by the Holy Spirit" and was associated with forms of worship such as shaking, quaking, prophesying, and speaking in tongues. John Locke devoted a whole chapter of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* to an attack upon enthusiasm, which ran counter his notions of enlightenment and reason.

In the 18th century the word came also to be used in the domain of military history, in collocations such as *martial enthusiasm* and *patriotic enthusiasm*. At the same time writers such as Dryden and Hume discuss the notion of *poetical enthusiasm* — the idea that poetry was divinely inspired in the most literal sense. This notion in turn came to be associated with literary Romanticism and Sturm und Drang.

Thus, to Jane Austen and her contemporaries, the word would have had a much stronger, and not wholly favourable from the one that it has today. Even though she used the word in its modern sense, connotations of divine inspiration; patriotic fervour; and dangerously wild, uncontrolled behaviour would have been much closer for her than they are for us. Austen's use of the word is a declaration of allegiance to Romanticism. By admiring Fanny's enthusiasm, Edmund is acknowledging that beneath her mouselike, downtrodden, self-effacing exterior there beats a passionate heart and an inspired soul.

We may deal rather more briefly with *condescending*. The semantic prosody of this word has moved in the opposite direction: from positive to negative.

There are only 91 occurrences of *condescending* in the BNC. Using the mutual information statistic, we can ask which words occurs most significantly within, say, four words to the right of the key word. The five most significant are:

- condescending tone
- condescending voice
- condescending towards
- condescending look
- condescending way
If we look more closely at the BNC citations for condescending (Figure 10), the negative prosody of the word today emerges quite clearly. Condescending is associated with a patronizing attitude, and with other negative words such as divisive, heartless, authoritarian, arrogant, high-handed, dictatorial, sexistam, sod, old bitch and sneer. It is something to be avoided; it is something that people complain about.

But when we look at some of the 18th- and 19th-century uses (Figure 11), we see a rather different semantic prosody developing. In "gracious, condescending, and forgiving" and "a smile of condescending sweetness", the semantic prosody is unmistakably positive. By the time we get to Dickens, the prosody is equally clearly negative. The but in "a little condescending, but extremely kind" says it all.

And in the middle once again we find Jane Austen, but this time for a different reason. Her use of this word is consistent with the old, dying, 18th-century norm, but a wider reading of the contexts in which the word is used demonstrates that she by no means accepted that norm uncritically. A condescending deportment is associated in her novels with Lady Catherine de Burgh (as reported by Mr Collins in Pride and Prejudice), Mrs Elton, and Sir Walter Elliott – all characters whose conception of their own status and dignity is inflated to the point of ridiculousness.

This paper did not start out with the intention of offering a critique of Jane Austen's language. However, by looking at the way she used two words whose norms of usage were changing during her lifetime, we can see just how radical she could be in her attitude to received conventions.

Conclusion

Returning now to the monumental inscription with which we began, we can now see that what Bishop Lavington exposed was not (in the modern definition) "intense and eager enjoyment, interest, or approval", but rather, in Johnson's phrase, "a vain confidence of divine favour or communication" or, in Bradley's (OED), "ill-regulated or misdirected religious emotion; extravagance of religious speculation". The notion that rolling about and speaking in tongues was divinely inspired enjoyed considerable currency among some groups of Dissenters from the 17th to the 19th centuries, but Anglican clergy and rationalist philosophers resolutely set their faces against it from the first. However, as the term came to be appropriated in the cause of literary Romanticism and political libertarianism, the original notion of religious enthusiasm became relegated to the status of a historical curiosity. The norm had changed.

The norm has also changed for condescension. From a society in which everyone knew their place, and inferiors were gratified if a superior condescended to speak to them at all, we have moved on to an egalitarian meritocracy, where the appropriate reaction is to take offence if someone speaks condescendingly to you, be it a bishop, one's boss, or indeed even the Queen of England herself.


## Appendix

**SACRED**

To the Memory of

**GEORGE LAVLNGTON, LLD**

Who having early distinguished himself
By a conscientious and disinterested attachment
To the cause of Liberty and the Reformation,
Was successively advanced to dignities
In the Cathedrals of Worcester and St Pauls,
And lastly to the Episcopal Chair of this Church.

Endowed by Nature with superior Abilities,
Rich in a great variety of acquired knowledge,
In the study of the holy Scriptures consumate,
He never ceased to improve his talents,
Nor to employ them to the noblest purposes;
An instructive, animated and convincing Preacher,
A determined Enemy to Idolatry and Persecution,
And successful Exposer of Pretence and Enthusiasm.

Happy in his services to the Church of Christ!
Happier, who could unite such extensive cares
With a strict attention to his immediate charge!
His absences from his Diocese were short and rare;
And his Presence was endeared to his Clergy
By an easy access and a graceful Hospitality,
A winning conversation and condescending Deportment.
Unaffected Sincerity dignified his Instruction
and indulgent Candor sweetened his Government.

At length, having eminently discharged the Duties
Of a Man, a Christian, and a Prelate,
Prepared by habitual Meditation
To resign Life without Regret
To Meet Death without Terror,
He expired, with the Praises of God upon his Lips,
In his 79th Year. Septr 13th 1762

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Figure 1: In Exeter Cathedral.
Later on, backstage, I am greeted with enthusiasm, as if I were a long-lost relative. But she said that it was incorruptible moral ation, knowledge and confidence, and the excitement of the audience, running towards the do...
1 A person may say something (or do something) with enthusiasm.

2 A person may feel or show enthusiasm for something.

3 Enthusiasm is a quality which people have: 'enthusiasm' is often preceded by a possessive determiner (his, her, their, your, Sophie’s, John’s, the men’s, etc.).

4 People may be fired with enthusiasm.

5 An event or state of affairs may arouse or excite enthusiasm in people.

6 Enthusiasm is associated with energy and commitment.

7 Enthusiasm may be tempered by something else (caution, realism, cynicism, or a state of affairs).

8 Eventually, enthusiasm wanes.

9 'Enthusiasm' is often used with an intensifying adjective, e.g. great enthusiasm, tremendous enthusiasm, enormous enthusiasm, immense enthusiasm, boundless enthusiasm, unbounded enthusiasm, unbridled enthusiasm, passionate enthusiasm, real enthusiasm, genuine enthusiasm, excessive enthusiasm.

10 Enthusiasm may be shared collectively.

11 Kinds of enthusiasm include: initial enthusiasm, new-found enthusiasm, sudden enthusiasm, early enthusiasm, spontaneous enthusiasm, growing enthusiasm, undiminished enthusiasm, renewed enthusiasm; boyish enthusiasm, youthful enthusiasm, innocent enthusiasm; popular enthusiasm, infectious enthusiasm, patriotic enthusiasm.

12 There is another kind of enthusiasm, called religious enthusiasm.

Figure 3: Norms of Usage for "Enthusiasm" in modern English
1 NP[PERSON] [SAY/DO] NP[ACTION/SPEECH] with __

2 NP[PERSON] [FEEL/SHOW] __ for NP

3 POSSDET __

4 NP[PERSON] be fired with __

5 NP[EVENT/STATE_OF AFFAIRS] arouse/excite __ in NP[PERSON]

6 ___. energy/commitment.

7 __ be tempered by NP[(caution/realism/cynicism/STATE_OF AFFAIRS]

8 __ wane.

9 ADJ[INTENSIFYING] __

10 __ be shared.

11 ADJ[CLASSIFYING {list}] __
   {list: initial, new-found enthusiasm, sudden, early, spontaneous enthusiasm, growing, undiminished, renewed enthusiasm; boyish, youthful, innocent enthusiasm; popular, infectious, patriotic }

12 religious __

   Figure 4: Formal Representation of the Norms of Usage for "Enthusiasm" in modern English

13 Enthusiasm is an emotion. [superordinate in a semantic hierarchy]

14 Enthusiasm involves a positive emotional response to some event or state of affairs. [positive semantic prosody]

15 Enthusiasm is often shared collectively by members of a group.

16 Enthusiasm is variable and, generally, transitory. [First it is excited, then it wanes]

   Figure 5: Norms of Associated Belief for "Enthusiasm" in modern English
   (less easy to express in formal terms)
ited in the short term, despite its apparent enthusiasm in couples, greeting one another with false enthusiasm. Could have chosen but he accepted with feigned enthusiasm. (p. 239) In fact he fou... 

The mother's uninterest and lack of enthusiasm for The Sunday Telegraph. There is little enthusiasm for the prospects of a water rate, showed as little enthusiasm for the benefits of water for the military discipline for the venture. Could the fat man looked at us without enthusiasm to off-load a VAX 6000 and competing for the at... 

In fact he fou... 

The third police officer among voters for a coalition government for the military disciplines, showed no enthusiasm for the venture. Could he travel to South Wales and competing for the at... 

Their reception lacked any trace of enthusiasm. The fat man looked at us without enthusiasm to off-load a VAX 6000 and competing for the at... 

enthusiasm, Fanny. It is a lovely night, an enthusiasm of a woman's love is even beyond enthusiasm, and that the remaining cold por... 

enthusiasm of her fondness for Henry. I told enthusiasm did captivate her still. She fel... 

Sources 

1811 Austen: Sense and Sensibility 
1813 Austen: Pride and Prejudice 
1814 Austen: Mansfield Park 
1817 Austen: Persuasion 

Figure 7: SOME USES OF "ENTHUSIASM" BY JANE AUSTEN


## Computational Lexicology and Lexicography

1690 between faith and reason, no enthusiasm, or extravagant in religion, ca
1690 her faith or reason; I mean enthusiasm: Which laying by reason, would s
1690 ght I pretend to, it is but enthusiasm. For whether the proposition sup
1740 ferences betwixt a poetical enthusiasm and a serious conviction. In the
1740 in the warmth of a poetical enthusiasm, a poet has a counterfeiten
1740 l say, that it is religious enthusiasm to place our salvation, or capac
1749 wild passionate rapture and enthusiasm, that express'd excess of pleasu
1749 n mine, that in a delicious enthusiasm, I imagin'd such a transfusion o
1759 t levity, and piou with enthusiasm. He soon gained the esteem of hi
1763 n and narrow-minded bigoted enthusiasm; the younger branch of our famil
1764 e been under the madness of enthusiasm or disappointed hopes in their a
1776a he consuls, and the martial enthusiasm of the people. The seven first
1776a st writers in his patriotic enthusiasm for the virtues and noble manner
1776a ated by a blind and furious enthusiasm in the cause of their Donatist t
1776a ers, who glowed with ardent enthusiasm in the cause of their pupil, the
1776b hey are to the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition, which, among i
1776b by popular superstition and enthusiasm. This plan of ecclesiastical gov
1784 owns into our minds, is mere enthusiasm and deception; for that neither
1784 prejudices, superstitions, enthusiasms and diversities of interests an
1798 riancy of noxious passions? Enthusiasm rushes forward with destructive
1811 's, which all the charms of enthusiasm and ignorance of the world canno
1814 cene." "I like to hear your enthusiasm, Fanny. It is a lovely night, an
1814 the fondest biographer. The enthusiasm of a woman's love is even beyond

### Sources cited

1690 Locke: Essay Concerning Human Understanding
1740 Hume: On Human Nature
1749 Fielding: The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling
1759 Johnson: Rasselas
1763 Brooke: the History of Lady Julia Mandeville
1764 Otis: Rights of British Colonies
1776a Gibbon; Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire
1776b Smith: Wealth of Nations
1784 Allen: Reason
1798 Wollstonecraft: Maria
1811 Austen: Sense and Sensibility
1814 Austen: Mansfield Park

### Figure 8: SOME 17TH- AND 18TH-CENTURY CITATIONS FOR "ENTHUSIASM"

[FROM THE OXFORD HISTORICAL CORPUS]
1 Enthusiasm was associated with possession, supernatural inspiration, and wild passionate rapture.

2 Enthusiasm was also associated (by mainstream writers) with fraud, delusion, and superstition.

3 Martial enthusiasm was associated with ardour for action and heroism.

4 People were motivated by enthusiasm in a cause (good or bad).

5 Men could be blinded by enthusiasm.

6 Kinds of enthusiasm included: religious enthusiasm, narrow-minded enthusiasm, bigoted enthusiasm, mad enthusiasm, ugly enthusiasm, wild enthusiasm, passionate enthusiasm, ardent enthusiasm, rapturous enthusiasm, furious enthusiasm; martial enthusiasm, patriotic enthusiasm, invincible enthusiasm; poetical enthusiasm, elegant enthusiasm.

Figure 9: SOME 18TH-CENTURY NORMS FOR "ENTHUSIASM"
also see <page=271> <gap> her as divisive, condescending, and a destructive force in political life. As in this extract: <page=79> heartless, authoritarian attitude, high-handed and ultimately didactic. Was it a question of not being too clever by half? <p_23l: Figure 10: CITATIONS FROM THE BNC FOR "CONDESCENDING"

also see <page=271> <gap> her as divisive, condescending, and a destructive force in political life. As in this extract: <page=79> heartless, authoritarian attitude, high-handed and ultimately didactic. Was it a question of not being too clever by half? <p_23l: Figure 10: CITATIONS FROM THE BNC FOR "CONDESCENDING"

\textbf{Stress and trauma}


ewline

Figure 10: CITATIONS FROM THE BNC FOR "CONDESCENDING"
hose below me, be gracious, however, as you are so approbation in a smile of sort to the company, he was with the lullaby strains of owledgments of so great and as lady Catherine herself m. just as accomplished and s; sir Walter prepared with s,' he said, in the tone of val of the player in a most Mrs. Blimber was a little Condescending and Forgiving, using Clemency condescending to take up with the best I ha condescending sweetness, I consented with a condescending enough to desire me and the p condescending endearment! Let them be taug condescending a kindness to her boy. Emma, condescendingly says, will connect themselv condescending as Mrs. Elton meant to be con condescending bows for all the afflicted te condescending praise, that a great man uses condescending bow and smile; and making a s condescending and patronising manner, which condescending, but extremely kind. </p>

Sources

1728 Franklin: Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion
1749 Fielding: Tom Jones
1763 Brooke: The History of Lady Julia Mandeville
1766 Goldsmith: The Vicar of Wakefield
1792 Wollstonecraft: Rights of Women
1809 Austen: The Waltons
1813 Austen: Pride and Prejudice
1816 Austen: Emma
1817a Austen: Persuasion
1817b Austen: Letters
1828 Hawthorne: Fanshawe
1837 Dickens: Pickwick Papers
1844 Dickens: Martin Chuzzlewit
1848 Dickens: Dombey and Son

Figure 11: SOME 18TH- AND 19TH-CENTURY CITATIONS FOR "CONDESCENDING"