Dear Professor: A Chronicle of Absences
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Modest as our understanding of the human psyche and its realization in language and discourse is, one cannot but marvel at the unfathomable richness of this corpus of letters—despite belonging to the same genre (roughly described as apology letters), over the same medium (email), spanning six years, in the same language, mostly by individuals of the undergraduate age ("fair sprinkling of adults and senior citizens" notwithstanding), who were all enrolled in a couple or so of courses concerning the same overall subject matter and taught in no more than a couple or so of academic institutions of the same caliber and largely standardized (by state law) pedagogical and educational charter.

And yet this corpus of letters whisks us directly into the dilemma of personality and its realization in words, sans the comfortable distance of erudite jargon or clinical diagnosis. Those who believe that all of us are in essence the same will find here as much evidence to support their views as those who believe that we are all unique. Not unlike the debate whether photons are particles or waves, only those who will try to hold both horns of the bull in tandem will do justice to the data—provided they survive the experience.

Let’s start with the sin of treating the whole book as one prolix letter and see what simple word frequency analysis can tell us about this average, intersex student. This sin is not only the most commonly committed one in psycho-linguistics, but also one of the very first and most influential in the field—making it a veritable “original sin.”

Like many sins, word frequency analysis is aesthetically pleasing in a way that might sometimes cloud our judgment. Consider this word cloud of the entire book (In a word cloud, the size of the word is proportional to the frequency with which it is used):
CLASS
Our average, intersex student seems to be preoccupied with the word “class.” The relative size of the word not only shows how much the concept (as an abstract noun, as a synonym for “course” or as a synonym for “session”) looms large in the student’s mind, but also how much it is “canonized” as a petrified concept, with no synonyms that could chip away at its size (consider, in contrast, the word “apologize” and how it might have diminished somewhat the size of “sorry” in the word cloud).

Yet the biggest deception of the word cloud is that it purports to show only “content” words, which supposedly carry “genuine” information. To do so, computational linguists of the “original sin” ilk discarded the bulk of the text, which is largely made of words they deemed uninformative: prepositions, pronouns, articles, and so on.

The ghosts of these words are haunting computational linguists to this day, but none more than the first person singular pronoun “I”. Had I (here’s this unescapable pronoun again!) added the word “I” to the word cloud above, it would have added an unseemly white block 4.5 times the size of the word “class.”

Furthermore, one can claim that as our social landscape has become increasingly self-centered, self-authored, self-appointed, and self-promoted (in no small part due to the World Wide Web), it has accordingly been teeming with individual stories (with a demonstrable bias to success stories) and personal opinions (with a demonstrable bias to negative opinions) — all contributing to the abundance of the first person singular pronoun in the linguistic atmosphere around us. Inasmuch as this discourse particle is so prevalent as to feed off its own reflective energy and prevent the introduction of external perspective to the communicative sphere, then one might well consider it the prime culprit in a global linguistic climate change.

For all the self-centeredness of our mash-up student, the emails show remarkably low insight — if we are to believe the
results of a thematic text analysis applied to the corpus. In thematic text analysis, all words that are synonymous, relevant or associated with a certain concept are tallied to gauge its prominence in the text. Using this technique we can ask “how many linguistic markers for insight do the emails contain? And what is the relative role of insight within the overall thinking of the writer”?

Considering the prominence of the single person pronoun in the emails, we may not be surprised to learn that “cognitive” words that are associated with reasoning and persuasion (e.g., “because,” “but,” “if,” “just,” “or,” “since,” etc.—all venerable building blocks of excuses) appear in 11.12% of the text (which is quite high for an interpersonal correspondence). After all, isn’t the ultimate goal of this genre of emails to confess to a transgression while carefully choosing words that may minimize its damage? The surprising aspect of the emails is that the ratio of general cognitive (read: “excuse”) words to “insight” words (e.g., words that show that the writer reflects back on their cognitive process: “believe,” “conclude,” “imagine,” “perceive,” “realize,” “recognize,” “think,” “understand,” etc.) is approximately 5 to 1. In other words, our composite student is on average at once cognitively sophisticated (as evidenced by the abundance of thinking-related words), self-absorbed (as evidenced by the abundance of single person pronouns), yet with little capability to reflect insightfully on their thinking and put it in larger perspective.

By now the reader of this epilogue might have a low opinion indeed of our composite student—and might have even proceeded to generalize this impression to all the students in the book (and beyond). This is a worthy experience to have—but not to trust. Though far messier than its computational counterpart, discourse analysis and its related fields (e.g., sociolinguistics, linguistic pragmatics, etc.) remind us that each individual may have different reasons for exhibiting similar verbal behavior. For example, what if the emails are low on insight because the professor is intimidating as to reduce the
cognitive capacities of their students? Or what if the professor has an accent and the students are trying to minimize misunderstandings by choosing the most concrete language possible? (both examples were chosen for their distinct inapplicability to Prof. Noterdaeme).

Indeed, when one abandons the wholesale word counting and forays into the various ways in which the students in this book construct their sentences—even while expressing the same sentiment—the wholesome statistical picture quickly disintegrates into myriad hard-to-track idiosyncrasies. Let’s revisit the first person singular pronoun and see what happens to it in context:
In other words, discourse analysis (or sociolinguistics) tell us that understanding word choice can hardly stop at their blind tallies. Rather, word choice can best be examined in their context, which may reveal the mental model that the individual writer has of their audience and the “tacit contract” that they follow in both form and content to express their minds. Consider this: both “I want(/ed) to let you know” and “I just want(/ed) to let you know” appear in the same frequency in the corpus (4 times). Generally speaking the modifier “just” is used mostly as a minimizer. If so, what exactly is the writer trying to minimize by choosing (not necessarily consciously) to write “I just wanted you to know”, and how is that (in their mind, at least — and again, not necessarily consciously) more effective in conveying their intentions than “I wanted you to know”? Considering the tremendous variability with which people may convey roughly the same idea and how this variability is linked with their (conscious, unconscious, or anywhere in between) assumptions about how the world works or what make their professor “tick” may just as easily make this book a meditation on individuality.

Such are the preoccupations of the conscientious linguist, and they don’t spare the writer of these lines. Is the tone of the epilogue too didactic, I wonder? And if it is, is it because I grew up with two idealistic educators as parents? Perhaps. Or is it because I have a congenital disposition towards being didactic? Equally likely. Or maybe I tailored this epilogue to the readership of this book, which is a projection of my own students? Also likely. Or perhaps it’s all of the above? Or maybe I just don’t know since not all my linguistic motives are available to me consciously.

This innate uncertainty in language may seem daunting and despairing, and with the dramatic improvement in computational power and storage capacities, it sometimes looks as if we are so grateful to quantitative methods for sorting out our messy world into simpler, manageable, reproducible, and standardized categories (and doing it so efficiently and rap-
idly, without ever complaining!) that we might be confusing gratitude with servitude, and forget that these categories are still ultimately but a simplification of our own messy perceptions—and sometimes an arbitrary simplification at that. Let's hope that whoever judges us based on a computerized version of our word choice (nsa, anybody?) does not lose sight of this fact.

In contrast, psycho- and sociolinguists, along with philosophers and other scholars, have been laboring over these fundamental discursive forces for decades, with no decisive hierarchy. Do speakers craft their sentences based on the norms they grew up on? Or based on the norms that they observe around them (whether in real life or through the “realities” of the entertainment industry)? Do they primarily strive to align the information with what they think the listener already knows and is capable or expecting to hear? Or do they primarily strive to minimize the possibility that the listener will feel slighted or stupid? And so on. Each approach proved a fertile (though admittedly messy) ground not only for a new variation of discourse analysis but also for whole linguistic sub-fields and “cliques.” As much as it may frustrate those who would like to see the field of discourse analysis become standardized and canonized as its quantitative and computational counterparts, its real-life messiness is more akin to the merry mayhem that ensues when a diverse group of creatures play cricket together, and so I would encourage the reader to apply the Dodo bird verdict as featured in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland: “Everybody has won, and all must have prizes.”

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