

Text Analytics Seminar Series

A Question of Time

Professor Tony McEnery,
Lancaster University, UK

6th November 2023

Online (Microsoft Teams)

9.00-10.00 (UK), 19.00-20.00 (Australia)

Sign up to the series at

<https://forms.office.com/e/326ZsRdpu7>.

If you have any questions, please contact Emma Putland at e.putland@lancaster.ac.uk.



Words change their usage over time. This profoundly simple and accessible fact about language is part of our everyday shared experience; if we reflect on the pre-internet meanings of words such as web, network and tweet, usage change is instantly apparent. Lexical changes are often prompted by changes in society, culture and technology requiring new naming strategies for new or modified concepts.

This talk introduces a methodology for the diachronic analysis of large historical corpora that looks at the fluctuation of word usage manifested through collocation, that is the co-occurrence of words in texts. In essence, this technique is theory neutral and does not presuppose commitment to any one semantic theory.

- Instead, it helps to accurately describe large amounts of evidence about word
- usage, in different contexts, that are available in historical corpora. This talk first
- addresses the issue of diachronic change in word usage and meaning after which
- I will present a technique, Usage Fluctuation Analysis (UFA) noting guidelines for
- the interpretation of the results of the analysis. I will then present some case
- studies, beginning by applying the technique to three words related to social
- actors in seventeenth-century Britain - whore, harlot and banker. The case studies
- will demonstrate the value of the technique by relating the observations to corpus
- and historical analyses carried out manually (as a validation of the technique) as
- well as by showing novel observations that the technique affords and that were not
- previously available.

Jointly hosted by the ESRC Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Science at Lancaster University (UK) and the Sydney Corpus Lab at The University of Sydney (Australia).



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