Generational Slang Grant Proposal

Yiu-On Li · Oct 20, 2022 · ENGL 197

Abstract

We seek $25,000 to compare slang use across generations in the United States, in mediums of social media posts, speeches, TV and film, and linguistic corpora.

A common present-day sentiment is that conflict between young and old generations, in terms of beliefs and actions, is inevitable and impossible. We aim to examine this belief through the lens of slang, because slang, as informal language, offers otherwise impossible glimpses into a person's psyche.

After collecting the contents of our corpora and sorting them into appropriate generations, we would isolate and examine the slang for each generation using a text analysis tool like AntConc. We would dig into frequencies for both individual words and word cohorts, the parameters of which would depend on the similarities of the words we end up with.

Similar studies have been small, restrictive, or irrelevant to our aims. We hope not only to further the existing literature on generations and linguistics, but to offer the possibility that generational conflict is not as intractable as it may seem.

Narrative

Every generation vexes its predecessors and its successors, and vice versa. Their ways are all different; they believe and experience differently; the past, present, and future stare at each other unintelligibly.

This unintelligibility can manifest as hostility. One narrative has the newer generations warring against the older, against their stodgy manners and mannerisms and inability to change (Lorenz). The same narrative stages itself on

social media and in mass protests. The new and the old guard, it seems, are engaged in a bare-knuckle brawl for the fate of humanity and the planet.

But is this *the* narrative? Or is it just one of them?

We believe the answer lies in language. More specifically, we believe in colloquial language—that is, slang—as a window into a person's deepest beliefs. The way in which a person speaks when they are not thinking about speaking at all is perhaps the closest we will ever come to mind reading.

Slang disarms. It is personal, uttered only between close confidants—or to those one would like to make a confidant. It is a powerful vehicle for moving ideas and people toward particular ends and actions. And we want to see how these words have changed over time, to see if people really have changed over time.

We seek a grant of $25,000 to investigate the use of slang across generations, from baby boomers in 1946 to Generation Z in 2022 (Brunjes). Our analysis will focus on the United States, in mediums of social media posts, speeches, TV and film, and linguistic corpora.

We hope, with this project, to further the fields of generational and linguistic study so that we may enrich the human experience. In the process, we may discover that we have more in common than we think, and that it is possible to heal from divides that may have never existed at all.

Environmental Scan

Similar studies to this proposal have been conducted prior, but none satisfy the aims of this proposal completely.

A study from the State University of New York at New Paltz examines the use of slang between different generations, and ties those words to one of six emotions (Citera). They find that each generation gravitates toward unique slang, but some words like "pissed" and "gross" are used by multiple or all generations. However, their sample size is limited to 107 participants, and their primary mode of information collection is surveying—design considerations that may restrict the study's generalizability.

Other sociological reviews explore demographic transitions through the lenses of historical experience, family, and education (Hareven; Ryder). However, they make little mention of how language and slang inform and affect these transitions.

A final article suggests that “different ways of speaking” between generations may increase the difficulty for one to understand the other (Grenier). However, the author does not elaborate much, does not quantify the statement, and does not assert its validity outright. It is possible that, at the time, the tools did not exist for the author to solidify their position.

Materials, Methods, and Outputs

As mentioned in the narrative, our experimental corpora will comprise social media posts, speeches, TV and film, and linguistic corpora. While we will attempt to locate most of this text from existing sources, others we would likely have to collect by ourselves. However, even for texts that have already been collected for us, we would have to take the extra step of identifying each speaker and sorting them into different age cohorts, so that we can compare their vernacular to speakers from other cohorts.

Luckily, ample samples already exist for us to dip our toes into. The UC Los Angeles library website contains a wealth of corpora, ranging from State of the Union Addresses to Twitter posts (“Linguistic Corpora”). UC Santa Barbara’s Department of Linguistics also features the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English, with 60 recordings of casual conversations from people of all ages (Du Bois, “Santa Barbara”).

The following is an excerpt of a transcription from one conversation in the Santa Barbara Corpus, titled “SBC004 Raging Bureaucracy.” The transcription notes that all speakers are in their twenties, placing them either in Generation Z or the millennial generation.

```
0.00 1.07   PAM:         .. Juice [2anybody2]?
0.46 1.07   SHARON:               [2I like it2],
1.07 1.56                .. for a little while.
1.56 2.04                You go --
2.04 2.87                .. [You go] crazy.
2.12 2.45   CAROLYN:        [(Hx)]
```

```
2.87 4.25                @@@[2@2]
3.90 4.25   SHARON:          [2I already2] --
4.25 5.95   CAROLYN:     .. (H) [3I don't go3] [4crazy4].
5.05 5.59   PAM:                [3Juice ~Warren3]?
5.59 5.95   WARREN:                              [4(THROAT)4]
5.95 6.30                (THROAT)
6.30 7.10                ... Good.
7.10 8.55   WARREN:      ... [XX][2XX2]
7.60 8.00   PAM:             [~Care]?
8.00 8.55   CAROLYN:             [2No thanks2].
8.55 9.40                ... I %i %i --
9.40 10.60               I can't drink OJ anymore.
```

Of course, this being a linguistic translation, the transcript includes timestamps and a variety of symbols indicating features of spoken language, such as pauses, intonation, and unclear sounds (Du Bois, “Basic Symbols”). The plain words would appear like so:

```
Juice anybody?
I like it, for a little while. You go – you go crazy. I already –
I don't go crazy.
Juice, Warren?
Good.
Care?
No thanks. I – I can't drink OJ anymore.
```

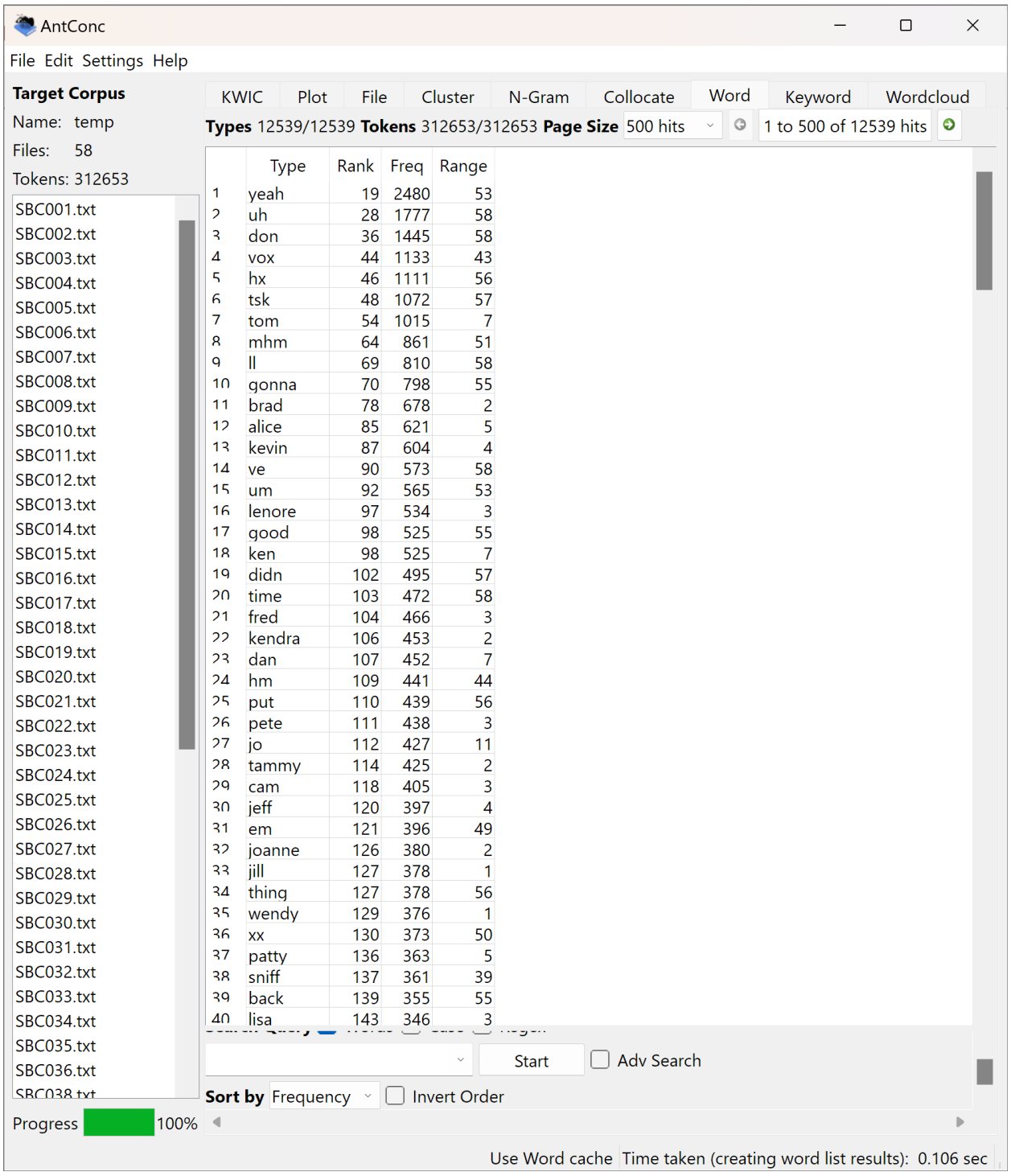
However, such a process of manual simplification is tiresome and time-consuming. Instead, we would simply use the raw transcriptions and add any transcription symbols that appear to the stopwords list.

Speaking of stopwords: Once we have all of our texts collected and sorted, we would use a text analysis tool, such as AntConc, to examine each generation’s vocabulary individually. We would use the Buckley-Salton stopwords list to eliminate common prepositions, with the following modifications:

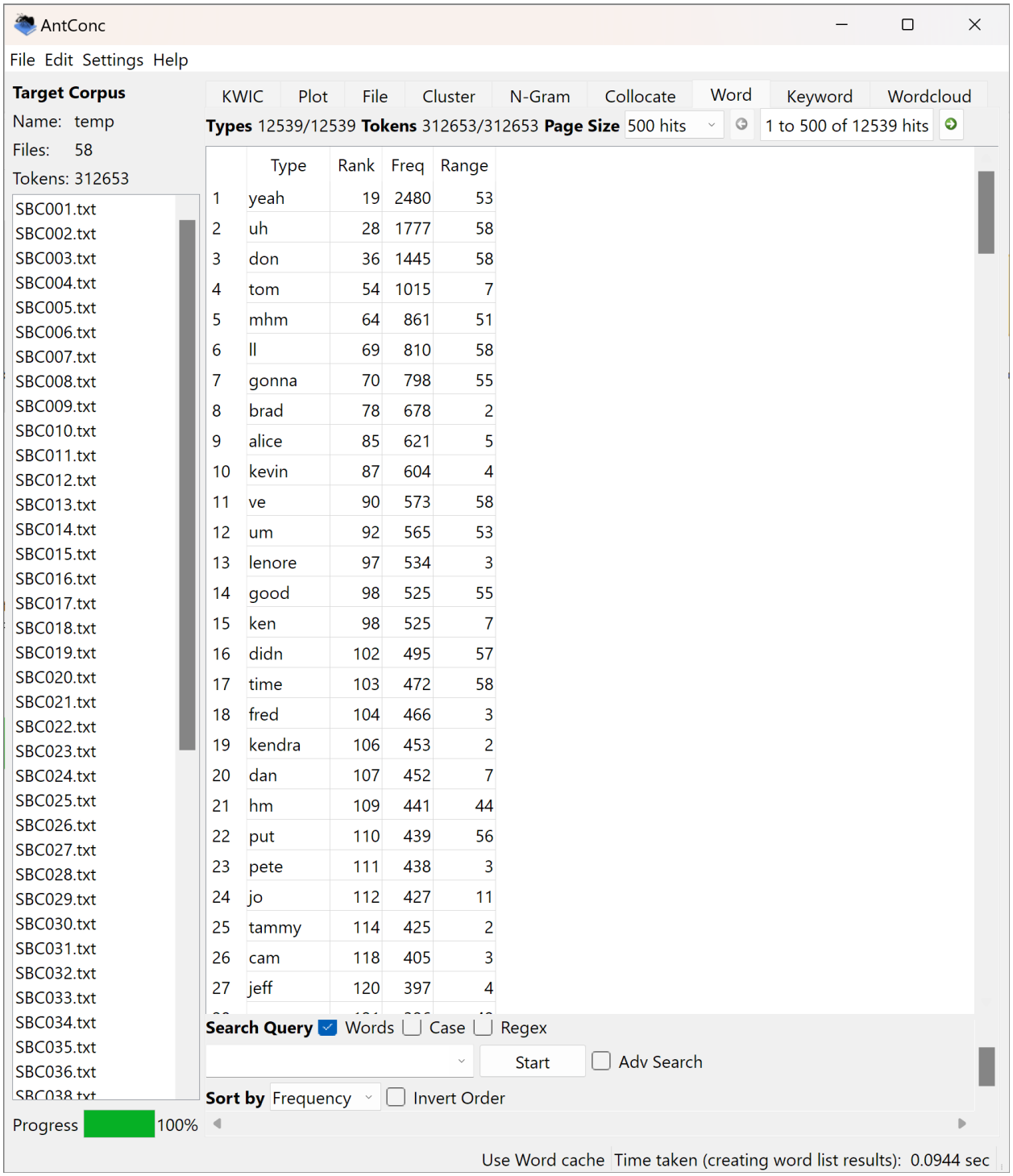
- Add linguistic transcription symbols (as mentioned previously).
- Remove prepositions that double as potential slang words, such as “like.”
- Add non-slang words through multiple passes.

The corollary to adding non-slang words to the stopwords list is that each generation will have a unique list, the goal being that we get as clear a picture as possible of each generation’s go-to slang without other words getting in the way.

Here is a word frequency analysis of the entire Santa Barbara Corpus, using AntConc and an unmodified stopwords list:



Here is the same analysis using a stopwords list that includes transcription symbols:



The next step would be adding names and other non-slang terms to the stoplist, but in the interest of time, we omit that step here.

After isolating all of the slang in our corpora for each generation, we would proceed to compare words across different generations. To do so, we would compare individual word frequencies—for example, how often do baby boomers use “yeah” compared to Generation Z?

But individual comparisons are limiting—while words may change between generations, sentiments may not. We therefore plan to also group words into cohorts based on shared criteria, and to compare how frequently different age cohorts use different word cohorts.

We have not yet decided on the criteria for each cohort—they will depend on the slang words we end up finding for each generation, and the qualities they share with other words. One possibility is to follow Citera et al.’s approach and to group slang based on one of six emotions: happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, surprise, and anger.

At the end of these comparisons, we expect to find a significant difference between the individual slang words that generations use, but no significant difference by word cohort—for example, by emotion. In other words, we expect generations to be more alike than they expect or would like to believe.

Works Cited

Brunjes, Kathy. “Age Range by Generation.” *Beresford Research*, 20 April 2022, https://www.beresfordresearch.com/age-range-by-generation/.

Citera, Maryalice, et al. *Generational Differences in the Use of Emotional Words*. SUNY Digital Repository, 2016. *SUNY Digital Repository*, https://dspace.sunyconnect.suny.edu/handle/1951/67533.

Du Bois, John W. “Basic Symbols for Discourse Transcription.” *Transcription in Action*, http://transcription.projects.linguistics.ucsb.edu/A02asymbols.pdf.

Du Bois, John W. “Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English.” *UCSB Department of Linguistics*, https://www.linguistics.ucsb.edu/research/santa-barbara-corpus.

Grenier, Amanda M. *Crossing Age and Generational Boundaries: Exploring Intergenerational Research Encounters*. Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, 2007. *Wiley Online Library*, https://spssi.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2007.00532.x.

Hareven, Tamara K. “Aging and Generational Relations: A Historical and Life Course Perspective.” *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 20, 1994, pp. 437–61. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2083373.

“Linguistic Corpora.” *UCLA Library Research Guides*, 1 September 2022, https://guides.library.ucla.edu/c.php?g=180293&p=1189870.

Lorenz, Taylor. “‘OK Boomer’ Marks the End of Friendly Generational Relations.” *The New York Times*, 15 January 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/29/style/ok-boomer.html.

Ryder, Norman B. “The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change.” *American Sociological Review*, vol. 30, no. 6, 1965, pp. 843–61. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/2090964.