

Think it. Say it. Reported. A century of reporting verbs in British fiction (1900-2019)

This work-in-progress report investigates reporting verbs in 20th and 21st century British fiction. The data come from the Corpus of British Fiction (CBF), which consists of 813 novels, approx. 60 million words. This WiP falls within the field of corpus stylistics, which Mahlberg (2016: 144) situates "within the wider context of digital humanities".

The investigation is limited to reporting verbs in direct speech (DS) and thought (DT), e.g. *cried* in (1) and *thought* in (2).

- 1) "Give us another call!" he *cried*.
- 2) "Why not?" he *thought*.

To my knowledge, no overview of reporting verbs in 20th/21st century British fiction exists. One of the aims is to find out whether there has been a development in the use of reporting verbs over the past 120 years, or whether there is stability regarding the verbs chosen.

According to Lambert (1981:18) "*cry* becomes less important as we move into the nineteenth century and then on to the twentieth". The CBF data support this. Figure 1 shows uses of *cry* per decade per 1,000 instances of DS/DT.

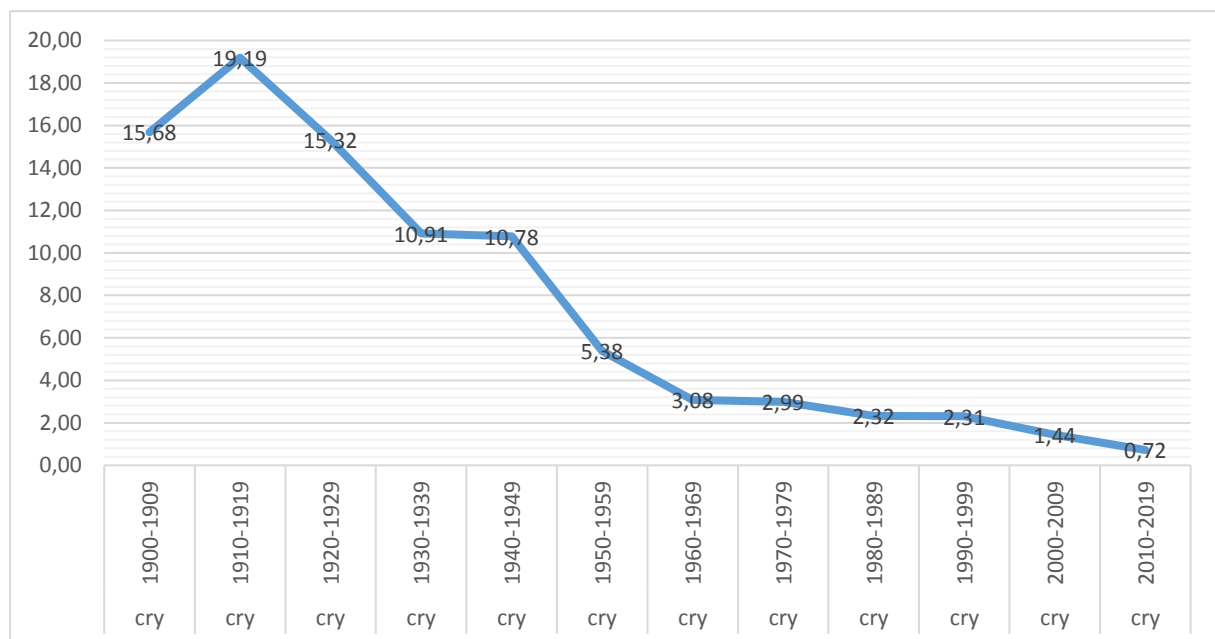


Figure 1. *Cry* as a reporting verb per 1,000 instances of DS/DT

Lambert (ibid.) continues "one would also like to know where the decibel level of novelistic conversation really becomes lower and where *cry* is simply displaced by more learned synonyms (*exclaim, ejaculate*)."

Addressing these issues, Figure 2 shows the relative decrease/increase of *cry* and eleven near-synonyms across three 40-year periods, P1: 1900-1939, P2: 1940-1979 and P3: 1980-2019. Although few of these verbs, labelled 'prosodic, direct speech descriptive verbs' by Caldas-Coulthard (1987), have surpassed *cry* in terms of raw frequency in any period, they show varying degrees of popularity. For example, all attested examples of *vociferate* are found in P1, whereas occurrences of *bellow* are distributed as follows: 19.1% in P1, 19.8% in P2 and 61.1% in P3. Thus, along with *cry, ejaculate,*

exclaim and *vociferate* show a decrease in use, while *bellow*, *call*, *intone*, *scream*, *shout* and *yell* show an increase from P1 to P3.

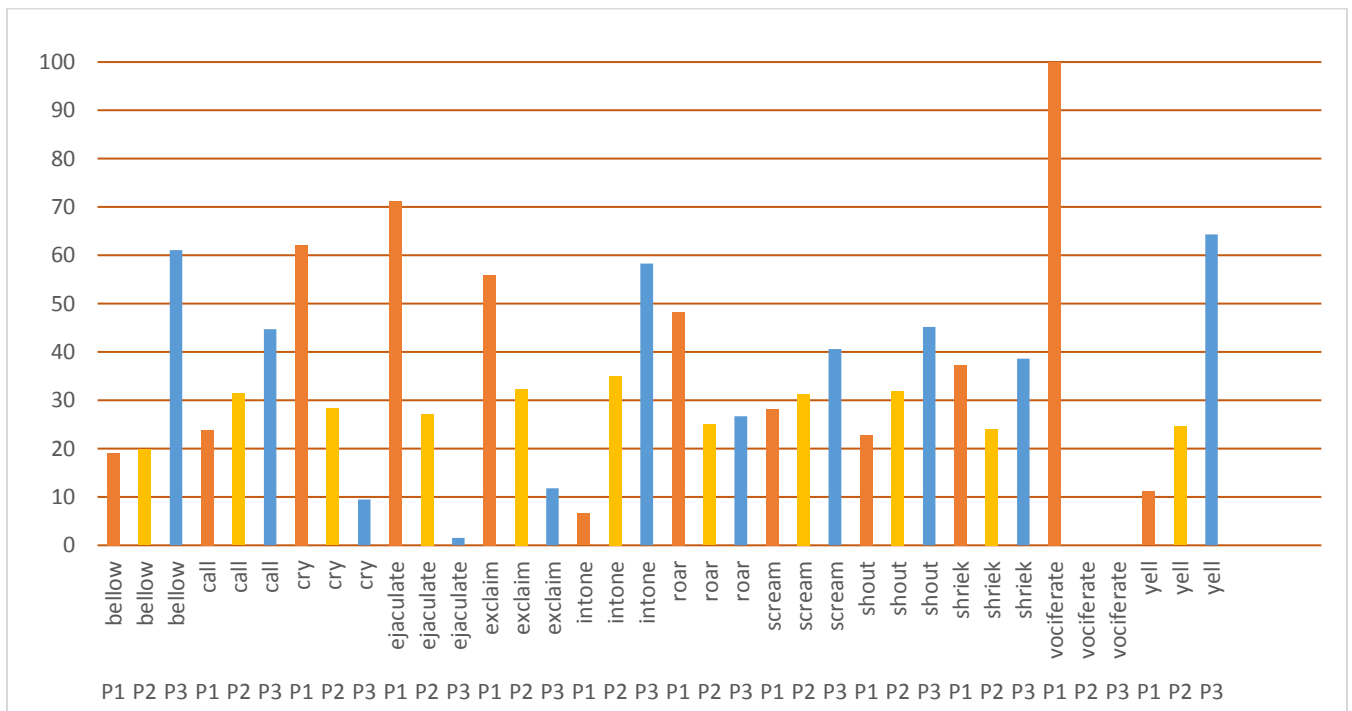


Figure 2. Relative decrease/increase (%) for each of the 12 verbs across three periods

The numbers presented in Figure 2 beg several questions, e.g.: Have both men and women stopped crying and started shouting and yelling? Have both (major) senses of *cry* ('shed tears', 'shout') decreased? This WiP looks at the former of these questions by extracting reporting verbs in combination with the personal pronouns *he* and *she*. The working hypothesis is that noticeable gender differences early in the 20th century even out over time. Preliminary results seem to corroborate this: men shouted much more than women until the 1970s, and women did not bellow until the 1980s.

References

- Caldas-Coulthard, C.R. 1987. Reported speech in written narrative texts. In M. Coulthard, (ed.), *Discussing discourse. Studies presented to David Brazil on his retirement*, Birmingham: English Language Research, University of Birmingham, 149–167.
- Lambert, M. 1981. *Dickens and the Suspended Quotation*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
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