

Pondering the Quiddities: A Lexical Analysis of COVID-19 CCCC Documentarian Notes

Miriam Moore

Every semester, I assign a reflection essay at the end of the first-year composition course: students review their drafts, journals, feedback, and final portfolios. I ask them to observe this material, reflect on it, and then draft some “big ideas” about reading, writing, and language—a personal theory of literacy, if you will—that will stay with them in future courses. The paired practices of observation and reflection frustrate some students, who send me emails in hedged, uncertain language. “I hate to bother you, but could you tell me a little more about what you want?”

Over the four days that would have been the CCCC meeting in Milwaukee, I completed eight surveys, documenting my days at home—days I had planned to spend in sessions and conversations with colleagues. Now, a few weeks later, I am tasked with observing and reflecting on these entries to see what conclusions emerge about this experience—the time of the “un-convention.” And like my students, I find myself ill at ease as I attempt this reflection, this pondering. To ponder in Biblical Greek is *συνβάλλω* (*sumballo*)—literally, to throw things together to see what patterns and insights emerge, to give consideration. I have looked at my survey answers, and I confess, I am flummoxed. What patterns could those four days possibly reveal, and why would they be of interest to anyone? What is there to discuss? I stayed home. I worked. It was spring break and the second week of a state-mandated stay-at-home order; the boundaries of my life got a lot smaller quickly. That’s it.

When students find nothing to say, I tell them to look again, to ask questions. I must take my own advice: I read the prompts and all my entries yet again. They seem rehearsed, forced. What substance is in them? Over those four days, I got ready for the transition to online classes, and I worked on data analysis related to metalinguistic concept development. I refer to the data analysis in several entries; it must have been at the forefront of my thinking over the four days. The analysis

required both concordancing software as well as manual coding. But what more can I say about it?

Making sense of a lexical analysis also requires pondering: a word list is produced, then frequencies and context of use are examined to find conceptual and syntactic patterns. It is an act of *συμβάλλω* yet again. I wonder: could my CCCC survey answers also be analyzed lexically? Would that reveal any insights, anything of value?

To explore this idea, I converted my answers from the eight surveys into a data file for analysis with the AntConc concordancing program (Anthony). I loaded the file and ran a simple word list: I had just 3,958 words to work with—far fewer than my research datasets (numbering in the tens or hundreds of thousands)—and fewer, too, than the output my students typically review in one semester. I had used 997 different words (252 unique words per 1,000). The student writers in my most recent study of journal entries averaged 124 unique words per 1,000. In other words, I employed a broader range of vocabulary than those students did. But surely that is expected—and not particularly helpful.

The highest frequency word in my dataset is *I*, which appears 238 times. The word *my* is also frequent, appearing 111 times across the entries. Of course, this makes sense; the entries are my own reflections. The prompts were questions directed to a second-person reader (*you*), so first-person responses are appropriate. And while I was writing for the editors, of course, and (potentially) members of our profession, there are no second-person pronouns in any of my entries: the focal point is myself. Even third-person personal pronouns are rare: only eighteen occurrences in the data. The first-person plural appears a bit more often—thirty instances across all entries. But still, nothing approaches the frequency of the first-person *I* (Figure 8.1).

That frequency fits my memory of those days: I felt I was alone most of the time. I articulated that thought—“I am alone”—five different times. But I am normally alone during early mornings and late afternoons; perhaps my perception of the un-convention was skewed in some way. I combed through the word list to find references to people. I was surprised by the results: across my surveys during the stay-at-home experience, I mention twenty different people (both individuals and groups), with 120 tokens (or thirty mentions per thousand words). My husband and son (also staying at home) appear most often. But the emphasis on people in my responses reminds me that I was not alone, neither physically nor virtually, despite changes to the rhythms of my usual interactions.

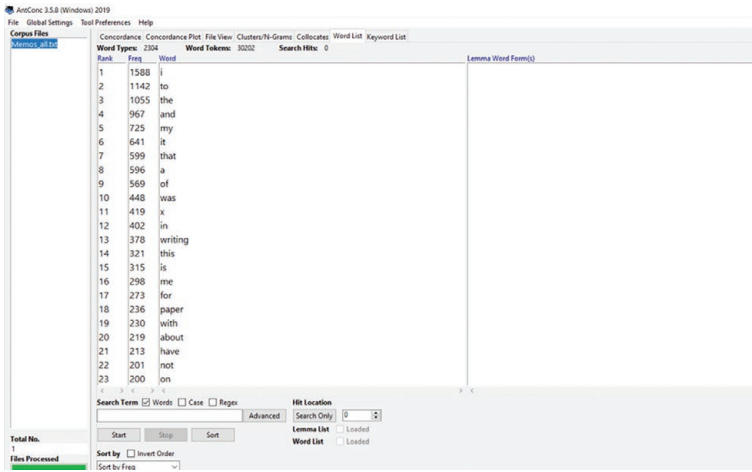


Figure 8.1. Screen capture of AntConc lexical analysis from the author’s research project. The capture shows the frequency of the top 23 lexical items in the dataset.

Perhaps the sensation of being alone was augmented by my experience of time over the four days; cognitive psychologists tell us that the sense of time stretching out—time dilation—is powerful, just as the opposite sense (time compression) can be. Our perception of time may be tied to our understanding of space; looking back, I would say that time seemed protracted over the four days, while space, in contrast, felt constricted, given the limitations on my movements. I wanted to know what the surveys would show about my experience of space and time during those days.

The lexical analysis reveals a typical English-language reification of time: metaphorically speaking, it is a *thing* that I can *give myself*, I can *spend*, I can *redeem*, or I can *waste*. Time appears commodified in my entries; my responses read as minutes of a meeting, an accounting. But time is also metaphorically a container. We are *in* a time of isolation, and I got analysis work *in* before dinner. I worked *in* two-hour chunks, and I journaled and prayed *in* the mornings. We are *in* a season—and to be *in* a container suggests constraints, yes, but also secure boundaries. Such boundaries give shape to the fluid substance contained within. My days were not so much points on a line (punctuated by events *at 2* or *at 4*), but a succession of open containers that I needed to fill and account for (Figure 8.2).



Figure 8.2. Time is a series of open boxes.

I did indeed fill the time-containers, dutifully and consistently. My survey responses mention more than thirty different activities, of which the most common include working (39), emailing (14), researching (10), planning (18), and walking (10). I also mention completing tasks or analysis, reading, playing badminton, grading, resting, teaching, writing, relaxing, shopping, reviewing, doing housework, journaling, packing, praying, cooking, editing, doing schoolwork, revising, reflecting, mentoring, doing yard work, revisiting . . .

And yet my initial reading of these responses led me to think my days lacked substance. Why would I have reacted that way? After twenty-five years of completing annual reviews and evaluations (only recently in hopes of tenure), I am accustomed to sorting activities into those which “count” and those that do not. We justify activities that count as *legitimate* instructional activities, *legitimate* institutional or professional service, and *legitimate* scholarship. Certainly some of my activities over the four-day period could be listed in a tenure-review portfolio; most could not. They are nonetheless valuable, and I am learning to check the inner critic who would rebuke me when I “alternate between things that had to be done (emails and shopping), things that energize me (research analysis), and things that calm my spirit and bring me joy (journaling, walking, spending time with my family),” as I noted in my survey on Thursday evening.

The most frequent activity, according to my data, was *work*—*variations* of this word appear thirty-nine times in the data (9.85 times every thousand words). *Work* appears as both noun and verb, entity and activity. As activity, I *do* it, *tackle* it, or *back off* from it; work dominated those four days. It is something I had to *get through* and *get done*. Also, work is an atelic process, one without a defined endpoint: I worked *on* research, I worked *on* emails, and I worked *through* the chunks of the day. But those instances of working do not contain a defined goal; I can say that I worked on a project *for an hour* (duration), but I cannot say that I worked on it *in an hour* (with the implication that something was finished or achieved). And

perhaps the frequent repetition of this atelic verb in my data (in contrast to telic actions like *grading a paper*, *making leek and garlic soup*, or *buying toilet paper*) contributed to my sense that somehow these days lacked substance; much of my work did not lead to clearly defined products, despite meticulous planning. I am a planner: *plans* and *planning* show up eighteen times in my data, along with references to *schedules* and *chunks*. Even spontaneity during the stay-at-home period was, to some extent, planned: there were chunks of time set aside for *play* (which shows up only four times in my data, in contrast to the thirty-nine references to *work*). *Plans*, *schedules*, and *work*, like containers, gave shape to the un-convention days.

The surveys also asked us to consider the spaces we occupied between March 25 and March 28. The words in my data reflect descriptions of these spaces: *home* dominates the list (twenty-three mentions), as do spaces within and around my *home*—*den* (nine), *kitchen* (nine), *outside* (ten), *backyard* (six), *porch* (six). I do not have designated office space in my home, so I moved between the dining room and my den, where I sat on the *sofa* with a *lap-desk*. My words betray my preferences for how I engage in academic work—near bookshelves, with bright natural light. Three different times I noted that I was working near *bookshelves*—*writing*, if you will, in the company of other writers. Just prior to the closing of schools, my husband had floor-to-ceiling bookshelves built in our den (along with a library ladder, which I had coveted since the early days of our marriage). Throughout the stay-at-home mandates in March, April, and May, I found myself drawn to this space (Figure 8.3), despite the lack of a desk.

I have always found it easier to write, read, and think where words are prominent, in spaces that are beautifully designed, well-lit, and full of books. In my days at Baylor University, I was drawn to the sunny classrooms of the Carroll Science Building (now the English department) and the magnificent foyer and stained-glass windows of the Armstrong Browning Library.

In graduate school, I found respite in the Horseshoe at the University of South Carolina and nearby Trinity Cathedral, where concerts were held during lunch on Wednesdays. I remember stepping out of searing heat into the cool of the nave, adjusting my eyes, and finding an empty pew where I could read before the quintet or pianist or soloist began the day's performance.



Figure 8.3. The author's home library.

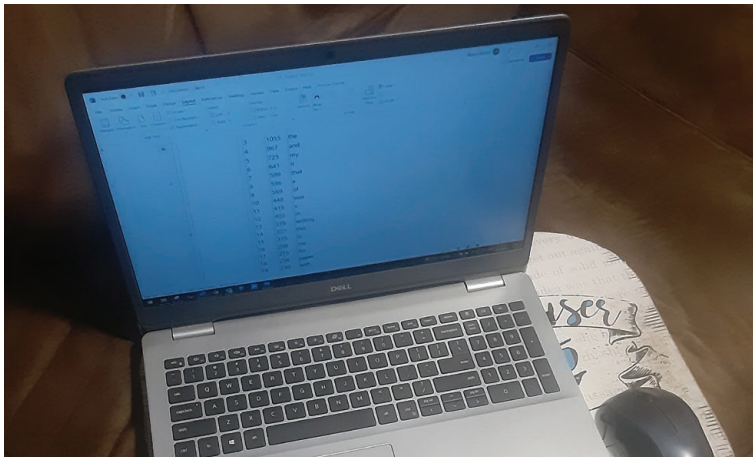


Figure 8.4. The author's open laptop displaying AntConc analysis data on its screen.

As I think about beauty in the sites of my academic work, I have to confront a difficult reality: my privileges. I looked again at my data for evidence of advantages in my staying-at-home that I might not have paid attention to before, beyond the comfort of the space in which I was working: I had freshly ground *coffee* (mentioned four different times), I had *internet* access, I had a reliable *laptop* (Figure 8.4), and I could stop when the work made my head spin and play a game of *badminton* with my 15-year old son, or take a long *evening walk* with my *husband*, or sit in the *sun on my porch* and watch the birds, chipmunks, and squirrels in our *backyard* (Figure 8.5). The objects mentioned in my data, from the *honeysuckle vine* (Figure 8.6) to the *tower fan* to the *Pandora* playlist, imply ease; despite difficulty in finding toilet paper, my time at home cannot qualify as hardship.



Figure 8.5. The author's back porch and laptop, where she both worked and relaxed during the stay-at-home period.



Figure 8.6. The author's honeysuckle vine.

Many of my first-year writing students do not share this privilege: some completed the semester without internet, without privacy, without quiet, without resources. The university tried to provide internet hotspots in campus parking lots, to reach out to struggling students, to ensure flexibility and accommodations. But my own words evoke privileges that my school and its well-meaning personnel cannot recreate or supply.

I am reminded again that we must not gloss over divides in educational access—and more importantly, educational experiences. I have taught in community college buildings and classrooms that are stark, utilitarian, plain. It was in such a classroom in New Jersey where I first encountered an educational experience that was utterly different from my own (and from the experiences of students at the state university and intensive English program where I had begun my teaching). In an early morning composition course at this New Jersey community college, where some students who were working full-time jobs attended class after finishing overnight shifts, we read an Oliver Sacks essay and talked about determinism in a space with cinder-block walls and no windows. At the end of one class, I encouraged the students to spend some time thinking about the assigned reading and what it might mean for the way they viewed the world. One of the students looked at me in exasperation: “When? I mean . . . when? I have three kids and a husband and a job. I’d love to sit and just think about all this—but I have a life.”

The student was exhausted, and she was trying. I could not empathize, not fully; after all, I completed my undergraduate degree at a private liberal arts university on a full-tuition scholarship, and my parents had saved enough to pay my room and board. As an undergraduate, I selected classes because I wanted to, not because I needed them for a specific job after graduation (Greek sounded fun, as did a course on C.S. Lewis). I had an on-campus job as secretary to the Greek professor, not because of financial need, but because I could maneuver the Greek font on his manual typewriter (I had to change the letter ball to get all the accents in). I was—and am—privileged.

My survey responses hint at awareness of the divide created by privilege. There are references to both *gratitude* (five occurrences) and *guilt* (three times). I described my guilt as *nagging*, as it reminded me of those who could not enjoy the time at home. For example, I mentioned my brother, a truck driver who delivers milk across parts of Alabama and Georgia; he had to run some double routes during early days of the pandemic. And even now, as I am writing a few weeks later, the reality of diverging experiences dominates my newsfeed and my thinking: people of color have been disproportionately affected by this disease, and they have been killed for living *in* the spaces—the containers—of their lives. Nothing I know or have lived through compares. We have devalued the first-person *I* of Black men

and women; my first-person pronoun connotes a different experience. When I say, “I can’t breathe,” people jump into action—an ambulance is called, a ventilator supplied. When George Floyd said, “I can’t breathe,” the knee pressed on his neck. Today, weeks after my CCCC journal entries, I see the privilege in my first-person pronoun, a privilege I must name as privilege. And I must name George Floyd. He mattered.

These thoughts point me to another privilege embedded in my survey responses: the ability to block news and distractions when I felt the need to do so. Five different times, I spoke of *turning off* or *avoiding* the news and other distractions. I played music; I went outside—I got away from reminders of COVID-19. I enjoyed stillness and the green of my backyard (Figure 8.7). To suggest that my choice to shut out the barrage of virus-talk came from willpower or determination would imply that anyone could do the same. But actions that I took to care for my spirit and my mind, though certainly deliberate, were made easier, made possible, by privileged circumstances of place, time, and resources. I could take a walk in a neighborhood under construction to relieve my stress. There are some in the state where I live who could not safely do so.

~ ~ ~

The tools of my work—my writing—during the stay-at-home period also connote privilege. I love the convenience of the laptop, to be certain, and the preparation for the transition to online work would have been all but impossible without it. Still, I delight in the feel of an ink-cartridge pen in my hand and smooth, empty page (Figure 8.8.). My survey data show that *journaling* by hand was part of the daily cycle for me; I began every morning with notes in the *journal*, and those notes provide a different perspective on my frame of mind over the four days that would have been spent in Milwaukee. My handwritten journal entries are both more fluid and more frenetic than my survey responses; in them, I did not try to restrain bouts of panic over the unknown. I did not revise or shape my words for an audience, nor did I digitize them to analyze lexical choices. They are a counterpoint to the surveys; the loops and angles of the cursive words fluctuate along with the emotions underlying my lexical choices, much as the pitch and speed of my speech might in conversation.



Figure 8.7. A corner of the author's backyard.

Even without concordancing data, I know the lexical range of my journal entries over those four days differs from the Documentarian survey responses: the words center on concern for my daughters (and their cats, quarantined with them in different states), anxiety for my husband, who was still working, the virus, PPE, the death toll in Italy, possible cures, laments and prayers. In the journal, I engage in soul-speak, the language of faith—words that are easy to quarantine, in a sense, away from the sphere of the academy.

And yet here again, my privilege is evident: I choose how to speak, and my choices are not condemned. But I have students whose

Englishes are judged defective, un-American, incapable of expressing logical thought—not even “real English.” I have students whose multilingualism may be viewed as a threat. They are told to keep the cadences and accents and expressions of their languages and dialects at home—or at least to mask them in public spaces. “Stay-at-home” began, for some, long before the virus.

~ ~ ~

The downward pull of *weight* and *pressure* also appears in my responses: *under the strain, under the circumstances, under stay-at-home orders, under pressure*. But seeing myself *in* the situation, not *under* it, created moments of joy and laughter, too. Once again, this simple act of framing the circumstance via a preposition may be a choice tied to privilege. To suggest otherwise would be cruel.



Figure 8.8. The author's journal.

In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis described a friend who always demonstrated “a serious, yet gleeful, determination to rub one’s nose in the very quiddity of each thing, to rejoice in its being (so magnificently) what it was” (199). In this *συμβάλλω*, I see my attempts—not always successful—to find the quiddities of quarantine and embrace them—including the uncomfortable lessons of my privilege.

As I write this now, I am still at home, back on my couch, laptop balanced on the lap-desk. *Back*. That word also appears in my CCCC survey data in reference to the *backyard*, but also in *looking back* or *looping back* or *coming back* (Figure 8.9). *Back* suggests repetition, return, movement towards what has already been, in cycles (if we conceive of time in a linear format, returning to a previous condition or location is going *backwards*). Cycles appear in my written data; I came *back* to my chair each morning, and *back* to the couch to work. It has been eleven weeks now, and I have cycled *back* to this space—literally—yet again.

I think coming *back* may be required to appreciate the quiddities fully, to name what we have learned, to recognize our privilege. I am not alone *in* this space, *in* this season. I have much to be grateful for. I hope that when I move *into* the next season and *come back* to the spaces I occupied before COVID-19—my office, my church, my neighborhood, and my classrooms—I will relish the quiddities of those spaces, as well as the perspectives and immense value of the people who share them with me.



Figure 8.9. Looping back.

WORKS CITED

- Anthony, Laurence. AntConc (Version 3.5.8) [Computer Software]. Waseda University, 2019. <https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconcl/>.
- Lewis, C. S. *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*. 1st American ed. Harcourt, Brace, 1956.