Part II

Methodological approaches to language and politics
Content analysis

What makes Bunin’s *Gentle breath* ‘one of the best short stories ever written … a true model of its genre’? Vygotsky entertains that question in *The psychology of art*.¹ It is a question about beauty and art in writing. It is a question of little concern to content analysis in its approach to writing. Harold D Lasswell, the ‘father’ founder of content analysis, made that clear: ‘Content analysis will not tell us whether a given work is good literature’, whether it is “beautiful writing” (Lasswell et al. 1952, pp. 45, 22) Rather, Lasswell looked at writing for what it would tell him about propaganda² and communication – propaganda as ‘the control of opinion by significant symbols… [and by] forms of social communication’; and communication as answers to the questions ‘Who, says what, how, to whom, with what effect?’, the ‘what’ question being the primary concern of content analysis (Lasswell 1926, p. 11, see also 1927, p. 627; Lasswell et al. 1952, p. 12).

The study of propaganda and communication had been Lasswell’s interest as early as his PhD dissertation in Political Science at the University of Chicago (1926), a study of the propaganda symbols and themes used by the various belligerent countries during the First World War.³ By 1938, when he published the short article ‘A provisional classification of symbol data’, Lasswell was pursuing new substantive and methodological avenues. After reading Freud and visiting European universities, Lasswell’s study of symbols had shifted from propaganda to psychoanalytic interviews; to his earlier theoretical and historical approach, he had added a concern with classifying, counting and quantifying:

> We may classify references⁴ into categories according to the understanding which prevails among those who are accustomed to the symbols. References used in interviews may be quantified by counting the number of references which fall into each category. (Lasswell 1938, p. 198)

No doubt, Lasswell’s foray in the novel field of Freudian psychiatry based on ‘prolonged (psychoanalytic) interviews’ was pushing him in novel directions: ‘Lacking precedents in this matter, it was necessary to invent somewhat novel categories and methods’ (1935,
p. 15). And while measuring a patient’s physiological reactions (e.g. pulse rate, electrical conductivity of the skin, blood pressure, 1935, 1936b), he was also measuring the rate of words uttered per minute, was noting the association of these words, and was classifying them into ‘numerous categories of verbal reference’ (1936b, p. 242). As an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, Lasswell had already shown an interest in measurement and hypothesis testing, in methodology. In a letter from Europe to his parents – he would write weekly long letters – the twenty-one-year-old Lasswell muses about ideas he is mulling over in his head; the word *methodology* appears several times in the letter. Young Harold has the sense of humour to acknowledge to his parents that the letter could only be of interest to ‘a technically trained psychologist and social scientist; and even he might yawn and give it up in disgust’ (cited in Muth 1990, p. 6).

In *World revolutionary propaganda* (1939), Lasswell returned to his earlier interest in propaganda symbols and themes (e.g. 1927), but with a new methodological approach based on frequency counts of those themes and words. The book’s focus was communist propaganda in Chicago as found in documents (namely, American Communist Party leaflets, shop papers and speeches, Lasswell 1939, pp. 101–164). The drive to quantify permeates the entire book. In the ‘Preface’, Lasswell and Blumenstock (1939, p. vii) write: ‘Events … are described as quantitative changes of variables.’ We find here the embryo of Lasswell’s later famous manifesto ‘Why be quantitative?’ (1949), an apology for theme counts in texts.

The technique of content analysis really came of age during the years 1941 and 1943, when Lasswell became Director of The War Communications Research Unit, a new special project, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. Some of the key methodological developments of the technique came out of the Unit. And building upon Lasswell’s earlier attempts to quantify through counts, the technique was born quantitative. ‘There is clearly no reason for content analysis unless the question one wants answered is quantitative’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, p. 45). Lasswell proposed to quantify by counting words, themes, symbols (‘a technical term for words’, Lasswell et al. 1952, p. 29), symbol clusters, but also concepts and ideas (Lasswell et al. 1952, pp. 29, 27, 34, 54, 69). He would apologetically write:

> content analysis is not a cheap technique. But the advance of science has always been expensive. Our advantage over Plato and Ibn Kaldun is certainly not that we have more insight. We cannot expect to go far beyond their results without introducing tools which they did not have.

(Lasswell et al. 1952, pp. 46, 45)

He was hopeful that ‘Someday there may be a handbook which will specify standardized types of investigations that may be undertaken with confidence by moderately skilled personnel’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, pp. 46, 45, emphasis added). That day came sooner than anticipated. In that same year of 1952, the first such handbook was published (Berelson 1952) and others followed in rapid succession (Budd et al. 1967; Holsti 1969). And they have continued to be published, a testimony to the popularity of the technique (Krippendorff 1980, Weber 1990, Neuendorf 2002, Krippendorff 2004).

*How content analysis deals with a text*

The press was certainly Lasswell’s favourite source for the study of symbols (Lasswell et al. 1952, pp. 17, 40). Let us follow Lasswell in his preferences and focus on newspaper articles
on race relations in the American South, Georgia in particular, during the period 1875–1930. Let us start with an article that appeared in *The Atlanta Constitution* (8 December 1897, p. 1) about the yearly meeting at Tybee Island, Georgia, of the Georgia Agricultural Society. Mrs W H Felton was one of several speakers. Mrs W H Felton (after her husband’s first and last name, Dr William H Felton, member of the US House of Representatives and of the Georgia House of Representatives), would later be remembered as Rebecca Latimer Felton, the first woman representative to the US Senate, albeit for one day only: 21 November, 1922. But on the day of 11 August, 1897, she was undoubtedly the star of the day at Tybee Island, as we read in *The Atlanta Journal*:

It was reserved for Mrs. W.H. Felton… to make the speech of the day… she declared it to be the duty of the white man to protect the women of his home, no matter how much rope it required, or how much some people might howl against lynching, the convention arose in tumultuous applause.

(1897, p. 1)

Mrs. Felton’s speech may well have gone unnoticed beyond the enthusiastic audience of the Society had it not been picked up by a scathing, ‘hot editorial’ of the *Boston Transcript* (*The Atlanta Constitution*, 18 August, 1897, p. 1). Mrs. Felton replied to the *Boston Transcript* with an open letter in *The Atlanta Constitution*:

I took the position that the churches seemed to be incapable of handling the subject of lynching… and our young women were violently destroyed in their homes and on the public highways by black fiends and rapists. I also said that the courts seemed to be incapable of protecting the innocent from the guilty; that the ‘law’s delay’ had apparently become the villain’s bulwark. I also said that the manhood of the country seemed to be incapable of enforcing a regard for law… IF IT NEEDS LYNCHING to protect woman’s dearest possession from the ravening human beasts, then I say lynch a thousand a week if necessary.

(20 August 1897, p. 4; original emphasis)

Mrs. Felton repeated those arguments about the vulnerability of white women to black brutes in several speeches (Whites 1992). What would content analysis do with Felton’s speeches? Let Lasswell answer: ‘Conceive of a newspaper as a collection of responses to questions we wish to ask it. This is indeed a fruitful way of conceiving the research situation in which content analysis operates.’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, p. 78) Again, following Lasswell’s analogy, what questions do we want to pose? What themes do we want to record? Unfortunately, there is no single answer to these questions. Basically, ‘the choice … depends on what one wishes to find out’… ‘The choice is entirely a function of the goals at hand.’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, pp. 30, 54; also 35). While avoiding specifics, Lasswell makes two general recommendations for the design of a coding scheme and its categories, that is, for the questions to ask:

1. Avoid abstract coding categories (a recommendation often ignored in content analysis projects). Reliability increases with ‘coding by explicit symbol rather than by more interpretive categories.’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, p. 62)
2. Avoid ‘attempting to reproduce all the possible complexities of language’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, p. 52). Simplify, ‘painful’ as simplification may be. Or… You may end up with too
much (costly) data only a fraction of which you will ever use or data that will require ‘a content analysis of one’s collected content-analysis data’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, p. 52).

With that in mind, what do we want to know about Mrs Felton’s letter to The Atlanta Constitution? Southern attitudes about race (and gender) relations in Jim Crow South? About lynching? The role (failure) of religion in instilling morality into individuals? The role (failure) of the courts in upholding the law? The design of coding categories does indeed reflect the questions asked of texts.

Vygotsky, Bunin, and the question of artistic writing

‘The sound of the coffin hitting earth/is a sound utterly serious’, Machado writes in a gem of twentieth-century Spanish poetry, ‘En el entierro de un amigo’ (The burial of a friend). There is nothing of Machado’s heaviness and the silence-breaking ‘loud thump’ of a coffin, in Bunin’s opening scene of Gentle breath at a cemetery. Even the ‘heavy’ ‘cross… made of oak’ is ‘a pleasure to look at’ (Vygotsky 1971, p. 161). That, for Vygotsky, is Bunin’s mastery as a writer: turn light what is heavy, bright what is dark, in a form of rhetorical redescription or paradiastole (on rhetorical figures, see Franzosi 2017). The troublesome image of what lies beneath that cross, ‘buried in the frozen earth’, does not hit the reader until the end of Bunin’s short story when other images come to make light of it (Vygotsky 1971, p. 165). No doubt, through rhetorical redescription, Bunin masterfully turns into artistic beauty the ordinary ‘material’ of his story – material that ‘differs in nothing’, except perhaps in its tragic ending, ‘from the usual life of pretty, well-to-do girls living in provincial Russian towns’ (Vygotsky 1971, p. 150): the story of Olia Meshcherskaia, a beautiful Russian high-school girl – ‘at fifteen everyone said she was a beauty’ – who seduces her school mates, her father’s best friend and a Cossack officer who ends up shooting her at the railroad station.

Of course, ‘of great bearing on the artistic treatment’ of the story are also:

the manner in which the author narrates the events, the language he uses, the tone, the mood, his choice of words, his construction of sentences, whether he describes scenes or gives only a brief summary, whether he transcribes the dialogues of his characters or just tells us what they have said, and so forth.

(Vygotsky 1971, p. 158)

But the main tool in Bunin’s hands for artistic production is his savvy use of story and plot, between the chronological order of the events narrated (story or disposition) and the arrangement of these events in an order aimed at maximising the rhetorical grip on the reader (plot or composition). Vygotsky even provides a table (Vygotsky 1971, p. 151) where the events of Bunin’s short story are placed side-by-side in their story and plot order to show that in Gentle breath ‘the chronological sequence is completely disrupted’ (Vygotsky 1971, p. 151). It is that disruption that gives Bunin’s writing ‘artistic form’, that makes him a Nobel writer, the first Soviet Nobel laureate, in 1933 (Vygotsky 1971, p. 152).

(Quantitative) Narrative Analysis

We owe the distinction between story and plot (fabula versus sjužet) to Tomashevsky, Vygotsky’s contemporary and a member of the school of ‘Russian formalists’. For
Tomashevsky (1965, p. 70), ‘A story may be thought of as a journey from one situation to another… Motifs which change the situation are dynamic motifs; those which do not are static.’ Propp, another formalist, further argued that in Russian folktales the number of dynamic motifs is limited (31 in total) and their sequence invariant. Half a century later, American socio-linguist Labov would similarly search for invariant macro-level structures of narrative. Such is his classification of parts of narrative in Abstract, Orientation, Complicating action, Evaluation, Result or resolution, Coda (Labov 1972, pp. 362–370), where each functional part answers the following set of questions: what was this about? (abstract) who, when, what, where? (orientation), then what happened? (complicating action), so what? (evaluation) what finally happened? (resolution) (Labov 1972, p. 370). Not all narratives contain all these functional parts; only ‘the complicating action, is essential if we are to recognize a narrative’ (Labov 1972, p. 370). For Labov, micro-level narrative clauses are based on the structure who-what, where the what is further characterised by time (when), location (where), mode (how) and instrument (this corresponds to the 5 Ws + H of American journalism: who, what, when, where, why and how) (Labov 1972, pp. 375–376). French structuralist Todorov similarly argued that Tomashevsky’s dynamic motifs or Labov’s orientation are expressed in (narrative) clauses consisting of two basic elements: who and what, agent and predicate (Todorov 1969).

It is with a structure of this kind, the 5 Ws + H, a ‘story grammar’, that I started toying with in the early 1980s as a way to study historical processes using newspapers as sources of data (on newspapers as data sources, see Franzosi 1987). I used rewrite rules to formalise the relation of every object in the grammar to all other objects. I developed a computer-assisted program that would make the grammar practically usable in larger-scale historical projects (Franzosi 2010, 2014a; www.pc-ace.com).

How (Quantitative) Narrative Analysis deals with a text

Beautiful writing was hardly the goal of newspaper articles on lynching. A typical article, taken from my project on Georgia lynchings between 1875 and 1930, would look like the following string of ‘factual’ information, with no literary pretense:

ANOTHER LYNCHING. Special to the Journal. HAWKINSVILLE. Owen Jones, colored, was hanged by a mob in this county day before yesterday for an outrage on Miss Howell, a daughter of Mr. Sanders Howell, who lives in the upper edge of Pulaski. The crime was committed while the young lady was alone at the home. The negro confessed. He was left swinging to the limb all night last night and nearly all day today. (The Atlanta Constitution, 1 November 1890, p. 9)

Coded output for part of this article within the objects of a complex story grammar would look something like this:

(Participant-S: (Actor: (Individual: (Name of individual actor: negro) (Personal characteristics: (First name and last name: (First name: Owen) (Last name: Jones)) (Race: negro) (Type (adjecive): colored)))))) (Process: (Simple process: (Verbal phrase: outrages))) (Participant-O: (Actor: (Individual: (Name of individual actor: young lady) (Personal characteristics: (First name and last name: (Last name: Howell)) (Gender: female) (Age: (Qualitative age: young)) (Race: white) (Family relationship: (Type of relationship: daughter) (Actor: (Individual: (Name of individual actor: man)))))))))
This snippet of coded output clearly shows the main features (advantages) of QNA: 1. output preserves both the words and the narrative qualities of input; 2. each coded object is related to all other objects through formal relations set up in the grammar. What the output does not show is QNA disadvantage: coding based on a story grammar as coding scheme (the 5 Ws + H) works well when the input text is a story, a narrative (indeed, the example shown here); it breaks down for different types of texts (e.g. Mrs. Felton’s letter to *The Atlanta Constitution*), or even for those macro-structures of narrative (e.g. evaluation) that do not display the ‘basic narrative clause’ of the 5 Ws + H. Content analysis, where the design of the coding scheme reflects the interests of the investigator, rather than underlying linguistic properties of the text, does have its advantages, as Lasswell noted: ‘content analysis is, in principle, a method of unlimited applicability’, with ‘no limits, in principle, to the applicability of content-analysis technique’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, pp. 36, 39).

‘Words as Data’

Back in 1989, as I was working on ways of going ‘from words to numbers,’ (some) colleagues in the sociology department of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where I was an assistant professor, asked: ‘What’s Franzosi gonna do with thousands of words in the computer?’ Legitimate question (and one that would cost me dearly). The web, data mining, big data, digital scholarship were yet to come. Back then, data were numbers, not words. Yet, even further back, in 1952, Lasswell was already conceiving of ‘words as data’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, p. 29) and was asking himself: What’s Lasswell gonna do with thousands of words (on paper coding sheets)? He approached that question in a section titled, ‘How Content-Analysis data are analyzed’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, p. 36). The answers (plural) were modest, within the limits of available technology (and methodology): indices, covariates, time plots.

The methods of analysis currently available for QNA-type data go far beyond what Lasswell could do with words in the dawn of quantification in the social sciences. From dynamic network graphs to dynamic GIS modelling, QNA allows the user to apply techniques of data analysis that are true to the fundamental properties of story grammars: relations between actors via their actions (network models), and actions that are set in time and space (GIS modelling) (on these issues and applications, see Franzosi 2010, 2014). There are answers (plural) to the question of what to do with thousands (now millions) of words in the computer!

To stay with Lasswell’s counts of symbols, but ‘introducing tools which … [Lasswell] did not have’, I can ‘go far beyond … [his] results’, as he himself went further than Plato and Ibn Kaldun. I can use word-cloud software, such as Wordle, to visualise the actors and actions found in my database for the Georgia lynchings project (Figure 10.1, words coded verbatim from newspaper sources).12 I can also use network software such as Gephi to visualise in a network graph the relations of violence between the social actors involved in lynching (Figure 10.2).13

I can also use GIS (Geographic Information System) software such as Google Earth Pro to visualise in a map the lynching events known to have occurred in Georgia between 1875 and 1930, with the ability to display information on each event by clicking on a selected pin (Figure 10.3).
Figure 10.1  *Wordle* cloud of lynching words (PC-ACE, Georgia lynching project, 1875–1930)

Figure 10.2  Gephi network graph of actors involved in lynching violence (Georgia lynching project, 1875–1930)
Figure 10.3  Google Earth Pro map of lynching events in Georgia (1875–1930)

Although, certainly, newspaper articles on lynching make no claim to beautiful writing, the visual representation of their words can still produce ‘beautiful evidence’, based on colour, shape and movement (unfortunately, neither colour nor movement can be reproduced in these pages; Tufte 2006; on the relationship between QNA and aesthetics, see also Franzosi 2014b). And for those detractors who would argue that there is nothing but description in the graphs of Figures 10.1 and 10.2, Lasswell already had an answer: ‘research is important [even] when it goes no further than to describe trends and distributions’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, p. 21).

Beyond CA & QNA: discourse analysis

A lynching provides the ‘material’ for another masterful short story by another Nobel Prize winner (in 1950), William Faulkner. Except that in Dry September, rhetorical redescription plays no part in making bright of dark, light of heavy. Both Bunin and Faulkner open and close their stories with descriptive lines. In between, ordinary tragedies of Bunin’s and Faulkner’s ordinary worlds are consumed. Bunin opens with a short description of Russian grey, cold, and wind-swept April days; Faulkner with ‘the bloody September twilight, aftermath of sixty-two rainless days’ of the American South. Bunin closes with Olia’s gentle breath, a requirement for ‘what a woman’s beauty should be’ – Olia tells her best friend – “I have it, don’t I? Listen, how I sigh. It’s there, isn’t it?” And now this gentle breath is dissipated again in the world, in this cloud-covered sky, in this cold spring wind.’ There is no redemption in Faulkner’s closing lines. The last scene is not one of gentle breath, but one of violence of a lynch mob leader. After which, the reader is left with the words: ‘There was no movement, no sound, not even an insect. The dark world seemed to lie stricken beneath the cold moon and the lidless stars.’ If with Bunin ‘we experience an almost pathological lightness’, with Faulkner it is ‘painful tension and suspense’ (Vygotsky 1971, p. 160).

The unsigned journalist who penned The Atlanta Constitution article on the lynching of Peter Stamps (26 July 1885, p. 7), one of the few articles on lynching that goes beyond the
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factual, also uses the script of the natural world as background to the social world, a frame for tragic human events: the dark night, the heavy clouds hanging below the sky, the quiet town, with which the newspaper article opens:

His body cut down. Peter Stamps laid out in an old stable. ... The negro admits his guilt... The town is quiet again. Peter Stamps has been hung and the body of the unfortunate girl has been laid to rest in the cold and silent grave. When Stamp’s life was choked out of his body by the rope, the hands of the clock pointed to twelve minutes after one o’clock. The night was dark. Heavy clouds hung below the sky.

(Atlanta Constitution article on the lynching of Peter Stamps, 1885, p. 7)

As in Dry September, there is no room for rhetorical redescription in this newspaper article. If anything, the description of nature underscores the heaviness of the events. But a close linguistic reading of the article has many surprises in store for us.

Overall, despite its brevity, the article does present the macro-level structural features outlined by Labov. The ‘abstract’ is given in the lead. Orientation and complicating actions are fused together to give us the who, what, when, where and why of the story. In keeping with Labov’s comment (1972, p. 369) that the ‘evaluation of the narrative … may be found in various forms throughout the narrative’, the entire article may serve that function. Lasswell himself had noted: ‘We made the mistake of assuming that in editorials, unlike news stories, judgments would be numerous. Consequently, we defined judgments narrowly, requiring that they be quite explicit. In fact, however, explicit judgments proved to be fairly rare’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, pp. 51–52). Indeed, evaluation is not always explicit in lynching articles (e.g. ‘a justly merited death’, even though outside the law), or taken up in separate, complete clauses. It is often confined to the choice of adjectives and nouns, such as the ‘fiend,’ ‘the brute,’ ‘human beast,’ ‘animal in human disguise.’ And if The Atlanta Journal of 1 November 1890, in reporting the lynching of Owen Jones provides no explicit evaluation of the event, The Atlanta Constitution of 1 November 1890, reporting the same lynching, starts right with evaluation: ‘Owen Jones, a negro, met a justly merited death at the hands of a crowd of deeply incensed citizens...’ (emphasis added).

Closer analysis of The Atlanta Constitution article on the lynching of Peter Stamps (26 July 1885, p. 7) reveals that nearly all opening sentences have passive constructs (except for ‘the Negro admits his guilt’, of course, right in the lead). Nominalisation creeps in (‘the lynching’). Such linguistic features are of little interest to content analysis, but discourse analysis has shown that they play key functions. They help to deny or hide agency: Who did it? Who is responsible? To probe further into the language of the article, the word ‘hung’ appears twice, once in the passive form (‘Peter Stamps has been hung’), once in the active form (‘Heavy clouds hung’) – an uncomfortable association of the verb ‘hang’. There are no words of sympathy or human compassion for Peter Stamps, while the unnamed girl is ‘unfortunate’ and the image of a girl resting ‘in the cold and silent grave’ makes us shudder. ‘Peter Stamps has been hung... When Stamps’ life was choked out of his body by the rope’... Ah! Now it is clear. The rope did it, not the ‘determined and quiet mob’. Remarkably, in the second part of this sentence about Stamps’ choking, we learn that ‘the hands of the clock pointed to twelve minutes after one o’clock’ (in the active form). Yet another uncomfortable association of Stamps’ choking and hands (of the clock, not of mob members). A few sentences down - ‘When Stamps’ heavy body stretched the rope’ – makes it seem like Stamps’ choking was his own doing, the result of a heavy body that stretched the rope that eventually would choke him. ‘Unfortunate’ Stamps. A lighter body may have saved him. The rope returns as a semantic
agent a few sentences down when ‘The mob knew that STAMP’S [sic] EARTHLY CAREER was over when they heard the dull, heavy thud made by the rope as it went taut.’

The uneasiness of language in the opening lines of the newspaper article on Peter Stamps’ lynching betrays perhaps the journalist’s uneasiness with the content of the story – of Peter Stamps, ‘colored’, and of a white girl, Ida Abercrombie, ‘daughter of a well-to-do white farmer’ – a story, to remind the reader, told from the perspective of a white Southern journalist, in the context of Jim Crow anti-miscegenation laws. Peter is 45, married. Ida is 13. When she confesses to her father that she is pregnant with Peter Stamps’ child, Stamps is lynched and Ida is found dead the day after the lynching. Poisoned. Did she commit suicide? Did Stamps give her the poison? Did her father, her step-mother, her uncle, a physician, poison her? Whatever the answers to these questions, raised by the journalist and forever left unanswered, the post-mortem autopsy would find poison in Ida’s body and a black foetus in her womb. The journalist remarks: ‘The people here are more than satisfied that Stamps richly deserved his fate. They all believed the story of the girl’s innocence…’ Rhetorical redescription does play a role in this newspaper article after all, turning evil into good, guilt into innocence: Ida ‘was pure and honest, and though she did a great sin she was sinless.’ The myths of the purity of white Southern women and of black ‘ravening human beasts’ is safely reestablished, the order of things is linguistically restored. ‘No other story will ever be believed by the people of Douglasville. On this point they are satisfied.’

‘Reading between the lines’: the linguistic construction of facts

The front flap of Lasswell’s *World revolutionary propaganda: A Chicago study* in the Alfred Knopf’s edition (Lasswell and Blumenstock 1939) tells us that ‘The purpose [of the book] is to give the facts and to tell what they mean. For this book is first of all a fact book. … And these facts are given by methods which are both precise and original. … And the book analyzes facts.’ Lasswell and Blumenstock (1939, p. v) themselves state in the ‘Preface’ to the book: ‘We are interested in the facts. We have taken care to find them. But we are chiefly concerned with the meaning of the facts for the understanding of the future.’ Facts. Methods. Precision. Originality. As Lasswell would put it in a later work: ‘Through the use of statistical methods, content analysis aims at achieving objectivity, precision, and generality.’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, pp. 31, also 32–33) These are the buzz words of social scientific language to which Lasswell was one of the early contributors. Yet, facts imply choices; ‘what they mean’ implies interpretation. For Vygotsky, ‘the choice of facts’ is one of the ingredients of artistic writing (1971, p. 158). But the silence on some facts and the emphasis on others is not just a matter of artistic writing. It is a general characteristic of all writing, including scientific writing.15

The subtleties of language are of little interest to content analysts. They go at language with a hatchet, rather than a razor. Only *manifest*, rather than *latent* content is of interest.16 Anything else would lead to a ‘coy approach’ to words, to imprecision, vagueness, uncertainty, and ‘“impressionistic” analysis’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, p. 32).

This coy approach to the human vocabulary shows among scholars in such habits as ‘reading between the lines’ of verbal texts used as data. Such habits, when used by a skilled person, produce insights which are often brilliant but usually unverifiable. Content analysis is, in the first place, a method for ‘reading on the lines’ and for reporting the results which can be verified.

(Lasswell et al. 1952, p. 32; original emphasis)
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Coy, no doubt, would have been for Lasswell’s later social science approaches to text, such as discourse analysis or frame analysis. That Lasswell’s own approach could be weird, rather than coy … that criticism had yet to be formulated (Henrich et al. 2010): coding for content analysis projects being typically carried out by undergraduate college students, WEIRD, indeed (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic). And since these weird people are hardly ‘skilled’ in language, intractable issues of interpretation are turned into more numbers as indices of inter-coder reliability. Much scholarly ingenuity has gone into the construction of these indices (Krippendorff 2004, pp. 221–56).

‘Reading between the lines’, Dry September would suggest other interpretations of lynching stories over outrages. Could Miss Howell have lied about her outrage at the hand of Owen Jones, colored? ‘The negro confessed’, we are told. In many other Georgia newspaper stories of lynchings, the ‘negro’ professes his innocence, even with a noose around his neck. Does it make a difference to the outcome of the event? “Wont you take a white woman’s word before a nigger’s?” … “you’d take a nigger’s word before a white woman’s? Why, you damn niggerloving—” (Dry September). Could Miss Howell and Owen Jones have had a consensual relationship, consumed in Miss Howell’s house when alone? Would she, might she, be forced to scream rape when caught? In the 200 or so lynching events over ‘outrages’ of white women that occurred in Georgia between 1875 and 1930, the ‘facts’ suggested by these questions are never part of the newspaper narratives. The story of Peter Stamps and Ida Abercrombie, the white girl for whom he was lynched, comes close to a publicly admitted consensual relationship between a black man and a white woman. Yet… it is a love story that leaves us uneasy, at least as told by a Southern newspaper in Jim Crow culture. There is more to ‘the string of factual information’ of newspaper articles on lynching.

Of terrible, horrible objects: language and politics

You will be hard pressed to find literary beauty in newspaper articles on lynching across the US South – even if you apply ‘coy’ approaches to texts, even if, Vygotsky at hand, you start looking for rhetorical figures (e.g. paradiastole), for style, for story and plot, for silence and emphasis in the selection of facts.

If not art, what then was the purpose of those newspaper articles? Why do they tell lynching stories? For Labov, the ‘story point’ is typically part of the ‘evaluation’ section of narrative, where the narrator indicates ‘the point of the narrative, its raison d’être: why it was told, and what the narrator is getting at’ (Labov 1972, p. 366). Lasswell offers clues for an answer to these questions, taking them from one of his most cited books: ‘successful violence is relatively more dependent upon proper coordination with propaganda’ (Lasswell 1936a, p. 63). ‘An act of violence becomes “propaganda of the deed”’ (1936, p. 65) a deed leading to a ‘loss [that] will terrorize the enemy’ (1936a, p. 66). ‘Stamps, as he hung from that bridge, made a fearful picture, one which will live long in the minds of many of those who saw it’ (The Atlanta Constitution, 26 July 1885, p. 7). And ‘those who saw it’ were ‘men, women and children, both black and white,’ a motley crowd that ‘contained the lawyer, the physician, the merchant, the barroom keeper, the planter, the man servant, the maid servant, the wife, the maid, the child and the babe. No class, sex or color was wanting in the crowd, every member of which had his eyes riveted upon the same terrible, horrible object’ (The Atlanta Constitution, 26 July 1885, p. 7).

And terrorised it was, the ‘enemy’ of this white Southern culture obsessed with the purity of white Southern women: members of a black community struck by a lynching would not
claim the body for proper burial for fear of reprisal, would lock themselves up in their homes, take to the woods and swamps to hide, or leave the South for good, heading North (on the reactions of the black community to a lynching, see Franzosi et al. 2012). The body – ‘this terrible, horrible object’ – would often be left hanging for a couple of days, ‘a fearful picture’ for all, for those whites tempted to be ‘damn niggerlovers’ (Dry September) and for those blacks who could use a reminder for a lesson to be taught. As Mrs W H Felton put it in her letter to The Atlanta Constitution (20 August 1897, p. 4): ‘when a human beast gets ready to thus destroy my child or my neighbor’s child the beast should be taught to expect a quick bullet or a short rope.’ No doubt, as Calabrese (2010) aptly puts it, Southern culture was ‘sending a message’ through lynching: violence as political communication. And that message was often explicit. Pinned to the lynched bodies, in the case of outrages, you would sometimes find a sign ‘We must protect our ladies’ (on one side) and ‘Beware all darkies. You will be treated the same way’ (on the other side) (Newnan Herald and Advertiser 28 April 1899), ‘This is the penalty for rape. Yours truly Brother Dooley’ (The Augusta Chronicle 16 May 1904).

‘Imagine … some mysterious method’

Weird it may well have been this content analysis, this new social science approach to words. But prolific it turned out to be, across different fields, from political science to sociology and particularly mass communication. Hundreds of journal articles have been written with their ‘data and methods’ based on content analysis.

Writing in 1952, Lasswell had a vision, a vision for content analysis, a vision for a day when counting key symbols in countless documents ‘may reveal truths not heretofore established’: ‘New lines of research may open new vistas: Perhaps the new technique of counting key symbols may reveal truths not heretofore established. That, at least, is a provisional hope of the social scientist’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, p. 26, emphasis added).

We take these words from one of Lasswell’s books available on the web, originally held at the library of the University of Michigan and digitised by Google. Using tools such as Google ngrams (books.google.com/ngrams) we can turn into reality a figment of Lasswell’s imagination: ‘Imagine that we are transported by some mysterious method to the year 1900, carrying back with us our present knowledge’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, p. 6). The time plots of Figure 10.4 do bring us back to the year 1900, carrying back our current knowledge of the millions of books digitised by Google. And just as Lasswell imagined, but on a scale beyond even his imagination, through frequency measures we can get trends, comparisons, covariances (Lasswell et al. 1952, pp. 36–37).

Using the ‘mysterious method’ of Google ngram, we can track Lasswell’s academic fortunes over the twentieth century in US published books, compared to his closest early competitors as writers of handbooks of content analysis (Berelson and Holsti). We can compare the popularity of content analysis to its ‘coy’ competitors of discourse analysis, frame analysis, or narrative analysis. And while quantitative content analysis still comes on top at a steady level since the late 1960s, qualitative discourse analysis is rapidly surging to threaten that position of dominance.

We learn all that through counting symbols taken from millions of documents. One of ‘the weirdest people in the world’ – Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, where he had started as an undergraduate student at the age of 16, Professor of Law at Yale, President of the American Political Science Association, ‘a bit of a freak: pedantic, verbose, and quite ill at ease’, in the recollection of one of his first students in 1927.
Content analysis

Discourse analysis

Laswell

Holsti

Berselos

narrative analysis

Frame analysis

Figure 10.4 Google ngram of selected words

(Rosten 1969, p. 1) – could have predicted that: ‘The sequence of movements in history can be conveniently read by scanning the dominant symbols of successive epochs’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, p. 15). Weird, then, as Janowitz noted (1969, p. 156), that in a book Lasswell published in 1963 on ‘the future of political science from the viewpoints of scope, method, and impact’, he would make only one passing reference to his own method of content analysis without dignifying it with an index entry (Lasswell 1963, p. 45). Weird, perhaps, that Gottschalk, who applied Lasswell’s content analysis to Lasswell’s psychoanalytic verbal data, would make no references to Lasswell’s work (e.g. Gottschalk & Gleser 1969, Gottschalk et al. 1986).

As for the social science approaches to text… Weird or coy? Quantitative or qualitative? Which road should we follow? Let qualitative historian G R Elton give the answer (to us and to his sparring partner, quantitative historian Robert Fogel, 1993 Economics Nobel laureate, in their book Which road to the past?): ‘I should like to think that each will go to heaven his own way, and to the other for answers to the questions properly investigated by either sort’ (Fogel & Elton 1983, p. 83).

Acknowledgements

My thinking about the language of lynching has benefited from a fellowship at the Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry of Emory University (2011–2012) and a sabbatical year (2013–2014) with fellowships at the Italian Academy of Columbia University, Nuffield College (University of Oxford), University of Trento, and Ca’ Foscari (University of Venice). The project on lynching in Georgia (1875–1930) was made possible by funding from the University Research Committee at Emory University. Woody Beck kindly provided the cross-references between each lynching event and newspaper articles. The Atlanta Constitution article on Peter Stamps and Ida Abercrombie was discussed at a talk I gave at the Free University of Amsterdam (Critical Discourse Community ACDC) on 23 April 2014.

Notes

1 Vygotsky (1971:4). Vygotsky completed The psychology of art in 1925; the manuscript was published posthumously in 1965, some 30 years after Vygotsky’s death.
2 On this point, see Lasswell et al. (1952, p. 40).
3 For a reflection on the propaganda themes discussed in his dissertation, see Lasswell (1927); Themes return briefly in his 1930 Psychopathology and politics.
In the same article, Lasswell defines references as ‘a sentence or part of a sentence’ (1938, p. 201; see also 1935, p. 16, 1936b).

There is no mention of content analysis, under any label, or quantification of symbols, themes, or words in two crucial publications prior to 1938, Rice (1931) and Lasswell et al. (1935).

For the story of the label ‘Content Analysis’, see Franzosi (2008). Lasswell himself wavered between different labels. Two different consecutive sections in Lasswell et al. (1952, pp. 29, 31) bear the two different headings of ‘Why symbol analysis?’ and ‘Why content analysis?’ As a way of explanation, Lasswell writes: ‘The general method involved we have been calling symbol analysis, and the special technique used in the RADIR Project is known as content analysis (or quantitative semantics). The exposition of what content analysis is becomes somewhat easier if one deals first with its more technical name, quantitative semantics’ (Lasswell et al., 1952, p. 31).

‘Content Analysis, as practiced today, is a development of the past decade. Although some important thinking in this direction was done earlier, the elaboration of the technique was not accomplished until the Experimental Division for the Study of Wartime Communications was established at the Library of Congress during World War II.’ (Lasswell et al., 1952, p. 40).

The Unit, known as the Experimental Division for the Study of Wartime Communications, was housed in the basement of the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. For a brief sketch of that period, see Muth (1990, p. 15).

For that story and for a reprint of some of those hitherto unpublished documents, see Franzosi (2008). See also Franzosi & Sevin (2014).

For a lengthier treatment of the characteristics of narrative briefly traced here, see Franzosi (2012).

That structure, in turn, has a very long history in rhetoric and the theory of circumstances (Franzosi 2012).

For visualization purposes, most verbs have been lemmatized (e.g. shoots, shot, will shoot – shooting lemmatized as shoot).

In network graphs, the thickness of the line (‘edge’) is roughly proportional to the number of events between a pair of actors (‘nodes’) and the arrow represents the direction of the action (e.g. violence).

Johnstone (2007), Billig (2008), van Dijk (2008); for a history of discourse analysis and its basic concerns, see Wodak & Meyer (2009).

Franzosi (2004a, pp.147–53, 175–77, 202–14, 219–22); see also the emphasis of early content analysis on issues of measurement (Franzosi 2008); on historical evidence and facts, see Franzosi (2006).

Lasswell et al. discuss ways of assessing latent structures through manifest content (Lasswell et al. 1952, pp. 75–77).

On frame analysis and its foundations in rhetoric, see Franzosi and Vicari (2014).

On violence as a means of political communication, see also Arendt (1969) and Apter (1997).

On Lasswell’s life and achievements, see Muth et al. (1990).

‘When it is desired to survey politically significant communication for any historical period on a global scale, the most practicable method is that of counting the occurrence of key symbols and clichés. Only in this way can the overwhelming mass of material be reliably and briefly summarized.’ (Lasswell et al. 1952, p. 16).

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