

The use of words in context: the vocabulary of college students

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New York: Plenum Press, 1985. xi + 263 pp.

This is a book which adds to the growing literature on word frequency. The authors have compared the vocabularies of two generations of college students in public speaking—1943–45 and 1979–81. The data-base is a sample of over 288,000 word tokens representing parts of 607 classroom speeches made by 270 male college students; the 1979–81 sample was the same size, but used 263 speeches by 110 speakers—in all, about 70 hours of speech. The items from the latter sample are first arranged in order of frequency of occurrence, then words unique to each period are listed. There are over 2000 unique to the first sample (e.g. *barracks*, *jukebox*, *walky-talky*), over 3500 unique to the second (*abortion*, *disco*, *Iran*). A group of judges was able to associate sets of words selected from the lists with their respective period. In a further study, 8-hour samples of speeches from black students and white students were recorded and compared (about 72,000 words from each group), and the results given in an appendix. Some of the differences are simply explained with reference to the time and social background (e.g. more military words in the earlier sample). Others are more intriguing, but probably are artefacts of the sample size (e.g. *bitterness* occurs only in the earlier sample and *sadness* only in the later sample). There was also a considerable similarity between the lists.

The organization of the book takes some getting used to, with textual comment appearing at intervals between word lists: confusingly, tables 1 and 5 appear before their associated commentaries. The methodological decisions made need to be read carefully, in order to be clear about the

status of the words in the list. For example, no word classes are given, so it is impossible to tell whether *round*, say, is noun, verb, adjective, adverb, or preposition. The authors review the difficulties in carrying out survey work of this kind, and themselves point to several weaknesses in their procedure. In particular, there were a number of inconsistencies, especially in the transcription. The typing was done by as many as five people, who it seems were not given guidance in formal transcriptional techniques to ensure consistency. The 1943–45 transcripts had all been double-checked; the recent sample, for some reason, was only spot-checked. The lists must be used with caution, therefore; but undoubtedly they will repay careful investigation, both for what they might tell us about recent linguistic change, and for their information on style and social variation.