# Skunked Terms as Part of Language Evolvement

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**Abstract**

The present article focuses on the process of language change and more specifically the evolvement of word meaning through the so-called skunked words. The term was coined by Bryan A. Garner, a lexicographer who uses it to refer to words that have developed new meanings, which have become so controversial that they are best avoided in writing and speech due to the risk of being misunderstood. This phenomenon poses significant challenges for linguists, lexicographers, and language users alike. In this research, we observe skunked words through the lens of corpus linguistics, aiming to shed light on their elusive nature and the dynamics of their usage. By applying corpus linguistic techniques, based on Coca Corpus tools, we offer insights into the nuanced meanings and connotations of skunked words, highlighting their fluidity and susceptibility to semantic change over time. Furthermore, we discuss strategies for managing the usage of skunked words in discourse, emphasizing the importance of context factors and linguistic awareness. This study contributes to the growing body of research on language variation and change, providing a corpus linguistic analysis of skunked words. Our findings not only enhance our understanding of these linguistic phenomena but also offer practical guidance for foreign language learners striving for clarity and precision in communication.

**Keywords:** *skunked terms, meaning change, language evolvement, corpus studies, Coca corpus.*

## 1. Introduction

Language, as a living and dynamic entity, constantly evolves, reflecting the intricacies of human culture, society, and thought. Within this evolutionary process, certain words undergo a peculiar transformation, acquiring contentious meanings that make them problematic for language users. These words become difficult to use because the new meaning is inconsistent or even opposite to the older one or perhaps this is due to another controversy surrounding the word. Coined by the lexicographer Bryan A. Garner in *Garner's Modern American Usage* (2003), such words are aptly labeled "skunked", signifying their treacherous nature and the challenges they pose in communication.

Dictionaries are regarded as guardians of language. Their role was defined far back at the time of Samuel Johnson and Noah Webster. In a dictionary we see the lexical facts: spelling, pronunciation, different meanings but also the cultural facts: is the word archaic, obsolete, offensive, chiefly British or only used in Southern American English, etc. Part of the role of the dictionary is to prevent users from embarrassing themselves and offending others, therefore dictionaries deal with the perplexing nature of skunked words, confronting the inherent tension between descriptive and prescriptive approaches to defining word meanings. Descriptive dictionaries, such as the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and Merriam-Webster dictionary, aim to capture the evolving usage of words in real-world contexts, acknowledging the fluidity and variability of language. In contrast, prescriptive dictionaries, like Webster's New World Dictionary, often prescribe "correct" usage based on established norms and conventions, potentially overlooking the nuanced meanings and controversies surrounding skunked words.

This dichotomy between descriptive and prescriptive lexicography profoundly influences how skunked words are treated within dictionaries, with descriptive dictionaries more likely to

acknowledge the contested nature of these words and reflect their usage diversity, while prescriptive dictionaries may adopt a more conservative stance, prescribing a single "acceptable" meaning despite ongoing debates. The initial idea, to fix the language, does not seem very tolerable nowadays because currently it is clear that language is untamable and uncontrollable; you cannot fix a language that is a living language. A synchronic dictionary is a snapshot of the language in time; it records the current active use of English. The mission of a diachronic dictionary is different, measuring across time a thousand years of literary English.

Most new words take decades or longer to be entered in a dictionary. The fastest term ever that has been entered into a dictionary was unsurprisingly the term Covid 19. There were literally 34 days between its coinage by the World Health Organization and its entry into the online dictionaries, which is record speed. Online dictionaries provide unlimited space so lexicographers may add example sentences which are very important for idioms and collocations and for very basic use of these sentences by foreign speakers. The lexicographer Peter Sokolowski[1] claims that the hardest words to define are not long, complicated words of Greek or Latin origin like *sesquipedalian* 'having many syllables'; the hardest words to define are polysemantic words like *get*, *set*, *run* and *in* (and other function words) because of their numerous meanings. These are strictly the cases where the AI in Machine Translation is not doing a good job and fails to separate the different definitions of a word, e.g., the verb *set* is particularly problematic as it has the longest entry, several columns of different meanings. According to Sokolowski, AI's work will always require editorial judgment because human language needs human interpretation.

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[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVbCY51iz1k

## 2. Research methods

In this article, we embark on an exploration of skunked words, employing the corpus linguistics perspective to unravel their mysteries and shed light on their elusive nature. Specifically, we consider how the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) can serve as a valuable resource for examining the usage patterns and semantic nuances of skunked words in contemporary discourse. By analyzing a vast collection of written and spoken texts spanning diverse genres and contexts, we aim to elucidate the complexities surrounding these linguistic phenomena. Our investigation aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of skunked words, drawing on corpus linguistic methodologies to uncover their usage patterns, semantic shifts, and pragmatic implications. By doing so, we endeavor to contribute to the broader discourse on language variation and change, offering insights that can help language users in the complexities of contemporary communication.

Drawing upon the diverse Coca corpus of contemporary written and spoken English texts, our analysis employs quantitative and qualitative methods to identify, categorize, and examine instances of skunked words across various linguistic contexts. We use quantitative methods to analyze the frequency of occurrence of specific words and linguistic features within the corpus. This involves counting the number of times a word appears in the corpus and examining patterns and collocations of usage, lexical associations and semantic relationships.

Qualitative methods involve examining the context in which words are used within the corpus. This involves close readings of texts to understand the nuances of meaning, connotations, and pragmatic functions of words in different discourse contexts. Qualitative methods can also be applied to explore the semantic nuances and changes in meaning of words over time. We can trace the historical usage of words in different genres or examine shifts in connotation and usage patterns. The stylistic analysis of the texts within the corpus identifies

the stylistic features and rhetorical devices employed in them. This involves analyzing linguistic choices, figurative language, and author's intent.

By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, we gain a comprehensive understanding of language variation and change within the COCA corpus. These methods enable the exploration of both statistical trends and nuanced interpretations of language use in authentic contexts.

Previous research on language variation and semantic change has set the fundamentals for understanding the dynamics of skunked words. Scholars have long documented the fluidity of language, observing how words undergo shifts in meaning over time due to sociocultural influences, ideological shifts, and linguistic innovations. Weinreich, Labov and Herzog's (1968) publication laid the groundwork for a systematic empirical investigation of language change, emphasizing the complex interplay between linguistic structures, social dynamics, and cognitive processes in shaping the trajectory of linguistic evolution. Bailey's book (1973), on the other hand, offers a broader overview of variationist sociolinguistics, exploring the relationship between linguistic variation and theoretical frameworks in linguistics. It covers topics such as sociolinguistic methodology, social factors influencing language variation, and implications for language planning and policy. The book engages with theoretical frameworks in linguistics, exploring the implications of linguistic variation for theoretical models of language structure and change. He argues for the integration of sociolinguistic insights into linguistic theory, advocating for a more socially informed approach to understanding language evolvement.

More recent research dwells on the language variation and change as a vibrant and interdisciplinary field that explores the diversity and dynamics of language use across different communities and contexts. Mostly in these studies the focus is on newly coined words. Hilpert (2015) offers a comprehensive investigation into the semantic development of noun-participle compounds and its relation

to the upward strengthening hypothesis, drawing on empirical data and theoretical insights from cognitive linguistics. He discusses the cognitive and linguistic mechanisms underlying the semantic evolution of noun-participle compounds. This includes considerations of cognitive processes such as categorization, conceptual metaphor, and prototype theory, as well as linguistic factors such as productivity, analogy, and lexicalization. Both Libben's chapter (2020) and Savoglu's study (2020) investigate aspects of new word formation, but they do so in different contexts. Libben explores how new compounds are created and how they contribute to our understanding of language processing and lexical representation, while Savoglu investigates the lexical innovations that emerged in response to the pandemic and explores their linguistic characteristics and cultural significance. Libben's chapter is aimed at scholars and researchers in linguistics, psycholinguistics, cognitive science, and related fields who are interested in multi-word expressions and lexical creativity. Savoglu's study, being part of conference proceedings, targets a broader audience, including linguists, language educators, policymakers, and the general public interested in language change, cross-linguistic comparisons, and the impact of socio-cultural events on language evolution.

Previously, some word-formative strategies used in 21-century newly coined English vocabulary and English borrowings in Bulgarian were studied (Nedelcheva 2023a). This research aims to identify the ways in which English borrowings adapt when integrated into the target language, as well as the formation of entire word families centered around the newly borrowed words. Another article (Nedelcheva 2023b) examines neologisms in contemporary Bulgarian, focusing on their methods of creation and semantic attributes. It discusses recently emerged terms (from the past decade), revealing the significant impact of new words on modern Bulgarian language trends. The research is based on two corpora, which are sourced from online and printed dictionaries.

The present article is a continuation of a broader research on language development and the contact between languages. The emergence of skunked words presents a unique challenge, as they display the transitional stage in acquiring a new meaning. Some of these meanings become hotly contested and fraught with ambiguity, defying traditional models of semantic evolution.

### 3. Data Analysis

In this research we use the Coca Corpus and apply text mining through a keyword analysis to help identify the different meanings of the words or phrases in the reference corpus. This method highlights linguistic features that are characteristic of specific genres, time periods, or varieties of English. In this qualitative analysis, concordance lines provide context about how a word is used in different contexts. They comprise up to three words to the left and/or the right, and they indicate the part of speech of the surrounding words, i.e., how words pattern as part of larger phrases, and which phrases are coordinated. Since the words around the key word are marked by color for part of speech, it is quite simple to scan through the list to see the collocations (and thus meaning and use)[2].

Quantitative methods can involve analyzing concordance lines to identify patterns of usage, syntactic structures, or semantic nuances associated with a target word distributed by genres, e.g., spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, academic texts, TV and Movies subtitles, blogs, and other web pages. We expect to find the new meanings of the investigated words in Blogs and in texts excerpted from Spoken language.

Most of the words below tested as skunked terms are suggested by Erin Brenner in her article "Nine Skunked Terms to Consider" (2021). However, we added some new words to her list and removed

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[2] The concordance view reveals "semantic prosody" (Louw, Milojkovic 2014), i.e., the tendency of words and phrases to attract positive or negative surrounding words.

others, which were not relevant to the present research. As a result, ten skunked terms are analyzed below.

| Term | Traditional Meaning | Newer Meaning |
|------|--------------------|--------------------|
| *data* | plural of *datum* | datum |
| *media* | plural of *medium* | medium |
| *comprise* | be made up of | make up |
| *peruse* | to examine in detail, study | to look cursorily through |
| *enormity* | state of being outrageous, immoral | state of being huge, enormous |
| *disinterested* | impartial | uninterested |
| *fulsome* | excessively or insincerely flattering | copious, plentiful |
| *humbled* | brought low | honoured |
| *inflammable* | prone to catching fire | not flammable |
| *hopefully* | in a hopeful manner | it is to be hoped |

**Table 1.** *Ten Skunked Terms to Consider*

### 3.1. DATA, MEDIA

The keyword search shows that the combination of *data* and *media* with the verb *to be* in singular is quite frequent, 7303 (compared to 10613 hits with the verb in plural) and 5409 (2382 hits with the verb in plural), respectively. The quantitative analysis indicates that the tendency to concord the plural nouns *data* and *media* with singular

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verbs is in progress. With *media* this process has reached a higher level as the singular *to be* outnumbers the plural.

Figures 1 and 2 display a few excerpts from the Coca corpus, which depict the wrong uses of the investigated lexical units. The software suggests 100 random examples on the home pages[3] of the analyzed words, which provide insights into the meaning, usage, and patterns of these words.



**Fig. 1.** *Excerpts from the 'data' corpus*



**Fig. 2.** *Excerpts from the 'media' corpus*

As Fig. 1 illustrates the plural noun *data* collocates with both singular and plural verbs, e.g., singular: *data has* (Ex. 38), *data is + adjective* (Ex. 41, 42), *data is + participle* (Ex. 43); plural: *the data provide*

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[3] Coca corpus allows you to see an extremely wide range of information about words called word-sketches https://www.english-corpora.org/help/word-sketch.pdf. It contains information about the lemma and part of speech, history, frequency information, etymology, pronunciation and external videos, synonyms, related topics, collocates, 2-4 word clusters, concordance (KWIC) lines, etc.

(Ex. 50)*, these interview data reveal* (Ex. 51)*.* Fig. 2 displays mostly examples of *media* with singular verbs, e.g., *the media has a double standard/ the power* (Ex. 36, 37)*, the news media is just thinking* (Ex. 42)*, the media was more open* (Ex. 73)*.*
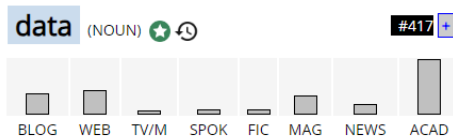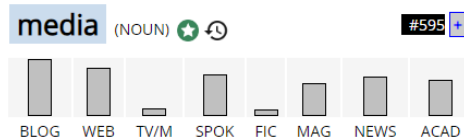


**Fig. 3.** '*Data' chart*



**Fig. 4.** '*Media' chart*

The qualitative analysis based on Figures 3 and 4 leads to the conclusion that *data* is mainly used in Academic texts, followed by Web pages and Blogs, while *media* reveals an almost even distribution among the genres with the exception of TV and Fiction, where the examples are very few. The Blogs are prevalent, followed closely by Web pages and Spoken language.  According to Garner (2003), many people now use "data is" and "data are" based on the context, the same way they would say a single sheep is, but multiple sheep are. The Associated Press (AP) stylebook takes this approach and categorizes *data* as a plural noun but cites singular exceptions. The same could be said about *media*. *Data* and *media* are skunked because of the dispute over whether they are plural or singular, still commonly debated. Today the number of people claiming that only "data are" and "media are" are acceptable is considerably diminished. A clear majority has either given this up or – more importantly – no longer feels the need to correct it.

### 3.2.    COMPRISE
Both meanings of *comprise*, 'be made up of' and 'make up', are attested in the corpus. From the late 15th c. the meaning 'to contain', as 'parts making up a whole' is used; from the end of 18th c. its meaning is

'to constitute, make up, compose'. The Coca corpus contains 3283 hits of *comprise*, one third of which (see Fig. 5) belong to academic texts (1278) and the rest are distributed mainly among the genres Web (575), Magazines (529) and Blogs (412).
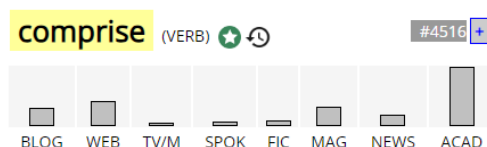


**Fig. 5.** '*Comprise' chart*

We studied a sample of 100 examples of *comprise*, suggested by the Coca corpus, to distinguish between the older meaning 'to contain, include' and the newer one 'to make up, compose'. The results show the ratio 47%: 53%, which makes the two meanings almost equally distributed in the usage of the verb. The collocation *comprise of*, however, minimizes the distinction between the two meanings. For instance,

(1) …Group, which is Zaire's main textile producer, is *comprised of* five companies…

(2) This *comprises of* not only parents who are or will be affected BUT neighbors and friends…

(3) …they have an extensive range of sounds, largely *comprising of* warning and alarm cries…

In Ex. 1 the *group* is made up of *five companies* and it also includes *five companies*. Similarly, in Ex. 2 *this* consists of and involves *parents*, *neighbors* and *friends*. In addition, in Ex. 3 the *range of sounds* contains *warning and alarm cries* but also is composed of *warning and alarm cries*. When *comprise* combines with *about* the interpretation could be either 'include' or 'make up':

(4) Helmand's poppy fields alone *comprise* about 160,618 acres…

(5) Oil *comprises* about half of the government's income.

Ex. 4 illustrates the 'include' meaning of *comprise*, while Ex. 5 displays the 'make up' meaning. The Coca corpus shows that the older meaning of *comprise* is not obsolete but is used as frequently as the newer one.

### 3.3. PERUSE

According to the Online Etymological Dictionary[4], the verb *peruse* is found in the late 15th c., meaning 'to go through searchingly or in detail, run over with careful scrutiny', from Middle English per- 'completely' (see per) + use (v.). By the 1530s another meaning is created: 'read carefully and critically'. The meaning 'read casually' was developed as late as the 19th c. Based on Coca corpus, which shows 814 hits, we studied a sample of 100 examples to distinguish between 'read, examine carefully' and 'look cursorily through'. The results reveal a dominant use of *peruse* as a synonym of read (83%), whereas the newer meaning 'read casually' is found in specific contexts in only 17% of the studied examples (see Fig. 6).



**Fig. 6.** *Excerpts from the 'peruse' corpus*

Contexts discussing websites, forums and blogs as in examples 81, 84, 86, 87 (Fig. 6) are interpreted as 'reading cursorily' or just scanning the text. At the same time with example 82 we would expect a more careful reading because *the whole of the book* is mentioned.

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4 https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=peruse

Examples 83 and 85 are ambiguous between the two meanings since both *menus* and *images* could be examined in detail or just scanned.
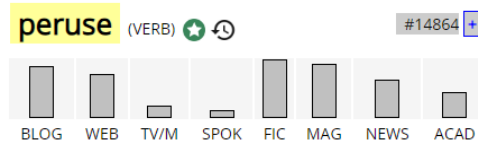


**Fig. 7.** '*Peruse' chart*

In Fig. 7 the Fiction genre dominates with 170 hits, but Magazines (164), Blogs (159) and the Web (138) are with almost the same results. The more specific meaning of 'reading cursorily' is found in the same genres which have a reasonable explanation having in mind the specifics of online reading. Present day psychological research (Turkan, Durgunoglu & Twite 2022; Allcott 2021) suggests that reading online results in lower understanding and less critical reflection, which is an aftermath of looking through a text really quickly without paying attention to the details. Our observations show that the two contradictory meanings of peruse, 'read in detail' and 'read cursorily', exist together although the newer one is still quite peripheral and related mostly to informal texts. Due to the two conflicting meanings, it would be better to avoid using the verb in contexts which are not transparent about the interpretation of the verb.

### 3.4.   ENORMITY

*Enormity* originates in the late 15th c., 'transgression, crime; irregularity', from Old French *enormité* 'extravagance, atrocity, heinous sin' and Latin *enormitatem* (nominative *enormitas*) 'hugeness, vastness; irregularity'. In mid-16th c. the meaning 'extreme wickedness' is attested in English, interpreted as a notion which surpasses the endurable limits of order, right, decency. The sense of 'hugeness' (first attested in 1765 in English) originally meant 'immeasurable wickedness' (1718). Although etymological, it was not developed until 18th c. but then it was avoided in favor of *enormousness* to prevent

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misunderstanding. We use the Coca corpus to study the opposition between the quality of being extremely evil and immoral and that of being of very great size or importance. Of all 1086 hits we studied the sample 100 examples suggested by the Coca corpus software. An excerpt of the construction that stands out *the enormity of*, attested 86 times (86 % of frequency), is presented in Fig. 8.



| 23 | thank me . It ran . It took days for the | enormity | of my error to become apparent . The b |
| 24 | , who are in their 20s and 30s , recognize the | enormity | of our club having started something so |
| 25 | for additional gas-or other , dirtier fuels . " Given the | enormity | of our energy needs , a segment of our |
| 26 | spare but effective set for " The Dresser " puts the | enormity | of Shakespeare 's play , including an as |
| 27 | housework , a diver with the bends , overcome by the | enormity | of small tasks . At first , the work , unpr |

**Fig. 8.** *Excerpts from 'the enormity of' corpus*



| 93 | Staples were hoping to reduce the disaster 's " overwhelming | enormity | to a more manageable individual |
| 94 | small confusion of who she was . # Whenever she encountered | enormities | [] Erica could only think of walking |
| 95 | in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid | enormities | [] is itself a frightful despotism . Bu |
| 96 | repeatedly arced through the wave-whispering , buoy-clanging | enormity | [] the beauty of it all) , yes , many n |
| 97 | The verdict ended a case that was shocking in its sheer | enormity | [] It was the worst arson fire in the |

**Fig. 9.** *Excerpts from the 'enormity' corpus*

As Fig. 8 displays, the examples of this construction could be understood either with the meaning of 'hugeness' (Ex. 23, 25, 27) or 'importance' (Ex. 24, 26). Even when *enormity* is collocated with words carrying a negative connotation the interpretation could be ambiguous, e.g., in Fig. 9 (Ex. 93) *the disaster's overwhelming enormity* does not suggest so much the irregularity of the event as its scale. Examples 94 and 95 (Fig. 9) are similar in the fact that the key word is used in plural, *enormities*, and they exhibit the older meaning 'extreme wickedness'. However, example 97 (Fig. 9) *shocking in its sheer enormity* proves that the singular *enormity* can also be used with the meaning 'crime; irregularity'.

Fig. 10 depicts the distribution of examples containing *enormity* among the genres, which reveals almost an equal distribution (approx.

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130 hits), excluding the slightly prevalent Fiction (231 hits) and the minimal representation in the category TV/Movies (35 hits).
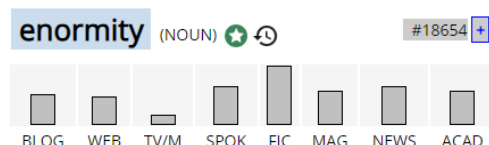


**Fig. 10.** *'Enormity' chart*

The results could be summarized with the claim that *enormity* is a skunked term because it is widely used (90%) as a synonym of *enormousness* and the primary meaning of 'being outrageous and immoral' is gradually becoming obsolete. Therefore, language users should be on the alert for a possible misinterpretation of *enormity*.

### 3.5. DISINTERESTED

*Disinterested* is formed by the prefix dis- "opposite of" + interested. In the 1610s the meaning 'unconcerned' (the sense that now would go with *uninterested*) is attested. The sense of 'impartial' originally was found in *disinteressed* (circa 1600), from Old French *desinteresse*, and subsequently passed to *uninterested*. The modern sense of disinterested, 'impartial, free from self-interest or personal bias' is attested by 1650s. By late 18th c. the words had separated their meanings as things stand now, *disinterested* means 'impartial', *uninterested* means 'caring nothing for or not excited about the matter in question'. According to the Century Dictionary, *disinterested* and *uninterested* are sometimes confounded in speech, though rarely in writing. We study the Coca corpus to check whether *disinterested* is used as a synonym of *uninterested*. The key word search resulted in 1391 hits. In the sample 100 examples suggested by the Coca corpus we distinguished 65% of *disinterested* with the meaning 'impartial', 13% of *disinterested* with the meaning 'uninterested' and 22% which are ambiguous between the two meanings. Fig. 11 illustrates some of the examples potentially prone to misinterpretation.

| 32 | to hatch a plan . Frank gave Barry 's | body | a | disinterested | glance | | | | | Tom , I think it 's time to go |
| 33 | dollar in a fertile market . # In the | light | of | disinterested | hindsight | | | however | , it seems that there was in |
| 34 | ? I tried to make the case that I | was | a | disinterested | historian | without | an | ax to grind , ? he said . # |
| 35 | names and answer all of my other challenges so | that | a | disinterested | hypothetical | and | objective | US Dept of Justice en |
| 36 | die , and he was n't abusive . He | was | simply | disinterested | in | a | family | . He was n't physically cruel , nor did |
| 37 | . # The Daedra - specifically the Daedric Princes | - | were | disinterested | in | assisting | in | the creation of Mundus and mere |

**Fig. 11.** *Excerpts from the 'disinterested' corpus*

In Fig. 11 examples 32-34 are dubious as a *glance*, *hindsight* and *historian* could be both unbiased and uninterested. In example 35 the adjective *objective* helps the reader choose the corresponding meaning 'impartial' for *disinterested*. In 36 and 37 (Fig. 11) the two contexts (*a family* and *assisting in the creation*) and the collocation with *in* lead to the interpretation 'uninterested' and in those cases *uninterested* should be used instead of *disinterested*. This disproves the claim that incorrect usages of *disinterested* instead of *uninterested* appear only in speech.

In order to explore how *disinterested* is distributed among the genres and to compare it to the distribution of *disinterested in*, which corresponds to 'uninterested', we use the home page of *disinterested* (Fig. 12), provided by Coca corpus, and the genre chart of *disinterested in* (Fig. 13).
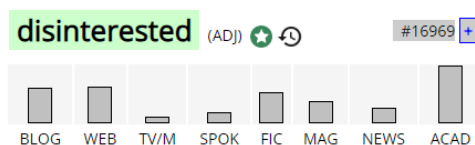
**Fig. 12.** *'Disinterested' chart*

| SECTION | ALL | BLOG | WEB | TV/M | SPOK | FIC | MAG | NEWS | ACAD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| FREQ | 227 | 49 | 42 | 10 | 21 | 23 | 21 | 18 | 43 |
| WORDS (M) | 993 | 128.6 | 124.3 | 128.1 | 126.1 | 118.3 | 126.1 | 121.7 | 119.8 |
| PER MIL | 0.23 | 0.38 | 0.34 | 0.08 | 0.17 | 0.19 | 0.17 | 0.15 | 0.36 |
| SEE ALL SUB-SECTIONS AT ONCE | | | | | | | | | |

**Fig. 13.** *'Disinterested in' chart*

Figures 12 and 13 clearly show that both meanings of *disinterested*, 'impartial' and 'uninterested' appear primarily in

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Academic texts, but the meaning 'uninterested' is predominant in Blogs and Web texts. This confirms that *disinterested* is a skunked term because it is confounded with *uninterested* in 13% of the examples and misleading between 'impartial' and 'uninterested' in another 22% of the uses, according to the 100-example excerpt from the Coca corpus.

Understanding the distinction between *disinterested* and *uninterested* is crucial because choosing the incorrect phrase can generate misunderstandings, confusion, and a lack of clarity in the message. In all genres, it is critical to convey the message to the target audience in an effective manner.

### 3.6.  FULSOME

The search of the keyword *fulsome* has shown 160 hits of both meanings, the traditional 'excessively or insincerely flattering' and the new one 'copious, plentiful'. Their distribution among the different genres is presented in Fig. 14. The adjective is used both attributively (examples 3-7, 9, 10) and predicatively (1, 2, 8). Although the most frequent occurrences are in Fiction and Academic texts, we checked Blogs and Spoken excerpts for the new meaning 'copious, lavish'. Of all 12 hits found in Blogs and 18 Spoken examples, seven are doubtful between the old and the newly developed meaning, namely the collocation *fulsome praise*. The rest of the hits exemplify the new meaning. Other collocations which may require the traditional reading are collocations of *fulsome* with *answer, eulogy, compliments, description*, etc.
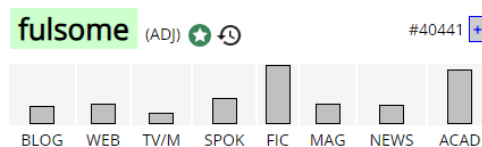


**Fig. 14.** '*Fulsome' chart*

Fig. 15 exhibits ten examples suggested by the Coca corpus on the home page of *fulsome*.



| 1 | or any other stimulants was tough , but the hospitality was | fulsome | and [ ] was welcomed into people 's homes and treated |
| 2 | of his . His voice was another surprise : British and | fulsome | and taking too long to get to the final sounds of words |
| 3 | that his probing interrogation technique might elicit a more | fulsome | answer than the recently concluded diplomatic session |
| 4 | have more time for them to ask questions . You have | fulsome | answers [ ] chances for follow-ups and chances for back |
| 5 | # Thanks Mike . We 'll now be treated to the | fulsome | apology being made by Leif to the authors and Astron |
| 6 | , hung , and dried . Later she forms them into | fulsome | arrangements and wreaths . " When making a Peegee |
| 7 | she 'd seen them a thousand times , and now the | fulsome | border made the room feel less an airy chamber than |
| 8 | should n't trust it . # There in Venice it was | fulsome | but sincere [ ] Is n't it Pushkin who says that one judges |
| 9 | . I recounted our many contacts , paid her courage the | fulsome | compliments she well deserved , and promised that a |
| 10 | I think this is maybe an opportunity to have a more | fulsome | conversation about that and see what that looks like . |

**Fig. 15.** *Excerpts from the 'fulsome' corpus*

The examples displayed in Fig. 15 show different interpretations but the traditional reading 'flattering', originating from the 17th c. and used till the 1960s, can only be associated with *complements* (Ex. 9). Overall, the corpus of *fulsome* exhibits the tendency of the second half of the 20th century for the word to be used in its original, favorable sense dating back to the Middle English period (13th c.), namely 'abundant, plentiful'. Therefore, *fulsome*, which firstly meant 'copious, plentiful', then started to mean 'flattering' and in the last 60 years it returned to its oldest meaning.

### 3.7. HUMBLED

*Humbled* originates from the late 13th c., used of persons to describe them as 'submissive, lowly in manner, modest, not self-asserting' from Old French *humble*, *umble*, earlier *umele* and from Latin *humilis* literally 'on the ground', *humus* 'earth'. Since late 14th c. it has acquired the meaning 'lowly in kind, state, condition, or amount' when used about things and 'of low birth or rank' when used about people. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary[5], the present-day

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[5] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/humble

meanings of *humble* are 1. not proud or haughty; not arrogant or assertive; 2. reflecting, expressing, or offered in a spirit of deference or submission; 3. ranking low in a hierarchy, insignificant, etc. However, as one of the skunked terms another meaning is attached to *humbled*, namely 'honoured'. If we check the Coca corpus, the keyword search reveals 1740 hits. The detailed lexical analysis of the sample 100 examples, provided by the software, exhibits a number of binomials[6], e.g., *humbled and ashamed*, *humbled and excited*, *humbled and grateful*, *humbled and (very) honoured*, several collocations, e.g., *humbled man*, *humbled sinner*, *humbled heart*, etc. and some grammatical constructions, e.g., *humbled by*, *humbled* + to infinitive, etc. The quantitative analysis shows a ratio of 37 to 63% in favour of the newer meaning 'honoured'. Fig. 16 displays a number of excerpts from the *humbled* corpus.



**Fig. 16.** *Excerpts from the 'humbled' corpus*

Fig. 16 includes several binomials, some of them related to the older meaning, e.g., *humbled and in awe*, *humbled and lowly*, *humbled and oppressed*, *humbled and simple*, and others to the newer, e.g., *humbled and incredibly fortunate*, *humbled and renewed*. The binomial *humbled and*

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[6] a pair of words (for example, *neat and tidy*) conventionally linked by a conjunction or a preposition

*honoured* or more correctly *honoured and humbled* is the most frequently used and it indicates 'a feeling of appreciation and respect'. When *humbled* is collocated with *honoured* they seem to convey the same meaning, which results in a kind of tautology, but it gives the phrase a rhetorical effectiveness and turns it into a fixed phrase.
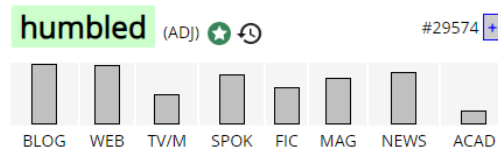


**Fig. 17.** '*Humbled' chart*

The chart in Fig. 17 depicts the distribution of *humbled* by genres and the two prevailing ones are Blogs (337 hits) and Web texts (335 hits), followed by News (254) and Spoken examples (252). Fewer hits are found in Academic texts (73), which is understandable due to the informal character of most binomials. Considering the dominant use of *humbled* with the newer meaning 'honoured' proves that it is a skunked term because in most of the cases it is not used with its denotational meaning.

### 3.8. INFLAMMABLE

*Inflammable*, meaning 'able to be set alight', dates back to the 17th c. and comes from French *inflammable*, from Medieval Latin *inflammabilis* and from Latin *inflammare* 'to set on fire'. The problem with *inflammable* arises from the fact that since 1980s, especially in safety warnings, it could potentially lead to confusion or misunderstanding regarding the flammability of the substance or material concerned. While some might think this means the contents are resistant to fire, it actually means the opposite – they can easily ignite and burn. Consequently, the word has been sometimes avoided for fear it could be wrongly interpreted as 'non-flammable' due to confusion of the two prefixes in- used in English, i.e., the negative in- and in- that intensifies the meaning of the root morpheme. Using the

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key word search of Coca corpus, we got only 66 hits of *inflammable* and all of them employ the correct meaning of the word. In fact, some of the excerpts discuss the confusing misinterpretation of inflammable (see Fig. 18).



**Fig. 18.** *Excerpts from the 'inflammable' corpus*

In Fig. 18, examples 48 and 49 are questions about the meaning of *inflammable*, while examples 50 and 52 answer these questions. In example 51, excerpted from a Blog, *inflammable* is used metaphorically to refer to the way someone speaks.
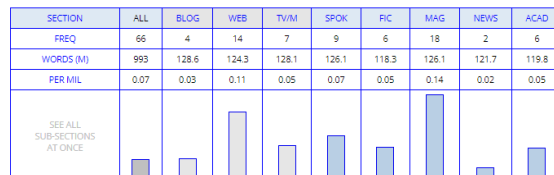


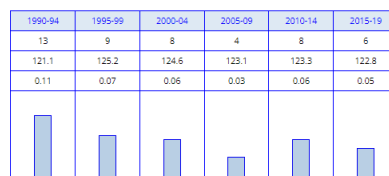**Fig. 19.** '*Inflammable*' *chart*



**Fig. 20.** '*Inflammable*' *time chart*

According to Fig. 19, the use of *inflammable* is most frequent in Magazines (18 hits) and Web texts (14 hits), whereas the other genres show less than 10 hits. The time chart in Fig. 20 clearly displays the

gradual diminishing in the use of *inflammable*. Regarding all this, *inflammable* can hardly be considered a skunked term because it is only used with the newer, mistaken meaning in informal speech. We can view this change of meaning as a continuous process, whose final result is not quite clear.

*Inflammable* is not the only term undergoing skunking that can cause confusion when interpreting the correct meaning. *Irregardless*, meaning 'regardless', is a special case in which the negative connotation is marked twice, on the one hand, by the negative prefix ir- (commonly added to words beginning with 'r'), on the other hand, by the negative suffix -less. Although this double marking is a mistake, the word displays 227 hits in the Coca corpus (78% of them are found on the Web (Fig. 21, Ex. 1), in Blogs (Ex. 2) and Spoken American English (Ex. 3)). Moreover, lexicographers of Oxford Dictionaries and Merriam-Webster Dictionary included it in the dictionaries because it was "popularized in dialectal American speech in the early 20th century"[7].

| 1 | I 'm fairly relaxed either way . The Oxford  Dictionaries  list  irregardless  as  informal  ] whereas the two pronunciations of |
| 2 | , but how much money does all your close  relatives  have  irregardless  as  to  whether  they will actually give you any of t|
| 3 | they said that I had a reason for defense  ,  but  irregardless  I  have  always  remembered that homicide from t|

**Fig. 21.** *Excerpts from the 'irregardless' corpus*

However, they added a remark that "it is still used primarily in speech, although it can be found from time to time in edited prose. Its reputation has not risen over the years, and it is still a long way from general acceptance" (ibid.).

*Niggardly*, denoting 'ungenerous with money, time, etc.; mean', is also problematic due to its similar sounding to a racially charged word although they have nothing in common in their semantics. This is a reason for avoiding using the word in ambiguous contexts,

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[7] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/irregardless

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consequently only 86 hits are found in the Coca corpus and some of them openly arguing on the topic (see examples 6, 7, 8):

(6) *Niggardly*, meaning miserly, has no racial connotation, but soon rumors begin spreading…

(7) …using the term "niggardly" – which means miserly and has no connection to that other word that shall remain nameless.

(8) …being criticized for saying the word "niggardly" during a meeting with two city employees.

All the examples refer explicitly (Ex. 6) or implicitly (Ex. 7, 8) to the negative meaning wrongly associated with *niggardly*. The best solution suggested in such cases is to avoid the usage of the words with ambiguous meanings.

### 3.9.    HOPEFULLY

*Hopefully* is first attested in the 1630s with the meaning 'in a hopeful manner, with grounds of expectation for success'. Since 1932 another meaning is introduced to express a sense of optimism or desire for a positive outcome, indicating that something is to be hoped for or wished for in the future. *Hopefully* replaced the admittedly awkward *it is to be hoped that*, which appeared too long and clumsy. When checked in Coca corpus, the key word search displayed 27159 hits but the representative sample of 100 excerpts revealed only examples expressing the newer meaning (see Fig. 22).



**Fig. 22.** *Excerpts from the 'hopefully' corpus*

*Hopefully* is used as a sentence adverbial (Ex. 66-69) to convey the opinion of the speaker and is attested mainly in Blogs (7675 hits), on the Web (4835) and in Spoken language (5539) (see Fig. 23).
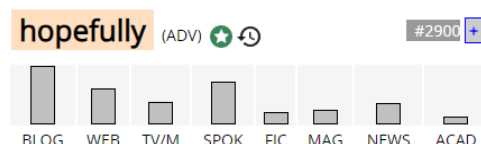
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**Fig. 23.** *'Hopefully' chart*

The fact that these genres comprise mostly informal texts leads to discrepancies in the punctuation; it is either preceded by a comma (Ex. 66), or surrounded by brackets (Ex. 67, 68), or it is put between commas (Ex. 69). Strict grammar requires in most of the cases two commas around sentence adverbials in the middle of the sentence and it should be preceded by a comma at the end of the clause. *Hopefully* in initial position should be followed by a comma but as the corpus presents it is not always the case. The analysis of *hopefully* shows the final stage of skunking, in which the skunked word appears only with the newer meaning in the texts compiled by the Coca corpus.

**Conclusions**

In this article we studied the phenomenon of skunking of some words by using the Coca Corpus tools. The words we analyzed showed dynamic meanings and sometimes elusiveness due to the context. By applying corpus linguistic techniques, we offer insights into the nuanced meanings and connotations of skunked words. Having in mind all the data, we can outline three groups of skunked words. Firstly, the group of words with newer meanings gradually replacing the older ones: *comprise* 'make up', *peruse* 'to look cursorily through', *enormity* 'state of being huge, enormous', *fulsome* 'copious, plentiful', *humbled* 'honoured'. Secondly, the group of words undergoing change of meaning due to a mistake: *data* and *media* (wrongly used as singular), *disinterested* (improperly used as *uninterested*), *inflammable* (erroneously used as *non-flammable*). And thirdly, we should mention the case of *hopefully* as a fully skunked

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word because the use of the newer meaning greatly outnumbers the use of the old one.

What should be stated explicitly is that being skunked is only a temporary condition. A word begins in one state, passes through a period of ambiguity, and emerges with another meaning or accepted use. A skunked word is most hotly disputed in the middle part of this process: any use of it is likely to confuse, offend or simply distract some readers in this time span.

Furthermore, we discuss strategies for managing the usage of skunked words to avoid ambiguity in discourse, emphasizing the importance of context factors and linguistic awareness. The audience can misunderstand or misinterpret the intended meaning if the wrong word is used. Choosing the right phrase demonstrates the writer's command of language and ability to communicate clearly. This research adds to the expanding field of study concerning language diversity and evolution, conducting a corpus linguistic examination of skunked words. Our results not only deepen comprehension of these language intricacies but also provide valuable advice for non-native language learners aiming at clear and accurate communication.

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