

# Critical Studies in Risk and Uncertainty

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Jens O. Zinn · Daniel McDonald

# Risk in The New York Times (1987–2014)

A corpus-based exploration  
of sociological theories

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## Foreword

It goes without saying that it was a great pleasure for me to discover the work of Jens Zinn and to read this book that he has co-authored with Daniel McDonald. I and other linguists have long called for an engagement between linguistics and sociology. Norman Fairclough (e.g. Fairclough 1992), Ruth Wodak (e.g. Wodak 1989) and Paul Chilton (e.g. Chilton 2004) have engaged with sociological theory and with sociologists via critical discourse analysis. I worked with sociological theory, specifically moral panic theory, in developing an explanatory framework for the discussion of shifts in attitude to bad language through history (McEnery 2005). Perhaps most notably, Paul Baker worked with myself and others in calling for a fusion of research in corpus linguistics, discourse analysis and other social sciences including sociology. In calling for an approach to the analysis of public discourse in particular through corpus methods, linguists working in the tradition of corpus-assisted discourse studies (Partington 2003; Partington et al. 2004) have brought new methods in linguistics to bear on what is very much, so to speak, an active and productive border area between linguistics and sociology: discourse analysis. In works such as Baker (2006), Baker et al. (2008), Partington et al. (2013) and Taylor (2014),

linguists have looked at issues in public discourse of interest to a wide variety of social scientists.

Through such work, linguists have started to network with and to influence the work of sociologists while being in turn influenced by sociology. Through major investments such as the Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Sciences (CASS) funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council,<sup>1</sup> linguists have been working with a range of social scientists to realise the promise of the corpus-based approach to the analysis of language in general, and discourse in particular. I was delighted when Jens Zinn gained a Marie Curie grant to join CASS, and I see this book as an outstanding example of how corpus linguistics can interface with other methods in linguistics and illuminate questions of interest to sociologists, in this case related to risk, while in turn being deployed within the powerful explanatory frameworks presented by sociological theory.

The importance of a book like this thus runs well beyond the contents of the book itself, impressive though these are, because it contributes directly to the ongoing debate about the method in the social sciences in particular. There has been much debate within the social sciences, and indeed the philosophy of social science, as to the respective strength of different methods of conducting research on humans or the social world. Historically, these social research methods have polarised between two broad positions. On the one hand, there are advocates of methods broadly equivalent to those employed in the physical sciences. This entails conducting large-scale surveys or accessing and analysing large data sets or conducting large-scale field trials. This quantitative material can then be subject to various kinds of statistical manipulation and testing. These methods often draw inspiration from American social science which since the 1960s has developed a technical sophistication of methods and procedures, drawing especially upon the latest developments in computing power and programming. The strength of quantitative research is reflected in many of the top-rated journals within the social sciences which are US-based and which mimic the procedures and characteristics of the physical sciences.

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<sup>1</sup> Grant reference ES/K002155/1.

On the other hand, there are social research methods which developed partly in opposition to these quantitative research methods. Advocates of qualitative methods argue that there is something about the character of human beings or human activities which makes them less susceptible to the methods deployed within the physical sciences. Some qualitative researchers even argue that there is something improper in treating ‘people’ as being similar to physical objects. There is generally much debate as to what makes ‘humans’ distinct and whether this necessarily presupposes distinct method of research. These involve claims that (i) human beings do not so much ‘behave’ as act meaningfully towards each other; (ii) the social world is unpredictable and subject to rapid historical change; (iii) there are no universal laws of human behaviour; (iv) there are emergent social systems with properties non-reducible to physical-like laws; (v) humans can learn and disrupt what appear to be lawlike relations and (vi) humans in using talk and text are not susceptible to quantitative measurement and manipulation. These various points are sometimes expressed in terms of presumed ontological differences between humans and say molecules, and sometimes as methodological.

However, in recent years, the strength of this distinction has been dissolving. This is for various reasons including how it is now clear that much of science also concerns distinct historical events, e.g. the big bang origin of the universe. Also, most important processes in physical and social worlds, such as the weather or riots, are probabilistic, and data collection is being autonomised through software. This autonomisation generates data relevant for both quantitative and qualitative research (e.g. through barcoding). In addition, it is undoubtedly the case that most important contemporary processes are a mix of the physical and social and hence need researching through multiple methods—an excellent example of that climate change. As Chap. 2 of this book rightly notes climate change has ‘not only changed the material world ... (it has) also contributed to the changing social meaning of technology and environment’. Such a change clearly defies a mono-disciplinary method of analysis. Similarly, the digital world increasingly enables qualities of human interaction, meaning and belief to be captured and modelled in a way that demands a broader methodological approach.

Overall, there is less sense now of maintaining the purity of the ‘best’ method and more emphasis upon assembling the plurality of methods useful and relevant to particular social issues and topics. There is also more emphasis upon ‘methods’ being brought into play and put to work within particular social science topics and issues—this book is a good example of that. This might be characterised as the ‘proof of the methods pudding should be in the eating’ (and not in the technique per se).

This book shows clearly that corpus-based analyses of language are too important to be left with linguists alone and that the quantitative analyses of text and talk need to be mainstreamed within the study of diverse social worlds. This is also because it is increasingly understood that talk and texts matter; they are forms of power, interest and powerful meaning that constitute social worlds and do not simply reflect upon them. Talk and text we might say help produce social actions and systems and are not merely reflective. This book is a powerful demonstration of that.

Lancaster, UK  
14 June 2017

Tony McEnery

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Somewhere on this planet in 2017

Jens O. Zinn

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# Abbreviations and Acronyms

Avandia	A trade name for Rosiglitazone, an antidiabetic drug released in the USA in 1999
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
BASE jumping	An extreme sport; BASE stands for (jumping from) Building, Antenna, Span and Earth
CADS	Corpus-assisted discourse studies
CANCODE	The Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English
Celebrex	A trade name for Celecoxib, a drug used to treat pain or inflammation caused by many conditions such as arthritis, released in the USA in 1998
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency, civilian foreign intelligence service of the USA
CL	Corpus Linguistics
CoreNLP	Software tools for automatic annotation and grammatical parsing of digitised text, developed at Stanford University
DDT	Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane, a chemical that has been used as insecticide
EPA	The Environmental Protection Agency (USA)
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation, the domestic intelligence and security service of the USA

## xvi      Abbreviations and Acronyms

FDA	US Food and Drug Administration
Fed	US Federal Reserve System
H1N1	Influenza A virus, H1N1, also known as swine flu, was the most common cause of human influenza in 2009
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
IS	Islamic State, militant group
MD-CADS	Modern diachronic corpus-assisted discourse studies
N	Population/main unit
<i>n</i>	Sample size
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration (USA)
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
<i>n</i> -gram	In computational linguistics, an <i>n</i> -gram is a contiguous sequence of <i>n</i> items from a given sequence of text or speech. In corpus linguistics, the concept often refers to sequences of two words (bigrams) or three words (trigrams)
<i>NYT</i>	<i>The New York Times</i>
Oxycontin	Trade name for an oxycodone-based opioid pain medication
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, a serious form of pneumonia first identified in 2003
SFG	Systemic functional grammar
SFL	<i>Systemic functional linguistics</i>
Vioxx	A trade name for Rofecoxib, a drug to treat osteoarthritis, acute pain conditions and dysmenorrhea, released in the USA in 1999
WHO	World Health Organization
WW2	World War Two

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