‘Somewhere between the toast and the marmalade’: analysing an intuitive approach to memory sources

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Abstract

Historians are often reluctant to talk in detail about their methodological approach to their source material. This paper examines an attempt to apply interpretative methods to oral memory sources. It describes a small “experiment” with quantitative analysis. The author applied a specific type of data analysis - word-frequency - to study interviews with four British women who migrated to Australia after the Second World War. This allowed her to explore one aspect of transforming a collection of individual interviews into a coherent historical account. While acknowledging that this sort of data analysis clearly has benefits when using a large body of material, she concludes that it can not replace close reading and listening to the original interviews.

It never helps historians to say too much about their working methods. For just as the conjuror’s magic disappears if the audience knows how the trick is done, so the credibility of scholars can be sharply diminished if readers learn everything about how exactly their books came to be written. Only too often, such revelations dispel the impression of fluent, confident omniscience; instead, they suggest that histories are concocted by error-prone human beings who patch together the results of incomplete research in order to construct an account whose rhetorical power will, they hope, compensate for gaps in the argument and deficiencies in the evidence. Perhaps that is why few historians tell us how they set about their task.

Keith Thomas

Introduction: the ‘conjuror’s magic’

The above quote comes from an article Keith Thomas recently wrote for the London Review of Books on historical research methods. He describes his rather unusual research method which consists of first taking notes on sheets of paper. After transferring these notes into an alphabetised index book, he cuts up the sheets of paper which he periodically files according to topic in old envelopes. If the notes on a topic
are ‘especially voluminous’ he puts them in a box file, container or a desk drawer. He writes: ‘This procedure is a great deal less meticulous than it sounds. Filing is a tedious activity and bundles of unsorted notes accumulate. Some of them get loose and blow around the house, turning up months later under a carpet or a cushion’.2

William Lamont wrote a letter in response to this article saying he had seen Thomas’s method in action – and it worked. He described how, many years before, he asked Thomas over breakfast about the Muggletonians and Thomas left the room. He later returned with an envelope marked ‘Muggletonians and animals’ which he proceeded to scatter over the kitchen table. Lamont reported he found what he needed, ‘at a point somewhere between the toast and the marmalade’.3

Eccentric as it may be, this approach appeals to me. I like the idea of history being found ‘somewhere between the toast and the marmalade’. When analysing memory sources, I have tended to take what could be called a grounded history approach. Kathy Charmaz describes grounded theory methodology as being emergent and providing opportunities for analysis at various points in the research process – not just at the ‘analysis stage’.4 My ‘method’ is probably more accurately described as listening carefully and scribbling down what seems important. So, when I was asked to apply an interpretative method to memory sources, I thought perhaps it was time for me to analyse what I was actually doing with this intuitive approach. Alan Bryman and Robert Burgess argue ‘much mystery surrounds the way in which researchers engage in data analysis’.5 This is typical of writing in the field. Historians who have used quantitative approaches have often been rather unforthcoming about how they actually set about their research. So, ignoring Thomas’s warning about the ‘magic’ disappearing, I decided to explore this mystery and to experiment with a specific type of data analysis – word-frequency. Admittedly my explorations were rather ad hoc and not a rigorous experiment. Nevertheless, in this process I discovered word analysis can be a useful tool but that, for me at least, it does not replace close reading and listening to the original memory sources.

Rather than close analysis of an individual interview, I chose to examine a set of interviews. I planned to begin with a quantitative approach which I hoped would help elicit themes and patterns and lead me back to my more familiar qualitative analysis. As well looking for patterns and themes, I also wanted to explore how analysing these
themes would help in the process of transforming a collection of individual interviews into a coherent historical account. As Trevor Lummis points out: ‘if oral history is to move from a form of biography to an historical account, it must proceed from an individual to a social experience.’ Susan Gluck and Sherna Armitage, in their email exchange about women’s oral history, also grapple with this question of ‘what are the legitimate ways to draw meaning and generalizations from interviews.’ Armitage feels there is a need to move beyond the individual voice of an interviewee to make connections which can tell us something about collective experience. The difficulty is finding how to do this. Gluck concludes, ‘the construction of meaning is perhaps the most difficult challenge we face, and I guess we just all muddle along in our own way’. Rather naively, I decided to muddle along myself and experiment with NVivo, the data analysis software. NVivo is a software package for qualitative data analysis designed to assist researchers sorting, analysing and organising non-numerical data. Obviously quantitative historians are the main users of this software and qualitative historians may not be familiar with it. It has certainly been used in the area of health in the Wellcome Trust funded research project "The Health of the Cecils" based at Royal Holloway, University of London. Other projects, such as Decker’s examination of people’s experiences of health and well-being in Halton, England and Reid’s oral history of radiography, mention using NVivo but give little detail on how or why it was used to analyse the data. I downloaded a 30 day trial version of NVivo 8 and quickly discovered it is complicated software and to use it properly requires coding as well as considerable time and practice. I confined myself to using it to examine word frequency in order to tease out the main themes in my material. I will discuss the methodology below.

Migration interviews

My material was British migration accounts some of which I already knew. For an earlier project, I had interviewed my aunt about her experiences as a child migrant but I had not compared this interview in detail with other migration accounts. My aunt and her family migrated to Australia in 1956 as part of the Assisted Migration Scheme. This interview and my grandmother’s subsequent death opened up this area for family discussion and it became clear that my mother’s migration story was quite
a different one to my aunt. I decided to revisit my aunt’s interview for a ‘second
take’, to borrow Joanna Bornat’s term.\textsuperscript{11} I was hoping that revisiting her interview in
the context of other contemporary migration accounts would help me to understand
how I had previously analysed and made sense of my aunt’s interview. I hoped this
process would also assist me to understand how to begin to write history from
memory sources.

Once again, I started with the word analysis approach. Because my object of
comparison was a woman and I wanted to have more or less common gendered
experiences, I chose three other accounts by women. And because I wanted to avoid
being misled by my own preconceptions, I chose three accounts by women that I had
not heard or read: Sandra O’Neill, Janet Francis, and Christina Daly.

I chose not to read these transcripts until after experimenting with data analysis. As
far as was possible, I wanted to draw out the themes through word analysis, rather
than identifying them myself through reading the transcript. Learning from my first
attempt, I carefully copied the entire transcripts from PDF into separate Word
documents making sure I removed any material not directly related to the interview:
e.g. notes about transcription and the tape, interviewer and interviewee initials etc.
This of course still left the questions posed by the interviewer but in most cases these
were fairly brief and, at this stage, I made the decision to keep them in as I felt they
might contain important key words. I created a new ‘project’ in NVivo and imported
these documents as separate files (what NVivo calls ‘internals’). This allowed me to
run ‘queries’ against these files individually or as a group. Without complex coding,
it is not possible to run sophisticated queries but simple ones are possible. I did not
have the time to learn how to code the transcripts so had to work with the documents
as they were.

I initially ran a ‘Word Frequency Query’ which searches across the entire document
for common words. I ran this search for each of the four transcripts, looking for
words with a minimum length of three letters and limiting it to the most common1000
words. Then I ran a search on all the transcripts together and exported this into an
Excel file. This left a large document listing each word and its frequency. As it was
in Excel I could sort the data alphabetically as well as by word frequency. This
allowed me to pick up similar words, such as homesick/homesickness. To reduce this
list of 1000 words to a manageable number, I sorted the list by frequency of the word and began to delete the ‘everyday words’ or common words. Clearly it was unnecessary to count the definite and indefinite articles and auxiliary verbs (to be), and it was quite a straightforward decision to delete some words: ‘you,’ ‘also,’ and numbers. But the process became more subjective beyond that as I had definite ideas about some of the possible migration themes. Some apparently commonplace words were problematic: ‘anymore’ (reflection on change?), ‘before’ (comparison of two lives?) and ‘behind’ (leaving family behind?). The word ‘had’ occurred 736 times, and was a candidate for exclusion, but ‘back’ had 393 counts and might well have been significant: it might simply have referred to the back of a house, but if it meant ‘back to England’ (i.e. return), it could have had a very important meaning. Depending on context, words like this could connect to a significant story or simply refer to an everyday event. I began to worry whether this process would give me any meaningful data at all.

I continued with trepidation and pruned the list down to roughly 200 words (Table 1) by choosing the words which struck me as having the most significance for my topic of migration. I then exported these words into a separate Excel file so I could look at them in a table and see what picture they might give me. From there I constructed 15 words or groups of words encompassing the same theme. Of course this carried with it great subjectivity. I was working on post-war migration so therefore I knew certain subjects such as money, family, conflict and war would be crucial. I added these to a Word table and plotted their frequency in each separate interview (Table 2). This was probably possible using NVivo but I could not work out how to do it, so I decided to use the ‘Find’ function in Word. This was a tedious and time consuming process, but useful as it allowed me to cross-check against the NVivo generated word counts.

Looking at this second table, I was immediately struck not by the appearance of those themes, which I had expected but by the unequal distribution of some of them with different interviewees. Some patterns began to emerge. It allowed me to quickly see similarities and differences and, more importantly, raised questions for me to have in mind when reading the interview transcripts. I looked through the table and highlighted what seemed to be patterns such as similarities or groupings for a particular interviewee, anomalies such as words/themes which seemed particularly
important for one interviewee or silences when one theme did not seem to be mentioned for a particular interviewee. Obviously, this sort of process alone does not immediately identify silences which occur across all the interviews. But, with triangulation and sophisticated coding, I could imagine this data analysis might identify the sorts of silences Luisa Passerini observed in her research of the Italian working class where the two decades of the fascist period were often omitted from people’s life narratives.\textsuperscript{12} Her interviews were closely analysed but she does not give details of her methodology so it is impossible to say whether she used word analysis or not.

Even through this simple query, some patterns emerged. In some ways, my query was similar to running a grammar check on a document. It might give false positives but in some cases it draws attention to areas worth further investigation in a secondary analysis. It gave me word patterns to take back to the interviews to see their context and to try to understand the explanations behind the patterns. I drew up another table showing themes in blue which occurred with similar frequency in each interview (e.g. war, winter/cold, school/education). I also highlighted themes which stood out for specific interviewees as either being noticeably absent or in higher numbers and added these to the third table as questions to take back to the interviews.

**Results**

Winter/cold appeared with similar frequency in all four interviews. This was not a surprise as, in the migration accounts I had been listening to, the poor English weather was often remembered as a motivating factor in the decision to migrate. For many the feel of the cold and the rain was a metaphor capturing their emotions around emigration. James Hammerton and Alistair Thomson had discovered that for some emigrants the British weather was a primary motivation for emigration but for many it was: ‘a thread that circles around other personal and political factors for emigration’.\textsuperscript{13} Looking at the data, it was certainly a thread appearing in each of the four interviews. But, the question is whether I would have chosen the words ‘winter/cold’ from the list of 200 words, if I was not aware of this theme. The words were reasonably frequent (35) but not much more than, for example, ‘God/Church’
Both of these might also tell an interesting story but I had to make a selection and I selected based on my own preconceptions about assisted migration and especially my experiences interviewing my aunt.

Other words/themes occurred in each interview but with one interviewee standing out as either being silent or raising it more frequently than the other interviewees.

School/education was talked about at least 30 times in each interview but almost double this in the interview with Janet Francis. Clearly school was important for my aunt who migrated in 1956 the middle of her schooling at the age of 12, but also for Christina Daly and Sandra O’Neill who both had children to consider. For Janet Francis it seems to have been crucial. She migrated around the same time as my aunt (1955) but she was older. She was 17 which she describes as her favourite age when she ‘had just started to live’.14 After she returned to school to repeat her final school exams, she had been offered a place at Coventry Training College to be a teacher when her parents suddenly announced their decision to migrate to Australia. This lost opportunity seems to have reinforced the importance of education for Janet Francis: ‘I do believe that if you can afford it I think a good education for any child is first and foremost. I educated both my boys’.15

Other themes emerged from the data analysis as being possibly more important for Janet Francis than the other interviewees. ‘Accent’ was repeated 17 times and less than three times for the other interviewees. Likewise, ‘homesick/homesickness’ was raised 26 times and less than three times by the other interviewees. ‘Christmas’ was another frequent word count, as was her parents - especially her father. When I read the interview transcript this pattern began to make sense. Janet Francis was desperately unhappy with her parents’ decision to migrate and repeated several times she ‘hated Australia with a passion even before I left England’.16 It was something she ‘never ever got used to’.17 She was clearly homesick and conflict between her parents and her mother’s breakdown would not have helped. After she married an Australian she ‘learnt to adapt’ but she always felt she was an ‘alien’ and did not belong. After her adult sons moved to England, she and her husband followed them where she seems to have found some peace: ‘I’m home now and this is where I belong’.18

Sandra O’Neill also had a negative migration experience and some of this is communicated through the data analysis. She mentioned ‘conflict’ eight times and it
was only mentioned once by one other interviewee. She also talked about money more than 63 times which was more than double any of the other interviewees. Sandra’s migration experience was not a happy one and, like Janet, migration was not her decision. She migrated at her husband’s suggestion, in an attempt to save her marriage as it was to be ‘a completely new start’ for them.¹⁹ Money became important as there was a recession in Australia when they arrived and her husband could not find work. They returned to England after only six weeks in Australia, finding the ‘whole damned experience cost us about £5,000’. ²⁰

Christina Daly also returned to England but after many years in Australia. The data analysis did not seem to be negative and, reading her transcript it is clear her migration experience was positive. The main theme emerging from the data analysis of her interview was ‘work’ with 142 counts - double that of Janet Francis and Sandra O’Neill. This might be explained by the fact she migrated as a married woman for an adventure and an opportunity to travel ‘…for two years…this was going to be the beginning of our travels’.²¹ She and her husband found good jobs in Australia, began to settle, and took out Australian citizenship. After the birth of her son, she found being out of the workforce isolating and, wanting him to know his grandparents, they decided to move on from Australia: ‘I only came here for two years. Do I want to retire here? Do I want to die here? No I don’t’.²² However, she is very positive about her time in Australia saying it was a ‘very very good and worthwhile experience’.²³

In Christina Daly’s interview transcript, the word ‘class’ appeared 20 times which was much more than the other interviews. This is more difficult to explain as the other interviewees were also clearly from working class backgrounds but did not use this specific word in their interviews. I wondered whether she may have been referring to school classes but when I read the transcript I saw she was actually talking about her working-class background. I also wondered whether I was counting the interviewer’s use of the word ‘class’ which might have skewed the results. On checking I found the interviewer only used it to echo her use - although of course by asking a follow up question he encouraged her to use it again. It might seem that the solution to this would be to have deleted the interviewer’s questions in Word before importing the text into NVivo. But, I decided that it was just as important to know if the interviewer,
by picking up on a theme, encouraged the informant to repeat it, in effect leading the informant.

Christina Daly is older than the other three interviewees. She was born in 1951, so growing up in the 1960s in London may explain this increased class consciousness. Class was becoming a political issue and her comments about being involved in demonstrations against the Vietnam War suggest she was already politicised. Certainly the data analysis raised this topic and it would be an interesting one to explore further. Some of the other themes would probably have emerged simply from close reading of the interview transcripts. But, I am not sure I would have picked up on the class element in Christina Daly’s interview if it had not emerged from the data analysis. Word analysis can draw out areas that may be missed – even after careful reading of a transcript.

However, this type of data analysis can also produce misleading results. The interview with my aunt demonstrated one of the pitfalls of the data analysis method. Looking at the data, it shows my aunt mentioned her mother 68 times - which is many more times than any of the other interviewees. Her father is mentioned only five times which is low compared with the other interviewees. When I ran a word count on ‘grandpa’, it increased the count for her father to 22 times. And, running a count for ‘Nanna’ increased the count for her mother even further to 77 times. This is where the context of the interview becomes important – as it is in any interview of course, but in this one it is crucial. I interviewed my aunt at my grandmother’s (my aunt’s mother) house. My grandmother was ill. At the time of the interview we did not realise how ill she was. But, we were both aware of being in her house, of her being 101 years old, unwell and of an era coming to a close. I am sure this awareness affected my aunt’s focus. It would have been a very different interview if it had been conducted a week earlier (when my grandmother was well) or a week later (after my grandmother died). She began the interview with her mother and, when I ended by asking if there is anything else she would like to talk about, she chose to end with her mother. Obviously the transcript could not contain the context of the interview – which would affect any reading of it, not just a data analysis. This led me to reflect on using oral history sources recorded by others which might not include this
contextual detail and the importance of an interview summary which provides essential contextual information.

**Reflections**

This experiment made me increasingly conscious of what Michael Frisch terms the ‘shared authority’ of an interview. Meaning was not only in the interviewee’s answers but was part of the context of the interview. I had quite a lot of this context with my aunt’s interview but not with the other interviews. This meant I could not ‘listen in stereo’ to these interviews as Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack recommend. I was not able to explore the dynamic between the interviewer and the interviewee in the same way as I could with my aunt’s interview. Anderson and Jack recommend ‘listening in stereo’ to the narrator and ourselves:

> Realizing the possibilities of the oral history interview demands a shift in methodology from information gathering, where the focus is on the right questions, to interaction, where the focus is on process, on the dynamic unfolding of the subject's viewpoint.  

I could do this with my aunt’s interview but it was lost to me as the historian approaching the other interviews. I was not connected to these interviews and much of the context was not available. This highlighted to me some of the shortcomings inherent in any memory source – not just oral history interviews. As Paul Thompson points out: ‘most of the essential skills in judging evidence, in choosing the telling extract, or in shaping an argument, are much the same as when writing history from paper documents’.  

However, my main reservation about this method of analysis is that it was personally frustrating. NVivo responds to comprehensive rules and is even-handed in applying them. But, historical writing is not even-handed in that sense – it depends on nuances. I did not feel that word analysis allowed me the freedom to explore the areas which interested me. When reading the interview transcripts I was intrigued by several themes which seemed significant to me but were not highlighted with a word
frequency count. They were more diffuse. It is possible they would be picked up with sophisticated coding but they were not identified with the simple word queries I ran against the data. Even Lummis, a supporter of data analysis admits that in ‘good open-ended interviews responses are discursive and coding them is a very subjective process’. \(^{28}\) As a librarian, I am aware similar considerations apply to original cataloguing and how the subjective judgement of the cataloguer affects classification. I am not convinced a life story can be reduced to codeable categories. As Catherine Kohler Reissman notes, ‘narrators interpret the past in stories’. \(^{29}\) Breaking these stories into pieces of data, fragments this story. However, I also appreciate this is an area for caution. Lummis points out, even when analysing a few interviews, ‘the most striking interviews’ take our attention and ‘the feeling that one knows the material well enough to generalize without coding and structuring the data can be dangerously misleading’. \(^{30}\) Recognising this, there were at least three topics I would have liked to explore, which did not emerge from my data analysis.

The first was the impact the interviewees felt migration had had on them personally. This sparked my interest when I interviewed my aunt and was surprised how enthusiastic she was about the experience of migration: ‘Oh it did wonders for me. Absolutely fabulous. Yes, I would have been nowhere near as outgoing nowhere near as assertive’. \(^{31}\) Christina Daly was equally positive about her experiences in Australia: ‘I grew up there and I learnt a lot about myself and I learnt how to be independent and I learnt how to be responsible, self-reliant’. \(^{32}\) She also spoke of her frustration with what she saw as the insularity of her friends when she returned to England: ‘I’ve gone and I’ve changed and I’ve come back and I’m a different person, they aren’t’. \(^{33}\) For Janet Francis migration was ‘something you never really get over’ \(^{34}\) whereas for Sandra O’Neill migration was ‘almost dream-like’ and remembering it was, ‘like regurgitating something that’s been long gone, long dead’. \(^{35}\) Rich images such as these are lost with word counts.

Farewells were another topic which interested me. I would have liked to explore the way these liminal moments are described by the interviewees and whether the way they are remembered and retold has any connection with the interviewees’ more general experience of migration. Sandra O’Neill explains her mother was so distraught about her leaving she could not come to the port to see her off. Instead she
said goodbye at New Street train station and ‘we sort of arrived there on our own, which was really kind of sad, because you know, well you realise then you are on your own’. 36 Janet Francis also remembers leaving on her own: ‘nobody came to wave us off. Nobody came to the station, so it was a, I think it was a, like a one man band I think’. 37 For Janet Francis and Sandra O’Neill this moment of farewell was a turning point highlighting their unhappiness about leaving. But for Christina Daly and my aunt, both who had positive migration stories, the moment of leaving England is barely mentioned in their interviews.

The final topic which was not clearly highlighted by my data analysis, but which stood out to me when reading the transcripts, was the impact migration has on subsequent generations. I expected migration would affect extended family members but not that it would still reverberate half a century later. A decision made in the 1950s still sends ripples out to grandchildren. Migration is clearly a complex process and I am not convinced data analysis alone does this complexity justice. But, as Kohler Riessman and other advocates of narrative analysis points out, ‘any methodological standpoint is, by definition, partial, incomplete, and historically contingent. Diversity of representations is needed’. 38 Perhaps, depending on the sources and the purpose of the study, a combination of analytical methods would be the best approach. For very large data-sets NVivo would be a valuable tool because it would be very hard for an individual researcher to master all of it. The word count did suggest some themes, and that is even more valuable in large scale analyses. It also heightened differences between similar accounts and so might be more valuable for many accounts taken together than one taken alone.

**Conclusion: ‘a lumper, not a splitter’**

While I can see this sort of data analysis might be a useful way to begin approaching a large body of data, I can not see how it could replace close reading and listening to the original interviews. In my small exercise, it raised potential themes and patterns. But, I could only make sense of these by returning to the memory sources themselves. This ‘sense making’ is often the first stage of writing history. The comparison with my aunt’s interview demonstrated how much is lost when we do not know the context
of a memory source. So much of this context is not included in a written transcript but clearly so much more comes through in the recording. Judith Oakley describes this when discussing the way a participant observer thinks through their material:

The fieldworker cannot separate the act of gathering material from that of its continuing interpretation. Ideas and hunches emerge during the encounter and are explored or eventually discarded as fieldwork progresses. Writing up involves a similar experience. The ensuing analysis is creative, demanding and all consuming. It cannot be fully comprehended at the early writing-up stages by someone other than the fieldworker.39

I must admit, even after this dalliance with data analysis, I am still attracted to the ‘toast and marmalade’ approach and identify strongly with Thomas’s sentiments:

I am a lumper, not a splitter. I admire those who write tightly focused micro-studies of episodes or individuals, and am impressed by the kind of quantitative history…which aspires to the purity of physics or mathematics. But I am content to be numbered among those many historians whose books remain literary constructions, shaped by their author’s moral values and intellectual assumptions.40
Notes

2 Ibid., p.36.
3 Ibid., p.37.
8 Ibid., p.80.
14 Janet Francis, interviewed by Alistair Thomson, August 2000, British-Australian Postwar Migration Research Project.
15 Ibid., p.11.
16 Ibid., p.15 and p.17.
17 Janet Francis, interviewed by Alistair Thomson, August 2000, British-Australian Postwar Migration Research Project.
18 Ibid., p.48.
20 Ibid., p.42.
21 Ibid., p.13.
22 Ibid., p.31.
23 Ibid., p.45.

Ibid., p.140.


Robina Baxter, interviewed by author, May 2010, tape and transcript held by author.

Christina Daly, interviewed by Alistair Thomson, July 2000, British-Australian Postwar Migration Research Project.

Ibid., p.41.

Janet Francis, interviewed by Alistair Thomson, August 2000, British-Australian Postwar Migration Research Project.


Ibid., p.20.

Janet Francis, interviewed by Alistair Thomson, August 2000, British-Australian Postwar Migration Research Project.


Thomas, 'Diary', p.37.