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Examining Register-based Variation in the BNC: The Case of Phrasal Verbs

We have recently created "Variation in English Words and Phrases" [view.byu.edu], which is a new tool that allows users to examine a wide range of lexical, syntactic, and semantic phenomena across registers -- probably at a level that is unmatched by any other BNC interface. For example, in a matter of two or three seconds, users can select or create registers "on the fly" to find which common nouns are more frequent in medical texts than in general non-fiction texts, which verbs occur in the sequence [we * that] more in conversation than in newspapers, or which adjectives occur near the word *woman* more in fiction than in non-fiction.

In this presentation, we will provide a concrete example of the power of the corpus by looking at register-based variation with phrasal verbs in English -- *carry out, leave off, look up*, etc. We will look at the most common verbs and adverbial particles in 5-6 different "macro" registers (spoken, fiction, newspapers, academic, etc), as well as 5-6 "micro" registers (sermons, poetry, medical, interviews, letters, etc). We can also quickly and easily compare different sets of registers against each other -- for example, which phrasal verbs occur more in classroom use than in conversation generally, in economics-related texts vs. general non-fiction, or in tabloid vs. broadsheet newspapers.

In summary, as we carry out a number of different queries as part of the presentation, we will see how the corpus at [view.byu.edu] allows users to investigate register-based variation in English syntax with speed and ease that is perhaps unmatched by any other version of the BNC..