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Reading Habits in the COVID-19 Pandemic

An Applied Linguistic Perspective

Abigail Boucher · Marcello Giovanelli
Chloe Harrison · Robbie Love
Caroline Godfrey

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Introduction

Abstract In this chapter we introduce the book and the project, outlining the background to the study, our research methodology and design, and an overview of the headlines of the data. We explain our mixed-methods approach, which combines quantitative analyses of discrete survey data with corpus-based and qualitative analyses of participants' free-text responses. We also briefly summarise the main chapters, outlining how each makes a contribution to our study and to our overall understanding of reading habits during the pandemic.

Keywords Methodology • Qualitative analysis • Quantitative analysis • Reading habits

1 COVID-19, LOCKDOWN AND READING

On 16 March 2020, the then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson, announced that, in the midst of rising cases of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), 'now is the time for everyone to stop non-essential contact and travel' (Gov UK 2020a). A week later, the first lockdown period was announced, coming legally into effect 3 days later on 26 March. At this point, stay at home measures came into force which meant that schools and universities were closed and the public were only allowed

to go out for household shopping and limited exercise (one form per day), to seek medical help or to provide care for a vulnerable person, or to travel to work if a *keyworker* defined as those, for example, working in health and social care, education, and public services (Gov UK 2020b). Between May and August 2020, these restrictions were eased and other measures brought in, such as the 2 m social distancing rule and guidance on group gatherings. Additional regional and national lockdowns and restrictions followed throughout the period leading to the end of December 2021.¹

In a general sense, we know that the public's relationship with books changed during the lockdown months. Studies and reports have highlighted the increased number of books sold during the pandemic (BBC 2020; Flood 2020a) and how, in particular, both longform novels (Flood 2020b) and poetry (Bravo 2020) were bringing the nation together with a shared purpose of reading to cope. In fact, the relationship between a reader's engagement with novels and their subsequent ordering of temporal experience is a key theme that emerges from Davies et al.'s (2022) study of novel reading during the pandemic. They demonstrate how reading gave many people living through lockdown a way of 'reckoning with pandemic time' by providing 'a specific structuring purpose' (2022, p. 27). In a broader social context, The Reading Agency (2020) even claimed that their 'New survey says reading connects a nation in lockdown' and community reading projects also took off as readers found ways of discussing books in online spaces. Northington (2021), for example, suggests that the pandemic resulted in 'fellow book lovers [...] banding together, supporting each other and reaching out to those in need', implying that readers offered each other a form of community support and even, perhaps, an informal counselling service. We also know, however, that some readers, often the most vulnerable and/or with limited access to new ways of accessing and talking about books, were deeply affected by the restrictions. For example, in their study of the impact of lockdowns on UK libraries, McMenemy et al. (2023) highlight how the closure and subsequent restricted services offered by libraries meant that tens of millions of books were not borrowed compared to pre-lockdown years.

In this book, we specifically focus on the impact of the first lockdown period (March–July 2020) on UK public reading habits. We explore the extent to which the consequences of lockdown measures, such as working from home, home-schooling, the loss of opportunities to engage in leisure

¹ A useful timeline outlining government measures between March 2020 and December 2021 can be found at Institute for Government (2022).

pursuits that involved leaving the home and/or mixing with others, as well as general anxieties about the pandemic and what the future might hold, affected readers' relationships with books and reading. Our book thus provides, to our knowledge, the first study that draws on a set of applied linguistic methodologies and a broad range of linguistic methods to examine how public reading habits changed in those first weeks of what was a remarkable moment in our history. Our book makes key contributions to applied linguistics, health humanities, stylistics, and the sociolinguistics of reading, enhancing our understanding of the ways in which the first lockdown impacted on reading and revealing important and novel insights with regards to the relationship between readers and reading practices during that time.

2 THE *ASTON LOCKDOWN READING SURVEY CORPUS*

The contents of this book are drawn from data that form the *Aston Lockdown Reading Survey Corpus*,² which in turn arose from *The Lockdown Library Project*,³ a study of UK reading during the first lockdown, that we ran from 1 July–31 August 2020. The project survey addressed the following research questions:

- RQ1: How has the pandemic affected the quantity of books people are reading?
- RQ2: How has the pandemic influenced the type/genre of books people are reading?
- RQ3: How has the pandemic influenced people to return to previously read books?
- RQ4: How has the pandemic made people access and talk about books in new/different ways?

We hosted the survey on and administered it through www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk, distributing it via multiple social media channels, our own

²The full *Aston Lockdown Reading Survey Corpus* is available publicly via Aston University's institutional research data repository, *Aston Data Explorer* (URL: <https://doi.org/10.17036/researchdata.aston.ac.uk.00000602>).

³See the project website for more details <https://lockdownlibraryproject.wordpress.com/>. The survey questions can be found in Appendix 1. Given that our data are drawn from UK respondents during a specific time period, we are aware that we cannot make wider claims about reading habits in other countries or at other moments during the pandemic. We hope, however, that our methods, results, and analyses will be of interest to researchers working in other contexts.

institution's website, and *Call for Participants* (<https://www.callforparticipants.com>), a platform that advertises academic research to the general public. In total 860 participants living in the UK completed the survey; we outline more details about our corpus in Sect. 3.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 *Applied Linguistics*

In this book, we draw on a number of methodologies and methods within the broad discipline of applied linguistics, defined by Schmitt and Cele-Murcia (2020, p. 1) as ‘using what we know about (a) language, (b) how it is learned and (c) how it is used, in order to achieve some purpose or solve some problem in the real world’. In the case of our book, we draw on theoretical knowledge and ways of generating, presenting, and analysing empirical data from linguistics and apply these in order to understand reading habits in the lockdown by examining the language that our participants use to talk about them. In other words, our investigation is an essentially *linguistic* one that aims to understand an important moment in our lived experience (the *application*). Specifically, as academics we work within the areas of genre studies (Boucher), the sociology of reading (Godfrey), literary linguistics (Giovannelli and Harrison), and corpus linguistics (Love). Consequently principles, approaches, and methods from these fields (and others when needed) also inform the ways that we work with and analyse our data. We have, as appropriate, outlined and explained these in more detail in each respective chapter, mindful of the fact that all analytical approaches are necessarily driven by the researcher's professional judgement in choosing ‘the right tool for the right job’ (Saldaña 2011, pp. 177–178). In Sect. 3.2, however, we discuss our corpus and provide a short overview of the general approach we took.

3.2 *Analysis of the Corpus*

The *Aston Lockdown Reading Survey Corpus* comprises all of the responses to our survey questions, totalling 200,245 tokens. Using ‘modest’ Extensible Markup Language (XML) (Hardie 2014), the corpus is marked up to capture the metadata attributes as highlighted in Table 1.1.

The distribution of survey responses according to the gender identity and age range of participants is presented in Tables 1.2 and 1.3.

Table 1.1 Metadata attributes of the *Aston Lockdown Reading Survey Corpus*

<i>XML attribute</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example</i>
URN	Unique response number (URN), automatically assigned by the survey software	‘606,218-606,209-62,332,731’
Respondent_id	Unique participant ID code corresponding to the URN, used in the reporting of individual responses	‘1’
Age_range	Participant age category	‘31-40’
Occupation	Participant occupation (uncategorised free text)	‘English teacher’
Gender	Participant gender identity (categorised free text)	‘Female’
q_id	Survey question number	‘5’
q_type	Survey question type (open or closed)	‘Closed’
q_prompt	Survey question prompt text	‘5. Since the start of the lockdown, I have been reading’

Table 1.2 Distribution of question responses and tokens by participant gender identity^a

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Participant count</i>	<i>Question response count</i>	<i>Token count</i>
Female	686	25,191	162,769
Male	138	4704	29,178
Prefer not to say/blank	13	781	2707
Non-binary	7	295	4227
Agender	1	50	365
Genderqueer	2	79	440
Genderfluid	1	34	323
Gender neutral	1	44	236
<i>Total</i>	<i>849</i>	<i>31,178</i>	<i>200,245</i>

^a Given the need to obtain survey data fairly quickly to capture reflections on the first lockdown period, we used convenience sampling in that our respondents self-selected to take part and we played no mediating role in that selection. We are aware that 80.8% of our survey respondents reported their gender as ‘female’ and that there is subsequently an imbalance and overrepresentation of females, which makes generalisability impossible. However, qualitative analysis of our data still provides, we believe, rich and valid evidence of the ways in which individuals perceived changes in their reading habits during the lockdown; see also Chap. 7 for discussion

Table 1.3 Distribution of question responses and tokens by participant age group

<i>Age</i>	<i>Question response count</i>	<i>Token count</i>
18-30	6848	47,213
31-40	7618	49,665
41-50	6974	43,797
51-60	6057	36,431
61-70	2691	16,632
70+	877	5741
Blank	113	766
<i>Total</i>	<i>31,178</i>	<i>200,245</i>

Table 1.4 Distribution of question responses and tokens by question type

<i>Question type</i>	<i>Question response count</i>	<i>Token count</i>
Closed	24,248	113,546
Open	6930	86,699
<i>Total</i>	<i>31,178</i>	<i>200,245</i>

We analysed the survey data using a range of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Whereas responses to the closed questions were analysed quantitatively, responses to the open questions were qualitatively examined, drawing on a sub-corpus of free-text responses to the open questions, containing 6930 individual responses and running to 86,699 tokens (see Table 1.4). In these cases, and drawing on established methods of qualitatively analysing data, we employed thematic coding (e.g. Auerbach and Silverstein 2003; Saldaña 2021; Braun and Clarke 2022) in order to identify emerging patterns in responses and group them together to create an analytical narrative. As Gibbs (2018, p. 38) outlines, ‘Coding is a way of indexing or categorizing the text in order to establish a framework of thematic ideas about it’. In the chapters in this book, these themes provide the structure for our analytical sections. This kind of qualitative approach works particularly well when examining the rich variation in description and motivation inherent in datasets generated from human accounts of experience (see Tracy 2020, pp. 6–7).

In addition, some strands of our analysis of open question responses were complemented by the use of methods from corpus linguistics, which, in general, involves applying computational techniques to (usually large)

samples of language data ‘to obtain information about frequencies, co-occurrences and meanings’ (Hunston 2022, p. 1). Language samples that are examined in this way are known as *corpora* (singular: *corpus*); a corpus is ‘some set of machine-readable texts which is deemed an appropriate basis on which to study a specific set of research questions’ (McEnery and Hardie 2012, p. 1).

The value of such methods for exploring patterns in the discursive construction of meaning across multiple textual samples is demonstrated by research in corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS; Partington et al. 2013). CADS combines principles from corpus linguistics and discourse analysis to effectively increase the scale of observations compared to manual qualitative analysis alone (see e.g. Gillings et al. 2023; Taylor and Marchi 2018). Furthermore, corpus methods have been shown to provide insight as a complementary approach specifically for the exploration of free-text survey data (e.g. Huntley et al. 2018; Brookes and Baker 2022; McClaughlin et al. 2023), as summarised by McClaughlin et al. (2023, p. 14), who found that:

corpus analysis of the open-ended survey questions surfaced a more nuanced patterning in responses, and at a faster pace of analysis, than would be possible through manual thematic analysis of survey responses

Where corpus methods were used, we analysed the data using *Sketch Engine* (Kilgariff et al. 2004, 2014), a commercial corpus query system which can process XML mark-up to facilitate the creation and analysis of user-specified sub-corpora, in this instance the sub-corpus of responses to open questions. All spelling, phrasing, and syntax in the data were maintained and are reproduced as they were originally written by participants.

4 STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book is structured so as to provide a uniform approach to each chapter, with a short introduction, an overview of context and a relevant literature review, a note on methodology, an analysis of specific parts of the survey corpus data, and then a conclusion.

Following this chapter, Chap. 2 (‘Reading, Genre, and Crisis’) surveys the literature on the relationship between pandemics, literature (especially the role played by genre and popular fiction) and reading habits. Drawing on previous studies, we first examine how world pandemics and public