



Wicked Witches and Evil Queens?

A corpus-based study of the near-synonyms *evil* and *wicked* in contemporary American English

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine what contemporary corpora can reveal about the use of the two adjectives *evil* and *wicked*. These two synonyms have been analysed using corpus linguistics in order to acquire results about the differences between them regarding frequency of use, as well as their collocating nouns. The results have also been analysed with a focus on gender perspectives. The study has a quantitative as well as a qualitative approach. The material investigated for this study consists of a corpus called The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The definitions of the two adjectives have also been searched within a few of the greater dictionaries.

The findings reveal that the word *evil* is used to a greater extent by speakers and writers in different contexts in comparison to its synonym *wicked*. There are also significant differences between male and female nouns in adjective and noun collocations. The adjective *evil* is more frequently used to address male nouns, whereas its synonym *wicked* is more widely used as an attribute to female nouns. The differences are aligned with common gender stereotypes presented in previous studies and support the results regarding gender approaches in adjective and noun collocations.

Keywords:

Adjectives, collocations, corpus linguistics, dictionaries, gender studies, synonyms.

Contents

1. Introduction	3
1.1 Aim and Research Questions.....	5
2. Theoretical background	6
2.1 Lexis and register	6
2.2 Corpus linguistics studies	7
3. Methodological approach	12
3.1 Material.....	12
3.2 Method.....	13
3.2.1 List of abbreviations	15
4. Results	16
4.1 Dictionary definitions of <i>evil</i> and <i>wicked</i>	16
4.2 Frequency of <i>evil</i> and <i>wicked</i> in COCA.....	18
4.3 Nouns collocating with <i>evil</i> and <i>wicked</i>	18
4.3.1 Collocating nouns of <i>evil</i>	18
4.3.2 Collocating nouns of <i>wicked</i>	22
4.3.3 Comparison of the collocations	27
4.4 Evil and Wicked in different genres of the COCA.....	28
5. Discussion	33
6. Conclusion	38
7. References:	39
8. Appendix 1	41

1. Introduction

There is a great deal to understand about any specific word by looking at the context in which it has been used as well as by examining the associated words that it keeps in its company.

Synonyms are words from the same end of a gradable scale. They are words that roughly have the same meaning and are often seen as related. However, this fact does not mean that the words in question are identical, since there might be differences in their semantic distribution, meaning that two synonyms can be used in different ranges of contexts (Melchers et al., 2019, p. 22). One way to achieve a greater understanding of a word and its significance is through corpus studies. According to Litosseliti (2010), corpus analysis can “Enable researchers to confirm or refute hypotheses about language use, as well as allowing them to raise new questions and theories about language that otherwise would not have been possible” (p. 94). In order to explore the meaning of a word through corpus linguistics, a central concept called collocation is used. Collocation is a key concept in corpus linguistics and it refers to how words co-occur with each other. By studying the collocations of a word, certain important features about the word and its particular associations might be discovered. Collocates are the selection of words that frequently accompany the word that we are interested in. By studying the frequencies in the achieved results of the searched corpora, the statistically significant collocations will be found (McEnery & Baker, 2016; Taylor, 2021). An example to illustrate this is the research by Taylor (2021, p.15) where the different collocational patterns in male and female performance of behaviour were studied. According to the results, the adjective *cutting* was associated to both male and female genders, while its synonym *bitchy* almost exclusively collocated to the female gender.

Adjectives play an important role in the description of characters in language use. In this essay, the collocations of the two adjectives *evil* and *wicked* and the extent to which they

intersect with the searched corpora will be examined. *Evil* and *wicked* are synonymous adjectives that share nearly the same meaning. These synonyms are more often used to describe a morally bad and cruel person. The two words are also evaluated in relation to gender in order to retrieve more information about their contextual meanings. Gender approaches have been an area of interest in linguistic studies for several decades and in recent years, there has been an increased interest in research on language and gender through corpus studies. There have been various studies exploring the language used to describe male and female athletes, politicians and artists to name a few. Most of the data-driven studies of gender and language focus on what speakers of different genders say, rather than the descriptions of men and women (Hoyle et al., 2019, p. 1708). Studying the language of a speaker is an easier task, since the only annotation required will be the gender of the speaker, whereas studying a referent language involves data from a greater scale of sources including both male and female speakers (Hoyle et al., 2019, p. 1708). Adjectives play an important role in the description of characters. Since this study intends to find out what the searched corpora reveals about the two synonyms *evil* and *wicked*, it would be interesting to see whether the findings are consistent with some previous studies, thereby confirming that some specific adjectives are commonly used when collocating female nouns rather than male nouns and vice versa.

1.1 Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to find out what contemporary corpora can reveal about the use of the two adjectives *evil* and *wicked*. These synonyms will be analysed using corpus linguistics to acquire results about the differences between the two regarding frequency of use, as well as how they affect their collocating nouns with a focus on gender perspectives.

The research questions are as follows:

- Is there a difference in frequency between the words within different genres?
- From a gender perspective, what are the most common collocating nouns with the two adjectives and how do they affect the meaning of these words?

2. Theoretical background

In this section, a selection of previous studies that are relevant to the topic of the essay are presented, in which researchers report on various aspects of corpus-based studies. The first part consists of a description of lexis and register as a grammatical background to the study. In the second part, corpus linguistics and some of its key concepts are presented through previous studies. The language used to describe men and women in terms of gender approaches will also be addressed.

2.1 Lexis and register

Melchers, et al. (2019) explain that dissimilarities between vocabularies are called differences in *register* and the subcategories are polysemous words, homonyms and synonyms.

Polysemous words have two different yet related meanings. The word *salt* for example can have different meanings yet derive from a common origin. Words with unrelated meanings are referred to as *homonyms* such as the word *mole* which can refer to the animal, or to mole as a quantity in chemistry. It can also refer to a mark on the face or a sea-defence wall. The third subcategory is *Synonyms*; they are words that roughly have the same meanings.

(Melchers et al., 2019, p.22)

Moreover, there are some regional varieties in English, meaning that some words can have either different or similar meanings in different regions. According to Melchers et al. (2019), the English language is constantly undergoing changes. Some of these changes can be attributed to the influence of American English. There are also some differences worth mentioning that are on the boundary of lexis and syntax, dealing with different collocational properties found in texts from different regions. These contrasts can be studied through large computer-based corpora studies where corpora from various regions can be compared and

analysed. Lexis is more difficult to assign to varieties. Words such as *chips* are polysemous, they mean different things yet share a common origin. These words can have general meanings within the English language as well as specific regional meanings. In British English, *chips* are long rectangular pieces of deep-fried potatoes whereas in the United States, *chips* refer to thin slices of fried potatoes eaten as a snack. On the contrary, these thin slices of fried potatoes are called *crisps* in British English (Melchers et al., 2019, p.23).

According to Supakorn (2020), perfect synonyms are rare and hard to find. They are defined as synonyms where all meanings of the two vocabulary items are identical. Near-synonyms on the other hand are far more common. They share the same core but differ in some other respects and therefore are not interchangeable in all contexts (Supakorn, 2020, p.2). One way to distinguish between synonyms is by looking at their degree of formality. The word *wicked* for example, might be considered as informal while its near-synonym *Evil* is associated with a higher degree of formality.

Sveen (2005) discusses the lexical relationships between adjectives and nouns. It is explained that adjectives tend to be selectors, presupposing semantic traits of their selectees. In other words, “The most relevant syntagmatic relation involving adjectives is that between the adjective and the noun it describes.” (p. 22). Collocations between nouns and adjectives indicate shared semantic properties and may contribute to a better understanding of the differences between synonyms.

2.2 Corpus linguistics studies

Litosseliti (2010) describes corpus linguistics as a fast growing and popular field of linguistics that enables analyses of a very wide range of electronically stored texts, assisted

by computers and software (p. 93). Corpus (plural corpora) is by definition “an electronic collection of texts, written or transcribed from spoken material, that can be searched to assess frequency of different items or usages” (Melchers et al., 2019, p. 215).

McEnery (2006) explains that the representativeness of corpora is determined by mainly two factors. The first one is balance, which is the range of genres included in a research study and the second factor is sampling which refers to how the text chunks have been collected for each genre. McEnery (2006) continues to illustrate and point to the need for careful consideration of the research question to determine the acceptable balance of the corpus that is being searched for and whether it is suitably representative (p. 13). According to McEnery and Baker (2016), keyword procedure is also a method that can be useful when the search is done within two different corpora. The keyword procedure will give a statistic over how frequent the keyword appears in the results within corpora. The corpus size must also be taken into account. If one of the corpora is larger than the other, the frequency of the keyword will most likely be at a higher level compared to the frequency results in the other corpus (McEnery & Baker, 2016, p. 24). Words that have increased in frequency and are mentioned more often are referred to as positive keywords. Negative keywords are the words that have decreased in frequency within the results of searched corpus (McEnery & Baker, 2016, p. 24).

In a research study by Hoyle et al. (2019), the language used to describe men and women as well as the extent of it being positive or negative was studied. The survey was conducted in the corpus of Goldberg and Orwant and gendered relationships between words were analysed. The study was done by using syntactic collocations with noun types as methodology. The results of the research showed significant differences between male and female nouns. The differences were also aligned with common gender stereotypes. For

example, positive adjectives that described women were repeatedly related to their bodies while positive adjectives describing men were more often related to their behaviour. It was further explained that some adjectives naturally describe one of the sexes, the word pregnant is for example almost only attached to the noun women rather than men (Hoyle et al., 2019, p. 1707).

Another relevant research using corpus linguistic approach is the study on gendered patterns of body language descriptions in children's fiction. In the study Cermakova and Mahlberg (2020) compared a corpus of 19th-century children's literature where they studied repeated sequences of words that contain at least one body part noun together with a marker of gender. The aim of the study was to identify differences between the description of male and female body language (Cermakova and Mahlberg, 2020, p.1). The results of the study showed a limited range of described behaviours for female characters. One example is the emergence of the cluster "*her hands on her hips*". Clusters indicate what is common in the social contexts of the time. Apart from identifying gendered body language, the aim of the study was also to raise an awareness of the existence of patterns of gender differences in culture and literature, as well as how these patterns affect the knowledge that children develop about gendered behaviours (Cermakova and Mahlberg, 2020, p. 28).

Motschenbacher and Roivainen (2020) used the corpus of contemporary American English for a study on the usage patterns of a set of personality trait adjectives. According to the authors (Motschenbacher and Roivainen, 2020), stereotyping is a mechanism that plays a significant role in the connection between personal nouns and adjectives. This mechanism is about: "gender stereotype confirmation and the overcoming of traditional gender related stereotypes." (Motschenbacher and Roivainen, 2020, p. 20). This means that for each

gendered personal noun, there are similarly gendered other forms in the syntactic environment to be found. These nouns will be socially gendered, meaning that they tend to be associated with social stereotypes. As an example, the adjective *beautiful* is expected to be more commonly found in collocation with a female personal noun (*beautiful woman*) rather than a male personal noun (*beautiful man*). The final results of the research showed that common personality adjectives are often used to describe males rather than females or people in general (Motschenbacher and Roivainen, 2020, p.35).

Even colour terms can carry gender and valence biases. In a corpus research carried out by Jonauskaite et al. (2021), the extent of gender connotations regarding colour preferences in males and females were discussed. The study demonstrated that pink and blue are commonly nice colours, while the red colour was considered to be both positive and negative. “We expected red to be embedded in both positive and negative contexts, pushing its valence bias towards zero. For its gender bias, we assumed red to represent power, and informed by the literature on gender stereotypes, power would represent masculinity.” (Jonauskaite et al. 2021, s.3). According to the results, pink was the only colour that was connected with femininity, blue colour however was linked to both males and females.

In a corpus study, Sveen (2005) compared adjectives used to describe characters in Victorian and contemporary British children’s fiction. The research has shown almost similar results as the previously mentioned study where a pleasant appearance has been the most characteristic feature describing female characters in Victorian literature. Looking at the analysed contemporary material, it appears that the realistic portrayal of characters has been of importance. In the Victorian era, however, the idealistic features and portrayals had been more common and reflected some of the traditional gender roles in the societies (Sveen,

2005, p. 18). An interesting result in the study of adjective phrases in semantic domains was that the adjectives describing male characters did not differ much and were relatively stable between the two time periods. In contrast, the adjectives describing female characters were subject to great change, but in some other cases remained remarkably similar (Sveen, 2005, p. 90).

Finally, Cermakova and Mahlberg (2018) describe the representation of gender in literature and discuss gender inequality in the toy and publishing industries. The findings show that male villains are eight times more common in children's books than female villains. The female villains are also usually described or pictured as old and ugly "Wicked witches and evil queens" (2018, March 22). Sveen (2005) points out the importance and the effects of how male and female characters are described on a larger scale, as these descriptions reflect the cultural values of societies and influence the socialisation process of children (p. 17). A research article written by Casey et al. (2021) exemplifies the same results about gender representations. It is revealed that male characters are overrepresented in literature even though there has been an improvement in female representation over the last years. It is further explained in the article that the protagonists' genders influence young children's understanding of gender stereotypes to a large extent.

3. Methodological approach

3.1 Material

The material investigated for this study consists of a corpus called the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and it is composed of more than one billion words, including 20 million words each year from 1990-2019. The search engine provides a variety of spoken and written language with the same genre balance year by year. Furthermore, COCA provides data from a wide range of genres (TV/Movie subtitles, spoken, blogs, web, fiction, magazine, newspaper and academic). The high amount of data from each genre provides useful information about the frequency of words and grammatical constructions across all genres. There are a few other corpora that could have been used in the study, such as the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) or the National British Corpus (NBC). However, some features in COCA such as the size of it, its wide range of balanced genres and its relevant time period makes COCA the ideal corpus for this study.

As explained in the previous chapter, the representativeness of corpora is determined by the two factors: balance and sampling. Balance is the range of genres included in the corpus, and the second factor refers to how the data for each genre have been collected. (McEnery. 2006, p. 13). McEnery (2006) also points out the need to determine the acceptable balance of the corpus that is being searched for and whether it is suitably representative. The key implication drawn from this is the importance of choosing corpora databases that provide a balanced and representative result about the use of the two adjectives *evil* and *wicked*. To answer the study question of the most common word and their collocates in American English, Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) is therefore considered a good choice for retrieving data in this research.

3.2 Method

According to McEnery (2006), a corpus in modern linguistics is defined as a body of naturally occurring language. There are two types of methods used when researching in the corpus linguistic fields. Qualitative approaches are valuable when it comes to providing rich-depth data while quantitative data is useful when it comes to generalising research data (Litosseliti, 2010). This calls attention to the importance of using the two different methods in this research. Collocation pertains to a more quantitative approach in linguistic studies, yet it is greatly used in other areas in language studies where a combination of discourse analysis and corpus linguistics are required (Taylor, 2021). The methods used in this study will therefore be both qualitative and quantitative since this will provide and contribute to a more comprehensive result to evaluate. As Litosseliti (2010) points out, “When consistent, mixed methods research allows for ‘diversity of views’ and ‘stronger inferences’” (p.33) The quantitative results will mainly answer the first research question regarding how common each of the adjectives are in American English, and the qualitative results will provide a better understanding of how these adjectives have been used and show the differences and similarities between these words.

In order to better understand and analyse the results of the corpus, the definitions of the two adjectives will be searched in a few of the larger dictionaries. A total of four different dictionaries have been chosen for this study: The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language Online, The Longman Online Dictionary of Contemporary English, The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary and finally The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. These dictionaries were chosen because of their popularity among scholars and language learners as well as them being regarded as some of the highest authorities in the study and reference of languages today. These dictionaries are also continuously updated with new

words and meanings. The aim of finding the meanings of the words in dictionaries is mainly to understand to what degree these words are synonyms and if there are any deviations in the meaning of the words.

The approaches that will be taken to the data will be based on frequency, collocation and keywords. Litosseliti (2010) explains that corpus analysis assists researchers in the confirmation of their hypotheses about language use. This understanding is crucial because it will provide some linguistic patterns that will lead to solid conclusions in the research. Apart from results about how widely the adjectives have been used in American English, the corpus analysis will also provide information about contexts and functions of the words.

A technique that will be used in this essay is called keyword procedure. According to McEnery and Baker (2016), this method is also useful when the search is done within two different corpora. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the keyword procedure will provide statistics of the frequency of the keyword in a corpus. The corpus size will also be considered. The COCA corpus is larger than most other corpora such as the National British Corpus (BNC); therefore, the frequency of the keywords will most likely be at a higher level in COCA compared to the frequency results in the BNC. Words that have increased in frequency and are mentioned more often are referred to as positive keywords. Negative keywords are the words that have decreased in frequency within the results of searched corpus (McEnery & Baker, 2016). The frequency of the words analysed in this work will be examined within eight different genres in the corpus. Since COCA is a balanced corpora, the choice to search in all its genres is of great importance. The selection of the genres consists of TV and Movie subtitles, spoken, blogs, web, fiction, magazine, newspaper and academic. The search will be conducted within the main genres and will not delve into subcategories of

each genre to eliminate the work from becoming too large. The data will then be compared and analysed in order to find answers about whether they are as equally frequent within each genre. The possible underlying causes of the similarities or differences will be examined in the analysing part. All the extracted data will be categorised and shown in tables.

3.2.1 List of abbreviations

AHD	The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language Online
COCA	The Corpus of Contemporary American English
LDCE	The Longman Online Dictionary of Contemporary English
OALD	The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary
WOLD	The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary

4. Results

In this part, the results of the searches made within COCA are presented. The results have been divided into four subheadings for a better examination of the questions that the study aimed to investigate. In section 4.1, the dictionary definitions of the adjectives are introduced. In section 4.2, the frequencies of the words *evil* and *wicked* are presented, looking at how frequent these words are. In section 4.3, results regarding most frequently collocating nouns are presented with examples. Finally (section 4.4), data from eight different genres within COCA are demonstrated looking at how frequently the two words occur in those genres.

4.1 Dictionary definitions of *evil* and *wicked*

According to *the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (AHD), the word *evil* is a Middle English word, from Old English *yfel*. *The Longman Online Dictionary of Contemporary English* (LDCE) defines *evil* as “someone who is evil deliberately does very cruel things to harm other people” and “something that is *evil* is morally wrong because it harms people”. So according to LDCE, *evil* can represent a person or a thing. The examples given are: “an *evil* dictator responsible for the deaths of millions” and “They condemned slavery as *evil*”. Furthermore, it can also mean something unpleasant such as: “An *evil* smell”. According to *the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* (WOLD), *evil* means “morally reprehensible”, as in “an *evil* impulse” or “arising from actual or imputed bad character or conduct”, as in the example “a person of *evil* reputation”. “Causing harm” is another definition for the word *evil*: “the *evil* institution of slavery”. The two main synonyms of *evil* presented in WOLD are *sinful* and *wicked*. Looking at *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* (OALD), the word *evil* is mainly defined as in the previous dictionaries: “(for people) enjoying

harming others; morally bad and cruel” and “connected with the devil and with what is bad in the world” as in the following examples:

- Police described the killer as ‘a desperate and *evil* man’.
- She had been deceived by an *evil* demon.

In comparison, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (AHD) reveals that the word *wicked* has Middle English origins and is an alteration of *wicke*, ultimately from Old English *wicca*, meaning *sorcerer*. *The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* (WOLD) defines *wicked* as “evil: morally very bad”, “fierce, vicious: disposed to or marked by mischief” and “vile: disgustingly unpleasant”. The two words already show similarities in their definitions, whereas *wicked* seems to be a bit more negative in terms of the level of being bad or unpleasant. *The Longman Online Dictionary of Contemporary English* (LDCE) has three main definitions for the word *wicked*. The first definition is “behaving in a way that is morally wrong” with the example: “the *wicked* stepmother in ‘Hansel and Gretel’”. The second one is the informal definition “behaving badly in a way that is amusing” as in the following sentence: “Carl had a *wicked* grin on his face as he crept up behind Ellen”. The third meaning is the spoken informal or slang definition of the word *wicked* which means “very good” as in “That’s a *wicked* bike!”. *The Oxford learner's dictionary* (OALD) has the most extensive number of examples including the word *wicked* and presents the two different synonyms of it: *evil* and *mischievous*. According to the synonyms, *wicked* either means “morally bad” or “slightly bad but in a way that is funny and/or attractive”. It can also mean “dangerous, harmful or powerful” as in the example “a *wicked*-looking knife”.

4.2 Frequency of *evil* and *wicked* in COCA

The results of the completed searches in COCA are presented in table 1 below. The results show that there are clear differences in frequency between the two words. There are only 8255 occurrences of *wicked* compared to 55326 instances of *evil*. This brief look at the synonyms in COCA shows that the word *evil* has been used nearly seven times more than *wicked*.

All forms of:	Frequency	Per million
Evil	55326	55.71
Wicked	8255	8.31

Table 1. Frequencies of EVIL and WICKED in the COCA.

4.3 Nouns collocating with *evil* and *wicked*

4.3.1 Collocating nouns of *evil*

In this section, the nouns most frequently collocating with *evil* are presented. The collocates have been sorted by frequency. When sorting by frequency, the minimum mutual information, or possible word pairs is what scores for the results in collocates. This means that a higher collocating number shows a tighter association between the node word and the collocate. The search was limited to nouns found within the four collocating words before and after the adjective. The top 50 results were selected for analysis. When analysing the results, the samples were divided into four main categories: male, female, unspecified gender and religious/occult. These categories were chosen based on their association with humans (such as male and female) or other living beings considered to have certain human characteristics, for example breathing, moving or responding to stimuli (such as spirit or creature). In this work, results from the remaining categories (32 results) have been

disregarded as they do not contribute relevant information to answering the research question. As an example, according to the results, *eye* is the third most frequently collocating noun to *evil*. Yet, results such as *evil eye* are not consistent with the chosen categories and therefore will not be taken into account. The results of the collocating nouns to *evil* are shown in the table below.

Categories	Examples	Frequency	Total
Male	Man Wizard	1098 56	1154
Female	Witch Queen Bitch Stepmother	155 149 88 69	461
Unspecified gender	Twin Genius Scientist Bastard Ward Villain Dictator	315 282 140 95 87 85 60	1064
Religious/occult (Unspecified gender)	Spirit Demon Monster Creature Soul	1074 120 112 89 68	1463

Table 2. The most frequently collocating nouns of *evil* in the COCA, divided by category.

There are only two samples within the Male category, *man* (example 1 & 2) and *wizard* (3). The collocating noun Man has the highest frequency with 1098 occurrences. As previously explained, the search has been limited to nouns within the four collocating words before or after the adjective. In the example 1, the noun *man* occurs before *evil* in the same sentence and in example (2), the collocating noun *man* is placed after the word *evil*:

- (1) That *man* is the true *evil* mastermind. All just so that he could stay the all-powerful Light Lord. (FIC, *Fan Fic*)

(2) His eyes against contemplating evil-- Isaiah 55:7 Let the wicked forsake his way and the *evil man* his thoughts. (WEB, *bible.cc*)

(3) ...not the only thing that's different about Smurfette. She was created by the *evil wizard*, Gargamel. (MOV, *Smurfs: The Lost Village*)

The Female category consists of the nouns *witch*, *queen*, *bitch* and *stepmother* where the first two nouns show almost the same high frequency. The words *bitch* and *stepmother* also show similar frequencies, but their occurrences are about half of the first two nouns *witch* and *queen*. In example (4), with a word in between, *bitch* is the collocating noun to *evil*:

(4) She went from being the helpless young girl to the *evil selfish bitch*. (BLOG, *edones.wordpress.com*)

(5) I feel like the *evil stepmother*. The evil and very old stepmother. - Let's not forget the old part. (MOV, *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark*)

(6) They act like I'm some *evil old witch* doctor, but I got feelings, and I never asked for this. (FIC, *SciFI & Fantasy*)

(7) the Screaming Mummy beside the king, who he was and his connection to our *evil queen*, can only be explained back in Cairo's Egyptian museum. (SPOK, *NBC: Today Show*)

While analysing the produced data, there were some nouns that could neither be placed under the Female nor the Male category as these had unspecified gender. Among the top 50

collocations there were also some nouns that could represent living beings, but in a more religious or occult context. Some examples that can be mentioned are *spirit* and *demon* as is illustrated in (10) and (11). These nouns could also have been placed under the Unidentified gender category as the gender is not stated. The most frequently collocating nouns in this category are *twin* and *genius*. In example (8), *twin* (unidentified gender) is a collocation to *evil* and in example (9), the noun *genius* is the collocation. The word *genius* with a frequency of 282 occurrences has been placed in the table since it refers to a person:

(8) No one wants to be the *evil twin*. No one wants to be the face inside the mirror.

(WEB, *writersdigest.com*)

(9) Each writer takes advantage of this opportunity to project *evil genius* into characters. (WEB, *cameron.blogspot.com*)

(10) Later the *evil spirit* got more power on earth, so Makunaima sent a great flood.

(WEB, *talkorigins.org*)

(11) If you want to tell the intern it WAS *Evil demon* who freed him, go to the section marked R. (WEB, *...kintern.blogspot.com*)

A second search has been done to look more closely at the nearest noun collocations. The search was therefore limited and this time, collocating nouns occurring immediately after the adjective *evil* have been selected for analysis. The top 50 results have been examined from a gender perspective with a focus on male and female nouns only. Unspecified gendered nouns are not included in the latter corpus search as they do not contribute relevant information

about how they are affected by their collocating adjectives from a gender perspective. The results are shown in the table below.

Categories	Results	Frequency	Total
Male	Man Men Guy	370 272 50	692
Female	Queen Witch Woman Stepmother	123 77 65 57	322

Table 3. Most frequently collocating nouns of *evil* referring to gender in the COCA.

It is noticeable that the most common nouns occurring in the near vicinity of the word *evil* refer to the male gender. Male nouns have generated more than twice the results compared to female nouns (692 versus 322 hits). The collocating nouns in the category Male only refer to men in general, whereas the collocating nouns in the category Female are more specific, referring to for example queens, witches and stepmothers as seen in example (5) and (7).

4.3.2 Collocating nouns of *wicked*

Next, the top collocating nouns of the adjective *wicked* have been analysed. As in the previous part, the search was limited to nouns found within the four collocating words before and after the adjective. The top 50 most frequently collocating nouns were chosen for analysis. The results of the collocating nouns to *wicked* have been placed in the same four categories (see section 4.3.1) and presented in the following table:

Categories	Examples	Frequency	Total
Male	Man King Wizard Prince	430 39 14 12	495
Female	Witch Stepmother Queen Stepsister	462 154 38 20	674
Unspecified gender	Minion Servant Sinner	93 28 17	138
Religious/occult (Unspecified gender)	Spirit Fairy Soul Devil Creature	28 21 19 15 11	94

Table 4. The most frequently collocating nouns of *wicked* in the COCA, divided by category.

As can be seen in table 4, there are four nouns among the top 50 results that can be placed in the Male category. These nouns are: *Man*, *King*, *Wizard* and *Prince*. The word *Man* (13) with a frequency of 430 is the second most frequent collocating noun of the word *wicked*. The other three results have a significantly lower frequency than the word *Man*. In a comparison with *evil* (table 2), *Man* is the top frequent collocated noun to both *evil* and *wicked* within the Male category. There are some examples where the adjective *wicked* may not directly refer to the targeted noun. These results have not been eliminated since they constitute a significant small part of the total results and due to time constraints. In example (12), the *king* is not the wicked one even though the words collocate with each other:

(12) My heart knows only virtue. My wrath will undo the *wicked*. My *king*. As chief advisor, my goal is nothing less than ensuring that the old code... lives on in the hearts and minds of all people. (MOV, *Dragonheart: A new beginning*)

(13) The *wicked man* has his soul forced from him; he dies in his sins. (WEB, *biblestudytools.com*)

In comparison, in the category Female, *witch* is the most frequently collocating noun. Alongside it, other nouns such as *Stepmother*, *Queen* and *Stepsister* are placed within the same category. In a comparison with *evil* (table 2), *witch* is the top frequent collocating noun within the Female category. Interestingly, *wicked stepmother* is more frequent than *evil stepmother* even though *evil* is the most frequently used adjective of the two. *Stepsister* is only found in the results of collocations to *wicked*. According to the results shown in table 4, the total of generated female nouns extends the total of male ones (674 versus 495). The following examples (14-17) illustrate the collocation of a noun from the Female category to the adjective *wicked*:

(14) House began to pitch / The kitchen took a slitch / It landed on the *wicked Witch* in the middle of a ditch (WEB, *imdb.com*)

(15) She always hated me. The *wicked stepmother*. It's ingrained from all those goddamn Bavarian fairy tales. (MOV, *The Crew*)

(16) After he reached manhood, he had the *wicked queen* put to death. (ACAD, *ReVision*)

(17) " They've often kind of been seen as the *wicked* or ugly *stepsister*, " Allen said. (NEWS, *Atlanta*)

The final category includes *Spirit, Fairy, Soul, Devil* and *Creature*. Some of these collocations are also in the final category of *evil* (see Table 2) such as *Spirit, Soul* and *Creature*. According to the results, the words *Fairy* (18) and *Devil* (19) are only a collocation of *wicked* looking at the 50 most frequent noun collocations. The words *Demon* and *Monster* on the other hand, are only a collocation of *evil*.

(18) The only question I asked myself was why such *wicked* things as *fairies* were allowed, even in stories, to exist...(FIC, *Ploughshares*)

(19) Maybe she says and puts on a *wicked devil* grin but not now, meh foot feelin weak... (FIC, *SmallAxe*)

There are only three collocations within the Unspecified gender category: *minion, servant* and *sinner*. The word *sinner* with its low frequency of 17 occurrences has been taken into account since it refers to a person:

(20) They all laughed at me. Those *wicked* little *sinner*s. Thought they were too good for me. (MOV, *Down Time*)

(21) for the Demons and the minions... You *wicked minions* (yea, he's talkin to you). (WEB, *activistpost.com*)

(22) It must not here be understood literally, that this *wicked servant* should be put to such a corporeal death. (WEB, *Bible.cc*)

A disadvantage of analysing collocations occurring a few words before and after the word is that the results may not always be reliable. In some cases, the searched word is accompanied by two different nouns from two different categories. In example (22), it is the *witch* who is addressed as wicked. Yet, the results also show *wizard* as a collocating noun:

(22) I'm playing the *Wicked Witch* in *The Wizard of Oz* with Queen Latifah and Ginuwine. (MAG, *Jet*)

Similar to the analysis of *evil* (see section 4.3.1) a second search has been done to look more closely at the nearest noun collocations. The search was therefore limited and this time, collocating nouns occurring immediately after the adjective *evil* have been selected for analysis. Once again, the 50 most frequently collocating nouns have been chosen to examine from a gender perspective, although this time with a focus on male and female nouns only. The results of the search are shown in the table below.

Categories	Results	Frequency	Total
Male	Man Men King Boy	151 141 18 9	319
Female	Witch Stepmother Queen Witches Woman Girl Women Stepsister	415 140 27 26 18 12 12 10	660

Table 5. Most frequently collocating nouns of *wicked* referring to gender in the COCA.

Interestingly, the collocation of female nouns shows twice the results compared to male nouns (660 versus 319 hits). It is noticeable that the most common nouns occurring in the near vicinity of the word *wicked* are within the Female category. Again, (as shown in table 3),

collocating nouns in the Male category mainly refer to men in general (with the exception of King), whereas the noun results in the Female category are more specific and diverse, referring to *witches*, *queens*, *stepmothers* and *stepsisters*. According to the results, a *wicked stepmother* is as frequent as *wicked men* (140 versus 141 hits). However, the majority of these collocations are not very frequent. If the search had been narrowed down to examine only the samples with a frequency higher than 50, the results would have shown only *man* and *men* in the Male category, as well as *witch* and *stepmother* in the Female category. Another interesting observation is the comparison between the instances of men and women. *Man* and *men* have a combined frequency of 292 hits, while *woman* and *women* only reach up to 30 hits in frequency. Yet, the total frequency of nouns in the Female category is twice as many as the nouns in the Male category.

4.3.3 Comparison of the collocations

When comparing the collocations of *wicked* and *evil*, it is noticeable that in collocation with *evil*, male nouns have generated more than twice the results compared to female nouns (table 3), whereas in collocation to *wicked* male nouns have generated less than half the results compared to female nouns (table 5). Additionally, the noun results in the Male category of *evil* only refer to men in general and the noun results in the Female category are more specific, referring to for example *queens*, *witches* and *stepmothers*. This is similar to the results of the collocating nouns to *wicked* (table 5) where the noun results in the Female category are more specific and diverse, referring to *witches*, *queens*, *stepmothers* and *stepsisters*. Considering *evil* being much more frequent in the corpora, *wicked* seems to be more gender-oriented than *evil* as gendered collocations are equally frequent in both cases according to the results. Looking at the presented examples, it is clear that the two adjectives *evil* and *wicked* have occurred according to their dictionary definitions presented in section

4.1, such as in example (4) “*evil selfish bitch*” and in example (17) “*wicked or ugly stepsisters*”. In both examples the near-synonyms refer to (for people) someone who enjoys harming others and is morally bad and cruel.

4.4 Evil and Wicked in different genres of the COCA

In this section, data from eight different genres within COCA are demonstrated looking at how frequently *evil* and *wicked* occur in them. The word *evil* generated a total of 55388 hits in the Corpus of contemporary American English. Looking at the distribution of the word in different genres, it turns out that the word occurs the most within the WEB, followed by BLOG and TV/Movie genres. *Evil* occurs at the lowest in the News genre with a raw frequency of 2679 hits. The COCA is balanced and therefore has almost the same amount of data within different genres. Looking at table 6, we can see that *evil* is almost three times more widely used in web and blog compared to spoken language. This can be interpreted as the word *evil* being more common in certain categories such as on the internet, in movies and in fiction. The reason why *evil* is less common in the news genre may be due to the fact that one's own opinions about for example people, are not relevant in a news context. Therefore, adjectives are not as widely used in news to describe events and people.

Frequency	Per Million	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD
55388	55.78	12125	12427	9772	4028	5733	4249	2679	4353

Table 6. Frequencies of *Evil* within different genres in the COCA.

The word *wicked* has a lower frequency and generates a total of 8262 hits. According to the results in table 7, *wicked* occurs more frequently in genres such as WEB, Fiction and

TV/Movies. It is less commonly used within the Spoken genre as well as the Academic classification. Comparing the two tables (6 and 7), it is noticeable that the results of the top genres are quite similar (apart from the BLOG results where *evil* is more frequently used). In addition, the Spoken and Academic genres generated low frequencies in both studies, yet it is important to remember that the overall frequencies of *wicked* is comparatively much lower.

Frequency	Per Million	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD
8262	8.32	1013	2204	1506	311	1535	687	609	397

Table 7. Frequencies of *Wicked* within different genres in the COCA.

In order to analyse the frequencies in different genres, the generated samples from the Male and Female categories in tables 3 and 5 have been transferred and searched within the Corpus of contemporary American English. The search was based on the combination of the adjective *evil* or *wicked* together with their nearest collocating nouns. The outcome of the generated results (appendix 1) has been converted into two separate charts, illustrated in chart 1 and 2. The bars in each chart represent the combination of the adjectives *evil* and *wicked* alongside their closest collocation (*evil man* and *wicked witch* for example). Each bar is split into coloured bar segments representing different genres, placed on top of each other. The charts have percent stacked bars, meaning that each colour represents the components' relative contributions to the total bar. Therefore, in the following charts, the differences between the genres rather than the actual values are given more emphasis. This means that the method also balances the major differences in frequency.

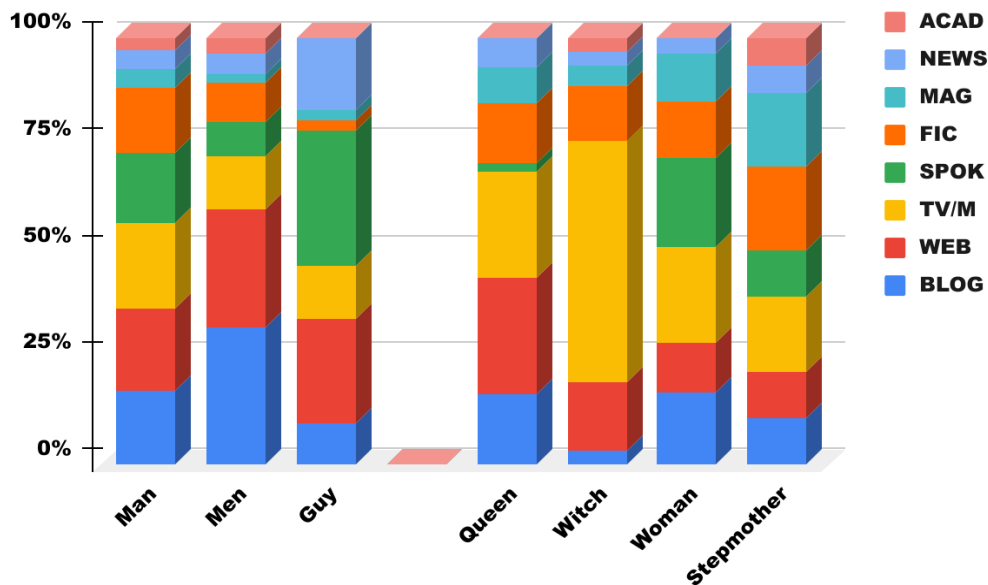


Chart 1. Representation of *Evil* and its closest collocations within different genres in the COCA.

The results of *evil man* are quite evenly distributed between the four genres of Blog, WEB, TV/Movie and Fiction whereas the plural form, *evil men*, is more frequent in Blog and WEB genres. *Evil guy* has its highest rate in the Spoken genre, being the most common result within the mentioned genre in both male and female categories. The outcome of *evil witch* stands out when analysing the results from the female category. It is highly represented in TV and Movie genres which suggests that it is a recurring feature in movies and TV programmes. *Evil stepmother* has its highest results in the Fiction and Magazine genres which is a deviation from the other results in the Female category.

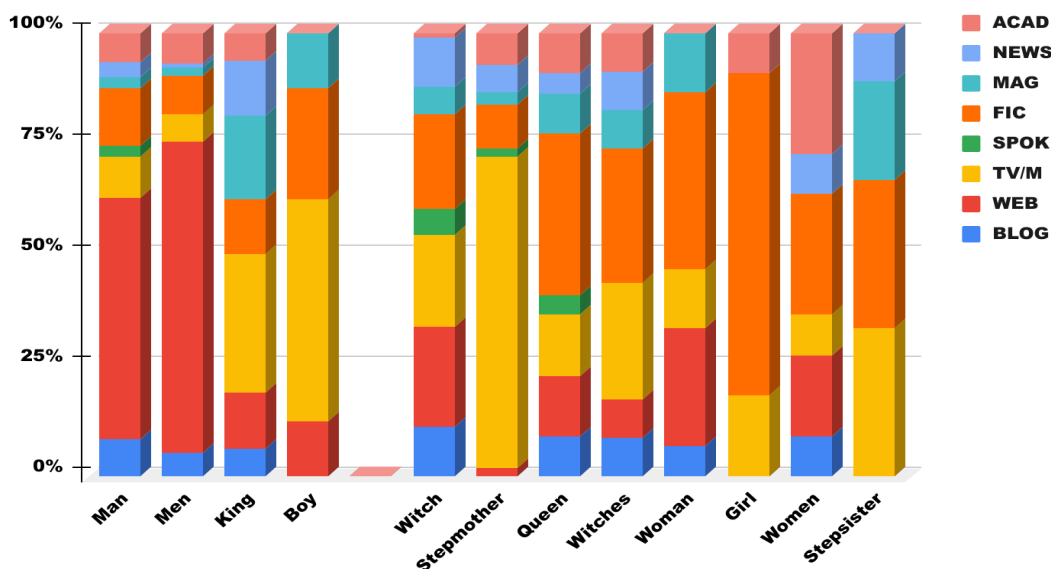


Chart 2. Representation of *Wicked* and its closest collocations within different genres in the COCA.

In the second chart, the results of *wicked* and its nearest collocations are presented. One remarkable data that stands out is the high occurrence of the combination *wicked man* and its plural form *wicked men* in the Web genre. *Wicked king* and *wicked boy* are, on the other hand, more frequent within the TV and Movies genre. In comparison to the Female category, it is noticeable that *wicked stepmother* as well as *wicked stepsister* have their highest hits within the TV and Movie genre. The overall lowest frequency results of noun collocations to *wicked* is within the Spoken genre. We can see that *wicked* followed by the nouns *man*, *witch*, *stepmother* and *queen* gave the lowest frequency results, while the rest of the samples did not generate any results at all. Looking at the Academic genre, it appears that *wicked women* has its highest results within the academic category while results such as *wicked boy* and *wicked stepsister* have not generated any hits in the same genre. Another interesting result illustrated in chart 2 is found in the comparison between *wicked king* and *wicked queen*. The first sample has its highest occurrence in the TV and Movie genre and its lowest in the Spoken genre (no hits), while the latter, *wicked queen*, has its peak in the Fiction genre and its lowest in the Spoken and News genre.

If the differences between *evil* and *wicked* are ignored and the results are looked at in alignment with the distribution of the results within different genres, some interesting observations can be made. The word *wicked* for example, is far more common in Fiction compared to the word *evil*. The latter is however more commonly used in different spoken contexts.

5. Discussion

In this chapter, a discussion of the results is presented, where the outcome of the study is discussed in relation to choice of method and implementation, but also to previous research. A discussion of the possibilities and limitations of the chosen method has also been included. The first research question in this paper investigates whether there is a difference in frequency between the words *evil* and *wicked* in total and within different genres. The second study question aims to give answers about the most frequent collocating nouns to the words *evil* and *wicked* in order to better understand these words through a gender approach. The research questions had to be limited to these above-mentioned questions in order to be able to accomplish the work of searching and analysing data within the limited period of time. As for the second study question, the focus has been solely on collocating nouns to portray the concordances specifically for the adjectives *evil* and *wicked*.

Based on the purpose and questions of the study, it has been shown that the research approaches have been appropriate methodological approaches as they have contributed to achieving relevant and illustrative answers to the research questions. The quantitative method and its results have answered the first study question regarding how common the adjectives *evil* and *wicked* are within the American English corpora. The qualitative method and its results have provided an understanding of how these adjectives have been used and which nouns they have collocated with the most. These methods combined together, or so-called mixed methods, have contributed to a more comprehensive result to analyse. In order to achieve the desired empirical data to answer the study's questions, one of the greater corpuses, the COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) has been used.

Considering the size of it, as well as its balanced genres, the use of COCA as a primary source, has been a matter of obvious.

In order to study the first research question, frequency analysis has been conducted using the COCA. The results showed clear differences in overall frequency, showing that the word *evil* has been used nearly seven times more than *wicked*. This implies that the word *evil* is used to a greater extent by speakers and writers in different contexts. The distribution of the searched words in different genres contribute to an increased understanding of the contexts in which the words are used. According to the results, *evil* occurs the most within the WEB, followed by BLOG and TV/Movie genres. Additionally, it occurs at the lowest in the News genre. The word *wicked* shows similar results in the top genres, while the Spoken and Academic genres generated low frequencies in both studies. By analysing the representation of *wicked* and its closest collocations within different genres in chart 2, it appears that *wicked queen*, *wicked woman*, *wicked girl* and *wicked stepmother* have their peak in the Fiction genre. These findings are in alignment with the statements presented by Sveen (2005), which suggests that the realistic portrayal of characters has been of importance in contemporary children's fiction. An interesting observation in this research is that these typical collocations to female nouns are also found frequently within the Fiction genre. The idealistic features and portrayals were more common in earlier eras and reflected some of the traditional gender roles in the societies. (Sveen, 2005). The presented results in this paper are also in accordance with the study performed by Cermakova and Mahlberg (2018), stating that the female villains in children's books are usually described or pictured as old and ugly "Wicked witches and evil queens". This may be one of the reasons behind the high frequency of female villains in combination with the noun *wicked*. Furthermore, in the study carried out by Hoyle et al. (2019), results of significant differences between male and female nouns were shown. The

differences are aligned with common gender stereotypes (Hoyle et al. 2019, p. 1708). Similar results were also presented by Motschenbacher and Roivainen (2020) in their research on gender related stereotypes. Additionally, another related assumption was presented in the study carried out by Jonauskaite et al. (2021) where the extent of gender connotations regarding colour preferences in males and females were discussed. Given that young people commonly use and are exposed to the language found on the web, television and in literature, the choice of the vocabulary used within these genres are of significance. The results in some genres represent mainly their authors' ideologies whereas results of non-fiction genres might present a more reliable image of the common ideologies and stereotypes of that time.

Melchers et al. (2019) describe synonyms as words that roughly share the same meanings. They further explain that there are some regional varieties in English meaning that some words can have either different or similar meanings in different regions (p. 22). Looking at the definitions of the two adjectives described in some of the greatest English dictionaries, it is clear that the two adjectives *evil* and *wicked* are regarded as synonyms. This also corresponds to the study carried out by Supakorn (2020) meaning that the adjectives studied in this paper are therefore considered to be near-synonyms.

The main difference between these words is the fact that *wicked* also has a positive connotation among its definitions. According to the Longman Online Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDCE) and the Oxford learner's dictionary (OALD), *wicked* can also have the meaning of something “very good” as shown in the examples: “That’s a *wicked* bike” or “This song’s *wicked*”. This can affect the meaning of the words that have been examined in the corpora search engine. However, considering the existing ideologies and the presence of common stereotypes within different genres, it is suggested that *wicked witch* or

wicked stepmother are most likely defined in their most common negative connotation (with the definition of morally very bad).

Collocations between nouns and adjectives indicate shared semantic properties and may contribute to a better understanding of the differences between synonyms (Sveen. 2005, p.22). The results of the frequency analysis in collocations show that female nouns tend to have a higher rate of collocations to *wicked* compared to male nouns. On the other hand, the male nouns showed a higher rate of collocations when they accompanied the adjective *evil* in the corpus search. According to these results, the adjective *evil* is more frequently used to address male nouns whereas its synonym *wicked* is more widely used to describe female nouns. This raises the question whether the results generated in the unspecified genders category are more likely considered to be male if collocated to *evil*, and female if they have a collocation to *wicked*, for example, if *evil bastard* rather refers to a man while *wicked fairy* refers to a woman.

Further, the near collocates of the adjectives *evil* and *wicked* were searched within COCA. The work of finding collocates was divided into two parts. In the first trial, the search was limited to nouns found within the four collocating words before and after the adjective and the top 50 results were chosen for analysis. The search generated many unspecified gender nouns that did not quite refer to either male or female. Interestingly, looking at the results within the Male and Female category it is noticeable that the results of female nouns (*witch, queen, bitch and stepmother*) are far more specific than the male ones (*man and wizard*) when collocated with *evil*. The results of the collocating nouns to *wicked* have more variety in the Male category (*man, king, wizard and prince*). One noticeable result in the female category is the occurrence of the word *stepmother* in both collocation searches. Interpreting

these results, it seems as if *stepmothers* have a reputation of being *evil* and *wicked* which is a way of stereotyping women. A similar assumption is pointed out by Hoyle et al. (2019), who have studied the language used to describe men and women as well as the extent of it being positive or negative. The results of it showed significant differences aligned with common gender stereotypes. In order to get a more reliable result, a second search was made looking for the first collocated noun directly after the adjective. In other words, the search was narrowed down and the results interestingly showed almost the same level of difference in frequency between Male and Female categories.

6. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to find out what contemporary corpora can reveal about the use of the two adjectives *evil* and *wicked*. These synonyms have been analysed using corpus methods in order to acquire results about the differences between the two words regarding frequency of use as well as their collocating nouns. The results showed that the word *evil* compared to its synonym *wicked*, is far more widely used in the English language. The findings also supported the results regarding gender approaches in adjective and noun collocations from previous studies presented in this paper.

For further studies based on this topic, it would be interesting to find out about the use of the two adjectives *evil* and *wicked* over a certain period of time. For example, to see if they have been used more or less frequently over time and investigate the patterns and differences that were found. Another suggestion is to compare the quantitative and the qualitative results found within two or more different corpora, such as the British National Corpus (BNC) or Corpus of Historical American English (COHA). This could be done with the aim of determining the top collocating nouns with focus on the gender approaches.

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8. Appendix 1

Generated results for Evil:

	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD
Man	00.51	00.57	00.59	00.49	00.45	00.13	00.13	00.09
Men	01.10	01.00	00.27	00.17	00.20	00.04	00.11	00.08
Guy	00.04	00.10	00.05	00.13	00.01	00.01	00.07	
Queen	00.16	00.27	00.24	00.02	00.14	00.08	00.07	
Witch	00.02	00.10	00.35		00.08	00.03	00.02	00.02
Woman	00.09	00.06	00.12	00.11	00.07	00.06	00.02	
Stepmother	00.05	00.05	00.08	00.05	00.09	00.08	00.03	00.03

Generated results for Wicked:

	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD
Man	00.10	01.06	00.11	00.03	00.16	00.03	00.04	00.08
Men	00.06	01.20	00.07		00.10	00.02	00.01	00.08
King	00.01	00.02	00.05		00.02	00.03	00.02	00.01
Boy		00.01	00.04		00.02	00.01		
Witch	00.33	01.06	01.00	00.18	01.02	00.18	00.33	00.03
Stepmother		00.02	01.18	00.02	00.11	00.03	00.07	00.08
Queen	00.02	00.03	00.03	00.01	00.08	00.02	00.01	00.02
Witches	00.02	00.02	00.06		00.07	00.02	00.02	00.02
Woman	00.01	00.04	00.02		00.06	00.02		
Girl			00.02		00.08			00.01
Women	00.01	00.02	00.01		00.03		00.01	00.03
Stepsister			00.03		00.03	00.02	00.01	