

Speaking Civil Service

How gov.uk can reveal the rules of government language



THE INDIAN JOURNAL OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Vol. IV

January-March 1958

No. 1

CIVIL SERVICE NEUTRALITY

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THE concept and practice of civil service neutrality is vital to the successful functioning of a parliamentary democracy. The tradition of civil service neutrality in India is a heritage of British rule. The British Civil Service is world famous for its political neutrality, impartiality and integrity. "The characteristic which has long been recognized in the British administrator and extolled as a special virtue is his impartiality, and, in his public capacity, a mind untinged by political prepossession."¹ The civil services of independent India

The Civil Service Code provides top-down directives for language use

*You must deal with the public and their affairs fairly, efficiently, promptly, effectively and **sensitively**, to the best of your ability*

*You must not act in a way that **unjustifiably favours or discriminates against** particular individuals or interests*

Sensitivity may be in conflict with **impartiality**

Using gov.uk we can measure a bottom-up view of our language use

The **most popular** websites on gov.uk will enjoy scrutiny from:

- The public
- The media
- Ministers

Therefore these pages represent well-honed examples of how the Civil Service talks to citizens.

Let's look at the top 100 pages on gov.uk

1. Use the content API to download the content of every page
2. Parse the content into an easy-to-analyse form
3. Use lexicon-based sentiment analysis to score each word used for positive, negative and neutral
4. Gather an overall score for each webpage
5. What is the overall picture of sentiment on these pages?
6. Which pages have the least-neutral score?
7. What do we learn about Civil Service language?

Get the content from the top 100 pages

```
url_root = "https://www.gov.uk/api/content"

# Connect to the file containing landing pages
filename = r'C:\Users\apool\Downloads\2023-04-13 Technical exercise base paths for 271122 - Senior Data Scientist.csv'

with open(filename, newline='') as csvfile:
    reader = csv.reader(csvfile)
    first_column = [row[0] for row in reader]

sample_landing = first_column[1:100]

responses = {}
for landing_page in sample_landing:
    url = url_root + landing_page
    response = requests.get(url)
    responses[landing_page] = response
```

✓ 8.5s

Perform sentiment analysis on the webpages

```
url_root = "https://www.gov.uk/api/content"

# Connect to the file containing landing pages
filename = r'C:\Users\apool\Downloads\2023-04-13 Technical exercise base paths for 271122 - Senior Data Scientist.csv'

with open(filename, newline='') as csvfile:
    reader = csv.reader(csvfile)
    first_column = [row[0] for row in reader]

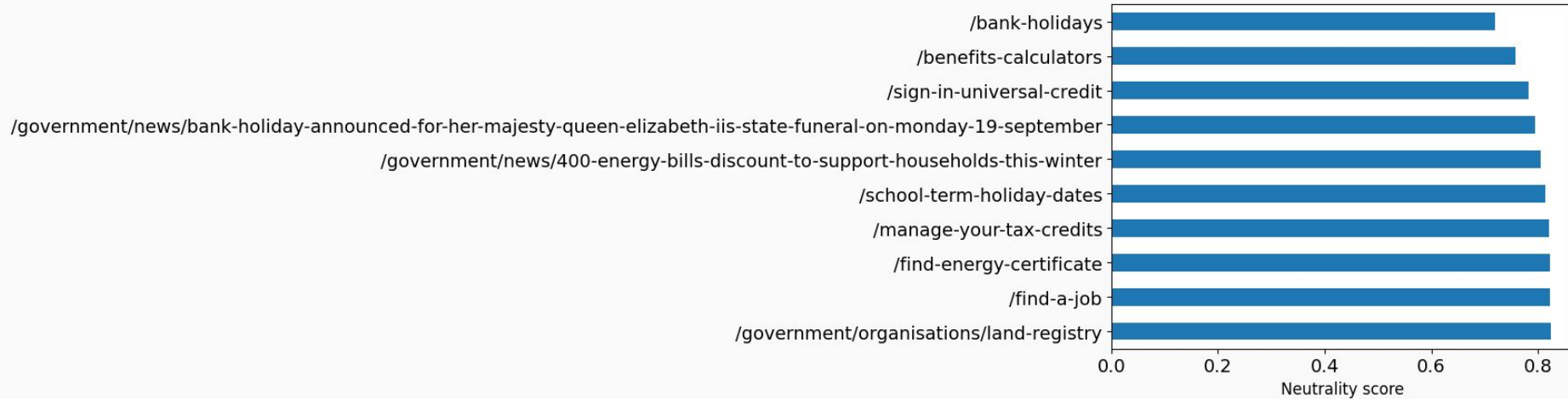
sample_landing = first_column[1:101]

responses = {}
for landing_page in sample_landing:
    url = url_root + landing_page
    response = requests.get(url)
    responses[landing_page] = response
```

A note on dictionary-based sentiment analysis

‘Last night was wicked’

The ten least-neutral pages are shown



The least-neutral webpage has a score of 0.72. We can therefore claim that the majority of language on gov.uk is neutrally valenced. Non-neutral pages generally have **positive language** rather than negative.

Future work: How does this compare to other neutral bodies?

/bank-holidays

'Holiday' is considered a positive word. The rest of the text does not contain any interesting positive associations.

Sometimes we have **no choice** but to use positive language!

/benefits-calculators

Positively valenced words include:

Benefit

Support

Credit

Help

Negatively valenced words include:

Fraud

Overall the language used here suggests a sympathetic view, and positive valencing outweighs the negative. Note that proper nouns like 'Universal Credit' and 'Housing Benefits' are **decided politically**.

/sign-in-universal-credit

Positively valenced words include:

Benefit

Support

Credit

Help

Negatively valenced words include:

Hardship

Affected

Overall the language used here suggests a sympathetic view, and positive valencing outweighs the negative.

Benefits are regularly the subject of political debate

Two gov.uk pages with low neutrality scores are associated with benefits.

I consider the evidence to be very strong that the Civil Service **values sensitivity** on this matter over impartiality.

Summary

1. The Civil Service Code creates a tension between sensitivity and neutrality.
2. The Civil Service must choose its language carefully to represent these values.
3. Oftentimes, the Civil Service has no choice due to the language adopted throughout culture and politically.
4. In the case of benefits, the Civil Service chooses sensitivity over impartiality.
5. Overall the language on gov.uk is neutrally valenced.

Future work

1. Use an averaging of scores from different sentiment analysis methods.
2. Better data cleaning.
3. Could this be matured into a tool for reviewing gov.uk content?
4. How does gov.uk compare to other bodies?
5. Are proper nouns disproportionately positively valenced due to their political nature (e.g. Universal Credit, Levelling Up, HS2)? What does this say about Civil Service impartiality?