**Abolition of slavery – a case study**

Hansard at Huddersfield offers two ways into the Hansard dataset: with pre-determined search terms or without. While the first option allows us to immediately dig deeper into the data, the latter provides exploratory visualisations to find potential search avenues. One such visualisation is the word cloud, which shows us the top-500[1] most frequently used words within a given time period. Words are differentiated by font size to reflect the relative level of frequency in comparison to all other words in the same word cloud.

**Exploring Hansard using a word cloud**

Let's say we are interested in exploring Hansard during the first part of the 19th century. Hansard online records start in 1803, so we define our search period as 1803-1850. By default, the word cloud will show words of all parts of speech (i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives et cetera all together). However, nouns tend to tell us more about the topics discussed than any other part of speech, which is why we may opt to show only nouns using the 'grammatical tag' drop-down menu. This produces the following word cloud:
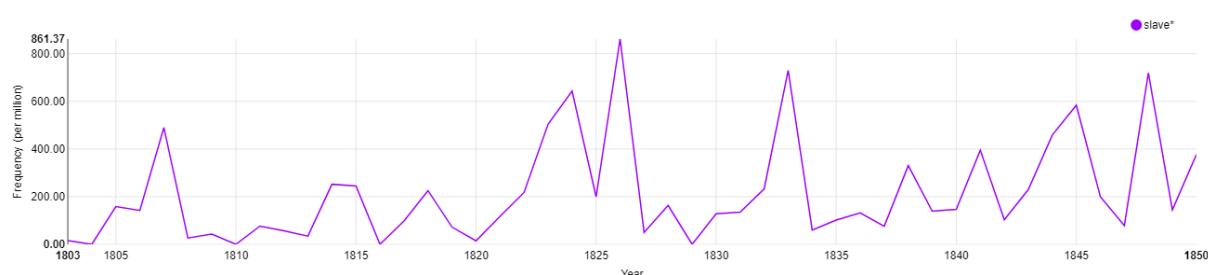


Some of these words, like *revenue* or *money* are likely to relate to economy-related issues. Others, like *subject* or *consequence*, could relate to debates of all kinds. It may be interesting to explore how these words are used differently in differently themed debates, but standing alone they cannot provide clear direction on debate topics.

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[1] While the 500 most frequent words are used for the creation of the word cloud, it never actually displays all 500. The cut-off is different for each word cloud, because of the way the system needs to fit in words of differing lengths and sizes into a square.

We also find words with rich historical connotations: *slave* and *slaves,* which are likely to occur in debates about slavery. That the singular and plural forms of *slave* appear in this word cloud lends evidence to the claim that they have clearly been important overall. We can also tell, based on the size of the words, that they do not appear as often as words like *revenue* and *money*. Given that *slave* and *slaves* are very rich words meaning-wise, hardly open to interpretation from context, we could thus argue that slavery-related topics were of high importance during the 1803-1850 period, but perhaps not as important as economy-related topics.

**Line graphs: frequency of use**

If slavery was discussed so much during 1803-1850, we may be interested to see *when* discussion of slavery happened most. One obvious place to start would be to let the site produce a line graph for the words slave or slavery. It is possible to catch both in one search if you use a 'wildcard' (*) behind slave: *slave\**. The wildcard allows for different forms of the search term, so that *slave\** would find *slave*, but also *slaves*, *slavery* and *slaving*. In the distribution graph that pops up when searching for *slave\*,* we can see a few obvious peaks:



A quick look at the peaks for 1807, 1824, 1826, 1833, 1845 and 1848 shows that the debates that mention *slave\** were all important slavery-related debates. The 1807 and 1833 peaks are historically unsurprising, given that these were important years in the slavery abolition process. Years of public and parliamentary campaign to abolish slavery in the British Colonies resulted in UK parliament passing the Slave Trade Act in 1807. This act imposed a fine of £100 for every slave found aboard a British ship, but did not abolish slavery altogether; slaves could no longer be sold, but they could still be held. Further campaigns to abolish slavery altogether bore success only in 1833, when parliament eventually passed the Slavery Abolition act.
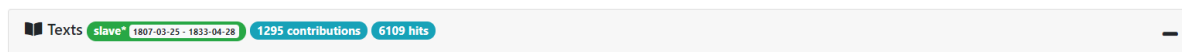
When interpreting this graph, however, it is important to remember that this graph represents normalised frequencies of the use of *slave\** against all other words used in the same year. This means these peaks do not necessarily say something relative to the other peaks (i.e. 1826 did not actually see more discussion of slavery than 1833), but only about the frequency of use compared to all the other words used in that year. Nevertheless, peaks in line graphs may indicate a high interest in the topic of slavery during those years and thus provide an interesting entry-point.

**Debate titles**

Our line graph indicates that campaigns between the Slavery Trade Act of 1807 and the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 were successful in securing further discussion of slavery in parliamentary debate. One way of exploring what these debates were primarily discussing is to gloss debate titles of debates in which *slave\** appears that took place between the acceptance of those acts[2].

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[2] NB. This may not work if you are looking for words whose meaning depends largely on context. It also only gives us an impression of what they were about, but it may help us find research foci.

The advanced search function allows for a little more control over the precise areas of Hansard that you want to search. We could, for example, limit the date to exact dates. If we want to capture debates between abovementioned acts without any debates surrounding these acts, we need to select as our time period the time between the royal assent given to the 1807 act[3] (25th March 1807) until the introduction of the first bill leading up to the 1833 act (May 1833). The results show that *slave\** appears 6109 times across 1295 contributions during this period:

📖 Texts **slave\*** 1807-03-25 - 1833-04-28  **1295 contributions**  **6109 hits**                                    —

However, the list of contributions shows that many of those hits occur in the same debates.

| 1833-04-25 | Mr. Francis Baring | landlords andthe tenants, or, in other words, the tyrants and the | **slaves.** | Neither could he agree with the hon. Member in designating | ELECTION BY BALLOT. (Hansard,April 1833) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1833-04-25 | Mr William Peter | the most pressing importance--by the questions of Tithes, Church Reform, Colonial | **Slavery,** | the Bank and East-India Charters--all calling for immediate inquiry and | ELECTION BY BALLOT. (Hansard,April 1833) |
| 1833-04-25 | Mr William Cobbett | the House that there is no Ballot in those States where | **slavery** | exists in the greatest degree; and that there is Ballot | ELECTION BY BALLOT. (Hansard,April 1833) |
| 1833-04-25 | Mr William Cobbett | in all the States where | **slavery** | does not exist. Then the hon. Member has read to | ELECTION BY BALLOT. (Hansard,April 1833) |
| 1833-04-18 | Mr Maurice O'Connell | that for three hundred years this parrot cry of friendship to | **slaves** | was repeated in the West Indies, as it was now | TRIAL OF OFFENCES IN IRELAND. (Hansard,April 1833) |
| 1833-04-18 | Mr. Hill | hon. and learned member for Tralee had compared them to negro | **slaveholders;** | but he would beg the House to recollect that there | TRIAL OF OFFENCES IN IRELAND. (Hansard,April 1833) |
| 1833-04-18 | Mr. Hill | the relation of England to Ireland, and of masters to their | **slaves.** | Negroes were the property of their masters, and worked for | TRIAL OF OFFENCES IN IRELAND. (Hansard,April 1833) |
| 1833-04-17 | Mr Thomas Macaulay | qualities of their forefathers--if by having been subjected to humiliation and | **slavery,** | they might have contracted some of the vices peculiar to | EMANCIPATION OF THE JEWS. (Hansard,April 1833) |
| 1833-04-17 | Mr Thomas Macaulay | outcasts and | **slaves,** | instead of being a subject of reproach to them, was | EMANCIPATION OF THE JEWS. (Hansard,April 1833) |

While it is possible to see all the debate titles these contributions appear in on one screen here, downloading all the examples in a spreadsheet may give a clearer overview. For the more experienced spreadsheet user, filter options in the spreadsheet will help select all unique debate titles.

ABOLITION OF SLAVERY. (Hansard,March 1809)
ABOLITION OF SLAVERY.-- (Hansard,March 1823)
ABOLITION OF SLAVERY. (Hansard,March 1824)
ABOLITION OF SLAVERY. (Hansard,March 1826)
ABOLITION OF SLAVERY. (Hansard,March 1833)
ABOLITION OF SLAVERY.\* (Hansard,May 1823)
ABOLITION OF SLAVERY--PETITION FROM CARLOW. (Hansard,June 1824)
ABOLITION OF SLAVERY--TRIAL OF MISSIONARY SMITH. (Hansard,June 1824)

DEPORTATION OF MESSRS. LECESNE AND ESCOFFERY FROM JAMAICA. (Hansard,June 1825)
DESTRUCTION OF AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENTS. (Hansard,February 1832)
DISTRESS IN THE MANUFACTURING DISTRICTS.--CORN LAWS. (Hansard,May 1826)
DISTRESS IN THE WEST INDIES. (Hansard,May 1832)
DISTRESS OF THE COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIOUS CLASSES OF THE COMMUNITY. (Hansard,June 1827)
DUTY ON EAST INDIA SUGARS. (Hansard,May 1821)
EAST AND WEST INDIA SUGARS.-- (Hansard,May 1823)
EAST INDIA PRIVATE TRADE BILL. (Hansard,June 1821)
EAST RETFORD. (Hansard,March 1830)
EAST-INDIA SUGARS. (Hansard,March 1825)
ELECTION BY BALLOT. (Hansard,April 1833)
ELECTIVE FRANCHISE IN IRELAND BILL. (Hansard,April 1825)
EMANCIPATION OF SLAVES. (Hansard,February 1833)

A quick gloss gives the impression that many of the debates were part of a process of working out what the Slave Trade Act meant in different colonies and of convincing parliament of the total abolition of slavery. Impressions like these may help us find foci for further research.

**Patterns in language use**

If debate titles are at the highest level of analysis regarding the contents of debates regarding a specific bill, speeches of individual MPs that concern this bill may help us understand the specifics of the debate. We could for example have a look at the contributions surrounding the 1807 Slave Trade Act. Using Advanced search, we can opt to limit our search to the date of introduction of the bill in parliament (January 1807) and to its finalisation with royal assent (25th March 1807). The results show find that one of the major contributors to the debate was Mr George Hibbert, a pro-slavery campaigner. To see for all his contributions during the search period, we can limit our search further by typing his name

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[3] If an act has been given royal assent, it has been approved and will be implemented.

in the MP search box of the Advanced Search. This gives us hits from 4 of his speeches during our search period. Note that these are likely not to be all his speeches, because Hansard reports of other debates may not contain *slave\**[4]. Indeed, when deleting *slave\** as a search word, we find he contributed to slavery-related bills 9 times in total.

The below sample from these four speeches contains occurrences of *slave\** in his 16<sup>th</sup> March 1807 speech, from which we gather that he considers the treatment of slaves in the West Indies. The words that he uses for this make slaves look inhumane, as these are often used for objects and by merchants when talking about their wares: 'purchase', 'conveyance' and 'maintenance'. Without further context, however, it is impossible to say whether he was using these words to defend slavery or to grant his opponents agreement in argument.

| 1807-03-16 | Mr George Hibbert | the question? When they thought fit to encourage an 'African | **slave** | trade,' for the purpose of 'supplying the West India colonies |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1807-03-16 | Mr George Hibbert | with | **slaves,'** | was not this the whole of that proceeding, which we |
| 1807-03-16 | Mr George Hibbert | circumstances not necessarily and indispensably connected either with the purchase of | **slaves** | in Africa, with their conveyance to the West Indies, or |
| 1807-03-16 | Mr George Hibbert | with their maintenance there as | **slaves** | on our plantations, and let me ask the young members |
| 1807-03-16 | Mr George Hibbert | debate, whether they can conceive it possible that two persons, neither | **slave** | traders nor West India proprietors, but impartial, enquiring travellers, should |

Another way of looking at his arguments could be to consider the keywords of his speeches using the keyword option. The algorithm behind this button computes the keywords of contributions using a RAKE score[5].



| #... | Word | RAKE score |
|---|---|---|
| 5 | policy | 1.42857142857142 86 |
| 6 | friends | 1.33333333333333 33 |
| 7 | measure | 1.3 |
| 13 | abuses | 1.2 |
| 14 | occasion | 1.2 |
| 15 | instances | 1.2 |
| 16 | charge | 1.2 |
| 17 | justice | 1.2 |

Among the keywords we find the theme of 'abuse', which could link back to Mr Hibbert's use of inhumane terms related to slaves. However, we also find that 'policy' and 'justice' are important in his argumentation, thus leading us to suspect that he is interested in the legal challenges slavery poses. If we see the full context around these dehumanising words, however, we can see he is only quoting his anti-slavery opponents here. The anti-slavery lobby were arguing that slavery had always been abusive, whereas Hibbert says that although it may be in practice, the laws were always in place to stop abuse. His use of dehumanising language is thus embedded in his argument that the people who started the slave trade were actually against slave abuse and made it punishable by law.

Therefore, while observations based on language patterns hint at the arguments of Mr George Hibbert, a close reading of his actual contributions may still be necessary to confirm the impressions found using language pattern analysis. This is why Hansard at Huddersfield has made sure users can always access complete contributions.

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[4] This could either be because he never used explicit references to *slave\** or because 1807 Hansard reports were pieced together using newspaper reports and are therefore summary reports rather than direct reports.
[5] RAKE is short for Rapid Automatic Keyword Extraction algorithm, an algorithm that determines keywords by analysing the frequency of occurance and its co-occurance with other words in the text. Unfortunately, the algorithm only functions appropriately on longer contributions.