



The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine, 1860, British Library.

## RESEARCH ACTIVITY: HISTORICAL VENTRILOQUISM

Ventriloquy is the art of speaking in such a way that one's voice appears to come from another source. When it comes to writing believable dialogue, writers of historical fiction are a bit like ventriloquists.

How can modern writers give the impression that their characters are conversing in the past? What research methods can we use to pull off this rhetorical feat?

In this research activity we'll be using the [CLiC Web App](#) to explore how to craft dialogue that authentically reflects a given historical period.

It is important to reflect on your character's tone and vocabulary, as well as what might have been popular or contentious topics of conversation in your chosen era.

The first step to writing believable dialogue is to effectively eavesdrop on historical conversations. The following activity demonstrates how you can use [CLiC](#) to immerse yourself in the language of the time period you want to emulate.

**TIP:** Keep in mind your character's gender, age, and social class when considering what would have been deemed "appropriate" conversation etiquette. This doesn't mean that your characters must act in a certain way, but it's useful to be aware of deviations from literary and cultural norms of the time.

**TIP:** Take care not to overwhelm your readers with unfamiliar jargon – you can simplify certain debates, paraphrase more complex terms, or provide contextual hints in your dialogue, if necessary. At the same time, 'info-dumping' can feel forced. Gradually weave information into your story in a way that feels natural. Try to think about how you can imply or infer contextual information instead of providing extensive exposition.

The thing about speech is that it's full of '*clusters*', i.e. words that appear together as repeated sequences. CLiC's '*cluster*' feature can help you zoom in on this phenomenon.

#### INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Go to [clic.bham.ac.uk](http://clic.bham.ac.uk) and click '*clusters*'. Clusters are also called '*n-grams*', where '*n*' stands for the number of words that are repeatedly found together in a sequence.
2. Select several texts from the drop-down menu under '*search the corpora*'. See our earlier building your corpora handout for further guidance. Under the subsets option, select '*quotes*'.
3. Under '*n-gram*' select an option. CLiC supports clusters of up to 7 words ('*I am very much obliged to you*'), but you will get more results for clusters that contain fewer words.
4. Look through your results, sorted by frequency. Below is a list, sorted by frequency, of the top [3-gram](#) and [5-gram](#) clusters that occur across Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, *Persuasion* and *Emma*. Take note of any phrases you feel might sit comfortably in the mouths of one of your own characters. Aspiring Regency writers among you might consider conversational clusters like '*to be sure*', '*much obliged*', and '*I dare say*'.

1	i do not	222	1	i do not know what	12
2	i am sure	206	2	i have no doubt of	10
3	i dare say	90	3	i do not know that	9
4	do not know	84	4	i am not afraid of	8
5	i assure you	81	5	i do not think i	8
6	it would be	76	6	and i am sure i	7
7	i am not	74	7	i am sure you will	7
8	i have been	74	8	i do not know who	7
9	i have not	70	9	i do not mean to	7
10	in the world	69	10	i do not pretend to	7

5. You can click through to run a *concordance* for a specific *cluster*. Here, you can gather further information about the use of these phrases. Note down any context you feel is important such as the gender or class of the speaker, the circumstances of the conversation, or the relationship between the parties conversing. If you require further context, you can individually click each *concordance line* to be taken to the text. If you detect a pattern, you can filter your results further using the *filter rows* option or the *KWIC Grouper*.

The cluster, *I have no doubt*, for example, occurs sixteen times in Jane Austen's *Emma*. In [a number of cases](#), it is used by a woman in either direct or oblique reference to the perceived marriageability of a specific man.



1	nduct, I shall certainly wish <b>him</b> well." ¶ "I have no doubt	of <b>their</b> being happy <b>together</b> ," said Em <b>emma</b>
2	ave overpowered <b>her</b> judgment." ¶ "Yes, I have no doubt	of <b>her</b> being extremely <b>attached</b> to him <b>emma</b>
3	u very well indeed--I mean by sight." ¶ "I have no doubt	of <b>his</b> being a very respectable young <b>emma</b>
4	in. What has he to do with books? And I have no doubt	that <b>he</b> _will_ thrive, and be a very rich <b>emma</b>
5	the good-hearted Mrs. John Knightley. "I have no doubt	of <b>his</b> being a most amiable young man <b>emma</b>
6	ly by a good many sacrifices. But now I have no doubt	of seeing <b>him</b> here about the second w <b>emma</b>
7	for it: you must let it go its own way. I have no doubt	of <b>his</b> having, at times, considerable inf <b>emma</b>
8	the new approach was made; but still I have no doubt	that <b>James</b> will take you very safely. A <b>emma</b>
9	ied she was not without suspicion; but I have no doubt	of <b>her</b> having since detected me, at le <b>emma</b>
10	with a disposition more truly amiable." ¶ "I have no doubt	of it." And it was spoken with a sort of <b>emma</b>

Likewise, the cluster *upon my word* is nearly always used by women in exclamation, often in reference to the boldness or perceived impudence of Emma herself.

1	ou divert me against my <b>conscience</b> . And, upon my word,	I do not think <b>Mr.</b> Knightley would be mu <b>emma</b>
2	or seeming so pleased and so doubtful. ¶ "Upon my word,"	<b>she</b> cried, "the young man is determined <b>emma</b>
3	ighest claims a woman could possess." ¶ "Upon my word,	<b>Emma</b> , to hear you abusing the reason yo <b>emma</b>
4	appointment to <b>Mr.</b> and Mrs. Weston. But, upon my word,	<b>Mr.</b> Elton, in your case, I should certainly <b>emma</b>
5	ing more than <b>she</b> may chuse to allow." ¶ "Upon my word!	you answer as discreetly as she could do <b>emma</b>
6	Donwell. I shall certainly be at leisure." ¶ "Upon my word,"	exclaimed <b>Emma</b> , "you amuse me! I shoul <b>emma</b>
7	complacently)--that would be rude--but upon my word,	<b>Miss</b> Woodhouse, you do look--how do y <b>emma</b>
8	is sacred, not to attempt concealment." ¶ "Upon my word,	<b>Emma</b> . "-- ¶ --"Your word!--why not your <b>emma</b>
9	every body's heart; but nobody else--" ¶ "Upon my word,"	said <b>Emma</b> , "I begin to doubt my having <b>emma</b>
10	ts, and Mr. Elton's time is so engaged." ¶ "Upon my word	it is, <b>Miss</b> Bates.--He really is engaged fr <b>emma</b>
11	not able to do any thing without him.--` Upon my word,	<b>Mr.</b> E., ' I often say, `rather you than I.-- <b>emma</b>

The frequency of *clusters* containing modal verbs (*must, can, would, should, may, will, shall* etc) is also interesting to look at...

Men and women were acutely aware of what they ought to do, even if these actions were at odds with their inner desires. Women, in particular, existed in a constant state of obligation towards their families, friends, and even acquaintances.

In an era when the concept of dating was yet to fully emerge, many were often compelled to draw large inferences from momentary meetings with potential suitors. The sense of doubt that accompanied this period of courtship is palpable.

See, for example, the cluster [I should not](#).

Showing 1 to 41 of 41 entries, Rel. Freq. 250.59 pm, from 3 books

2a3a120	Left	Node	Right	Book
1	(which, however, I am far from allowing)	I should not	feel that I had done wrong. Mr. Martin is	<a href="#">emma</a>
2	g a great increase of love on each side.	I should not	wonder if it were to bring on the declar	<a href="#">emma</a>
3	eadows, I cannot conceive any difficulty.	I should not	attempt it, if it were to be the means of	<a href="#">emma</a>
4	get out and walk. I am not at all afraid.	I should not	mind walking half the way. I could chan	<a href="#">emma</a>
5	about it. She knows their ways best; but	I should not	consider their silence as any reason for	<a href="#">emma</a>
6	much best," said Harriet, quite satisfied,	"I should not	at all like to have it sent to Mrs. Godda	<a href="#">emma</a>
7	one, she almost quarrelled with me--No,	I should not	say quarrelled, for we never had a quar	<a href="#">emma</a>
8	have imagined any thing but inviting." ¶	"I should not	wonder," said Mrs. Weston, "if Miss Fair	<a href="#">emma</a>
9	dea of _not_ being in love with her, that	I should not	wonder if it were to end in his being so	<a href="#">emma</a>
10	es for grandmama? Soup too! Bless me!	I should not	be helped so soon, but it smells most e	<a href="#">emma</a>
11	ct." ¶ "No, indeed I do not." ¶ "Dear me!	I should not	have thought it possible you could forge	<a href="#">emma</a>
12	then I have let a thing escape me which	I should not.	I am not like Jane; I wish I were. I	<a href="#">emma</a>
13	glad I have done being in love with him.	I should not	like a man who is so soon discomposed	<a href="#">emma</a>
14	g," cried Mrs. Elton emphatically, "which	_I_ should not	have thought myself privileged to inquire	<a href="#">emma</a>

Alternatively, if you are interested in the dialogue that surrounds a specific topic, then you can run a *concordance* search for various words related to this topic directly, selecting the subset 'only quotes' and marking the 'any word' option. See, for example, [this concordance search on marriage](#).

#### OVER TO YOU...

What catches your eye in terms of vocabulary and sentence structure? Pay close attention not only to what characters say but to how they express themselves: the slang or idioms they use and the syntax and of their speech. How do their thought patterns differ from ours?

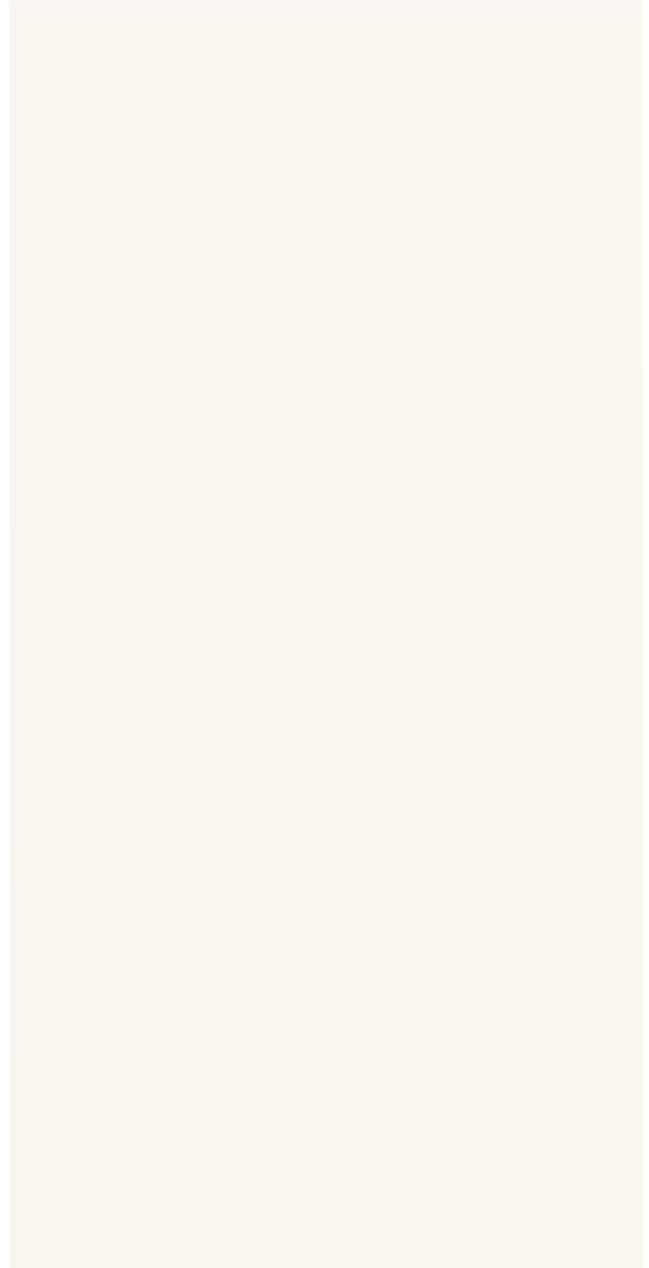
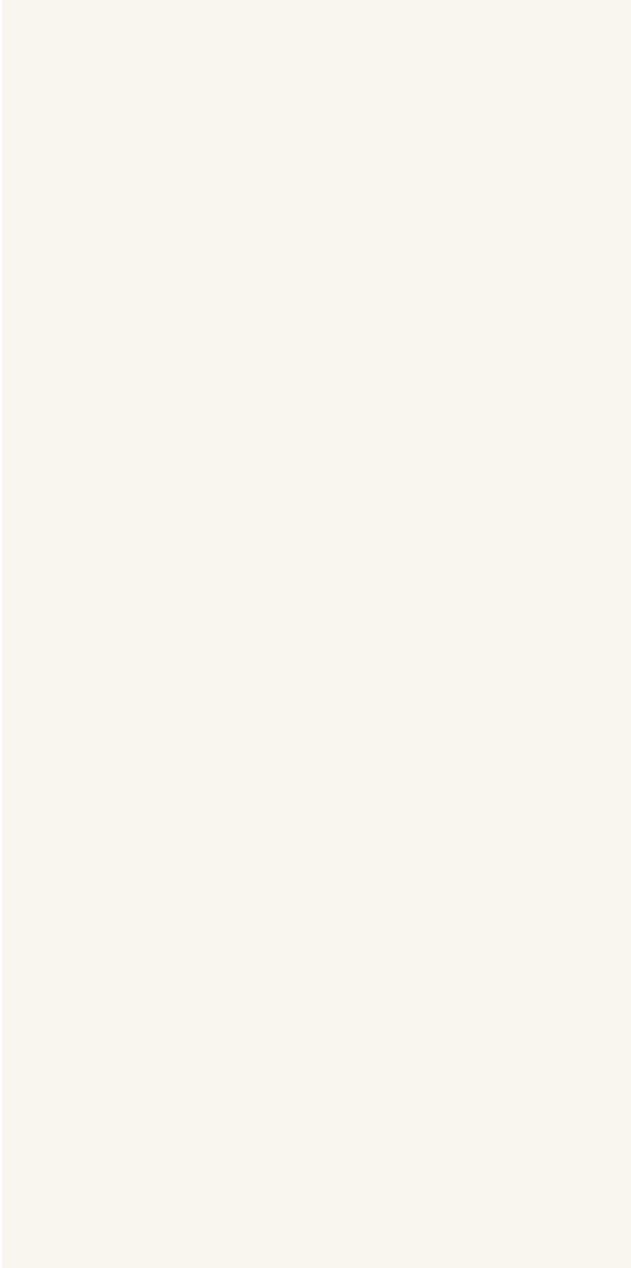
You can note down your findings overleaf in the first box marked 'research'.

In the second box marked 'application' you can consider how you might apply what you have discovered to a specific scene or exchange between characters in your own writing. This might be nothing more than a slight shift in syntax, or the inclusion of a colloquial phrase.



RESEARCH

APPLICATION



*If we got you interested in academic research on fictional nineteenth-century speech, maybe have a look at this article which you can download for free:*

Mahlberg, M., Wiegand, V., Stockwell, P., Hennessey, A. (2019). Speech bundles in the 19th-century English Novel, *Language and Literature*, 28(4) 326–353. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947019886754>



