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A Linguistic and Religious Interpretation of the Word *Pain* in the Age of American Secularism[*]

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Abstract

This article examines the words *pain, hurt, religion,* and *God* in American English. Despite the linguistic struggle to describe pain, sufferers discuss pain a great deal; they feel compelled to articulate their pain to engender sympathy or to seek medical treatment. But pain sufferers have not always articulated their pain experiences with the same frequency through time. There is variation in the frequency of *pain* language in American English. This article analyzes the frequency of the words *pain* and *hurt* since the year 1800 in four linguistic corpora: *Google Books Corpus*, *Corpus of Contemporary American English, Corpus of Historical American English*, and *Time Magazine Corpus*. In addition, this study includes a unique perspective in that it does not simply examine the frequency of pain words, but the frequency examination is done in light of the increasing secularization of American society. The principal question is this one: does the increase of *pain* language correspond with the decrease of language dealing with the divine in American English? The data presented show a substantial increase in *pain* language in American English, particularly since the 1960s, and this growth parallels the era when language related to the divine was in sharp decline.

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LINGUISTIC CHANGE

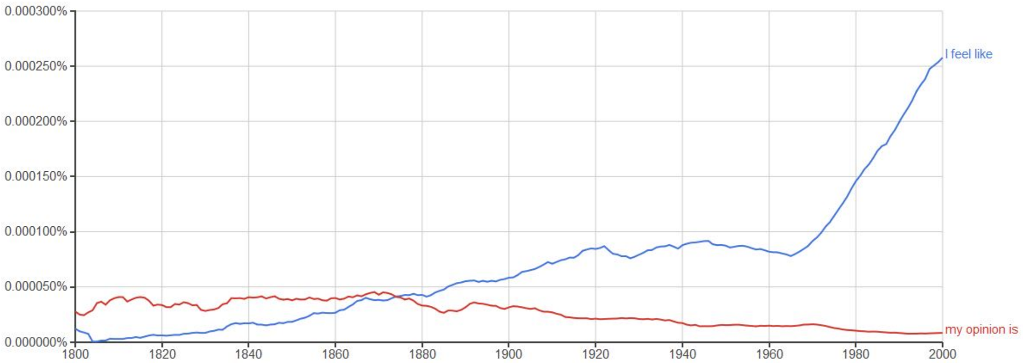
I teach linguistics courses at a university. As I tell my students in these courses, linguistics is the scientific study of language. And in the technology age, collecting and analyzing scientific data concerning linguistic phenomenon has become exponentially more efficient. For example, a recent discourse innovation in American English is the novel use of the phrase *I feel like*. In the past, this phrase could be used metaphorically (*I feel like a fish out of water*) or to express a desire (*I feel like having a pizza tonight*). But a nascent and spreading innovation is the use of *I feel like* to express an opinion or even to assert an answer to a factual question. In short, this phrase has a new semantic usage, taking the place of *I think* or *my opinion is* for many younger speakers of American English. Consider these examples from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA), a searchable 560 million-word corpus of current usage (Davies 2008):

- *I feel like the NFL has a responsibility to look into it* [concussions]. (PBS *NewsHour*, 2016)
- *I feel like the negativity can be counterproductive.* (*New England Review*, 2015)

To older ears, the use of *I feel like* in these constructions seems odd and, at the same time, perhaps revelatory of the fact that millennials are overly concerned with their own feelings even when discussing academic or philosophical subjects.

In the not-so-distant past, tracking and analyzing such linguistic innovations was difficult and labor intensive. Now, by using computerized linguistic databases known as corpora, we can examine such a phrase and track its change through time easily. Figure 1 shows the proliferation of the phrase *I feel like* in contrast to the decrease of the phrase *my opinion is* as used in American books from 1800 to 2000. The data in the figure is from *Google NGrams* (Davies 2011), which contains digitized books for this two-hundred year period. The y-axis indicates the percentage of this phrase in relation to the entire corpus of words for each year (the x-axis).

Figure 1: *I feel like* vs *My opinion is* in Google NGrams



A detailed analysis of the phrases would have to be conducted to address the nuances of the linguistic variation systematically. But even without a detailed analysis, we can see that *I feel like* has risen in percentage use considerably. And even a cursory glance at this data reveals something is going on with *I feel like.* When coupled with real-time observations of young speakers, the evidence becomes clear that a linguistic shift is happening with this phrase. Linguistics assures us that this change is not cause for alarm (though some prescriptive consternation might be in order) because all languages change. Phrases come into fashion, and they go out of fashion in any language. Oftentimes the reasons for linguistic change are uncertain. In fact, linguists do not fully understand all the reasons for language change, though it is a truism that all living languages will change. Yet, it is a fascinating endeavor to try to understand the ultimate motivations for some of the language changes. We now know that language change can be completely lacking in any linguistic or social motivation. These unmotivated changes are random mutations. Other times, however, the motivations are clear. For example, the linguistic principle of analogy was at work slowly to change the accepted and standard past tense of *to dive* from *dived* to *dove*. From linguistic corpora, we know that this change happened around the time automobiles were becoming abundant and the verb *drove* was increasing in frequency. Consequently, a shift occurred around the same era: *dived* became *dove* due to rhyming analogy with *drove*. The emergence of *dove* based on analogy to *drove* is an interesting linguistic explanation but hardly revelatory of a burgeoning social transformation. But sometimes the motivations are less morphologically driven and are indeed socially motivated.

Social motivations might shed light on *I feel like*. Is the increasingly ubiquitous *I feel like* in American vernacular English revelatory of millennials' preoccupation with their own feelings and their unconscious discourse strategy to avoid ever being wrong? After all, if a student asserts an answer beginning with the phrase *I feel like*, can a professor in good conscience tell the student that his/her *feelings* are wrong?

Morphological changes based on analogy reveal one kind of language change, and this change is subtle. But socially motivated changes in English can reveal noteworthy social trends.

AN INCREASE IN PAIN

I now turn to the word *pain*. The use of this lexical item in writing and speech has increased in American English in the 20th and the 21st centuries. Of this increase there is no doubt, but the reasons for it are less clear. Nevertheless, I contend that the motivations are both social and ultimately religious. Below I explain my reasoning based on linguistic corpora and a philosophical/theological consideration of *pain* as both a lexical item and a concept.

While humans experience a full range of compelling emotions (love, hatred, bitterness) and sensations (pleasure, hunger, exhaustion), it is pain that becomes all-encompassing and quickly contravenes any other co-occurring sensation. There is no greater universal sensation that unites humanity than pain (Glucklich, 2001: 11). Ironically, this most common and universal experience defies linguistic description and articulation. Sophocles noted the ineffable aspect of pain through the immortal words of Philoctetes who describes his leg pain due to a snakebite to Neoptolemus (Achilles's son): "Terrible it is, beyond words' reach. But pity me." (Sophocles, 2013: 79). The poet Emily Dickinson (323) notes, "Pain has an element of Blank." Novelist Virginia Woolf (1967: 200) writes, "The merest school girl when she falls in love has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her, but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry." Despite the linguistic struggle to describe pain, sufferers do talk about it a great deal; they feel compelled to articulate their pain (Biro 2010). Philoctetes did so to engender sympathy. Patients describe it in the hopes that physicians may alleviate it. Most human "pain behavior," including linguistic descriptions, "…seems designed to evoke care from others" (Thernstrom, 2010: 28). Describing and even articulating pain, though, does not always render sympathy, alleviation, nor care. Nonetheless, humans do speak of pain. But they have not always done so with the same frequency through time and across various social and linguistic contexts. Why the change in frequency?

It is apparent that *pain* has risen in regularity in American English. Unlike *I feel like*, however, *pain* has not undergone a dramatic semantic shift. Its semantic properties have remained relatively stable since the time it entered the English language in the 14th century. Despite this semantic stability, Figure 2 notes the increase of *pain* in *Google NGrams* (Davies 2011), and Figure 3 shows the increase from the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA), which is a database of 400 million words balanced by genre: fiction, non-fiction, and newspapers (Davies 2010). In both figures, the x-axis refers to the year and the y-axis to the number of tokens per million words (PMW). The PMW is the number of times *pain*, or a lemmatized form of the word (*pains, painful, pained*), appeared per million words in each year; thus results are normalized.

Figure 2: *Pain* in Google NGrams

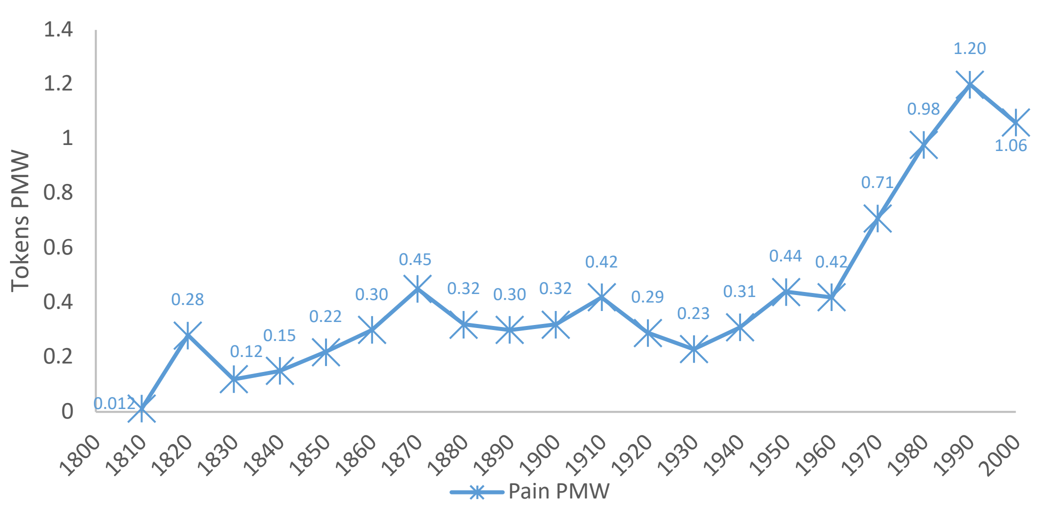
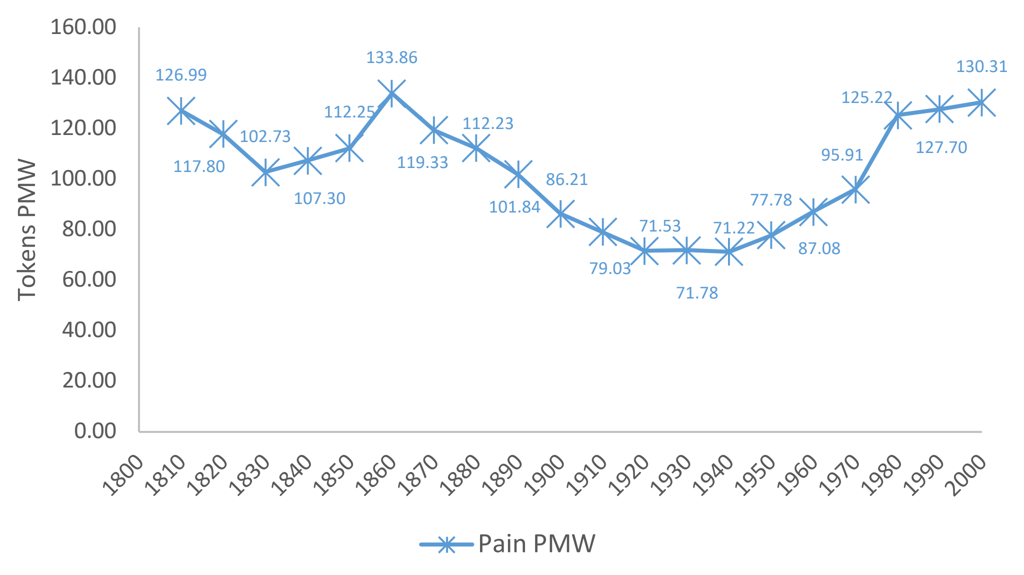


Figure 3: *Pain* in the *Corpus of Historical American English*



Figures 4 and 5 provide a more recent perspective. Figure 4 shows the increase in *The Corpus of Time Magazine*, while Figure 5 shows the frequency in *COCA* (Davies 2008). The latter includes spoken English as well.

Figure 4: *Pain* in the Corpus of *Time* Magazine

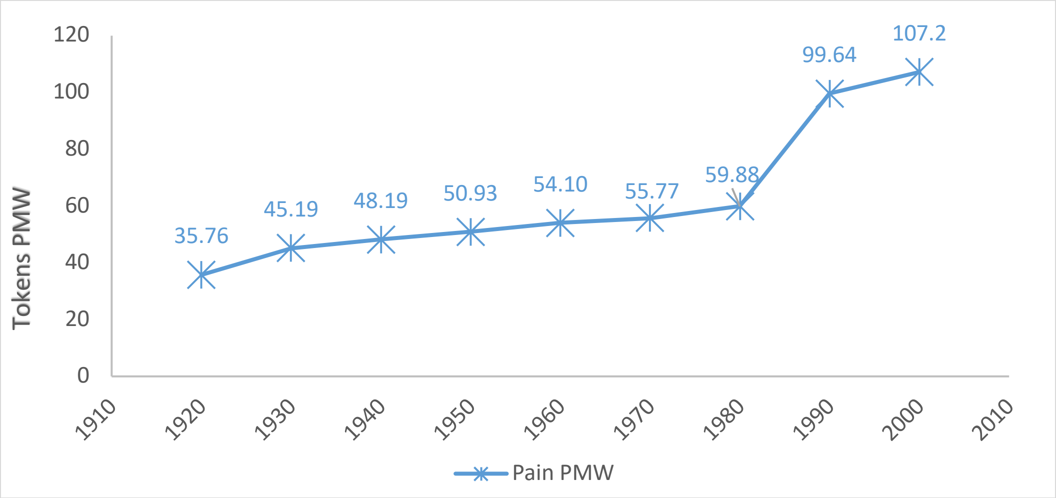
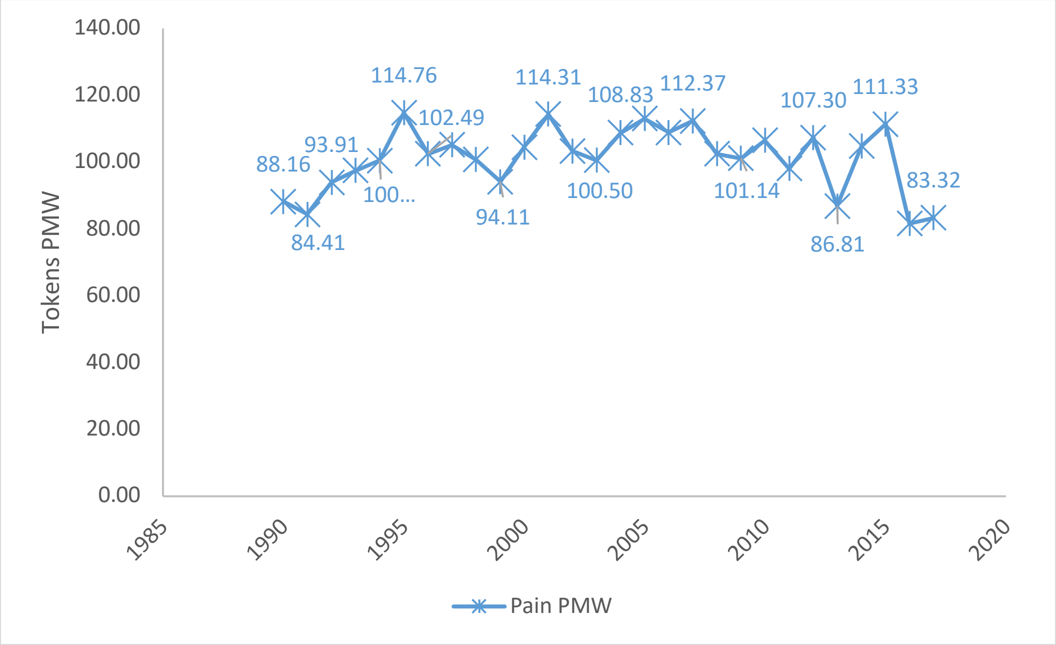


Figure 5: *Pain* in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*



In *COCA*, *pain* has remained relatively stable, even dropping a bit in 2016 and 2017. But the rate remains high compared to previous centuries.

A RELIGIOUS EXPLANATION FOR *PAIN*

Verifying an increase in usage of this lexical item is easy enough by use of linguistic corpora. Trying to ascertain the linguistic and/or social motivation for the increase is unquestionably more problematic. I believe, however, that increasing American secularism plays a significant role. After all, the dilemma of the co-existence of pain and a good God is an eternal problem. To suffer in silence is lauded as the appropriate Christian response to pain. And there is a long Christian tradition of promoting suffering in silence as exemplified by these quotes:

- "And there is much profit of soul in bearing illness quietly and giving thanks to God." St. Amma Syncletice (d. c. 1000) (quoted in Thigpen, 2001: 58)
- "Whenever anything disagreeable or displeasing happens to you, remember Christ crucified and be silent." St. John of the Cross (1542—1591) (quoted in Adels, 1987: 74)
- "Suffering borne in the will quietly and patiently is a continual, very powerful prayer before God." St. Jane Frances de Chantal (1572—1641) (Frances, 1988: 203)
- "You can be sure you are a man of God if you suffer injustice gladly and in silence." Josemaría Escrivá (1902—1975) (Escrivá, 1939: 166)

The admonition to suffer in silence, however, makes little sense without some divine recompense, and if increasing American secularization has influenced American English, then this secularization must, by linguistic and discourse necessity, influence the frequency of *pain*. Bourke (2014: 121) notes that modernism with its increasing secularization has "…dramatically changed the way people-in-pain experienced their afflictions." Traditionally, pain has been viewed as something to endure with saintly patience and stoic resolve, which mandated limited articulation as the quotes above indicate. In addition to saints, theologians note that pain is a chance to evidence virtue by suffering in silence, thus achieving divine intimacy. As Sarah (2017: 181), a Catholic theologian, notes, "The language of suffering and silence contradicts the language of the world. Faced with pain, we see two diametrically opposite routes traced out: the noble way of silence and the stony rut of rebellion." Thernstrom (2010) notes the well-established Christian tradition of the necessity of pain for redemptive purposes and the necessity for "noble silence." Indeed, C. S. Lewis (1962 [1940]: 93) comments on how pain allows the Christian to hear God: "God whispers to us in our pleasures…but shouts in our pains." The implication is clear: pain should be met with silence, or the sufferer runs the risk of not hearing God's message.

But with the increasing secularization in 20th and 21st century American society, notions of Christian stoic piety evaporated; thus, people discuss their pain more. And why not? If suffering in silence is not meritorious nor does it assist in religious redemption, then, like Philoctetes, sufferers should complain all they want. If for no other reason, it might make them feel better. Interestingly, the data presented above does show an increase in *pain*, particularly since the 1960s in American English, which coincides with the same era when language related to the divine was in sharp decline.

Consider Figure 6. The data is from *Google NGrams* (American Books). I included two words to gauge America's religious sentiment: *religion* and *God.* Certainly, it is true that the usage frequency of God has remained stable; however, note the precipitous decline in the use of *religion.* The frequency of *God* has remained stable in part because of common idiomatic expressions: *Oh, my God. For God's sake*. But *religion* is more restricted in usage, and it refers to a specific domain and is not used in an abundance of idiomatic phrase, thus providing insight into America's declining religiosity.

Figure 6: *Religion* and *God* in *Google NGrams*

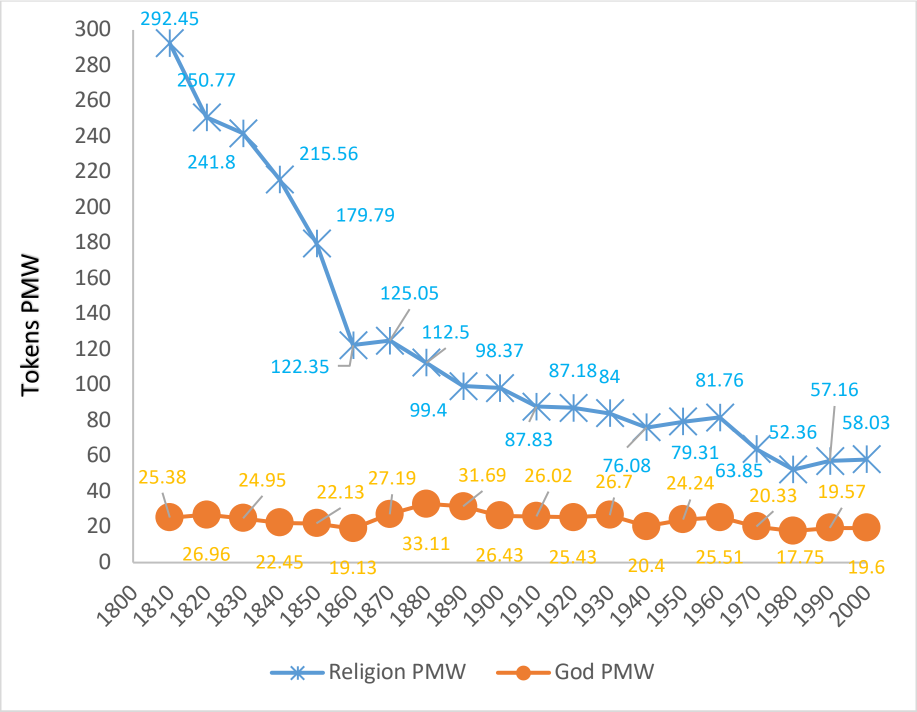
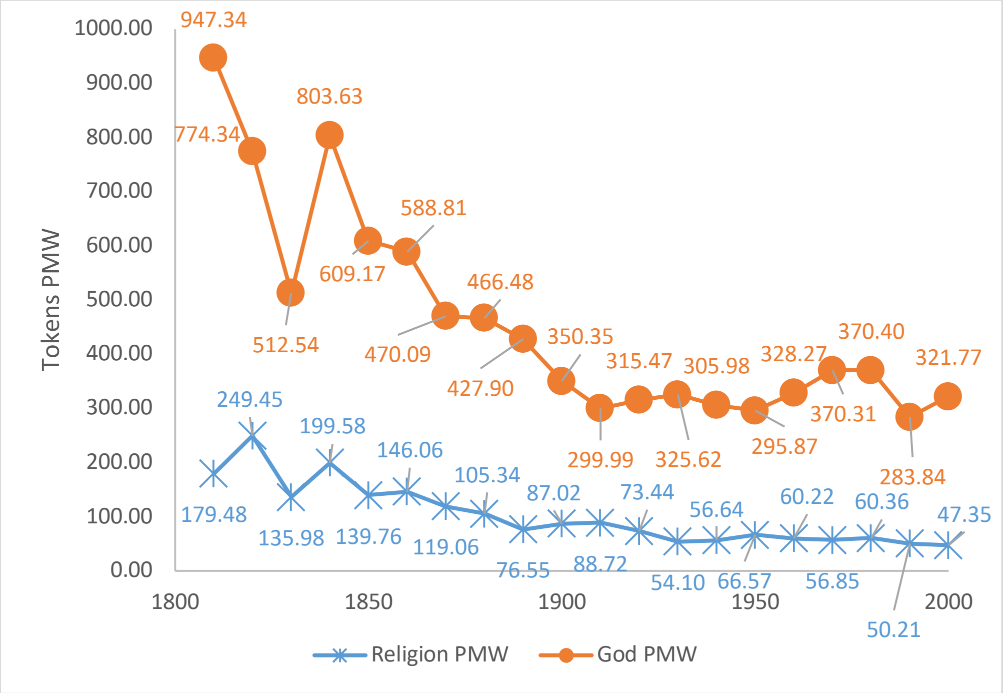


Figure 7 shows *God* and *religion* in *COHA*. There is a noticeable decline of usage of both *religion* and *God.*

Figure 7: *Religion* and *God* in COHA



From the data, it is apparent that *pain* has increased while *religion* and *God* have decreased in usage. But is there a connection, or are these unrelated lexical frequency shifts? Casual or even correlational connections can be difficult to ascertain. And finding a relationship between lexical usage and religious leanings is even more problematic given the widespread use of *pain* and *God* in idiomatic phrases. With linguistic corpora, however, there is another way to ascertain a relationship: collocate searching.

Collocate searches allow for insight into how a lexical item is used by examining words that appear next to it. By definition, collocations are words that appear together more often than would have happened by random chance. In essence, they begin to *co-locate*. For example, over time the phrase *fast food* became a collocate in American English, while *quick food* needs additional context to interpret due to the lack of collocative nature of these two words. Similarly, the phrase *eat a quick meal* is common while *eat a fast meal* is less common.

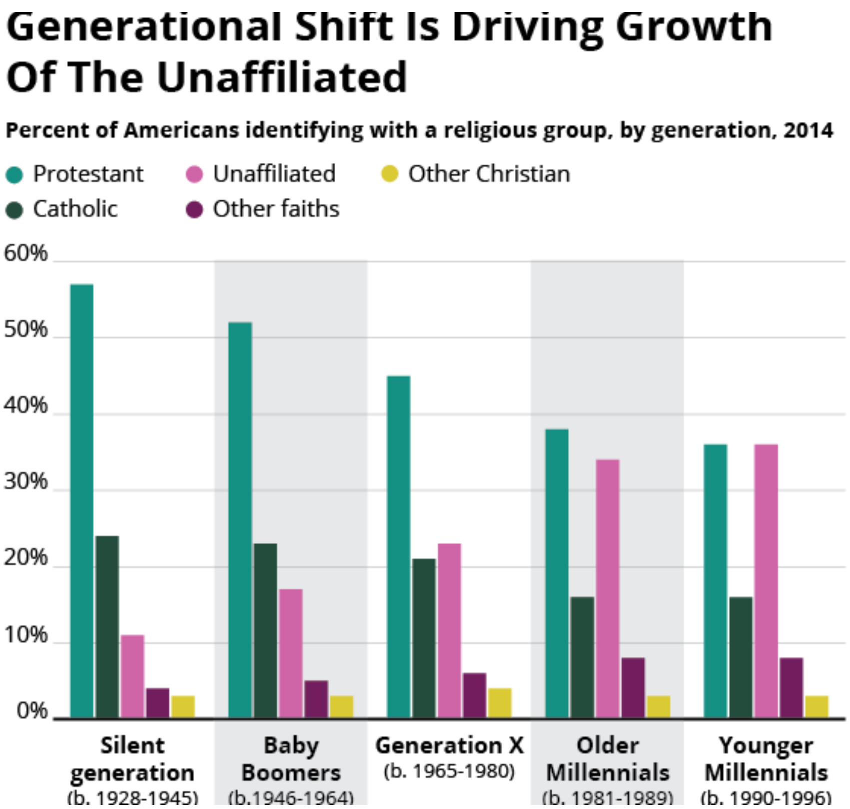
Returning to *pain*, collocate searching reveals interesting trends. For the 19th century, collocates for *pain* were *mortification, patience, dread*, and even *sin*. For the later part of the 20th century, collocates included *pills*, *nausea*, *arthritis,* and *chronic*. What is interesting is the increasing use of scientific terms. Granted, we try to understand pain, but this pattern also shows that speakers of American English no longer associate pain with religious contexts (sin and mortification) but rather with scientific contexts (*nausea* and *chronic*). Curiously, the traditional use of the term chronic as being related to a long time has shifted in American English to a colloquial meaning of intense or severe. Its repeated association with pain has altered the meaning of this word as Americans conceptualization of pain as shifted.

CONCLUSION

There is a long history of trying to understand pain in relation to the divine. And two questions remain constant. Is pain a sign of God's inexistence? Or is pain a path to traverse to seek the divine? The existence of pain is a formidable argument used by atheists to argue that there is no God. Conversely, pain for the religious ascetic allows for a cancelation of this world and thus the opening of a clear path "…for the entry of an unworldly, contentless force" (Scarry, 1985: 34). America was founded as a deeply religious country, and religious expressions remained strong in American English for many years. Even non-linguistic research, however, indicates that America is less religious than it once was. Chaput (2017) comments that the 20th and 21st centuries have seen a dramatic reduction in religious, specifically Christian, influences in America and in American public discourse. He notes, "We're passing through a religious revolution in America" (Chaput, 2017: 19). The Pew Research Center notes, "The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing…" (2015). Figure 8 notes the decline in religious affiliations by generation.

With such a decline in religious conviction, pain becomes more of a challenge. Glucklich (2001) and Lewis (1962 [1940]) note that pain was not a problem for the religious before the modern era. Bourke (2014) echoes this idea with her notion that a decrease in religion diminished a view of pain in positive terms. As she notes, "Anesthetics dealt a blow to the theological interpretation of pain" (Bourke, 2014: 124). If pain can be treated with science (recall the scientific collocates of *pain*), then an increasingly secular society begins to forgo any notion of pain's benefits, much less a notion of silent revolve in the face of pain. For the modern American society, pain should and ought to be discussed to encourage scientific remedies. Suffering in silence is no longer valid, and the data from these corpora illustrate the trend away from silence.

Figure 8: Generation Shift of Religious Identity in the U.S.



Equally perplexing for modern Americans is a statement from Dr. W. H. Atkinson, the president of the American Dental Association during the 19th century: "Anæstesia is of the devil…. I will not give my vote to the value of Anæstesia or any other satanic influence…. I am against these satanic agencies which prevent men from going through what God intended them to go through" (American Dental Association 1871). Such statements are incomprehensible in the modern era. What is, however, conceivable is that with lack of religious constraint, the frequency of discussing pain would increase. And this increase is what the data from the three linguistic corpora demonstrate. In fact, Stephens, Atkins, and Kingston (2009) report that swearing about pain helps the sufferer deal with pain. If so, then being silent would seemingly have the opposite effect. If religious proscriptions against swearing about pain are removed and indeed proscriptions against complaining or even discussing pain are removed, the modern American sees little reason to withhold discussion of pain.

The data presented show an interesting parallel between *pain* and *God* and *religion*. Satan's question in Milton's *Paradise Lost* seems relevant here: "Lives there who loves his pain?" (1975:109). Data from these corpora indicate that

Americans certainly do not love their pain, and they most definitely are not taught to be silent in the face of pain like their religious ancestors. In short, Americans have become more linguistically engaged by pain.

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