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# THE RISE OF ACE AS A DESCRIPTOR

A Linguistic Study Concerning the Jargon within an  
Online Asexual Community

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# Abstract

**Title:** The Rise of Ace as a Descriptor: A Linguistic Study Concerning the Jargon within an Online Asexual Community

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to explore the jargon that can be found within an online asexual community. The most common definition of asexuality is that a person does not feel sexual attraction to any gender. This group of people has since the 1950s gained attention in fields such as biomedicine and social sciences. Those who identify as asexual are estimated to be one percent of the population, and although the community has not dealt with much public hostility throughout history, previous studies show that these individuals are considered to lack basic human emotions. This study uses a subforum that can be found on the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) and compares two sets of data, collected from the years 2008 and 2017. This comparison of data which is ten years apart offers an understanding of what lexical words have been used, whether relevant vocabulary to the community is put in a positive, negative or neutral context, and whether there are any significant changes to the vocabulary. The results show both quantitatively and qualitatively that there are in fact some notable changes when it comes to words that are used more frequently, as well as words that seem to have lost their initial meaning over time.

**Keywords:** asexuality, identity, queer linguistics, keyness, online community, AVEN

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Background

As the internet grows, it is easier for individuals who do not conform with the norms of society to find a safe space where like-minded people reside, in online communities and forums, to exchange knowledge and express ideas and opinions. In these forums a unique jargon is bound to occur, as those who are posting in said forums typically share an interest in a specific topic. This study examines the attitude and language which is used in the online asexual community, and attempts to discover any changes that may have occurred during a ten year-period of time. Gupta (2017: 995) notes in a study where she interviewed 30 individuals who identified as asexual and partook in the same online forum, that they all, in talking about their experiences and how they decipher their own sexuality, shared a similar language.

The Oxford English Dictionary (n.d. [online]) has several interpretations of the words ‘asexuality’ and ‘asexual’. In biology, it is described as the possibility to propagate without any sexual contact. In one of its original meanings it is equated to androgyny. In another it is interpreted as a period of celibacy. The definition that the psychoanalysts give, that asexuals simply do not feel sexual attraction to neither males, females nor non-binary people, is the one that has been chosen for this study. A more thorough explanation on the history of asexuality is given in section two.

It was not until recently that scholars started taking an interest in this community, and although it is not a group of people that have been shunned in public by the Western society, the fact that sexual identification, rather than non-sexual identification, is methodically privileged is not difficult to imagine (Gupta 2017: 992). As sexuality has become a huge factor in how we see ourselves and our self-esteem, the fact that it has been pointed out that the general public more easily perceives asexuals as “less human” (MacInnis & Hodson 2012: 731) also contributes to the notion that this minority deserves some of the limelight when discussing sexualities and the understanding of asexuality. Gupta (2017: 1006) argues that the way asexual individuals use the language of sexual orientation and identity provides space for the concept of non-sexuality, as it “challenges the assumption that sexual attraction is universally experienced.”

Throughout history, categories have been used to make sense of the world around us. There is the example of sexuality, as well as religion, class, ethnicity and even what kind of

music one prefers. Therefore, a person is either asexual, or would have to belong to an entirely different sexuality if the definition does not apply. Gupta (2017: 1007) argues that this may be the reason more categories within the asexual spectrum have surfaced. One example is to identify as *demisexual*, sexual attraction based on an emotional bond, and another is *gray-A*, which is to be between sexual and asexual (see more comprehensive definitions for these terms in section 1.2).

Another aspect of the problems which those who identify as asexual face is the one of representation, as “representations are a resource people draw on – [...] – in constructing their own identities and way of doing things” (Cameron & Kulick 2003: 12). As the concept of asexuality is almost never seen or portrayed in any way in pop culture, such as on television, in music or in advertisements, it provides another reason to examine this field further, and try to gain new knowledge, and in the best-case scenario, contribute to the general discussion about unconventional sexualities.

## 1.2 Terminology

The asexual community, like any other tight-knit community, uses their own set of words in reference to their sexuality and to convey their thoughts. These words may either be completely related to the community, or simply a common word, used with a slightly different intent than in usual cases. The Asexual Visibility and Education Network have compiled a “wiki-style” informal lexicon of asexual terminology (n.d. [online]) which contains, for example, these words:

- Ace – Someone who identifies as asexual.
- Acephobia – Shunning of asexuality.
- Asexy – May be used either as an alternative to asexual/ace, or as an adjective for someone that an asexual person finds attractive, based on different attributes, such as a skill or intelligence.
- Aro – A person who does not feel romantically attracted to someone else (aromantic).
- Demi(sexual) – A person who experiences sexual attraction towards someone they share a deep emotional connection with.
- Gray-A – A person in between sexuality and asexuality, as some people sometimes experience sexual attraction while sometimes they do not.
- Indifferent – Either being indifferent toward the idea of sex or the act of having sex.
- Repulsed – Finding sex repugnant.

- Sex-negative - An individual who believes sex should be avoided.
- Sex-positive - An individual who approves the idea of sex.

Some of these terms are relevant to this study, but others are not in this particular case. An example of such a word is *aro*, short for ‘aromantic’, as a person identifying as aromantic does not automatically fall into the category of being asexual.

Erica Chu (2014: 89) points out that “asexuality also introduces a new theoretical vocabulary to discourse on sexuality – whether asexual or erotic.” Since being asexual does not at all mean one unconditionally avoids the notion of sex, it can be assumed that the discussion around the topic would be altered. Chu mentions the concepts of orientation and preference (2014: 90-92), meaning these are changing how sex may be discussed within the LGBTQ<sup>1</sup> community. There is a difference between, for example, one’s sexual orientation versus one’s romantic orientation. While identifying as asexual, it is still possible to be either heteroromantic, homoromantic or biromantic. Cameron and Kulick validate this idea, meaning that “the ‘reality’ of sex does not pre-exist the language in which it is expressed; rather, language *produces* the categories through which we organize our sexual desires, identities and practices” (2003: 19).

As the discourse around asexuality is still a fairly undiscovered territory in the discipline of linguistics, and quite a mystery for almost the whole non-asexual<sup>2</sup> population, research concerning the jargon, in this case online, can be considered a step in the right direction for better understanding of this community.

### 1.3 Aim and Research Questions

In this particular study, the use of language within the online asexual community is brought to light, and whether there is a change to the discourse when comparing two separate years which are ten years apart. A study with an ethnographic approach of an online forum where individuals who identify as asexuals express their thoughts is conducted. The following research questions will guide the present work:

- What are the most commonly used lexical words among those who identify themselves as asexual in discussions concerning their sexuality?
- Is the word *asexual* found in a positive, negative or neutral context?

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<sup>1</sup> Short for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer.

<sup>2</sup> Those who identify as sexual e.g. hetero-, or homosexual.

- Is it possible to detect a change in the usage of lexical words in this community when comparing data from two separate years?

## **1.4 Overview of Study**

Section one laid out the background and aim for the present study. The second section gives a summary of the previous research which has been conducted in relation to asexuality; as not many linguists have given this sexual identity much attention, it is relevant to investigate other disciplines and linguistic approaches for more knowledge in the subject. Therefore, research within both the biomedical and social sciences are considered in section two, given that these researchers have explored the traits of asexuality and what defines it. The third section introduces the material and method used in the study and gives reasons for why this data has been collected. The fourth section introduces the results from the analysis of the collected data, both from a qualitative and a quantitative approach. Finally, in the fifth section there is a discussion of the results in relation to the previous general research concerning sexuality and language.

## **2. Previous Research**

Within the linguistic discipline there have been nearly no studies made in regards of the asexual identity in relation to the use of language. What is covered in this section instead is previous research made within, for instance, the social sciences directly linked to asexuality, as well as research done with other non-heteronormative sexualities in mind in correlation to linguistics.

### **2.1 A Brief History of the Concept of Asexuality**

In 1948 Kinsey, Martin and Pomeroy published the *Sexual Behavior of the Human Male*, which described those who fell under the category of X as having “no socio-sexual contacts or relations” (1948: 638, 647). This group would later be called asexuals. Thirty-two years later, Michael D. Storms (1980: 785) included asexuality in his model of “a two-dimensional map of erotic orientation” (see Figure 2.1 on page 5), as Kinsey’s model risked bisexuality and asexuality being wrongfully interchangeable in studies about ambisexuality<sup>3</sup>, since individuals of both sexualities are described to “show no preference for the gender of their sexual

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<sup>3</sup> When one’s sexuality is ambiguous.

partners” (1980: 790). In 1983 Paula, S. Nurius (1983: 128) included asexuality alongside homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality in her study on the connection between one’s sexuality and one’s mental health status. The study showed that, although margins were slight, asexuals were more apt to experience depression and issues with self-esteem. One might wonder how this has come to be, as it is a somewhat ‘innocent’ sexuality, but it is not the norm, and the non-norm tends to be questioned in society. Consider Storms’ Figure (2.1) of erotic orientation below.

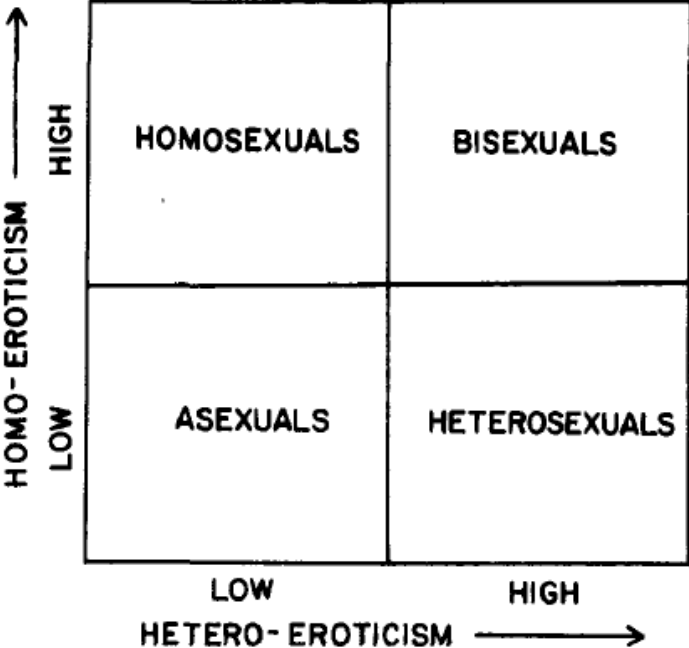


Figure 2.1. Figure of erotic orientation (Storms, 1980)

At times, asexuality has been associated with diseases such as Sexual Aversion Disorder and Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder, but Bogaert (2004: 279) strongly dismissed those claims as rather than asexuality being an illness, it is better described as “the absence of a traditional sexual orientation, in which an individual would exhibit little or no sexual attraction to males or females”. Also, according to Bogaert (2004: 282), based on samples of 18,000 participants from the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Johnson, Wadsworth, Wellings, & Fields 1994), one percent could qualify as asexual. However, this estimate is easily questioned, even by Bogaert himself, as it is possible to assume that the survey may have been rejected by those who identify as asexuals as they would see no point in participating in a survey about sex (Bogaert 2012: 48).



## **2.2 The General View on Asexuality**

Unbeknownst to many, the asexual community has had to deal with much, maybe unintentional, criticism directed their way, as it is a sexuality many know little about. Bogaert suggests that this skepticism may partly be because of the “human tendency to believe that everyone must be just like us” (2012: 51). This could explain why asexuals are met with doubt by society when they are trying to explain themselves, as the majority of humanity believes sex is a natural part of life. One study (MacInnis & Hodson 2012: 731), which set out to prove that there is in fact negligence and discrimination directed towards the asexual community, presented a result which corresponded with what was predicted. When the subjects, all of whom represented different sexualities, were presented with descriptions of each sexuality<sup>4</sup>, and were asked to rank them in different scenarios, such as if one would hire a person of that quality, or if future contact would be favorable, asexuals were generally given the lower scores. Notably, in the results section concerning uniquely human traits and human nature traits, as well as emotions, the expectation that asexuals would be viewed as “less human” was supported (2012: 731-732).

As formerly mentioned, Nurius (1983: 128) suggests that those who defined themselves as asexual are more prone to experience depression. Although much more research would need to be done within the area to understand why that is the case, it is possible that the general view of these individuals’ identities plays a part in causing it. In Western society, erasure of asexuality goes somewhat hand in hand with intensifying attention directed towards sexuality (Hanson, in Cerankowski & Milks 2014: 344).

## **2.3 An Online Asexual Community**

A sudden rise of the number of online platforms where asexual individuals could share their experiences was seen in the early twenty-first century (Jay 2003: 4). The use of the world wide web has opened doors for individuals who formerly thought they were alone to all sorts of possibilities of sexual expression. What is often not thought about is the fact that the world wide web, or cyberspace, as it is also called, is in itself a linguistic fabrication, with code used as the language that goes into creating these platforms where we go to communicate with each other online (Cicognani 1998: 19). What can also be said about communicating online is that it is a “language whose characteristics lie somewhere between spoken and written language”

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<sup>4</sup> Heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality and asexuality.

(Canning 2016: 40).

The Asexual Education and Visibility Network (n.d. [online]), which is thoroughly depicted in the material and method section, as it is the source of the collection of data in this study, has grown to be the biggest online forum for those who identify as asexual. Bragh, McKenna and Fitzsimons (2002, as cited in Marriott & Buchanan 2013: 171) found that some people may have an easier time expressing themselves online, showing their “true self”, but Marriott and Buchanan (2013: 177) came to the conclusion that rather than us expressing our true self online nowadays, the social media networks work as a tool of extending our personality, instead of personalities online and offline being completely separate entities.

When looking at these online communities in general, the larger the online group is, the greater the chances are that the members will start sharing a common jargon, shaped by a self-managed identity, and give each other feedback, rather than the group becoming divided (Huffaker 2011: [online]). In one particular study, Huffaker (2011: [online]) points out that the main contributors would not be more than 50 (out of 30,000 users at a time) who kept the conversations going, but that a transition of the contributors then was evident. However, it did not affect what was being posted, showing that if the number of members is high enough, communication will continue.

As Chasin (2013: 405) puts it: “asexuality is a matter of self-identification”. These individuals have created a jargon as well as a terminology which is unique to them, in order to have conversations which differ from other social contexts. It can be considered a self-managed identity since it is not shaped by one’s upbringing or religion, but rather the surroundings and paths one chooses to take.

## **2.4 The Linguistic Approach**

As previously mentioned, there is next to no linguistic research which correlates to asexual use of language or terminology. However, there is research in the queer community in general, at least when it comes to Queer Linguistics. Queer Linguistics is, of course, directly linked to Queer Theory, which deals with questioning the normalized view of sexuality as well as gender and takes into consideration what is non-heteronormative. Surprisingly, it was not until recently that this theory came in contact with discourse analysis and the study of language. Queer Linguistics claims that “all identity categories are problematic because they regulate and exclude people who do not fully meet their normative requirements” (Motschenbacher & Stegu 2013: 519, 523), using man versus woman, and homosexual versus

heterosexual as examples.

Asexuality is not mentioned in these papers published about Queer Linguistics in relation to discourse analysis (Motchenbacher 2011; Motchenbacher & Stegu 2013). Motchenbacher and Stegu point out that “the actual continuum of sexualities is not as clear-cut as sexual identity labels suggest, and the homogeneity that these labels evoke covers up considerable intra-category differences” (2013: 526). It is noteworthy that those who later in life end up identifying as asexual will until then automatically place themselves in one of the binary sexuality categories, e.g. heterosexual or homosexual, since it is the most common perception of which sexualities exists in society. This is reason enough to argue that asexuality should be one of the sexualities included in Queer Linguistic studies.

There are no clear stereotypes when it comes to the asexual community, in comparison to what we can see all around in terms of heterosexual or homosexual people (Bogaert 2012: 76), but it is possible to draw the conclusion that the way, say an asexual woman, uses language will differ from a sexual woman. Bogaert (2012: 76) suggests that “words and phrases describing beauty, attractiveness, and body image, particularly regarding areas normally related to sexuality [...], would be different in asexual versus sexual women”.

One recent study (Canning 2016: 24) investigates the use of, for example, pronouns as well as the difference between adjectival and nominal identity, arguing that “if one person uses *an asexual* instead of *an asexual person* to describe another, it could be viewed as reductive, as if the person is only their sexuality”. Nonetheless, what is also pointed out is that using *an asexual* to refer to oneself may also be one way of telling the world that this sexuality is something to take pride in. The study involved both asexual and non-asexual individuals. However, given that there are still few linguistic studies to be found on these types of online forums, let alone with asexuality as its main focus, the present study will at least attempt to scratch the surface of what could be learned from observing this type of community.

### **3. Material and Method**

The material used in this study is found on The Asexual Education and Visibility Network forums (n.d. [online]). This website, henceforth referred to as AVEN, is the world’s largest online asexual community, with the goals of “creating public acceptance and discussion of asexuality and facilitating the growth of an asexual community” (“About AVEN” n.d. [online]). According to AVENwiki (n.d. [online]), in the revision history, it showed that the

number of registered members in 2008 was 15,000, while as of 2018, it is closer to 106,000 members (AVEN n.d. [online]). AVEN is the biggest website for asexual individuals that does not require one to log in to gain access to what is shared and posted. Statistics from AVEN show that those who have gained access to the site do so by either googling ‘asexuality’, or by directly typing the web address (Jay 2003: 8). This shows that the users of AVEN must have some prior knowledge of the concept of asexuality before entering the site. A vast majority of the members of the forum are also from native English-speaking countries (Jay 2003: 8), which is reason to conclude that the use of the English language is legitimate. AVEN has also co-related websites in other languages, such as Dutch and French.

In the forum there are a number of sub-forums, all of them with their own purposes. In order to limit the number of posts that would be collected as data, the sub-forum called Asexual Musings and Rantings was singled out for this study, as it gives the user the chance to “talk, discuss, gripe, or revel about asexuality”. However, the sub-forum still had close to 400,000 posts, which means the collection of data would have to be restricted even more.

What this study attempts to do is to gain a greater understanding of the language which is used by the asexual community and thereafter examine whether it has changed in any way in recent years. It is, however, important to note that this study is only limited to a small amount of data in comparison to what would have been needed in order to gain a general understanding. A ten-year period of time, comparison of posts from the year 2008 and 2017, was set as a limit, even though the forum of AVEN dates back to 2002. The reason that this study will not go further back is the fact that a reasonable balance of the data when comparing the years might not be possible otherwise, as fewer entries would have been posted online when the forum was starting up.

In every fifth post, the first and last entry was collected and put in text files to be run through AntConc, a software program which allows one to create a monolingual corpus, which in this case was later used to find patterns and single out the most used words during the chosen months and years. Function words, like articles, prepositions and conjunctions, as well as discourse markers and text of meta data were removed from the result, as it was reasonable to assume that these categories would not contribute to the outcome of the study. The reason the first and the last entry were chosen was because the first entry typically plays the most important part in what kind of discourse will follow. The last entry usually shows where the discourse has ended up. A few entries were omitted from the data, as the content was not the original poster’s own, but song lyrics or quotes, or simply lacked content.

From the posts of 2008, a total of 97,852 words were collected, which consisted of 7,095 unique words. All posts included from 2017 ended up being 103,819 words in total, where 6,770 words were unique. However, it needs to be pointed out that some words were subjected to exclusion during the analysis of the data due to them not carrying any meaning at all, for example *xa* and *x*, which can be described as code collected unintentionally.

In order to identify the words which were relevant to this study, the Brown Family corpora, which consists of close to 5 million words where around 80,000 words are unique, collected during a 30-year period, was used as a reference keyword list. This kind of list automatically excludes word types such as function words and pronouns, when compared to a specific corpus, because these are generally expected to be used frequently in written text. Keyness is a way of comparing texts to reveal whether a word is being used more often than it is used in the general texts in English. The calculation compares the number of times one word is repeated in the specific corpus with how many times the same word appears in the general corpus, which results in a number, the keyness. Any number above seven may be considered significant in terms of keyness.

Whether or not a word was put in a positive, negative or neutral context was determined by close reading, and the nature of the phrases which preceded and followed the specific word. In this study, the word *asexual* was used as example, because of its relevance.

Since the majority of the users who have been active on the sub-forum in the best case only discloses more detailed information when it comes to their asexuality, for example, if someone is heteroromantic in addition to being asexual, a gender study is not suitable in this particular case. Instead, a more neutral approach has been taken in analyzing the data. Other variables, such as age, ethnicity, class, have also been excluded in the study, since none of this information is consistently communicated by the users and it was not possible to acquire this information in a reliable way. It is also important to note that not everyone expressing themselves in the data may identify as asexual, some may be aromantic, demisexual or otherwise.

Although there may be ethical issues in using this data without the consent of the original posters, half of the posts are dated from over ten years back, and a good number of the posters have kept their identity hidden. Therefore, the ethnographic approach of the study was deemed appropriate. Furthermore, this is an open forum which anyone is able to access, no passwords or logins are required. The ethnographic approach was chosen as the data was collected through observation of the environment or community without any interference, as

all the information gathered is freely accessible to anyone.

Considering this type of study has rarely been carried out before, if ever, it may be viewed as a first try, a pilot study of sorts, in finding more answers to the questions about the asexual community, and further research with a greater amount of data will be advised for the future.

## 4. Results

In this section, the review of the data is presented, and the results are used to try and answer the research questions which were introduced in the beginning of this paper. The questions asked were which lexical words were the most frequently used each year, whether the word *asexual* was found in a positive, negative or neutral context, and whether there had been any significant linguistic changes between the years 2008 and 2017.

### 4.1 The Lexical Words

First, when comparing the data from both years with the Brown Family wordlist (see Table 4.1.1 and 4.1.2) it became evident that the most significant lexical words which were used were all connected in some way to sexuality and identity. A list of the top hundred words results can be found in the appendices (see Appendix 1 and 2).

In both cases, the lexical word which showed the most keyness was *sex*, followed by *asexual*. *Sexual* and *asexuality* are also found at the top in both cases. When reviewing the word *asexual* with the study by Canning (2016) in mind it became evident that using *an asexual* was preferred when referring to one's identity, rather than *an asexual person*. In 2008, *an asexual* was used 17 times, while *an asexual person* could not be found in the data. Although *an asexual person* was found 7 times in 2017, it was still outnumbered by *an asexual*, which was found 23 times.

The words that stood in out in the data from 2008 are *think* and *know*, while in 2017 these words were absent from the top ten lexical words. Instead, *feel* is found higher up in the list, and a significant change in the data of 2017 compared to 2008 is the addition of the word *ace* to the top of the list. The word *ace*, which is part of the unique terminology of the asexual community, is given a more thorough explanation as to why this is a noteworthy increase in section 4.3. Words which were not surprising to find were *just* and *really*, since these are generally used in this type of online conversation amongst peers, as well as *want* and *like*, since these may be used in discussions about preferences. However, *want* and *like* may also

carry a grammatical meaning instead of lexical. Furthermore, while the value of keyness of the 2008 data appears to be decreasing, the value of keyness below + 830 already at the fifth lexical word, in 2017 the value of the keyness is considerably higher and only declines somewhat when the tenth lexical word is reached.

Table 4.1.1: Summary of the first ten lexical words in the Keyword list of 2008.

<b>2008 – Lexical Keywords</b>	<b>Rank in AntConc</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Keyness</b>
Sex	2	518	+ 2844.74
Asexual	3	355	+ 2713.14
Sexual	8	338	+ 1679.29
Asexuality	10	168	+ 1304.36
Just	11	562	+ 1139.7
Think	15	364	+ 822.29
Really	17	287	+ 810.4
Like	18	550	+ 805.47
Know	19	399	+ 740.78
Want	20	295	+ 703.5

Table 4.1.2: Summary of the first ten lexical words in the Keyword list of 2017.

<b>2017 – Lexical Keywords</b>	<b>Rank in AntConc</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Keyness</b>
Sex	3	477	+ 2516.53
Asexual	4	315	+ 2366.78
Just	8	711	+ 1636.7
Asexuality	9	213	+ 1629.13
Sexual	10	330	+ 1591.31
Ace	11	232	+ 1585.1
Feel	13	375	+ 1363.62
Really	16	379	+ 1199.82
Like	17	659	+ 1083.49
Want	24	329	+ 808.47

With the qualitative aspect in mind, the nature of the context in which the word *asexual* appeared out of the first twenty examples of the data of each year, was reviewed and compared, as can be seen in Figure 4.1.3 and Table 4.1.3. Close reading showed that only in one case in the data from 2008 was *asexual* found in a positive context. This differed drastically from the more recent data of 2017, where it was found in more than one third of the examples. Even though it would have been reasonable to examine the lexical word with the most keyness, which is *sex*, this study concerns the nature of an asexual identity. Therefore, it was deemed appropriate to first and foremost examine the lexical word directly linked to asexuality.

Table 4.1.3: Summary of the context in which asexual was found in both 2008 and 2017.

	2008 / 2017
<b>Positive context</b>	1 / 7
<b>Negative context</b>	14 / 8
<b>Neutral context</b>	5 / 5

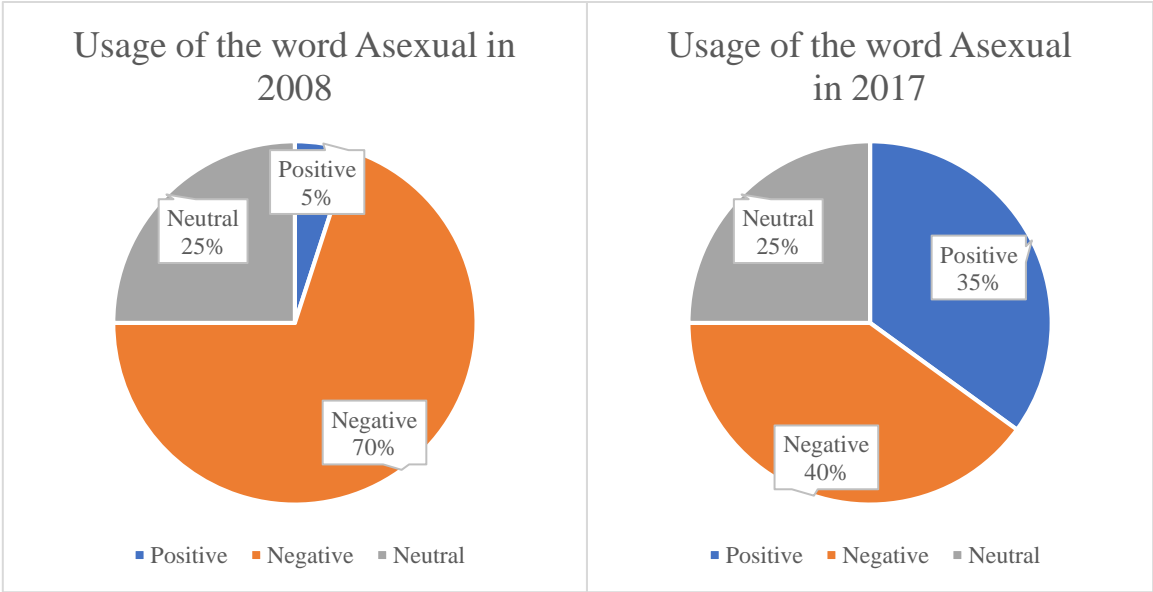


Figure 4.1.3: Summary of the context in which asexual was found in both 2008 and 2017.

**4.2 The Pronouns**

When running the data through AntConc, and comparing it with the Brown Family keyword list, some pronouns ended up being included in the result as well. Since pronouns typically are words that one would expect to reoccur quite frequently in a general corpus, the fact that these pronouns ranked high in terms of significance, or keyness, was surprising. What was



noteworthy about which pronouns showed the most keyness, as seen in Table 4.2.1 and 4.2.2, was that in both years mostly first or second person pronouns were used, indicating that a third party was less likely to be discussed by this community.

Table 4.2.1: Summary of the first five pronouns in the Keyword list of 2008.

Pronoun	Rank in AntConc	Frequency	Keyness
I	1	5313	+ 13139.47
My	4	1069	+ 2369.63
Me	7	848	+ 1803.87
It	13	1744	+ 843.16
You	26	897	+ 608.14

Table 4.2.2: Summary of the first five pronouns in the Keyword list of 2017.

Pronoun	Rank in AntConc	Frequency	Keyness
I	2	5375	+ 12829.07
My	5	1076	+ 2287.85
Me	7	874	+ 1813.69
You	25	1034	+ 805.07
It	26	1784	+ 792.28

Although the fact that the pronouns were included in the results is in itself surprising, it is not remarkable that the first person pronouns would be ranked much higher than those for second or third person. Since it is a forum where individuals come to share their personal experiences, this may explain why the keyness of the pronoun *I* is remarkably high in particular.

In terms of keyness, results from both years are consistent with each other, with the exception of shift in the rank of the pronouns *it* and *you*, where the number of times the latter pronoun was used increased significantly. Notably, *you* as a pronoun may either be used to address the second person, or as a generic or impersonal *you*, referring to someone who is not specified.

What needs to be pointed out about the results in Table 4.2.2 is that the only reason the pronoun *I* ranked as number 2 in AntConc was that *xa*, which is not considered in the data,

since it is code that unintentionally was collected. ranked as number 1. A list of the top twenty pronouns found in the data can be located in the appendices (see Appendix 3 and 4).

### 4.3 The Terminology

In the first section, a list of terminology was presented as being unique for the asexual community, which also included regular words, that are used with a different meaning when referring to asexuality. These words were reviewed in the data from both years, and the results were compared. The results can be seen below in Table 4.3. To make sure the words were not used out of the intended context, the data was closely read and deemed acceptable to be used in this study, with the exception of one or two posts.

Table 4.3: Comparison of the terminology used in 2008 and 2017.

<b>Word</b>	<b>Used in 2008</b>	<b>Used per thousand words</b>	<b>Used in 2017</b>	<b>Used per thousand words</b>
<b>Ace</b>	9	0.09	232	2.2
<b>Acephobia</b>	-	-	1	0.01
<b>Asexy</b>	16	0.16	1	0.01
<b>Demi(sexual)</b>	3 (3)	0.03 (0.03)	16 (17)	0.15 (0.16)
<b>Gray-A</b>	4	0.04	13	0.12
<b>Indifferent</b>	4	0.04	4	0.04
<b>Repulsed</b>	10	0.10	24	0.23

As described in the introduction, *ace* is a word which asexual individuals use to refer to their sexual identity, just as homosexuals use *gay* or *lesbian*. In the analysis of the data, a big difference in the usage of the word was apparent, as seen in Table 4.3, indicating that *ace* may not have been used as effortlessly when speaking of one's sexual identity ten years ago. A word with the opposite result was *asexy*, with only one example found in the data from 2017.

While the use of the word *indifferent* has not increased, the use of *repulsed* has taken a notable jump, and while these words are not interchangeable, based on the data it appears they have started to go a little hand in hand, as seen in examples (1) and (2) on page 16. Instances of this sort could not be found in the data from 2008.

(1) today i tried to explain to my therapist how i feel like I'm naturally sex **repulsed/indifferent**. i avoided saying "asexual" but instead talked about how I was manipulated and pressured into sex without figuring out if i really wanted it.

– Extract from post, January 2017, thatIhippie.

(2) I don't think it's false advertising unless you claim you are looking for sex when you're not or something. But I do think it can lead to issues when almost inevitably the other person wants to have sex, especially for **sex-indifferent** or **sex-repulsed** aces in particular.

– Extract from post, March 2017, cristalfleurs.

The usage of some of the words has clearly not undergone a noteworthy increase, but what is important to point out is that even the slightest rise in usage may be relevant to this study.

## 5. Discussion

The goal of this study was to get an overview of the discourse within the online asexual community, with its main focus being on the vocabulary. This was done by collecting data from an online forum, which is part of the Asexual Education and Visibility Network (n.d.[online]), from two different years, 2008 and 2017, ten years apart. The questions which were asked were which lexical words were the most commonly used in online discussions amongst asexuals, if the word *asexual* in its context was positive, negative or neutral, and if there has been a noticeable change when comparing the data. First, it is important to once more point out that this study, as a pilot investigation, has been carried out with less data than what would really be sufficient to gain a wide perception of the linguistic characteristics in the asexual community. However, given that this topic is relatively unexplored within the linguistic discipline, any grain of new information may be of help for future research concerning how language and this kind of underrepresented sexuality is connected.

When collecting the data, it was unclear whether it would be achievable to attain a balance in numbers between the two years in question, to be able to make an as fair comparison as possible. As previously mentioned, the number of members on the forum has increased tremendously over the past few years. When reviewing the updates made on AVENwiki (n.d. [online]), it showed that 15,000 members were registered at the end of 2008,

which means that the 106,000 registered members of today is a huge increase. This gave reason to believe the number of posts of 2017 would exceed the posts of 2008 by far. However, this turned out to be untrue, as the difference ended up being only around 6,000 words. This corresponds with Huffaker's (2011: [online]) claim that even though the total number of members might be high, that does not have to correspond with how many members are in fact actively participating in ongoing discussions. In both collections of data, the number of words from 2008 and 2017 got close to 100,000 words each. If a similar and more thorough study is carried out in the future, one suggestion is to examine if this would be the same outcome for every year between 2008 and 2017 as well.

There have been next to no similar studies published that can be used as a means of comparison in this case, hence the former notion of this being a sort of pilot study. Most of the previous studies carried out which have included asexuality in some way are related to social sciences or biomedicine. These studies have tended to focus on society's stance toward different sexualities, asexuality being the main focal point (MacInnis & Hodson 2012), as well as the mental health aspect (Nurius 1983). What these studies ultimately agree on is that the results tend to be negative, meaning not in favor of the asexual community. As one of the aims of this study was to look closer at what context the lexical words were put in, the example in this case being *asexual*, as it is unique to the community, the results interestingly showed a shift from negative to positive when comparing the year 2008 and 2017. This goes to show that the community itself may have started to gain a more accepting view of their sexuality in relation to their experiences.

Canning's (2016) study, which was introduced in section 2.4, although it did not have the same aim as this study, brought up some interesting points which could be examined in the data. The most interesting notion was that of whether one used *an asexual* or *an asexual person* to refer to a person that identifies as asexual (Canning 2016: 24), either in a positive or negative way. As this data was collected from users of the AVEN forum exclusively, it could be established that *an asexual* was used predominately. Given how effortlessly *an asexual* is used in both cases, more notably in 2017, it is concluded that the users of AVEN have no trouble using *asexual* as a nominal identity.

Another interesting change that became apparent when reviewing the data was the fact that although the verb *know* could be found among the top ten lexical words in 2008, it was not found in 2017 in terms of keyness (see section 4.1). The same was the case for the verb *feel* in 2017, which was not among the top ten lexical words in 2008. This does not mean that

the words have not been used as much. It may just show that the community has begun discussing personal matters with less uncertainty, as *know* is easily preceded with *not* in both sets of data, but as discovered, more seldom in 2017. The same goes for *feel*, only it was used around 150 times more in 2017, which indicated that the kind of topics that are posted and responded to, although random, are more related to discussing emotions, presumably around this sexuality. Given that former studies have shown that society has a tendency of labeling asexual individuals as “less human”, lacking the human traits (MacInnis & Hodson 2012: 731), this is one way of proving that it is not the case.

In the section concerning pronouns it was disclosed that first person pronouns, such as *I*, *me* and *my*, were clearly used in a much higher ratio in terms of keyness when compared to a general corpus. The only pronoun of a third person class that was included in both of the sets of data was *it*, which in most of the cases referred to either the poster’s own sexuality or sex in general. This indicated that the community first and foremost is discussing topics within their own group, directing much less attention to any specific outside group, meaning the asexual community sees the outside world as an entity. What this community does is use nouns such as *people* when discussing another party, which can be considered to be a more general approach to those who are not part of the community.

The only change that was apparent when comparing the two sets of data was the fact that *it* and *you* had switched places. However, *it* had not been used less compared to the data of 2008, but the usage of *you* had increased in 2017, enough to get a higher number in terms of keyness. This may have been a coincidence given that there was more data collected from 2017, or it has become more common to speak of asexuality as a general topic, using *you* as a generic pronoun, or for the users to put more focus on someone else rather than oneself.

The terminology which has been regarded as unique to the asexual community was introduced in the first section. These words were run through AntConc and compared to the Brown Family keyword list to gain understanding of which words were used significantly more than in a general corpus. One disclaimer that one needs to be aware of is that all of the samples have systematically been picked out, in order to be as consistent as possible, but they are still random samples. This means that these results relating to the usage of terminology can not give a general perception of how they are being used in the asexual community. It does, however, point to how there might have been changes to the discourse if the numbers of times the words have been used differ radically.

It is not yet possible to say that asexuals have their own version of gay speech, since it is

not a sexuality that obviously manifests itself in the same way to the rest of the world. However, just as Bogaert (2012: 76) puts it, even though it may not be obvious, when it comes to language there is in fact a difference in how, for example, a sexual woman and an asexual woman speaks. This would be relevant for all genders, as, heteronormatively speaking, men tend to associate their masculinity, and women their femininity, with sex. In the case of asexuality, this idea is absent, meaning it is fair to conclude that they would put less thought into the usual gender stereotypes.

Interestingly, the usage of *ace* has increased prominently, while the usage of *asexy*, although not seen particularly often in 2008 either, decreased to being found only in one example in 2017. One explanation could be that since *asexy* basically has been used as an alternative for *ace*, it has over time lost that descriptive meaning within the community. An asexual individual would rather identify as being *ace*, instead of using *asexy* as an identity marker.

Just as Chasin (2013: 405) spoke about asexuality being a self-managed identity, the use of the forum of AVEN may be encouraged by the notion of social media platforms being a way of extending one's personality (Marriott & Buchanan 2013: 177). The reason being that the asexual community is, as far as being known, not widely spread around the world, estimated to be one percent of the population (Bogaert 2004). It is important to bear in mind that this was concluded based on results from a British study over sexual attitudes with a limited set of data. However, if it can be reasonably presumed that the result is in fact representative of asexual individuals in the world, it may also be assumed that the best way to find someone who is like-minded is over the internet. This makes a forum of AVEN's size the best port for communication and development of the asexual jargon, as asexuals get the opportunity to extend their personalities further than they are able to do in public.

To conclude, there has been a slight change in how the terminology is used within the online asexual community, but it is nothing groundbreaking given that, as mentioned before, the amount of data is not enough to present a universal idea of how the jargon works in the online asexual community. What may be said, however, is that the community seems to be embracing their identity little by little, seeing as relatable words are being put in far more positive contexts, than what could be found ten years earlier. But, since the results indicate that feelings are being discussed more frequently, given the rise in usage of the lexical word *feel*, this does not exclude the possibility of both negative and positive aspects being brought up. This study has tried to focus its aim on finding out about the changes within the jargon of

the online asexual community, but one recommendation for future studies would be to examine the concordances more carefully.

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## 7. Appendices

### Appendix 1

	<b>2008 - Lexical Keywords</b>	<b>Rank in AntConc</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Keyness</b>
1	Sex	2	518	+ 2844.74
2	Asexual	3	355	+ 2713.14
3	Sexual	8	338	+ 1679.29
4	Asexuality	10	168	+ 1304.36
5	Just	11	562	+ 1139.7
6	Think	15	364	+ 822.29
7	Really	17	287	+ 810.4
8	Like	18	550	+ 805.47
9	Know	19	399	+ 740.78
10	Want	20	295	+ 703.5
11	Feel	21	231	+ 685.98
12	Asexuals	23	83	+ 644.34
13	Friends	24	204	+ 636.07
14	About	25	585	+ 616.48
15	So	27	613	+ 593.94
16	Have	33	853	+ 495.38
17	But	37	878	+ 442.23
18	Guy	38	107	+ 430.96
19	Aven	39	55	+ 426.96
20	Because	40	318	+ 417.59
21	Get	41	276	+ 377.19
22	Attraction	42	70	+ 372.63
23	Person	43	154	+ 369.06
24	Do	44	373	+ 324.06
25	If	45	493	+ 313.93
26	Relationship	46	111	+ 307.07
27	Love	47	153	+ 299.14
28	Friend	48	122	+ 297.43

29	How	49	282	+ 294.16
30	Sexuals	50	37	+ 287.22
31	Gay	51	75	+ 278.82
32	Sexually	52	51	+ 277.69
33	Actually	54	111	+ 268.98
34	Romantic	55	68	+ 267.12
35	Sexuality	57	57	+ 256.72
36	Guess	63	66	+ 230.29
37	Orientation	65	51	+ 211.76
38	Pretty	66	80	+ 203.89
39	Weird	67	39	+ 203.31
40	Things	70	143	+ 196.81
41	Not	71	710	+ 195.68
42	Rant	72	26	+ 193.32
43	Can	73	374	+ 193.84
44	Relationships	74	57	+ 191.6
45	Things	75	129	+ 191.26
46	Lesbian	76	30	+ 188.31
47	Stuff	78	55	+ 180.21
48	Being	79	213	+ 175.96
49	Attracted	80	46	+ 175.13
50	Yeah	81	44	+ 173.44
51	Else	83	94	+ 169.69
52	Boyfriend	87	29	+ 163.31
53	Guys	88	39	+ 161.01
54	Bit	89	79	+ 158.74
55	Having	91	117	+ 154.13
56	Virgin	92	39	+ 153.31
57	Thinking	94	80	+ 149.14
58	Never	95	174	+ 147.84
59	Topic	96	35	+ 146.58
60	Ok	97	32	+ 143.71

61	Mom	98	38	+ 143.7
62	Anyway	99	55	+ 143.67
63	Lot	100	82	+ 141.17
64	Out	101	359	+ 139.88
65	Mean	102	93	+ 139.69
66	Online	103	19	+ 139.59
67	Find	104	126	+ 139.24
68	Male	106	58	+ 133.08
69	Lgbt	107	17	+ 131.96
70	Female	108	56	+ 131.01
71	Tell	109	101	+ 130.16
72	Kinda	110	22	+ 129.23
73	Dating	111	29	+ 128.86
74	Thought	112	147	+ 128.01
75	Interested	113	62	+ 126.08
76	Asexy	116	16	+ 124.2
77	Masturbate	117	16	+ 124.2
78	Feelings	118	49	+ 124.06
79	Even	120	225	+ 120.18
80	Porn	122	16	+ 116.64
81	Understand	124	68	+ 114.37
82	Awesome	125	21	+ 113.07
83	Sure	126	86	+ 112.66
84	Bi	128	19	+ 110.54
85	Basically	130	29	+ 107.65
86	Idea	131	78	+ 106.46
87	Libido	133	18	+ 103.64
88	Why	134	119	+ 102.71
89	Telling	135	44	+ 102.1
90	Wikipedia	136	13	+ 100.91
91	Talk	137	70	+ 97.68
92	Though	139	126	+ 95.49

93	Thread	140	27	+ 94.25
94	Crush	141	18	+ 93.38
95	Aromantic	142	12	+ 93.15
96	Some	143	273	+ 90.84
97	Girlfriend	144	18	+ 90.57
98	Say	145	130	+ 89.6
99	Okay	146	28	+ 88.88
100	Going	147	119	+ 88.72

## Appendix 2

	2017 - Lexical Keywords	Rank in AntConc	Frequency	Keyness
1	Sex	3	477	+ 2516.53
2	Asexual	4	315	+ 2366.78
3	Just	8	711	+ 1636.7
4	Asexuality	9	213	+ 1629.13
5	Sexual	10	330	+ 1591.31
6	Ace	11	232	+ 1585.1
7	Feel	13	375	+ 1363.62
8	Really	16	379	+ 1199.82
9	Like	17	659	+ 1083.49
10	Want	24	329	+ 808.47
11	About	27	673	+ 783.43
12	Think	29	337	+ 686.24
13	Asexuals	30	83	+ 634.72
14	So	32	645	+ 616.55
15	Aven	33	76	+ 581.19
16	Because	34	384	+ 576.23
17	Friends	35	193	+ 563.91
18	Romantic	36	119	+ 553.05
19	Know	37	351	+ 549.26
20	Person	38	190	+ 499.95
21	Relationship	40	149	+ 467.1

22	Attraction	41	84	+ 456.4
23	Sexaulity	43	88	+ 439.72
24	If	46	571	+ 423.19
25	But	47	901	+ 420.95
26	Do	49	419	+ 394.67
27	Have	50	805	+ 363.87
28	Lgbt	51	46	+ 351.76
29	Aces	52	51	+ 339.67
30	How	53	310	+ 337.8
31	Maybe	54	111	+ 284.84
32	Things	55	177	+ 283.63
33	Aro	56	36	+ 275.73
34	Online	57	37	+ 273.73
35	Being	58	261	+ 264.6
36	Sexually	59	49	+ 258.79
37	Can	60	428	+ 256.56
38	Feelings	61	79	+ 252.47
39	What	62	441	+ 247.45
40	Lot	64	114	+ 243.82
41	Get	65	233	+ 242.39
42	Gay	67	69	+ 239.88
43	Kinda	68	179	+ 231.75
44	Understand	70	102	+ 229.87
45	Aromantic	71	29	+ 221.76
46	Friend	72	105	+ 220.21
47	Relationships	73	64	+ 219.99
48	Guys	74	50	+ 219.39
49	Love	75	133	+ 218.44
50	Partner	78	56	+ 199.27
51	Or	80	646	+ 192.49
52	Talk	81	102	+ 191
53	Always	83	166	+ 187.74

54	Actually	84	92	+ 186.15
55	Never	85	197	+ 183.73
56	Sexuals	86	24	+ 183.52
57	Tumblr	87	24	+ 183.52
58	Having	88	130	+ 179.61
59	Dating	89	38	+ 179.29
60	Orientation	90	46	+ 178.63
61	Else	91	99	+ 177.13
62	Talking	92	77	+ 175.92
63	Stuff	94	54	+ 169.53
64	Uncomfortable	95	43	+ 168.4
65	Weird	96	34	+ 167.23
66	Thing	97	124	+ 165.43
67	Repulsed	98	24	+ 164.82
68	Queer	99	32	+ 164.52
69	Pretty	100	72	+ 163.95
70	Feeling	101	84	+ 157.16
71	Okay	102	42	+ 155.81
72	Find	104	136	+ 153.22
73	Thoughts	107	54	+ 152.93
74	Comfortable	109	46	+ 141.9
75	Even	110	247	+ 141.1
76	Gender	111	46	+ 140.96
77	Guy	112	51	+ 139.88
78	Attracted	113	40	+ 139.1
79	Not	114	687	+ 137.83
80	Out	115	373	+ 137.51
81	Sure	116	97	+ 135.42
82	Spectrum	117	31	+ 135.28
83	Hate	118	42	+ 134.17
84	Community	119	90	+ 134
85	Boyfriend	120	25	+ 133.5



86	Demisexual	121	17	+ 129.99
87	Relate	123	34	+ 129.43
88	Ok	124	30	+ 128.52
89	Feels	125	45	+ 128.51
90	Happy	126	66	+ 125.48
91	War	127	210	+ 124.4
92	Say	128	152	+ 122.79
93	Lgbtq	129	16	+ 122.35
94	Makes	130	78	+ 121.53
95	Wondering	131	37	+ 121.39
96	Guess	133	43	+ 115.83
97	Lesbian	134	20	+ 115.18
98	Internet	135	15	+ 114.7
99	Conversation	136	46	+ 113.85
100	Experiences	137	40	+ 112.38

### Appendix 3

	<b>2017 - Pronoun</b>	<b>Rank in AntConc</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Keyness</b>
1	I	1	5313	+ 13139.47
2	My	4	1069	+ 2369.63
3	Me	7	848	+ 1803.87
4	It	13	1744	+ 843.16
5	You	26	897	+ 608.14
6	Myself	29	167	+ 537.75
7	That	30	1735	+ 516.37
8	Someone	34	166	+ 492.06
9	Anyone	35	153	+ 458.06
10	What	53	437	+ 270.68
11	Something	64	174	+ 229.37
12	This	82	695	+ 170.66
13	Everyone	84	78	+ 169.44
14	They	105	543	+ 135.43

15	Anything	115	97	+ 124.56
16	Your	138	179	+ 96.05
17	Some	144	273	+ 90.84
18	Who	151	335	+ 84.22
19	Them	159	261	+ 80.88
20	All	199	386	+ 63.93

#### Appendix 4

	<b>2017 - Pronoun</b>	<b>Rank in AntConc</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Keyness</b>
1	I	2	5375	+ 12829.07
2	My	5	1076	+ 2287.85
3	Me	7	874	+ 1813.69
4	You	25	1034	+ 805.07
5	It	26	1784	+ 792.28
6	Someone	28	222	+ 738.89
7	Myself	31	188	+ 620.75
8	That	39	1774	+ 469.98
9	Anyone	45	149	+ 423.89
10	Something	66	184	+ 241.14
11	Your	77	242	+ 199.55
12	Everyone	93	81	+ 172.69
13	This	108	701	+ 143.76
14	Anything	143	93	+ 105.81
15	Yourself	155	50	+ 98.66
16	Them	160	284	+ 94.41
17	Who	187	346	+ 79.29
18	They	213	496	+ 68.7
19	Some	222	260	+ 61.99
20	Any	355	180	+ 35.3