Totally and Completely: A Corpus-based Behavioral Profile Study of Near Synonymous Adverbs

Nilima Mow | nmow@gmu.edu
Linguistics | George Mason University

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the frequencies of *completely* and *totally* in COCA?
2. What are the differences or similarities between these two adverbs of degree considering the semantic connotations and sentential positions?

ABSTRACT

This is a corpus based behavioral profile study of two near synonymous adverbs; *Completely* and *Totally*. It provides insights into their frequencies, syntactic patterns and semantic connotations. Additionally, it examines the independent usage of *totally* in discourse. Data for this study is drawn from The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) has been used as data for this study.
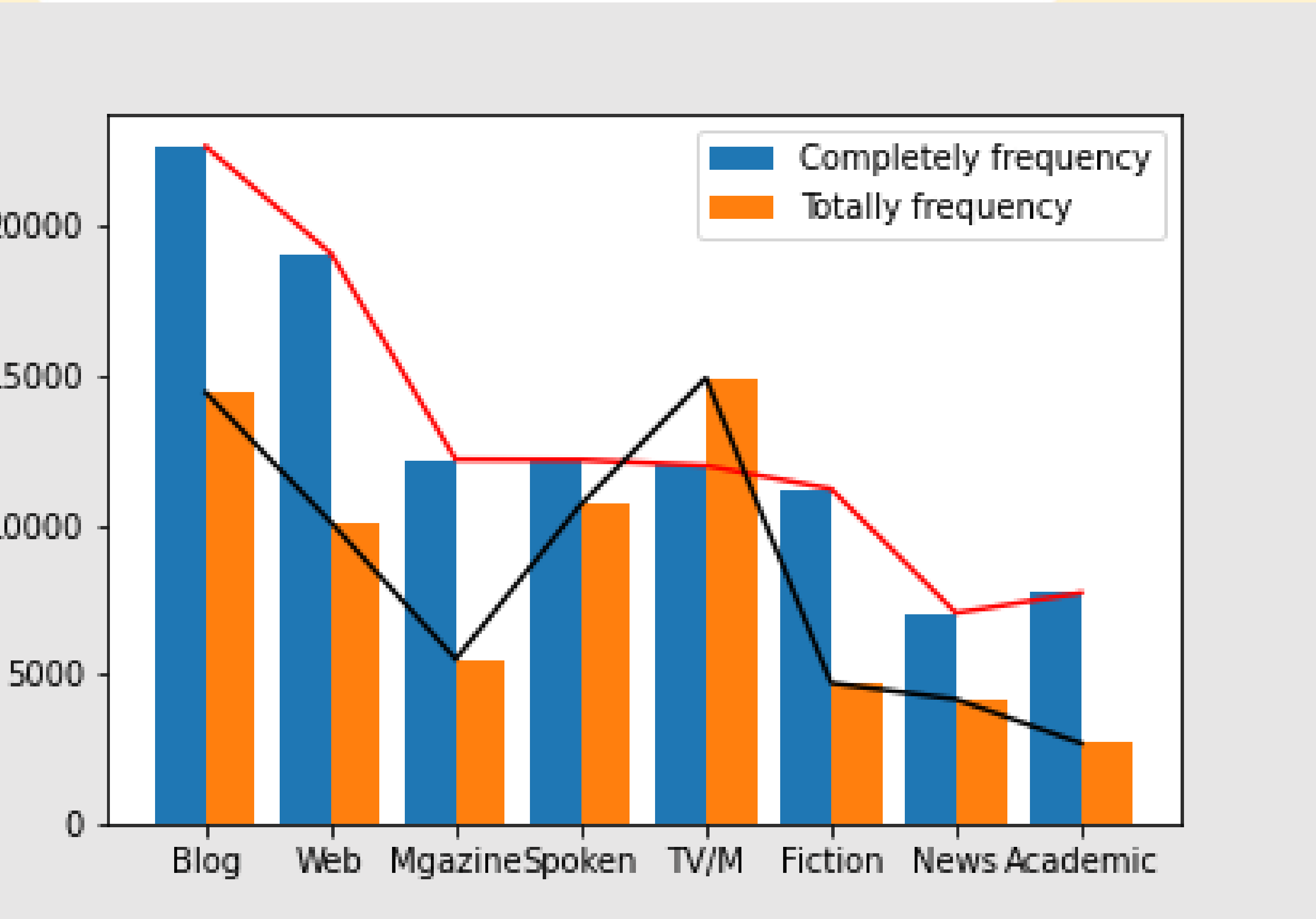
Figure 1: Frequency of *completely* and *totally* in across Eight Registers in the Entire COCA Corpus

METHODS

Liu and Espino's (2012) **three-phase query approach** from the Behavioral Profile study is followed.

1. First Query:
   Determines the overall frequency of *completely* and *totally*. Samples approximately 10% of the COCA corpus to validate trends (See Figure 1&2).
2. Second Query:
   Examines frequency of both adverbs in various sentential positions and functions
3. Third Query:
   Investigates the semantic types of adjectives and verbs that each adverb typically modifies/collocates with.

FINDINGS

❑ *Completely* is widely used in all 8 different registers comprising both spoken and written data in contrast to *totally.*
❑ The cross-register frequency chart of sample data exhibits a similar trend line as the frequency chart of full corpus data.
❑ Both adverbs appear in quite the same sentential positions.
❑ In some cases, *totally* holds a different sentential position not observed with *completely.*
❑ The adjective, **'Awesome'** predominantly collocates with *totally* and rarely with *completely.*
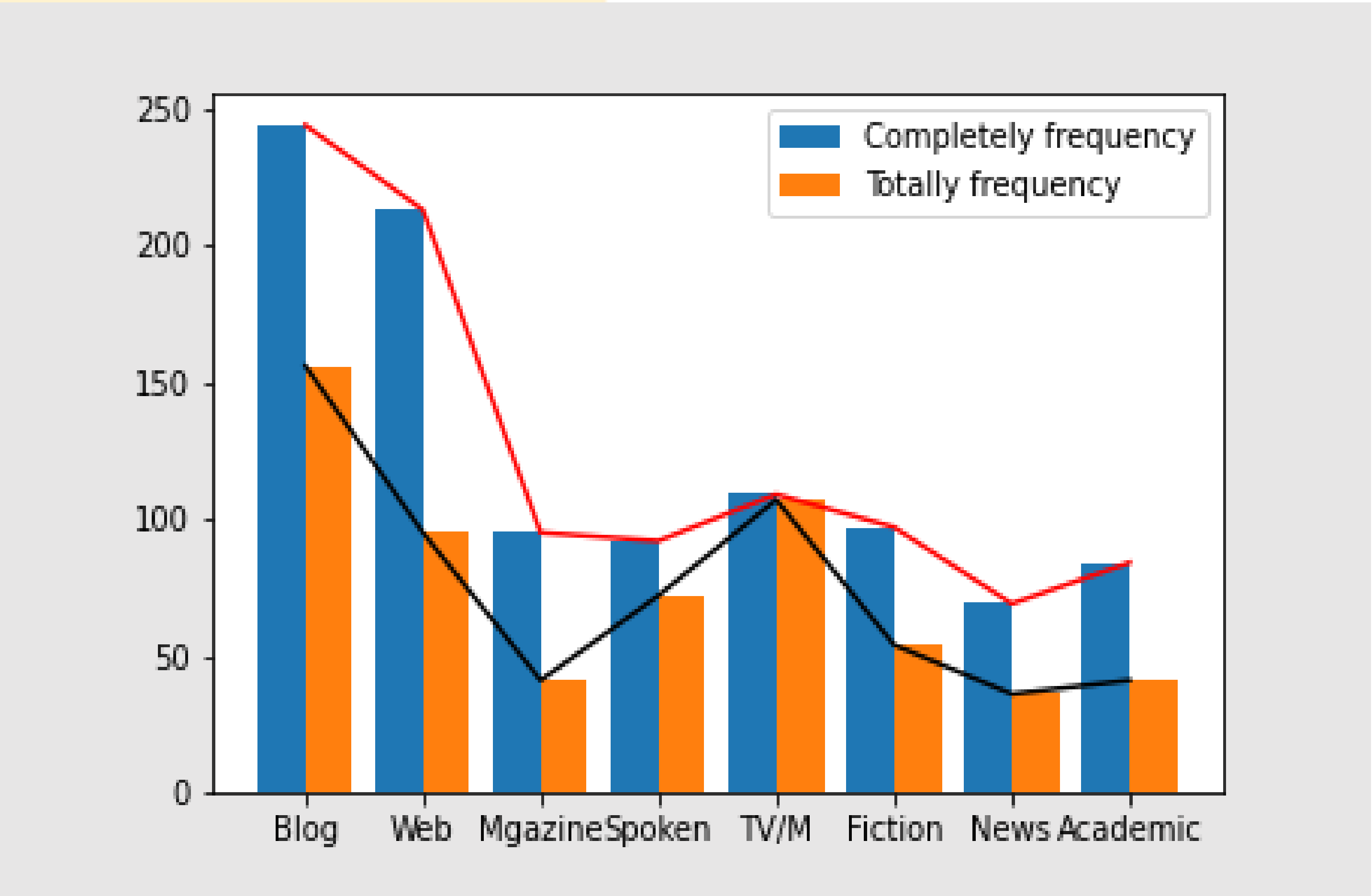❑ *Totally* serves as a turn initiator and a free expression often conveying agreement.

Figure 2 : Frequency of *completely* and *totally* across Eight registers in a sample COCA corpus

CONCLUSION

❑ *Completely* and *totally* are synonymous but cannot be used interchangeably in all contexts.
❑ They seem to have different behavior patterns in certain contexts. *Completely* is more frequent than *totally.*
❑ *Totally* shows an independent use in the discourse. This free-standing form is used as a turn initiator that is used to respond to a prior speaker in many cases.

Adverb	Frequency of the whole corpus	Frequency of the sample corpus
Completely	103937	1003
Totally	67144	602

Table 1: Frequency of *Completely and Totally*

Term	Modifying a verb, an adjective or an adverb	Sentence initial position	Sentence final position	One word sentence
completely	648	13	39	0
Totally	713	41	17	16

Table 2: Frequency of occurrences in different sentential positions in COCA

Totally	Different	honest	awesome	unacceptable	Dependent
Completely	Different	Honest	Normal	False	Unrelated

Table 3: The most frequent adjective collocations of *completely* and *totally*.

Totally	Agree	Ignore	Disagree	Freak	Screw
Completely	Agree	Ignore	Forget	Destroy	Disappear

Table 4: The most frequent verb collocations of *completely* and *totally*.

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Testing different English language corpus data to see if the frequency information remains the same.
Investigating if there's any significant difference between spoken and written data.

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