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Fostering Literary Connections Through Nonfiction Writing

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Abstract

There are significant gaps in understanding how popular nonfiction writers utilize language to gain perspective and understanding with their audience in the narratives they have created. In the literary community, there is a pressing need to investigate how these narratives have the ability to help us connect with the greater world around us. To address this gap, the present study utilizes the fields of Corpus Linguistics and English Literature to investigate how first-person voice affects sentence structure in multiple narratives from a single nonfiction author.

A 33-thousand-word corpus was compiled with 11 of author David Sedaris' most recent essays from *The New York Times*, all published from 2010-2015. The collection of essays will be analyzed using Corpus Linguistics software to identify frequently occurring individual words, phrasal structures, and grammatical structures.

The presentation will describe how particular word combinations in nonfiction narratives help to foster a broad connection with readers and offer recommendations for a larger use of nonfiction narratives in mainstream English Literature classes.

Using Corpus Linguistics to Analyze Past Tense Reporting Verbs in Fiction and Nonfiction Narratives

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Research Questions

1. Do both the fiction and nonfiction corpora frequently use common reporting verbs frequently in their narratives?

2. How does Sedaris' reporting verb use differ from use in published fiction?

3. How might investigating reporting verb use assist future authors in their own writing?

What is Corpus Linguistics?

- Corpus Linguistics involves discovering patterns through analysis of actual language use *(Krieger, 2003)*
- A corpus is a collection of texts designed to represent a particular domain of language use, for example:
  - Academic writing
  - Social media forums
  - Literature
  - Political speeches
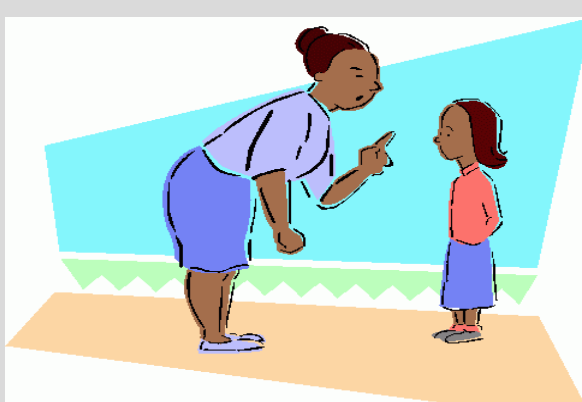
What is a Reporting Verb?

Reporting verbs are classified as verbs that relay spoken statements and questions *(Bloch, 2010)*
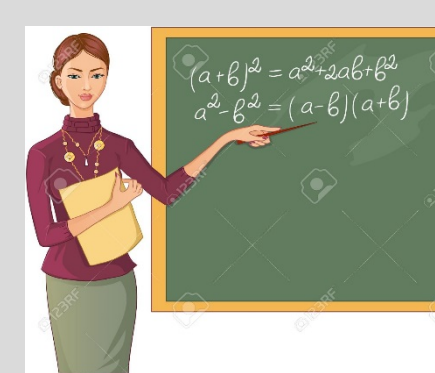
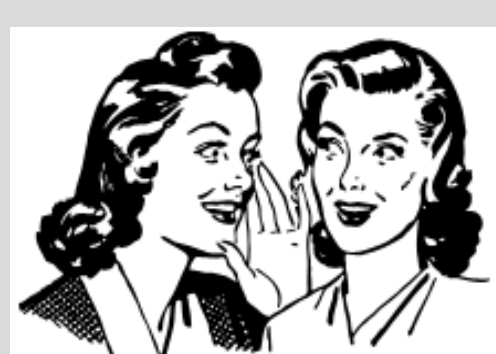"And you're giving them bread?" I **said** to Paul.
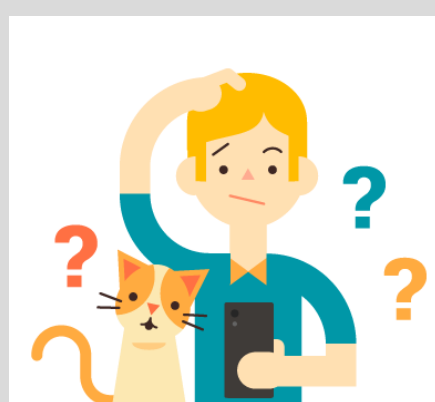
What could they possibly be doing here that they weren't doing for free on the other station? I **asked** myself.

"Right now it's called Fantastic Place," I **told** her, "but we're going to change it."

He sat me down and **explained** the procedure, using lots of big words that allowed me to feel tragic and important.

Lisa then **mentioned** a friend of hers, saying that if it could happen to Cynthia it could just as easily happen to her.

Methods

Data Collection: Two Corpora

David Sedaris--Popular Nonfiction Writer

Title of the Text	Year of Publication	Word Count
"Standing By"	2010	2,438
"Memory Laps"	2011	3,711
"Easy, Tiger"	2011	2,317
"Dentists Without Borders"	2012	1,790
"Understanding Owls"	2012	3,214
"Company Man"	2013	2,965
"Long Way Home"	2013	3,433
"Now We Are Five"	2013	4,285
"Leviathan"	2014	3,845
"Stepping Out"	2014	2,519
"A Modest Proposal"	2015	2,180
Total Text Count	**11**	
Total Word Count	32,697	

COCA: Corpus of Contemporary American English Fiction Section

THE CORPUS OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ENGLISH (COCA)

520 MILLION WORDS, 1990-**2015**

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

ENTER

Data Analysis: Investigation of Reporting Verbs

- Top five most common reporting verbs were taken from each corpus and compared to each other
- Investigated less common reporting verbs and compared them between corpora
  - Each count from the text was normed to 1,000,000 words
    - (Reporting Verb Count/Size of Corpus) X 1,000,000

Reporting Verb	Count: Sedaris Corpus	Count: COCA Corpus	1 Million Words: Sedaris	1 Million Words: COCA
Said	138	445,917	4,220	4,250
Asked	55	82,735	1,682	788
Told	47	77,384	1,437	737
Explained	6	8,158	183	77
Mentioned	5	4,492	152	42

Findings

Comparison of Top Five Past Tense Reporting Verbs

(bar chart: Sedaris Corpus / COCA Corpus for Said, Asked, Told, Explained, Mentioned)
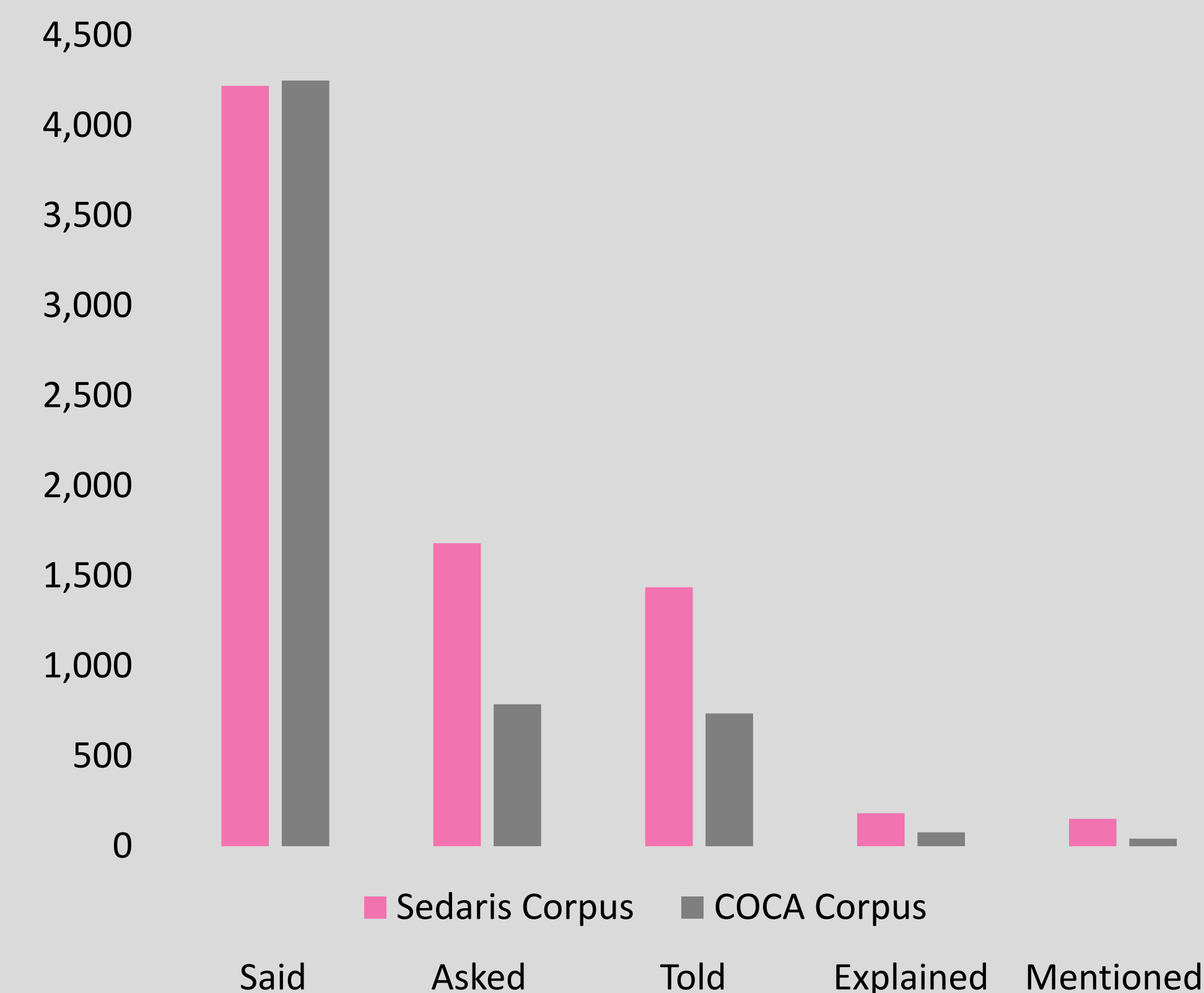
Reporting Verbs in the Sedaris and COCA Corpora					
Answered	Added	Announced	Repeated	Reported	Suggested
Complained	Demanded	Denied	Swore	Admitted	Agreed
Argued	Begged	Boasted	Claimed	Confirmed	Insisted
Proposed	Mentioned	Answered	Explained	Asked	Told

Comparison of Reporting Verbs: Sedaris Corpus

(pie chart: "Said" / Other Reporting Verbs)
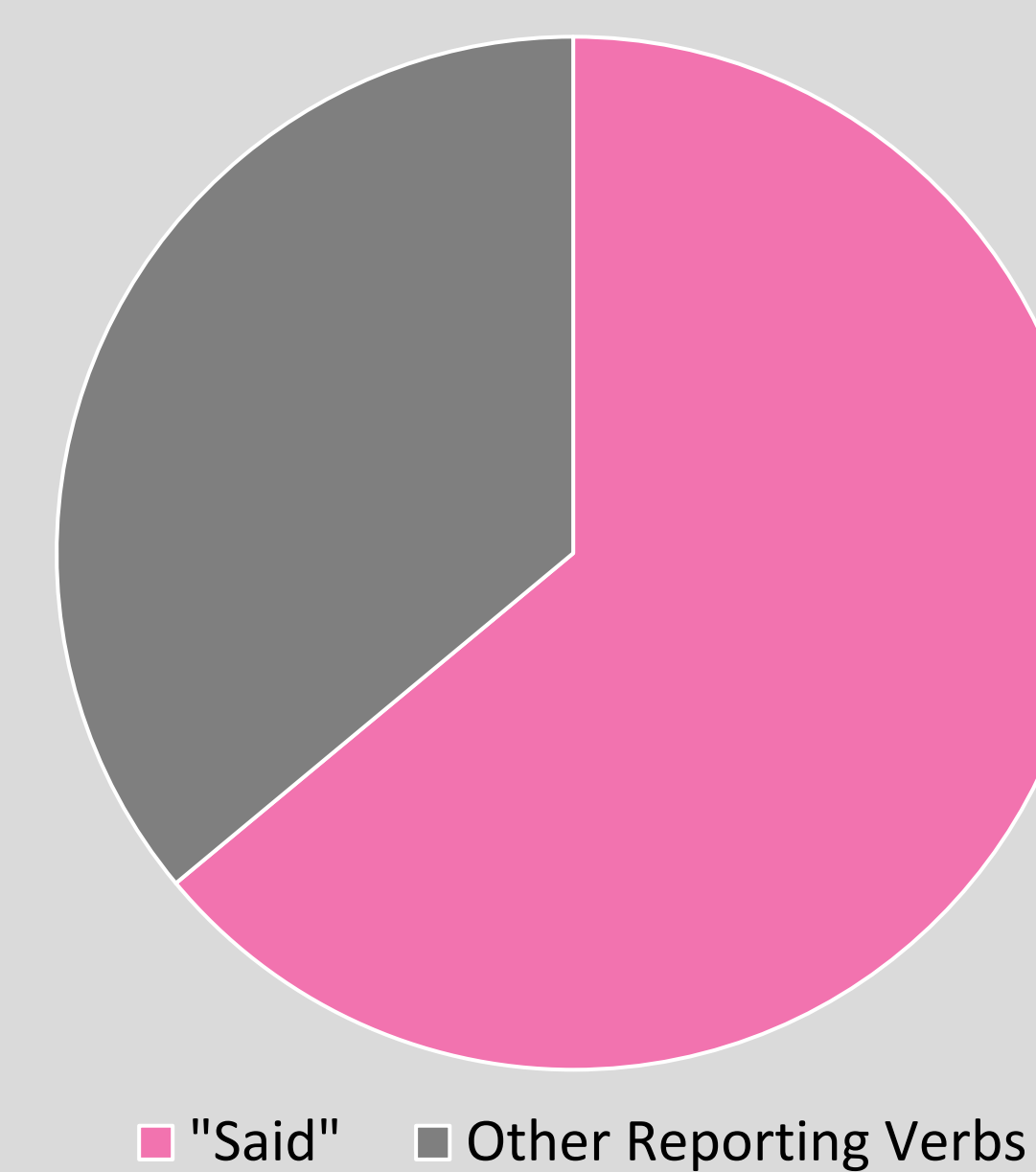
Comparison of Reporting Verbs: COCA Corpus

(pie chart: "Said" / Other Reporting Verbs)
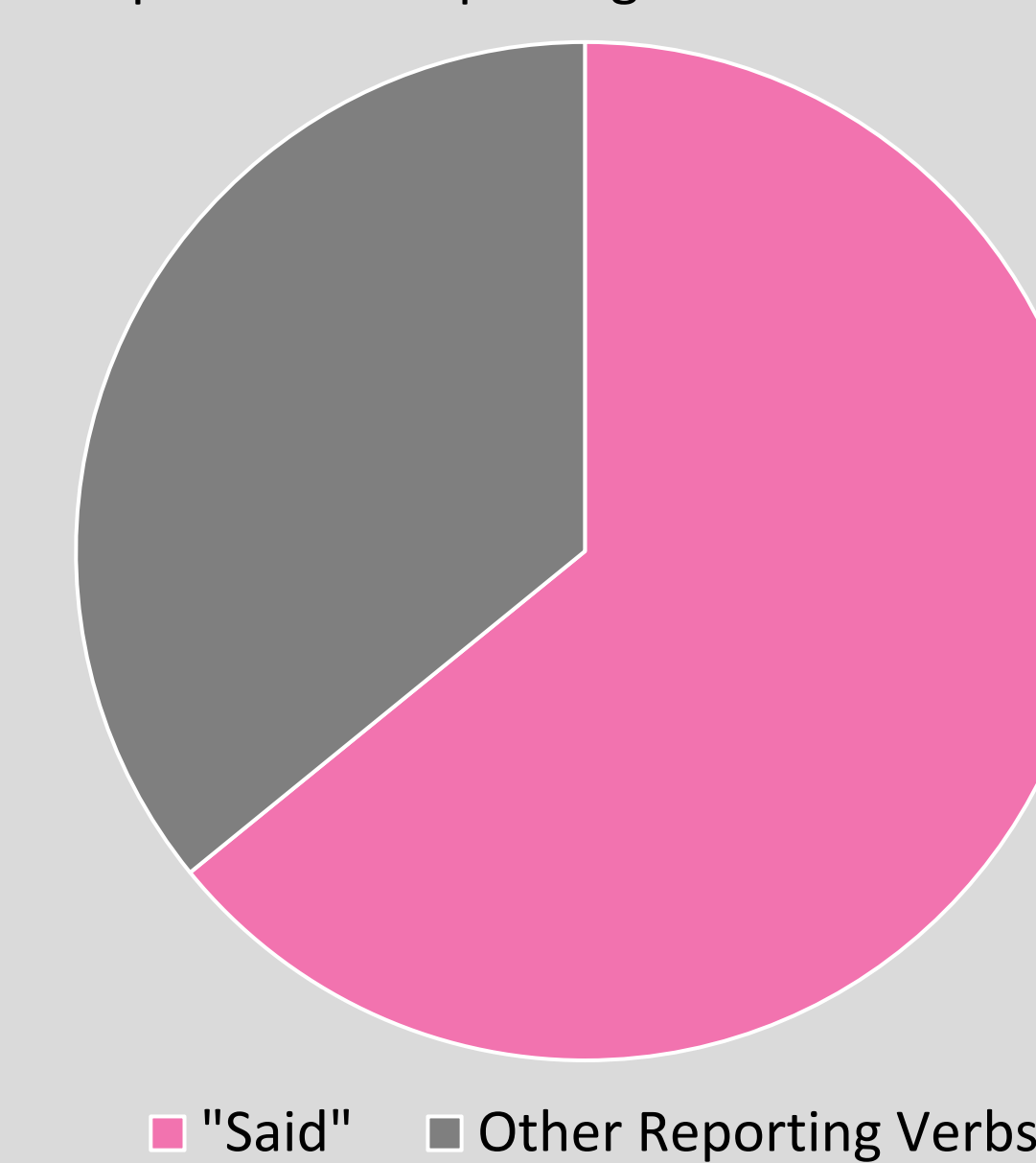
Conclusions and Implications for Future Narratives

- **Said** is the most common reporting verb in both the fiction and nonfiction corpora *(Carter, 1995)*
  - Both counts are similar, with a total difference of 30 instances per million between the two corpora
  - Said is the most common reporting verb in the English spoken language

- Sedaris, in the nonfiction corpus has a greater frequency of differing reporting verbs
  - There was an overall higher concentration of differing reporting verbs
  - This higher frequency occurs in all of the reporting verbs with the exception of said, in which case there is a minimal lower frequency count
  - The pattern of more frequent reporting verb usage in the nonfiction corpus occurs in reporting verbs that were not included in this data set

- Investigating reporting verb usage across fiction and nonfiction corpora depicts true word usage across texts
  - This gives authors an opportunity to fully investigate their own writing techniques
  - Authors can more carefully craft their narratives and choose differing language dependent upon previous verb frequency e.g. *(Biber, 1998)*

- Future studies can compare other creative nonfiction writers to Sedaris and how the use of reporting verbs differs
  - Is there a similar use of varied reporting verbs in other creative nonfiction works?
  - Are there differing reporting verbs that are more frequently used in other creative nonfiction works?

- Using Corpus Linguistics tools allows both authors and readers the freedom to investigate not only language structure but also deeper implications that the text may offer

Relevant Readings

Biber, Douglas, Susan Conrad, and Randi Reppen. *Corpus Linguistics: Investigating Language Structure and Use*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. Print.

Bloch, Joel. "A Concordance-based Study of the Use of Reporting Verbs as Rhetorical Devices in Academic Papers." *Journal of Writing Research* 2.2 (2010): 219-44. Web.

Carter, Ronald, and Michael MnCarthy. "Grammar and the Spoken Language." *Oxford Journals* 16.2 (1995): 141-58. Web.

Krieger, Daniel. "Corpus Linguistics: What Is Is and How It Can Be Applied to Teaching." *The Internet TESL Journal* IX.3 (2003). Web.