

The American Dream Revisited: A Corpus-Driven Study

Zhide Hou¹

¹ Shenzhen Tourism College of Jinan University, Shenzhen, China

Correspondence: Zhide Hou, Shenzhen Tourism College of Jinan University, Shenzhen, Guangdong, China.

E-mail: zidhou@jnu.edu.cn

Received: February 3, 2017 Accepted: February 20, 2017 Online Published: March 1, 2017

doi:10.5539/ijel.v7n3p182 URL: <http://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v7n3p182>

Abstract

As a dominant ideology throughout America, the American Dream rests on the idea that with hard work and personal determination anyone, regardless of background, has equal opportunity to achieve his or her aspirations. Given the importance of the American Dream to American national identity, and the enormity of it in shaping dominant ideologies, this study explores this deeply-held belief and particular mind-set in media discourses related to the American Dream. Modeled on the approach of corpus-driven discourse analysis, and combining the framework of a sociocultural linguistic approach to identity and interaction, the article reports on a corpus-driven sociocultural discourse study which aims to discover, through the analysis of frequent lexical and semantic patterns, discursive characteristics of media discourses related to the American dream, and whether there are any changes of the American dream to American national identity and ideologies which might be developed in time and space.

Keywords: the American Dream, media discourse, corpus-driven, identity, ideology

1. Introduction

The term American Dream was first used by the American historian James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America* published in 1931. Later on, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke about a dream of freedom, equality, and justice, which then has become the widespread American way of life in general. As a great source of pride, the American Dream has become the central creed of American nation since 1931, which represents a basic belief in the power and capacity of the individual (Cullen, 2003; Schwarz, 1997). The seemingly egalitarian system of opportunity regardless of background each individual has equal chance to prosper resonates throughout contemporary American society. As Johnson (2006, p. 21) notes, the American dream is shared as the national ideology of meritocracy, a system “contingent upon a societal commitment to fair competition so that no individual or group is advantaged or disadvantaged by the positions or predicaments of their ancestors”. But in fact, many individuals as well as scholars believe that the American Dream is not equally distributed among ethnic groups, which ultimately makes the dream an “inchoate fantasy” that has severe racial antagonisms embedded within it (Hochschild, 1995). In a same vein, Devos et al. (2010) examine the exclusionary definition of the American identity which is more readily granted to members of the dominant ethnic group, while other ethnic groups, at the minimum, are not created equal in their pursuit of the American dream and their aspirations to acquire the national identity. Findings show some individuals are relegated at the margin of the American identity because their group does not fit its prototypical definition, which contributed to a growing literature on the ramifications and consequences of defining a super ordinate identity in a way that excludes some subgroups.

While the specifics of each dream may vary from person to person, the overall vitality of the American Dream has been fundamental to American identity which is discursively produced, reproduced, transformed and destructed by means of language and other semiotic systems. Previous examinations on American identity have been focused on liberalism—America as a land of freedom and opportunity, and ethnoculturalism—America as a nation of white Protestants (Schildkraut, 2007). But identities as “a localized national culture” (Dervin, 2011), are always re/created in specific contexts and are usually fragmented, dynamic and changeable (Kellner, 1995; Park, 2007; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Wodak, 2011). American identity and the media discourses related to the American Dream have a dialectic relationship, because the media discourses manifest “who they are” and define reality partly through language use in the media.

Corpus investigations of media discourses related to the American Dream contributing to American national

identity and ideologies have been lacking. An important motivation of investigating the media representations of the American Dream is that it already existed in electronic form, although care needs to be taken when assuming that a person who has posted a message actually possesses the identity they claim to have. The corpus-driven quantitative research actually does help to uncover the secret of the American Dream in modern society.

2. Framework and Methodology

Discourse and identity are closely connected. Identity is always defined via similarity and difference (e.g., Ricoeur, 1992; Wodak et al., 2009). In the process of identity formation, news media plays a crucial role not only mirror some kind of objective reality, but also acts as powerful social agent in its own right. Through media reports, journalists as social actors can constitute objects of knowledge, situations as well as identities between different social groups and readers. Following Wodak et al. (1999, p. 22), identity is “constructed and conveyed in discourse, predominantly in narratives of national culture”. The present study adopts Bucholtz & Hall’s (2005) sociocultural linguistic perspective on identity. Identity produced in linguistic interaction based on the following principles: identity is best viewed as the emergent product rather than the pre-existing source of linguistic and other semiotic practice; identity relations emerge in interaction through several related indexical processes, such as the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific persons and groups; identities are never autonomous or independent but always acquire social meaning in relation to other available identity positions and other social actors (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, pp. 585-614).

The American media discourses related to the American Dream, with data collected from January 2012 to December 2016 are examined in this study. One important consideration of choosing data during this time span is America under the former American President Obama’s administration since his second term of presidency in 2012. The research questions are: What are the discursive characteristics of media discourse related to the American dream? Did the media discourses related to the American Dream reflect the American identity and dominant ideologies? If not, how has the American Dream to American identity and ideologies changed over time? To address the questions, the American Dream Corpus (ADC) of media texts with 99,832 words in 112 news articles are retrieved from the Newspaper database EBSCO host. All the articles are constrained to the American media because they represent the American ideologically construed social and political positions to international readers. Prominent newspapers with higher circulation include *Washington post*, *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today Tribune*, and *Christian Science Monitor*, with detailed descriptions in Table 1. The criterion for selecting articles is that *American Dream* has to be the primary topic and appear in the title. This is done with a view to including only articles in which the American Dream is discussed as the major topic and to exclude texts in which the two words *American Dream* are mentioned only in passing.

Table 1. Data description of American Dream Corpus

	Texts (n)	Words (n)
American Dream media corpus		
Washington Post	37	31,393
The New York Times	21	24,847
Wall Street Journal	19	18,566
USA Today	15	11,908
Tribune	12	7,709
Christian Science Monitor	8	5,409
Total	112	99,832

ConcGram 1.0 (Greaves, 2009) and *Wmatrix* (Rayson, 2001) are used as tools to retrieve two/three-word concgrams, keywords and key semantic categories and relevant concordances, from which analyses will be conducted below.

3. Discussion of Findings

3.1 Two-word Concgrams

As the identification of keywords can indicate what a corpus is about, the “aboutness” of a text or homogeneous corpus (Scott, 1999), the two-word concgrams in the study corpus offers “a first glimpse of the dominant theme and topic throughout the texts” (Cheng & Lam, 2013, p. 180). The top ten two-word concgrams in Table 2, with the exclusion of function/grammatical words, tells the dominant theme on the American Dream. The most frequent two-word concgram *American/dream* and the quotation-related concgram (*said/who*) and people-related

congrams (class/middle, more/people and high/school) are prominent, indicating the individualistic value of the American Dream, probably the American middle class are more concerned about their American Dream.

Table 2. The top 10 most frequently occurring two-word congrams of ADC

Rank	Two-word congrams	Frequency
1	American/dream	171
2	more/than	110
3	States/United	59
4	don/don't	51
5	said/who	45
6	less/than	31
7	class/middle	28
8	last/year	27
9	more/people	26
10	high/school	26

3.2 Keywords and Key Semantic Categories

Keywords act as a standard reference for normal frequencies of words that reveal something of the “aboutness” of a particular corpus. For the purpose of this analysis, ADC is compared against the AmE06, a very good reference corpus as it matched reasonably the data in terms of national and international variety of English. The top 20 keywords, relative to AmE06, listed in Table 3, confirmed the dominant theme and topic of the American Dream in the ADC, which further support the two initial observations from the two-word congram analysis. The keywords also showed the preoccupation of individualistic issues related to the Americans and their “homes”, “housing”, “mortgage” and “family”. Another noticeable keyword is “China”, implying the American Dream is not independent from China.

Table 3. The top 20 keywords of ADC when compared with AmE06

Rank	Keywords vs AmE06	Rank	Keywords vs AmE06
1	dream	11	buyers
2	American	12	U.S.
3	home	13	economic
4	Americans	14	says
5	homes	15	loan
6	mortgage	16	homeowners
7	housing	17	China
8	said	18	--
9	people	19	income
10	family	20	triple

With the help of Wmatrix, researchers are able to see “to what extent particular grammatical phenomena, as well as particular semantic domains, feature in a corpus” (O’Halloran, 2010, p. 178). The semantic domains or categories of ADC, relative to AmE06, offered the key semantic categories and their respective keywords which should be unique to American identity and ideology (Table 4). Consistently, the keywords in the categories showed the same as what the Americans related to or interested in are “home”, “China”, “mortgage” and etc.

Table 4. Semantic categories and keywords in the ADC when compared with AmE06

Key semantic categories	Keywords
Residence	Home (172), homes (63) , living (37), live (31), residents (13)
Geographical names	American (246) , Americans (102), America (62), United States (58), China (39) , Washington (31), Chinese (31)
Money and pay	Income (36), tax (35), afford (26), taxes (25)
Money: debts	Mortgage (49) , pay (29), debt (25), loan (21)
Business: selling	Buyers (31), bought (21), rentals (21), rent (21)

The above key semantic categories and keywords (Table 4), combining with the most frequent two-word concgrams (Table 1), guided the user to the analysis of the American Dream itself, American middle class, home and its relation with China.

3.3 The American Dream as an Emergent Product

Knowing the most frequently occurring two-word concgram *American/dream*, the discursive construction of the American Dream can be best analyzed from the concordance lines of the three-word concgram *American/dream/is* and *American/dream/of*, because the co-dependence of lexis and grammar from one another exert “a major impact on the way in which we describe language in use” (Adolphs, 2006, p. 51). Likewise, Sinclair (1991) also notes, the preposition *of* often occurs with nouns to form nominal groups, in which the first element can often denote a measure or an attribute. In order to see what attributes are frequently associated with the American Dream, the most frequent collocates appearing to the right side of the pattern *American/dream/is* are examined.

```

4      will have a better life than they have. "The American Dream is to have your own house with a white
5      he noted that the chance of achieving the American Dream is greatly enhanced if a person does just
6      have left many feeling threatened that the American dream is no longer achievable. As Americans
7      benefits for today's young," Kotlikoff says. The American Dream is down -- but not lost. Slim majority
8      native-born student had to say: "I think the American dream is that people can be who they are. Like
9      seeing money that we'd never seen before." The American Dream is realized in Scranton June 15--Michelle
10     on which this great country was built. The American dream is fast becoming an endangered species. If
11     "the pursuit of happiness" and "freedom." The American dream is American. The term "American dream" was
12     programs to help strapped homeowners. The American dream is safe again, right? If it were, I
13     Joseph Stiglitz said last year that "the American Dream is a myth" because "inequality is worse
14     One tag line we were considering was "The American dream is alive and well-in China." The
15     to the top earners, a majority believe that the American Dream is becoming markedly more elusive,
16     again into a house," Steve Jacobson says. The American Dream is down -- but not lost. Slim majority
17     and you work hard, you can achieve it." If the American dream is dismissed as dead or never existing, or
18     homeownership, which had been shorthand for the American Dream, is fading, with more than a quarter of all
19     thing about books like "The Betrayal of the American Dream" is that the authors offer very little

```

Figure 1. Concordances of three-word concgram *American/dream/is*

The above pattern of concordance lines (figure 1) strongly indicates a tendency of evoking negative representations of the American Dream. The American Dream is discursively defined as *no longer achievable*, *down*, *becoming an endangered species*, *becoming markedly more elusive*, *dismissed as dead*, *fading*, signifying each individual's American Dream as an emergent contribution to his identity in case when speaker's language use does not conform to the category of the American Dream to which it is normatively assigned with equal opportunity to achieve his or her aspirations.

Another useful pattern to discover the discursive characteristics of the American Dream is to examine the concordance lines of *American/dream/of* (figure 2). Some of these media representations of the American Dream tend to portray the *epitome*, *definition*, *condition* and *concept* of itself, while others implied the *violation*, *betrayal* and even *death* of the American Dream. In addition, *house*, *homeownership* and *college* became important factors in realizing the American Dream. The American “middle class gets priced out of American dream”, as one concordance lines reads, implied the challenge of the American middle class's pursuit of the American Dream—their aspirations to acquire the national identity.

48 Restaurateur killed in crash 'epitome of the American dream' Jan. 14--Naturalized American citizen
 49 waited nearly nine decades for his piece of the American Dream. Schmiess was 89 when he and his
 50 on the downsizing or outright death of the American dream. A Google GOOG +0.53% search for "the death
 51 or achievement." Today, those two aspects of the American Dream -- a better, richer life and homeownership
 52 it, we just wanted to have a measure of the American Dream," said Amit Sen, who teaches economics.
 53 on St. Paul's east side the fulfillment of the American dream. On Friday she acknowledged that the dream
 54 as their first or second definition of the American dream. Forty-five percent named "a good life for
 55 icon," Anderson said. "He was the epitome of the American dream, worked hard and achieved success. He saw
 56 waited nearly nine decades for his piece of the American Dream. Schmiess was 89 when he and his
 57 who appreciate the elevated meanings of the American dream that have triggered hope in good times and
 58 play, he says, deconstructs the concept of the American Dream as defined by the materialism of the
 59 looks at the U.S." Rethinking Part of the American Dream It's time to have a serious conversation
 60 the lucky and the shrewd achieve aspects of the American Dream that might otherwise have been outside
 61 alive and well-in China." The Betrayal of the American Dream As the authors say, public policies--taxes,
 62 thing about books like "The Betrayal of the American Dream" is that the authors offer very little
 63 might be fairly termed as the "violation of the American Dream series." Smith posits some steps that could
 64 America. When asked to rate the condition of the American dream on a scale of one to 10, where 10 means the
 65 Dad, he will." Octogenarians get share of the American Dream: The housing bust and tax credit helped
 66 those at the bottom who aspire to be part of the American dream. Our country's future prosperity depends on
 67 say owning a house is a cornerstone of the American Dream, down from 80 percent a quarter-century
 68 say going to college is very much part of the American Dream, down from 68 percent who said this in
 69 that homeownership is an important part of the American dream. But only 7 percent of Americans we
 70 as their first or second definition of the American dream. Why the discrepancy? Owning real estate is
 71 that a college diploma is a major part of the American Dream, compared with half of whites and African
 72 American salesman - if not the architect of the American dream, then at least its most time-honored
 73 home has formed the cornerstone of the American Dream. James Truslow Adams introduced that phrase
 74 their extended family found their piece of the American dream, the Cambridge Tsarnaevs' experience in
 75 book compares favorably with The Betrayal of the American Dream, the latest from Donald L. Barlett and
 76 Google GOOG +0.53% search for "the death of the American dream" yields more than 276 million citations.
 77 to find a mismatch between their idea of the American dream and the availability of work and quality of
 78 you tell? Middle class gets priced out of American dream More homes are becoming out of reach to

Figure 2. Concordances of three-word concgram American/dream/of

3.4 The Dream of American Middle Class

According to Gilbert (1998), the American middle class are persons commonly have a comfortable standard of living, significant economic security, considerable work autonomy and rely on their expertise to sustain themselves. The American middle class identity is used to be known around the world for conspicuous consumption. To this day, the professional middle class in the United States holds the world record for having the largest homes, most appliances, and most automobiles. In a same vein, Archer & Blau (1993) note that the American middle class owes much of its historical identity to the occupational stability provided by the jobs that its representatives filled and to its geographic sedentariness. But what are the media representations of middle class in modern America? As *middle/class* is one the top two-word concgrams (see table 1), and "home" one of the top keywords (see table 2), the examination of the pattern *middle/class* and its collocation with *home* or *house* will provide ideologically associated linguistic structures of American middle class and their homeownership in the realization of the American Dream.

8 homes are becoming out of reach to buyers Middle-class home buyers are finding fewer homes on the market
 9 homes this month were out of reach for middle-class buyers, data from real estate tracker Trulia
 10 are combining to limit choices for the middle class, says Jed Kolko, Trulia chief economist. Trulia
 11 Trulia considers homes affordable for middle-class buyers if their total monthly payment -- after a
 12 The drop-off in affordable homes for middle-class buyers is widespread, falling or flattening in 99
 13 Orange County, Calif. were affordable for middle-class buyers, Trulia's data show. That's down from 44%
 14 drops in housing affordability for middle-class buyers have been in California. Significant
 15 also are occurring elsewhere. Boston's middle-class buyers can afford 41% of the homes on the market
 16 of the homes were still within reach of middle-class buyers, Trulia's data show. Middle-class buyers
 17 offering effective solutions to help the middle class. Democrats are more likely than Republicans to
 18 median size of an affordable home for a middle-class buyer in the New York metro region was 978 square
 19 thus far has been the 300 million-strong middle class. That's less than a third of the population.
 20 a home was the only way to join the middle class. Not only did it promote social stability-recall

Figure 3. Concordances of two-word concgram middle/class

Clearly, more concordance lines above implied negative media representations of American middle class when they are home buyers. This result might help to explain the stereotypical representation of the largest homes of American middle class as American identity contradicts what is real in media representations. What is more

interesting is “the home was the only way to join the middle class” as one concordance line tells, indicating the strong desire of homeownership for American middle class because home promotes social stability. This result echoes with what Kroos (2012, p. 320) notes that “the American Dream in the contemporary equivalents of motor cars and high wages gets translated into homeownership”.

3.5 The American Dream not Independent from China

There is little wonder that the American Dream gained immense market share and is still widely equated with the general aspiration of obtaining a high living standard and human dignity. China, America’s most important partner either in economy or politics, has become America’s strong competitor in the 21st century. The American Dream is never independent from other social actors, especially when the recently announced Chinese Dream meaning the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has become the “twin” of the American Dream. In the following, the three-word concgram *American/dream/China* (figure 4) is searched for concordance analysis so as to examine their relationship in media representations.

```

1      to refinance with such ease makes sense. The American Dream, Alive and Well in China communist country
2      One tag line we were considering was "The American dream is alive and well-in China." The
3      Wall of China near Beijing. "I'm living the American dream, just not in America," says the Cleveland
4      alive and well-in China." The Betrayal of the American Dream As the authors say, public policies-taxes,
5      answered in that range. China threatens the American dream. Our surveys revealed that 57 percent of
6      for over 200 years. Latest export to China: The American dream Visionaries cash in on yak patties, spicy

```

Figure 4. Concordances of three-word concgram American/dream/China

An expanded examination of the above three underlined concordance lines tells the fact that they are titles of three news articles from *The Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post* and *USA today* respectively, indicating the American identity to which the American Dream ascribes is never autonomous or independent but acquire social meaning in relation to the strong impact of the uprising China.

4. Conclusion

By conducting a corpus-driven sociocultural discourse study (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) of the American Dream from the corpus of American media discourses, this study has demonstrated how the two areas of linguistic enquiry can be effectively and fruitfully combined, and the great potential of using *ConcGram* and *Wmatrix*. Through analyzing the most frequently occurring two-word concgrams, and keywords and key semantic categories contrasted against AmE06, and especially the concordance outputs, this study has shown the identity and ideology to which the American Dream contributed has undergone changes. The unachievable, elusive and even dead of American Dream are discursively constructed as central ideas to the American identity. The seemingly wealthy American middle class is getting priced out of the American Dream because of homeownership difficulty, implying the conflicts and negotiations of American middle class identity as well as the changing aspirations of the American Dream. The relational aspect of the American Dream to China indicated American identity emerged in relation to other identities such as the “threat” from China (one newspaper article entitled China threatens American Dream). These findings give insights into a new understanding of the American Dream in the 21st century which is different from or even contradicts with what dominant American identities and ideologies central to American Dream in the 20th century.

References

- Adams, J. T. (1931). *The epic of America*. New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Adolphs, S. (2006). *Introducing electronic text analysis: a practical guide for language and literary studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Archer, M., & Blau, J. R. (1993). Class formation in nineteenth-century America: The case of the middleclass. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 19, 17-41. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.19.080193.000313>
- Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2005). Identity and interaction: a sociocultural linguistic approach. *Discourse Studies*, 7(4-5), 585-614. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1461445605054407>
- Cheng, W., & Lam, P. W. Y. (2013). Western perceptions of Hong Kong ten years on: a corpus-driven critical discourse study. *Applied Linguistics*, 34(2), 173-190. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/applin/ams038>
- Cullen, J. (2003). *The American dream: a short history of an idea that shaped a nation*. New York: Oxford

University Press.

- Dervin, F. (2011). Cultural identity, representation and othering. In J. Jackson (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of intercultural communication* (pp. 181-194). Abingdon: Routledge.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203805640.ch11>
- Devos, T., Gavin, K., & Quintana, F. J. (2010). Say “adios” to the American dream? The interplay between ethnic and national identity among Latino and Caucasian Americans. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 16(1), 37-49. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0015868>
- Gilbert, D. (1998). *The American Class Structure*. New York: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Greaves, C. (2009). *ConcGram 1.0: A Phraseological Search Engine*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1075/z.159.17ind>
- Hochschild, J. L. (1995). *Facing up to the American dream: Race, class, and the soul of the nation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Johnson, H. B. (2006). *The American dream and the power of wealth*. New York: Routledge.
- Kroos, K. (2012). Becoming conscious of the American middle class (un)consciousness. *Integrative Psychological & Behavioral Science*, 46(3), 312-34. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12124-012-9206-y>
- O'Halloran, K. (2010). Investigating Argumentation in Reading Groups: Combining Manual Qualitative Coding and Automated Corpus Analysis Tools. *Applied Linguistics*, 32(2), 172-196.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/applin/amq041>
- Park, J. E. (2007). Co-construction of Nonnative Speaker Identity in Cross-cultural Interaction. *Applied Linguistics*, 28(3), 339-360. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/applin/amm001>
- Rayson, P. (2001). *Wmatrix: A web-based corpus processing environment*. Computing Department, Lancaster University.
- Schildkraut, D. J. (2007). Defining American Identity in the Twenty-First Century: How Much “There” is There? *The Journal of Politics*, 69(3), 597-615. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2007.00562.x>
- Schwarz, J. E. (1997). *Illusions of opportunity: the American dream in question*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Scott, M. (1999). *Wordsmith tools help manual, version 3.0*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sinclair, J. McH. (1991). *Corpus, concordance, collocation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wodak, R. (2011). Language, power and identity. *Language Teaching*, 45(2), 215-233.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0261444811000048>

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).