

Finding mentions of freedom in classic texts

By Gordon Rugg

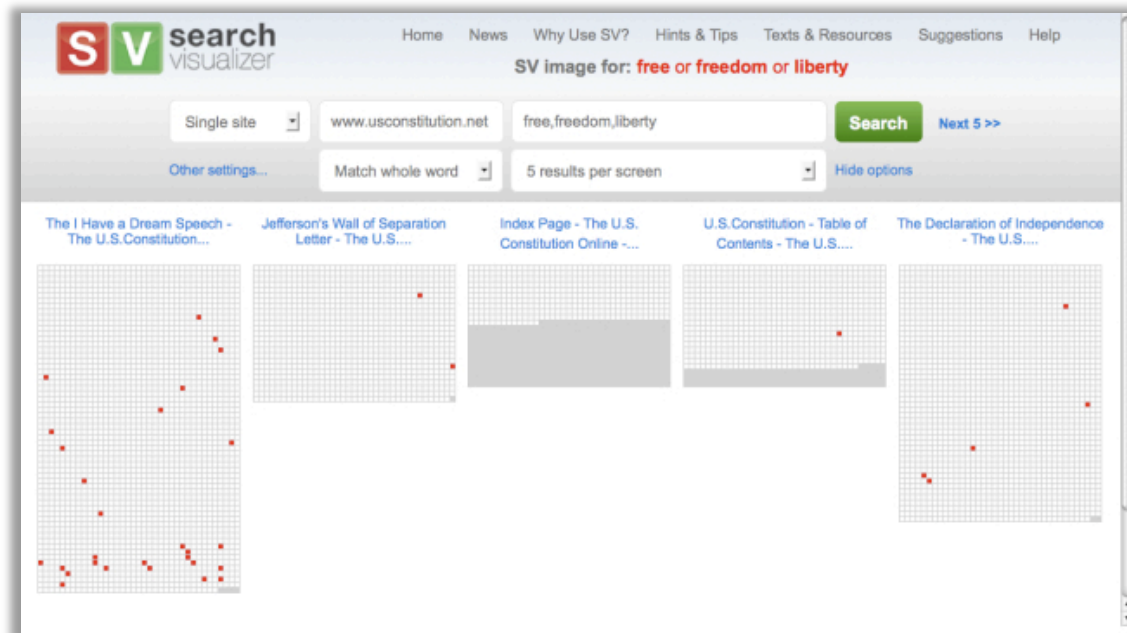
Background: This article shows how seeing where a word appears across a set of texts can give insights into issues such as the relative importance of that term in the different texts, and the contexts within which it is used across those texts.

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In this article, we look at mentions of freedom in some classic historical documents, and tease apart some concepts which can cause confusion.

The illustration below shows what happens when you use Search Visualiser to show mentions of words relating to freedom in some key documents from the history of the USA.

This search used the SV's "single site" feature to search the site *www.usconstitution.net* for mentions of *free*, *freedom* or *liberty* using the SV synonym feature, and set to find whole-word matches. The screenshot shows where these terms occur in each of the the first five documents found. The Declaration of Independence is on the right of the screenshot.



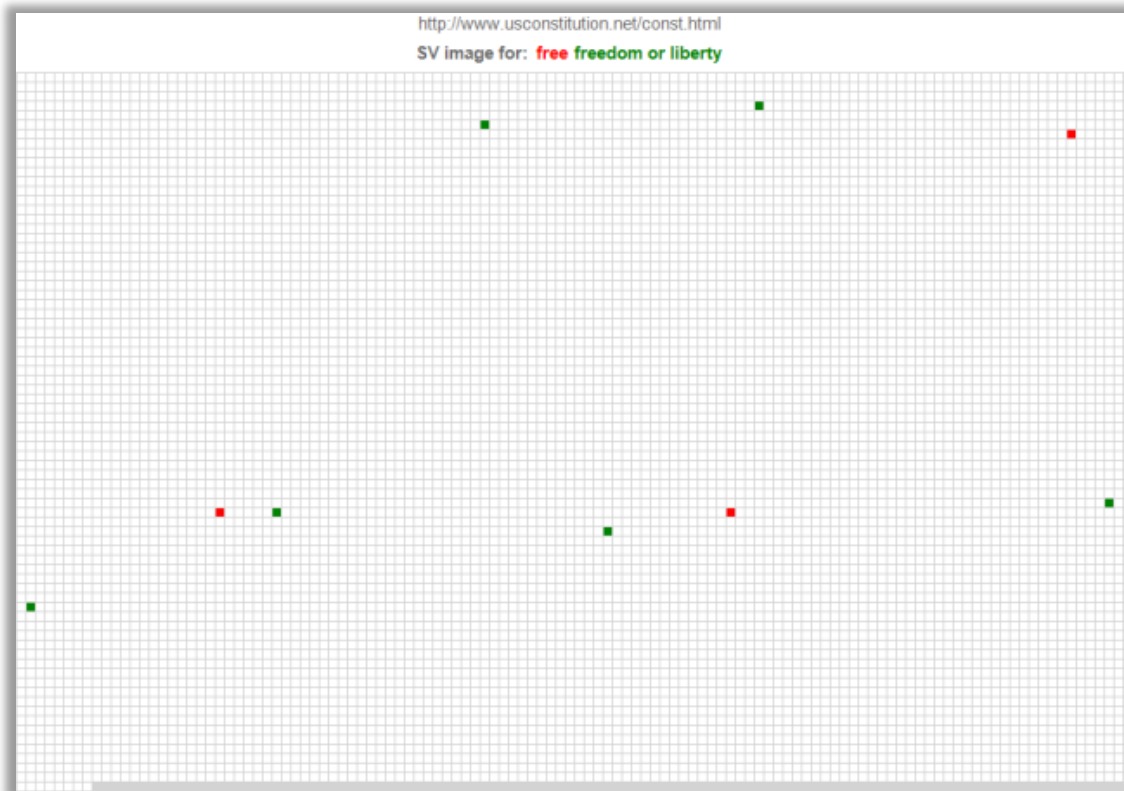
However, language has changed over the centuries, and some of the terms used have subtly shifted in meaning since the documents were written. A classic example is "free". If you look in detail at the text of Magna Carta in translation, there are mentions of "free man" which was a specific legal term at the time, distinguishing between "free men" and groups such as villeins.

The images below show what happens when you tease out this distinction by differentiating between mentions of *free* (which could be used either in the modern sense or in the old legal sense) and mentions of *freedom* or *liberty*, which are much more unambiguously about the modern sense.

The US Declaration of Independence mentions both concepts:



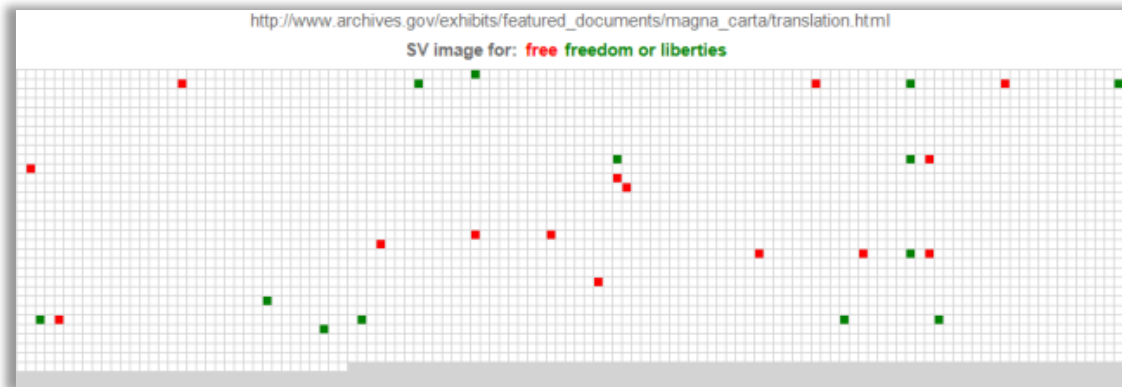
The US Constitution refers repeatedly to both *free* and to *freedom or liberty*.



The Declaration of Arbroath similarly mentions *free* and *freedom* or *liberty*.



The Magna Carta is slightly different. It mentions the word *free* numerous times, but it doesn't mention *freedom*, nor does it mention *liberty*. It does, however, mention *liberties*, in the plural, repeatedly.



So what does that mean? Among other things, it means that appeals to popular authorities, such as Magna Carta, need to be treated with caution. Concepts, like words, change over time, as historians know all too well.

Conclusion

We're well aware that this article scarcely scratches the surface of this huge, complex topic. However, it should demonstrate how representing texts in this manner can produce useful new insights. We've used English translations of the two documents above which were originally written in Latin; it will be interesting to see what happens when scholars start comparing documents across languages in this way.

Borrowing a misquote, much can, and doubtless will, be said about this...

Notes

The sites used for the single-site searches:

For the US Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution:

www.usconstitution.net

For the Declaration of Arbroath:

www.geo.ed.ac.uk/home/scotland

For the Magna Carta:

www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents

Search Visualiser:

The Search Visualiser is available for online use, free, at:

www.searchvisualiser.com