Letters in War: Analyzing Word Trends from the Battlefield

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Using digital tools in research, such as Voyant-tools.org, can add value to traditional methodology by assisting in finding trends or repetition in word uses and word choices of the letters’ authors, and delving deeper into understanding text by prying apart a vast data collection of these letters. The goal of this project is to support argument for my own personal thesis work, that published letters in book form during the war maintained a strong connection to the battlefields, and urged readers, who may be soldiers, to endure the fight. I feel that this was not the pulse of reality on the front lines, and with using digital methods with traditional research, a clearer picture of what they were actually thinking emerges when data mining the unpublished letters of soldiers.

The word cloud below was generated from the unpublished letters of Sam Riggins, a boy from Liberty, SC. The associated graphs begin in the 4th quarter of 1917, and ends with the 1st quarter of 1919. Riggins ended up back in the states in May because of medical reasons.

The use of the word ‘home’ diminished considerably after the first couple of months Riggins was in the army. Much like that of the published letters of Paul Jones. But what is noteworthy in this set of letters is the fact that the relative frequency of the use of the word ‘home’ is much higher that the use of the word ‘war.’

The secondary discovery from the text analysis is the use of the author’s words ‘write’ and ‘letter.’ The frequency of these words have its greatest use in the 3rd quarter of 1918 when Riggins is transferred to New York and then sent over to France. While he decreases his use of the word ‘home,’ he increases the domestic connection words ‘letter’ and ‘write.’ Would this be substitution words for ‘home?’

Examining the two graphs above provides a look into word trends within the published letters of the two words ‘war’ and ‘home.’ The first quarter on the graph is the third quarter of 1915, with the last quarter being the third quarter of 1917. [Paul Jones was killed in action by a sniper’s bullet in a battle on July 31, 1917.]

Connections to the home in these published letters was the greatest in the first months of 1916. The use of the word ‘war’ fluctuated and could be contributed to Jones’ reassignments that brought him closer to the front lines at certain points in his service. What is surprising to note is that the use of ‘war’ increased as the word ‘home’ decreased. Can this be because the text may have been used as propaganda?