Should Corpora be Big, Rich, or Dense?

Greg P. Kochanski[1], *Chilin Shih*[2], *Ryan Shosted*[2]

[1]The University of Oxford, UK
[2]The University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
greg.kochanski@phon.ox.ac.uk, cls@illinois.edu, rshosted@illinois.edu

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To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.
William Blake - Auguries of Innocence

Abstract

In this paper, we ask what properties make a large corpus more or less useful. We suggest that size, by itself, should not be the ultimate goal of building a corpus. Large-scale corpora are considered desirable because they offer statistical stability and rich variation. But this rich variation means more factors to control and evaluate, which can limit the advantages of size. We discuss the use of multi-channel data to complement large-scale speech corpora. Even though multi-channel data may limit the size of a corpus, due to the complex and labor-intensive nature of data collection, such corpora can offer information that allows us to tease apart various factors related to speech production.

Index Terms: corpora, experimental, linguistics, speech, articulation, large

1. Why use a Large Corpus?

Not too long ago, the concept of a large linguistic corpus did not exist; neither did the infrastructure necessary to build and maintain such a corpus. However, technology has advanced. Consider an enthusiastic human communicator who makes 200 hours of phone calls per month. Digitized at 16 bits, 16 kHz over a 90-year lifetime, this amounts to just 25 Terabytes, for a lifetime storage cost of ≈US$10,000.[1] Given a suitable speech recognition system, that lifetime of data could be transcribed (albeit with errors) if a similar amount of money were spent on computers and electricity. Likewise, it would be technically possible to capture and transcribe all the telephone speech of a nation. While political and ethical constraints will prevent researchers from acquiring an entire language, enormous corpora are suddenly within the realm of possibility, and we should think about their design.

In the past, speech corpora have been small; increasing the size tended to increase statistical power. If one is counting linguistic items,[2] 1000 examples ($N = 1000$) are much more informative than one, because they allow you to estimate the frequency of the word precisely,[3] whereas a single example gives only the crudest possible idea of how common the word is. Similarly, a single measurement of an acoustic property means little, because from it we learn nothing about variability. Ten samples allow us to measure variability in one dimension; one hundred or a thousand samples allow us to come up with multidimensional correlations.[4]

In principle, more repetitions of a word will always allow for a more precise measurement of the average properties of a sound, but the benefits of repetition taper off beyond $N = 1000$. Currently, we don't know any theories of speech variation that need to be tested by measurements at this level of precision. It is likely that theories of speech variation will never be this precise: and language is not part of the Newtonian "clockwork universe". Language changes with time, it has variations because each person grows up in their own unique linguistic environment, and because speech is sometimes intended to be unpredictable.

In natural speech (or near approaches to it), the frequency distributions often follow Zipf's law [1, 2]: There are a few items in a corpus that have a very high frequency, more items with lower frequencies, but most items have a very low frequency. One example is the distribution of words: The word "the" accounts for 5% of an English text corpus, but most words are more like "haggard", with frequencies near 0.0001%. Any particular word like "haggard" may not even appear in a corpus of less than a million words, even though such words (as a group) form much of the corpus.

We can define a boundary between "small" and "large" corpora by asking whether the most common items occur often enough ($N > 1000$) to allow for good measurements. In a small corpus, examples of all items are scarce; in a large corpus at least the most common items are sufficiently represented. The next natural step is a huge corpus, where most items have $N > 1000$. Large corpora are appearing; huge corpora are still rare unless the goal is restricted to the study of phones (Ta-

[1]Assuming no data compression, November 2010 storage costs, no future price reductions, and a disk lifetime of 10 years. With some compression, one can hold a lifetime of speech in the palm of one's hand.

[2]I.e. the frequency with which a word (or other linguistic items) occurs in a text. Or, more generally, the frequency of a particular word (or phone, phrase, accent, etc.) combination in a particular context.

[3]The confidence intervals and statistical significance of frequency measurements can be modeled by Poisson statistics, where the fractional accuracy of a frequency measurement is $N^{-1/2}$, where N is the number of occurrences of the items. So, $N = 1000$ occurrences allows you to measure an item's frequency within 3%.

[4]Automatic speech recognition (ASR) systems can benefit from somewhat more than 1000 instances of an object, because customers want their systems to work for everyone, even people speaking less-common dialects. Larger amounts of data help the system capture unusual sound combinations and rare pronunciations even within less-common dialects.

ble 1). Even the biggest current audio corpora, like the BNC [3] are just entering the "large" category if the goal is to study how one word affects another.

Table 1: Large and Huge phonetic corpora.

Research on:	How big is a "large" corpus?	...a "huge" corpus?
Individual phones	$> 10^3$ words	$> 10^5$ words
Triphones	$> 10^5$ words	$> 2 \cdot 10^6$ words
Triphones with prosody[5]	$> 10^6$ words	$> 4 \cdot 10^9$ words
Individual words	$> 3 \cdot 10^5$ words	$> 10^9$ words
Word bi-grams	$> 10^7$ words	$> 10^{15}$ words

If one starts with a minimally large corpus, because of Zipf's law there will be only a few items whose frequencies can be measured precisely. If we make the corpus bigger, this charmed circle of items with $N > 1000$ will slowly expand. So, very large corpora help studies of rare items – and recall that most linguistic items are rare. As can be seen in Table 1, one would need to expand the corpus by factors of hundreds, thousands, or even millions to be able to study an entire language, instead of studying merely its most frequent items.

2. Natural Speech vs. Experiments

The extreme amount of data needed for a huge corpus is a consequence of the rarity of many linguistic items (i.e. Zipf's law, interpreted broadly). But this is not a logical necessity, merely a description of the language that people produce in daily life. Techniques like sociolinguistic interviews (cf. [4]) and map tasks (cf. [5]) are useful to boost the frequency of a selected group of words while the speaker(s) still produce speech that is reasonably natural.

These approaches are steps along a continuum towards a laboratory experiment, where the speech is under the experimenter's control, and normally rare words and word combinations can be induced to occur as frequently as desired. So, for some purposes, laboratory experiments are far more efficient than a large corpus analysis. If a conclusion can be reached by examining a small fraction of the items in the language, and if these items can be easily induced, then an experiment may be appropriate.

But, experiments have difficulties beyond the possibility of phonetic differences between speech in a formal experiment and more natural situations (cf. [6]). An experiment and its associated analysis are typically designed to decide between two plausible hypotheses, chosen by the experimenter. When one hypothesis is rejected, researchers sometimes mistakenly assume the alternative is proven. This logic follows Sherlock Holmes' famous dictum, "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth" [7]. While misleading, the dictum is not strictly wrong, in the sense that the truth must be somewhere among whatever remains. However, Doyle (or Holmes?) was wrong to suggest that this was a useful way to solve difficult problems. It fails because when we apply it, our notion of "...whatever remains..." is limited by the human imagination, but the correct answer is not.

[5]Assuming several prosodic factors, such as stress, focus, distance from speaker to listener, and noise level.

The universe presents answers that people find hard to believe or imagine, so it is hard to anticipate them in order to turn them into an experimental hypothesis. In contrast, large speech corpora offer variations of language use and speech production that one does not need to imagine. With large natural corpora, it is possible to break out of the limitations of human imagination when the corpus turns up something unexpected.

3. Limits of Large Corpora

In addition to their advantages, large corpora have disadvantages, too. Expanding a corpus often introduces extra factors into a statistical analysis. A small corpus might be very uniform: it might be acquired in a short time, in a restricted location, with a carefully defined dialect, in a uniform speaking style, under controlled recording conditions. Large corpora often allow some of these factors to vary, either for practical reasons, or intentionally, as a way to explore their effect. But, with each new factor, one should allocate some of the data towards understanding the effect of the factor.

An (extreme) example can illustrate this point. Imagine a small corpus of English collected in Singapore, then double its size by adding American English. Singapore English is heavily influenced by its proximity to Chinese: it has different pronunciation, intonation, rhythm ([8], though see [9]) and word frequency. Any prosody research using the expanded corpus would probably be best done by partitioning the corpus into two halves, and analyzing each half separately. As a result, the expanded corpus will provide no better description of the prosody of Singapore English than the original.[6] This is an example where certain questions remain unanswerable, no matter how many dialects one adds to the corpus.[7]

Sometimes, if there are confounds amongst the extra factors, they do not even yield interesting comparisons. For instance, one can imagine a corpus intended to sample the speech that the average British person would hear in the 1970s. It might be comprised of informal middle class speech in the local dialect and formal RP speech from the BBC. Interpreting the difference between the two types of speech would be hindered because one would not know whether to attribute a difference to social class or to the formality of the presentation. Similar confounds between factors are common in speech data: the word pairs in a corpus are constrained by grammar, and the phone pairs in a word are limited to those present in the lexicon.[8]

So, though size may have benefits, extra, uncontrolled factors often present in a larger corpus will erase some of the ad-

[6]Of course, the hypothetical enlarged corpus will allow dialect-to-dialect comparisons for whichever prosodic properties can be measured in the original corpus. However, we would only be able to measure and publish those comparisons if the corpus reliably separates speakers of the two dialects. Many do not, and fall back upon self-reporting and/or geographic information (e.g. the British National Corpus).

[7]Under some conditions, with a large and diverse corpus, the research questions can be broadened from (e.g.) "properties of a dialect" to "properties of the language" when more dialects are added. However, this should only be done in cases where it is reasonably clear that these average properties are relevant to real individuals who speak the language. For instance, "small" and "wee" are equivalent words in two British dialects, and British English as a whole might use "wee" 0.1% of the time (Google statistics for "wee child" vs. "small child"), but there may not be any actual individuals who use those two words interchangeably at the population average rate.

[8]For instance, in a coarticulation experiment, one would like to be able to investigate all combinations of sounds to see how each sound affects all others. But most combinations are either unfamiliar to most speakers, or can only be formed across word boundaries.

vantage: rich variation in a corpus is not necessarily an advantage unless the goal is to study variation. For many purposes, one should think of a corpus in terms of the density of data per factor: the ratio between the size of a corpus and the number of combinations of relevant factors. If there is not enough data to support each factor, it will be impossible to find the best-fitting (possibly true), multi-factor explanation, no matter how large the corpus. In other words, the design of the corpus can be more important than its size, especially as we move through the range of large, into huge corpora.

4. Multi-Channel Data

Multi-channel data allow us to increase the density of data in a corpus; such data can be used to complement controlled experiments and large, speech-only databases. Of course, having multiple data channels is nothing new to speech scientists, because any audio signal can be interpreted as a group of related signals, e.g. the power in various frequency bands may each be treated as separate signals.[9]

By "multi-channel corpora" we mean corpora where other related signals are recorded along with the acoustics of speech. Data that can be recorded alongside speech acoustics include articulatory movement (Electromagnetic Articulography, ultrasound, fiberoscopy), linguopalatal contact (EPG), airflow and pressure, muscle activity (EMG), as well as facial and hand gestures.[10] In contrast to the large-scale speech corpus which is "horizontally rich" we view multi-channel data as "vertically" rich.[11]

Acoustic signals we record tell us something about the state of the oral articulators, but it is well-known that they render incomplete information. For instance, multiple articulatory configurations can generate virtually the same acoustic signal [10, 11]. This means, for instance, that one cannot deduce the state of the articulators from 100 milliseconds of a speech signal.[12]

The ambiguity can become harder to resolve when one tries to deduce features of the language that are deeper than articulatory positions. For example, when an English speaker emphasizes a word, he or she may increase the word's duration. But long durations are also associated with final lengthening and focus. So (absent other information), the cause of a long syllable is ambiguous. Likewise, loudness can be associated with focus, emphasis, or low vowels, so observation of loudness alone does not clearly indicate the prosodic function. Fant put it neatly: "The translation from speech wave back to articulation is to some extent restricted by the existence of compensatory forms of articulation…A deeper insight into the potentialities of this aspect of the physiological interpretation of spectrograms must rely on extensive correlative work" [13, p. 209].

In some cases, the function of a gesture can be deduced by comparing several aspects of an acoustic signal. But humans experience richer communication in person than over the telephone, so there is good reason to believe that face, hand, and arm gestures are an important part of our communication. They may carry information of their own in addition to disambiguating the acoustics. To pick a trivial example, one cannot easily convey a shrug over the telephone. That information is either lost to the listener, or the speaker adapts to the communication channel and packages the information into some other form.

Multi-channel data can be especially important when there are trade-off relationships between different factors. For example, while duration, loudness, and f_0 are recognized (across languages) as important acoustic correlates of stress or emphasis, a speaker does not need to use all these factors at the same time to convey linguistic meaning. This might be implemented as a trade-off relationship where if a speaker lengthens the duration for emphasis, changes in loudness or f_0 would be unnecessary. Given such a trade-off, any one measurement (e.g. duration) would show large amounts of variation across emphasized syllables, but the correct combination of multiple properties would add up to some gestalt of emphasis with much less uncontrolled variability.[13]

Also, the articulatory-acoustic mapping is nonlinear (cf. [10, 14]) This means that (for instance) a change of 1 mm can be easily perceived in the confines of a narrow airway, but may be acoustically undetectable in an open airway. However, if one has formant information along with articulatory information, the formant information can provide a detailed view of the articulation near closure, and the articulatory measurements will constrain hypotheses about what may be going on when the airway is open.[14]

Overall, adding data beyond audio measurements into a corpus can provide substantial information that is not otherwise available. From the perspective of data density, this data brings along a minimum of extra factors because it is a simultaneous view of the exact same instance of a word. Contrast this with a horizontal expansion of a corpus: one can multiply instances of the same word in a larger corpus, but there is no reason to believe these new instances are equivalent to the existing instances.[15] They are uttered in new conditions (typically we must introduce new factors to describe these conditions),[16] or simply uttered differently because of unexplained instance-to-instance variation.

When a second instance of a word is added to a corpus, one cannot determine if it is identical to the first word without spending some of the data's explanatory power. In effect, one must introduce new factors that describe the differences between pairs of potentially identical words and these give rise to new questions. Potentially, every pair of words comes with the implicit question, "Are these words linguisti-

[9] As in an MFCC front end for a speech recognition system.

[10] Part-of-speech annotation and other annotation might also count for something here, though such annotation carries relatively little information.

[11] Horizontally = large in terms of time; Vertically = large in terms of the number of measurements per time point. Data are typically plotted on the y-axis against time.

[12] Note that with longer speech signals, it is sometimes possible to use the idea that the motions of the articulators must be smooth and continuous to remove some ambiguities. See [12].

[13] Strong trade-off relationships (to the extent that they exist) are important because they indicate that variability in certain combinations of acoustic parameters is linguistically unimportant. Absent knowledge of the trade-off, this variability would likely be interpreted as a difference in meaning or function.

[14] One might reasonably ask, "Why do the articulatory details matter if it has no acoustic consequences when the airway is nearly open ?" First, your conversation partner may be watching you, so jaw opening may count as a facial gesture. Second, even for telephone speech, the width of opening is related to the velocity of the following closure, which may have audible consequences.

[15] Indeed, if there is a relevant trade-off relationship that involves non-acoustic data, then one might well falsely conclude that two instances did not have equivalent meanings or functions.

[16] Having metadata about the utterances will clearly help, but it should be noted that metadata derived from the audio is not strictly new, independent information.

cally/functionally/phonologically equivalent or not?"[17] On the other hand, if multiple, simultaneous measures of a related signal are added, each measure corresponds to the original word. There is no question regarding the identity of the word, it is merely being viewed from a different angle.[18]

5. Conclusion

Large corpora are better than small corpora, all other things being equal. But, other things are often not equal: large corpora often are more varied than small corpora, and this extra variation brings in new factors that need to be understood; evaluating these factors requires expenditure of some of the data in the corpus. In some cases, the increase in the number of unknown factors can cancel out the benefits of increased size. So, while size generally helps, that is not always the case, and the design of a corpus can be very important. Adding simultaneous, multichannel data to a corpus is a very effective way of increasing the amount of data, with a minimal increase in the number of new factors. Especially in cases where trade-offs are important or interpretation is ambiguous, multi-channel corpora with a relatively small number of items may have a comparable value to much larger acoustic-only corpora.

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[17] Clearly, this question brings in a number of factors that is at least proportional to the size of the corpus, so it limits the density of data per factor that one could achieve, even in an infinite corpus.

[18] There will, typically, be some data spent to determine the relationship between acoustic and articulatory measurements. However, that is often more like an initial calibration, and one does not have a new increment of uncertainty with each new instance.

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