Shifts in Objectivity in the Press:

Language Usage in the *New Times York* from 1851 through 1995

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INTRODUCTION: Objectivity and its links to language.

The ideal of objectivity is a principal component of Western journalism; even

though there are varying definitions of the concept and debates over its usefulness and

attainability (Ericson, 1998; Hindman, 1998; Durham, 1998; Patterson & Donsbach,

1996; Byerly & Warren, 1996; Althaus, Edy, Entman, Phalen, 1996; Gauthier, 1993;

Hackett, 1994; Westerstahl, 1993; Hemanus, 1976), journalists' work is evaluated at

least in part according to what Westerstahl (1993) called "standards of objectivity."

However, Boyer's (1981) argument still rings true: given its importance to the profession,

there is relatively little empirical research investigating the objectivity of the press.

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Most definitions of objectivity and most operationalizations of the concept in research studies consider a news story to be objective if it is accurate, balanced, fair, and complete. This conceptualization is evident in the work of Boyer (1981), Doll & Bradley (1974), Drew (1975), Merrill (1985), McManus (1981), and others. Westerstahl, (1993) on the other hand, has presented a schematic model of objectivity which seems to be more detailed and therefore perhaps more useful than other conceptualizations of objectivity.

Westerstahl (1993) posits that objectivity is a combination of two distinct requirements: factuality and impartiality. Factuality consists of the subrequirements of truth and relevance, while impartiality consists of the subrequirements of balance/non-partisanship and neutral presentation. One of the strengths of Westerstahl's model is its acknowledgment that "not all subrequirements apply in all cases, nor to an equal degree, nor in the same manner." Thus, researchers must determine which of the possible objectivity requirements are at issue in a particular case.

Yet even though Westerstahl indicates that not all subrequirements apply in all cases, one subrequirement seems universally applicable: that of neutral presentation. Hemanus (1976) interprets this subrequirement broadly, and argues that "neutral presentation is avoiding emotional words and words with connotations which are tendentious." Thus language usage and word choice is clearly linked with objectivity.

It therefore follows that an analysis of the words contained within news stories would provide a valid indication of the level of objectivity in the reporting of the news. (This analysis of words is not intended as an argument against analysis of the objectivity of visual images contained in the news as seen in Schwartz (1992).) Further, a linguistic analysis of news content would be particularly valuable if it were to occur over time, and

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facilitate an investigation and comparison of shifts in objectivity across different eras in journalistic history.

Moreover, it would be useful to add control by studying the same newspaper over time, particularly if it has remained influential among other news organizations in its projection of journalistic standards. The *New York Times*, for these reasons, provides a good source of data for a study such as we conduct here.

The model which most clearly guides this investigation is one presented by de Bonville's (unpublished) in an analysis of Canadian journalism history. We had the manuscript translated from French, but Gauthier (1993) also describes his work. The researcher argues that the press has experienced three main phases--editorial journalism, information journalism, and entertainment journalism. de Bonville's phases provide an apparently useful demarcation of different periods in journalistic history.

THREE PHASES: Editorial journalism, information journalism, and entertainment journalism.

Editorial journalism, or the journalism of opinion, flourished prior to 1930. According to de Bonville, opinion journalism received its legitimacy from freedom of speech and from the confrontation of ideas in a public democratic space. Particularly at the end of the phase, opinion journalism was abetted by technological advances and increases in both industrialization and urbanization, which increased interest for the news and allowed news to be rapidly disseminated. Thus the audience for news grew substantially--and the press wanted to encourage the public's appetite.

Indeed, Schiller (1979) argued that the fundamental goal of the penny press was to attain business success, and that the primary means of doing so was to interest the reader. However, this eventually went too far. As Schiller put it, "The newspaper itself was making unprecedented concessions to private necessity, in the form of stunts, gimmickry, sensation, and overt and incessant self-advertisement (p. 55)."

Thus we would expect to see, in the language of the news, attempts to appeal to a broad audience, just as may be evident in the entertainment journalism phase. However, the audience during the editorial journalism phase would not appear to be like the media-savvy news consumer of the late 20th century. Perhaps the naivete of the early audience led to broad acceptance of blatant editorialism. Perhaps the political climate in the U.S. at that time contributed to the public's embrace of a jingoistic press. Whatever the cause, the news has been characterized as both emotional and opinionated, so we expect this to be reflected in the news language of the period.

The emphasis on audience-building, even at this early stage of journalism, supports McManus' (1991) economic theory of organizational self-interest for commercial news corporations. Such corporations wish to maximize profits and minimize production costs. McManus' theory assumes that news is a commodity. News is the product of two transactions, the first of which is central to the present study: "Producers trade news content for consumer attention -- and subscription fees for some print media (p. 25)." McManus argues that there are several ways in which profitability of the news corporation might be increased, including protection or promotion of large advertisers, protection or promotion of information concerning the news organization or its parent corporation, taking shortcuts in the news gathering process, and, importantly for the present study,

"efforts to increase the audience draw of the story through exaggeration, appeals to emotion or aesthetics (p. 25)."

Information journalism was dominant from 1930-1965. According to de Bonville, the journalism of information is based on the principle of objectivity, and represents a paradigmatic shift. Streckfuss (1990) emphasizes that the concept of objectivity arose in reaction to an increasingly jingoistic press; "objectivity was an antidote to what liberals saw as newspaper emotionalism and sensationalism (p. 976)." In objective journalism, de Bonville argues, there should be consonance between the event and its report. Further, such objective information has a universal character and addresses all readers universally; it does not make any distinction among readers.

The language of news during this period would be expected to reflect this universal, singular, mass conceptualization of the audience. Mass industrial development required societal groups predicated on age and class. The dominant social group (white, middle-aged, middle-class males) was seen as the norm. Language during this phase could be less contextually rich, or more "objective," with less interpretive descriptive richness.

Entertainment journalism, according to de Bonville, reflects a period during which journalism adapts to the demands of a consumer and leisure society. This term, entertainment journalism is taken from Gauthier (1993) and his description of de Bonville's work. de Bonville considered the sub-phases in this period as reflecting subjectivity, criticism, analysis, commercialism, sensationalism, and entertainment.

By 1965, information journalism and its underlying epistemology of objectivity had been seriously questioned. Thus, de Bonville suggests that the entertainment journalism period began in earnest in the mid-1960s, and continues to this day. During this period,

many daily papers were purchased by large corporations, and professional managers became the decision makers. As de Bonville put it, financial and managerial logic replaced newsroom logic. Even the journalists themselves have become convinced that they can't ignore the marketplace, and they must respond to public demands.

Importantly, this public has become diverse, and journalists have to strive to meet the needs of a wide variety of consumers. An expressive style of writing, one which is attractive to the reader, may be evident. The possible return to subjectivity in this phase may be attributed at least in part to the demassification of the audience. Evidence shows that societal groupings or cohorts are not so much age-based but increasingly information- or content-based (Danowski & Ruchinkas, 1983). This would amplify the need for news content to diversify and appeal to these varied cohorts. Further, news media must compete not only with other traditional outlets, but also with emerging technologies which provide news access to an information-hungry public. News language may need to be more speculative and suggestive to attract audiences and cut through the multimedia clutter, even if this language may strive for neutrality at a higher intellectual level.

There may well be differences between the subjective language of the entertainment journalism phase and that of the editorial journalism phase. Perhaps in contemporary times, opinionation is muted by commercial interests which do not wish to lose audiences due to political incorrectness. Perhaps the emotional field is now pitched to more base levels (sensationalism) because that is safer in terms of avoiding audience alienation and it appeals to a more base common-emotional denominator. Thus, perhaps because of audience and commercial structural constraints, the language of the entertainment journalism phase may be more reflective of basic emotional expressiveness

and sensationalization than is the language of the editorial journalism phase, which may well have been more overt and "flaming" opinionation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research analyzes the language of The *New York Times* to investigate shifts in objectivity over the three phases presented by de Bonville. We have chosen to focus on one media outlet in order to control for variations across newspapers, and we have selected The *New York Times* because of its position as a well-respected and high-quality national newspaper, even though it is less likely than the "non-prestige" press to reflect the marked language swings we are investigating.

This research is guided by three questions, each of which asks whether there is evidence that the information journalism phase is more objective than the editorial journalism phase and the entertainment journalism phase. Questions rather than hypotheses are posed, because this research is initial and exploratory. At the same time, there are problems in choice of appropriate statistical tests; most widely known tests have assumptions which are violated by the dependence among words observed in language. There are rules of syntax and pragmatic usages that violate independence assumptions when words are used as units of analysis. Although most statistical language research assumes tests such as the t-test and z-test for proportions adequately robust under these conditions, rather than devote this paper to such statistical issues, we decided not

to use statistical significance tests, and therefore, posed questions rather than hypotheses. The differences in relative frequencies can be qualitatively judged by the reader as to whether they provide evidence pertinent to the questions posed.

RQ1: Does the information journalism (1930-1965) phase contain less language that reflects feelings, values, and emotions than either the editorial (pre-1930) and the entertainment journalism (1966-present) phases?

RQ2: Does the information journalism (1930-1965) phase contain less personalized language than either the editorial (pre-1930) and the entertainment journalism (1966-present) phases?

RQ3: Does the information journalism (1930-1965) phase contain less relativistic and speculative language than either the editorial (pre-1930) and the entertainment journalism (1966-present) phases?

Objectivity of news language is conceptually defined, based on the work of Westerstahl (1993) and Hemanus (1976), as the avoidance of "emotional words and words with connotations which are tendentious." We operationalize objective news language as language which is not highly personalized, not relativistic, and which does not focus on feelings, values, or emotions.

Objective news language is less emotional than is subjective news language. Therefore, as objectivity decreases, we should see an increase in words reflecting feelings, values, and emotions. Besides an increase in the use of language focusing on feelings, values, and emotions, subjective news language is asserted to be more personalized than is objective news language. Fundamentally, subjectivity deals with individual interpretations of situations; in less objective eras we would expect to see language which not only

reflects the individuality of the reporter but also the individuality of the audience member. Thus we should observe, as objectivity decreases, an increased personalization of language as evidenced by greater use of first and second person pronouns. Conversely, as objectivity increases more use of the third person pronouns would occur.

Also, contextualizing, interpreting, and framing the news for the reader may reflect a lessening of objectivity. As objectivity decreases, we may observe an increase in the use of speculative language about possible causes and effects, contingency, qualification, and future possibilities regarding news events and issues covered. Finally, subjectivity may also be reflected in an increased use of relativism. We would expect fewer definitive articles and more indefinite references. Tentative language as represented by words such as "could," or "might" likely reflect relativism and thus subjectivity. Accordingly, use of the subjunctive moods of grammar will be less frequent in more objective times. Interpretation and comparative language will occur more in less objective periods.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling of the New York Times

Microfilm copies of the *New York Times* are available from 1851 to the present. We decided to sample from each year of the available 144 years of publication of the newspaper. A table of random numbers was used to select a single date, September 15,

from which stories would be analyzed for each year. Use of a single date serves to control for possible seasonal variations in news language use. For each year on September 15, we typed into ascii computer files samples of text from the front page of the paper. We entered approximately the first 100 words from each of five stories selected on the front page. Selection criteria were as follows.

All stories dealing with local New York topics were included, to increase the likely language variability across stories. The remaining stories that were non-wire stories or stories labeled as "special to the *New York Times*" were selected if most prominently placed on the front page, as judged by headline size and number of column inches. This sampling procedure resulted in a sufficient number of words for each of the three periods of study that Zipf (1949) found adequate for general statistical linguistic analysis: 10,000 words or more per unit of comparison. The first period sample contained 15,024 words, the second 17,439, and the third 14,595, for a total word sample of 47,058.

Wordlink Analysis

Danowski's Wordlink programs (1993) were used for the content analysis. All words were counted in each period. No "stop" or drop list of words was used. All word frequencies, down to 1 occurrence per comparison period, were retained. No stemming or other transformation of raw words was performed. Also, adjacent pairs of words were tabulated. This shows the context in which a word appeared. Relative frequencies (percentages) were used to normalize the count data across periods. For example, the

most frequent word, "the," occurred at a rate of 10 times per hundred words in the first

period, expressed as a normalized frequency of .10. A word that occurred 10 times per

thousand words would have a normalized frequency of .010; a word occurring once per

thousand words would have a normalized frequency score of .001, once per 10,000 words

at .0001, etc. If a word of interest did not occur at a rate of at least 3 times per 10,000

words -- a normalized score of .0003 -- in at least one of the periods of observation, then

the word was not retained in this analysis.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: Emotional language

The first research question asked whether the information journalism period

contained less emotive language. Table 1 shows the normalized frequencies of words we

used to explore operationalization of emotive language. T1 is the editorial period, T2 is

the information period, and T3 is the entertainment period. The research questions posed

inverted u-shaped relations across the three periods, not linear relations. In other words,

the T2 column should contain lower relative frequencies than the T1 and T3 columns.

Table 1. Feelings, Values and Emotions vs. Facts

Normalized Frequencies

T1	T2	T3

```
very              .0017 .0002 .0005
enthusiasm        .0004 .0001 .0000
feeling           .0003 .0001 .0000
believe           .0005 .0000 .0000
know              .0007 .0002 .0001
fact(s)           .0002 .0004 .0000
good              .0009 .0003 .0002
said              .0013 .0032 .0079
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Table 1 reveals evidence in support of the expected inverted u-shaped curve for the modifier word, "very." Other emotive words show monotonic declines over the three time periods. In contrast, evidence of a u-shaped curve is seen for the objective words, "fact(s)." As suggested by the literature, these words peaked in T2. By T3 "fact(s)" does occur not all per 10,000 words sampled. The word, "said" shows monotonic increases over the three time periods. The word more than doubles in relative frequency from time period to time period. Why this is the case presents interesting avenues for future research. It could be reflective of space constrictions over time. "Said" takes up less space than "according to," etc. Another possibility is that using more quotes adds to the human interest of the news, and is more entertaining to read people's supposed own words, than summarized or paraphrased accounts of them.

Research Question 2: Personalization

As seen in Table 2, first and second person pronouns show monotonic declines across the three time periods. "I, my, we, our, us, you" all were relatively more frequent in T1, the editorial phase. But, T3 showed no rebound except for a slight increase in the

word, "we." This result was consistent with the expectation suggested by the research question. On the other hand, third person words, "he" and "it" show flatness across the three periods. In contrast, "she" shows an order of magnitude increase in the entertainment period, T3. This may reflect decreased use of sexist language in that period. It may also result from an increased participation of women in the work force, making them more likely subjects in newsworthy events. The plural third person pronouns, "they" and "them" do show evidence of the inverted u-shaped relation stated in the research question. Their usage is relatively lowest during the information T2 period, dropping by more than half from the editorial T1 phase, but again rebounding in the T3 entertainment phase.

Table 2. Pronoun Usage

Normalized Frequencies

	T1	T2	T3
i	.0018	.0005	.0004
my	.0005	.0001	.0001
we	.0023	.0005	.0007
our	.0033	.0005	.0002
us	.0008	.0001	.0001
you	.0003	.0001	.0001
he	.0063	.0058	.0053
she	.0002	.0002	.0010
it	.0068	.0056	.0048
they	.0029	.0010	.0032
them	.0017	.0005	.0012

Research Question 3: Relativism, Contingency, Speculation

Notable in Table 3 is the increasing subjunctive mood and interpretive word use seen in the T3 entertainment phase, evidenced in tripling of the relative frequency of "could," doubling of "might" and "should," compared to the T2 information phase. Of these three subjunctive words, "could" and "should" show the inverted u-shaped trend over the three periods, indicating lowest use during the information phase. "Might" shows a monotonic increase across the three periods, suggestive of more speculative news language in the T3 entertainment period. On the other hand, "supposed" "but" and "purpose" show u-shaped curves indicative of declines in usage during the T2 information periods, with relatively higher usage during the T1 editorial and somewhat of a muted rebound during the T3 entertainment phase.

Table 3. Subjunctive Words and Interpretive Words

	Normalized Frequencies		
	T1	T2	T3
could	.0005	.0003	.0009
might	.0001	.0004	.0010
should	.0004	.0002	.0005
supposed	.0004	.0000	.0001
but	.0033	.0016	.0027
purpose	.0006	.0001	.0003

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Findings

This research found evidence, systematically and statistically examining news language in the *New York Times* from 1851 to 1995, which supports the use of more objective language in the 1930-1965 period. The use of the words "fact" or "facts" was double that of the editorial phase, and by the entertainment dropped to virtually zero, below 1 occurrence per 10,000 words.

Also, in the entertainment period, news language has become more suggestive and speculative, as indicated by increased use of subjunctive mood words, "could," "might," and "should". Also, there is increased use of the word "said," which may be the result of more direct quotes used to increase the human interest, entertainment value of news. Moreover, the use of singular third person female gender word, "she" increased fivefold in the recent period. This may reflect less gender bias in favor of males. Or, it could be reflective of more women in the work force, and therefore more likely news objects and subjects. At the same time, readership studies show that women, compared to men, read more "human interest" stories. Such an increase in entertainment news is perhaps related to the large increase in the feminization of the third person singular voice in the news.

Limitations

The *New York Times* front pages mostly contain "hard" news. This made it more difficult to detect evidence bearing on the research questions. In this sense, this limitation

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is a strength for this research in terms of what would be type 1 error minimization, were

we testing hypotheses rather than examining research questions. Another characteristic of

the *New York Times* front page stories is that they are more likely to contain world or

national news than many daily papers in the USA. The *New York Times* does, however,

generally have at least one local New York story somewhere on its front page. Yet, there

is infrequent appearance of what would be judged "entertainment-oriented" news on this

paper's front page.

Nevertheless, the *New York Times* is considered by many journalists to serve -- on

a daily basis -- as a model for news selection and presentation by other media. As such,

we thought it appropriate to begin our research in this arena using this particular source of

news. One would expect that wider journalistic license would be taken in papers serving

less as "newspapers of record."

Polysemy Resolution

Many words have multiple meanings, depending on the context in which they are

used. Such polysemy of words cannot be resolved when words are looked at outside of

their linguistic context. The use of word pairs, showing the collocations of words, is how

computational linguists generally now resolve polysemy. The Wordlink program used in

this research computes all word cooccurrences within a window on either side of a target

word. Here words were analyzed in context of the words on either side of each word.

These bigrams are useful in resolving polysemic words. Such analysis was performed in

this research, and words were checked to see that they had the meaning intended by the

operational definitions. Nevertheless, most of the words used in this research are typically

not highly polysemous, because they are basic function words that reflect syntactical certainty. For example, pronouns have low polysemy. There is infrequently ambiguity as to the meaning of words such as: "I, you, he, she" etc.

The Significance of This Study and Implications for Future Research

Most noteworthy to us as a subject of future research is the finding that in the entertainment news phase we see a doubling and tripling in use of subjunctive words "could" "might" and "should." This is empirical evidence consistent with a proposition that textually-rich newspaper media may be increasing the use of damped speculative and judgmental language, so that while attempting to maintain their traditional credibility, they compete more directly with newer multimedia, such as television and the Internet, the latter more able to communicate emotional content to audiences attracted to a more virtual and more imaginary dream-like world, where fact and fiction meld more seamlessly in a multimedia web of fascination.

This increase in speculative and suggestive styles led us to possible theoretical explanations rooted in attribution theories in social psychology. Newtson (1976) addresses the question of how the continuous undifferentiated stream of physical stimulation that impinges on human senses is rendered into discrete, discriminable, describable actions. and presents a theoretical model for the process of behavior perception, and implications for theories of attribution of causality. Such research demonstrates that people appear motivated to sense-making. Even when presented with randomly generated information, they want to create a story the fills in the blanks in a

plausible way. In the entertainment news phase, stimulation of this reader involvement in weaving together possible explanations and attributions of causality is worthy of further research. Such attribution formation may be fundamentally more entertaining for readers than simply reading the "facts" stressed in the informative news phase.

The findings about "might," "could," and "should" led us to propose that such an news processing orientation may be enhanced in an environment where conspiratorial and paranoid thinking is more widely spread through interpersonal networks, talk shows, and chat rooms (Goertzel, 1994; Ferguson & Bowermaster, 1994; Sasson, 1994). Institutional trust has eroded in societies during the entertainment news phase (Platteau, 1994; Zucker, 1986; Triandis, Feldman, Weldon & Harvey, 1975). As institutional trust declines, audiences may be more attracted, even expect, more use of suggestive and speculative news language. Consistent with this trend is the observation that journalists themselves have become more distrustful of government sources, or at least tend to take points of view while peparing stories that are in opposition to government information (Althaus, Edy, Entman, Phalen, 1996).

Nevertheless, there may have been some origins of this contemporary entertainment style in the earlier informative news period, from 1930-1965. Perhaps some news from the information period planted which more pure seeds of fact, were nurtured later into more of a suggestive and speculative style by the cultural composting of recycled popular culture that seems to have flourished alongside the entertainment phase of news language.

Moreover, some of this increased use of "might," "could," and "should" news language may be rooted back to the informative phase in another way. The blend of some

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black, white, and gray propaganda from the hot and cold war information era may have evolved into the entertainment films of the current era that do more docu-dramas, more pseudo documentaries, purported to be based on fact, but also embellished with fiction or a particular speculative spin. Movies such as those about John F. Kennedy, Jimmy Hoffa, and other subjects of the informative news period are developed contemporary vertically-integrated information refinery corporations, that own news, movie, music, theme park, sports, and other entertainment enterprises. President Eisenhower's warnings about the military-industrial complex in his farewell speech seem now superceded by more shrill warnings from many quarters about the threats of the media-industrial complex nurtured during the past several years. The growth of these kinds of organizations are consistent with the theorizing of de Bonville about the reasons for the transition to the entertainment news phase.

Other News Outlets

Unlike as in the *New York Times*, we expect that some of the greatest variation in news language treatment may be with the local papers. These are likely to show more variation than either the tabloid or prestige press. Perhaps the most marked shifts might be found in local papers--not the national prestige press, not the national tabloids, but the papers of the city and region, the papers of Chicago, Indianapolis, Boston, Houston, Muncie, Peoria, Fort Lauderdale, Manchester NH, etc. Additionally, these local papers are the papers that most people read on a daily basis. So, future research tying news

language to audience language and thought might best be conducted with smaller market papers because of the likelihood of greater language variation there.

We also could do with a good solid comparison between the tabloids and the prestige press. We also should analyze the language of television news--the Roper Studies show that TV is increasingly the most important source of news for the american public. We can analyze TV news language on its own; we can compare TV news language in different markets; we can compare tv news language to print news language. We could also compare print news language in different markets: small versus large, rural versus urban, traditionally Democratic versus traditionally Republican. We can compare the language in newspapers that differ in the amount of space devoted to editorials. There are alot of future avenues of research that look empirically at both news language and audience language.

More sophisticated linguistic analysis tools should also be used. Parsing sentences by parts of speech, measuring use of adjectives and adverbs, and other such more refined language analysis merits. This research found differences in rather mundane word use using comparisons of normalized frequencies, using a news outlet unlikely to show as much variation as others. By "stacking the cards against ourselves," so to speak, in this initial empirical analysis of news language over time, we have demonstrated the likely fruitfulness of future research that uses more refined statistical techniques, and more varied news outlets. Future research can move forward expecting to find even more useful evidence to support theories of mass communication, as more sophisticated designs are used. Nevertheless, we found interesting news language changes having theoretical significance even though we used rather crude tools and narrow content.

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APPENDIX

Wordlink Parameter Settings and Log File Results

```
Text file name:                nyta txt

Drop list file name:           none

Select list file name:         nyt sel

Drop words < frequent than:    1

Drop pairs < frequent than:    1

Preserve wordpair order:       yes

Include numbers as words:      no

Link until sentence end:       yes

Link steps:                    1

Linkage Strength Method:       1

Total words in case  01:       0015024

Unique words in case 01:       0003652

Total pairs in case  01:       0014312

Unique pairs in case 01:       0010596

Total words in case  02:       0017439

Unique words in case 02:       0004150

Total pairs in case  02:       0016680

Unique pairs in case 02:       0012685

Total words in case  03:       0014595
```

Unique words in case 03:   0003686

Total pairs in case 03:   0013976

Unique pairs in case 03:   0010852