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# "A volitional interference": A Corpus-Assisted Discourse Study on Birth Control in Edwardian England<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

The Edwardian period (1901-ca.1910) saw numerous social changes that deeply transformed Britain and its society. A series of reforms that what would lay the foundations of the welfare state constituted a widespread source of public debate throughout the British press. Birth control was among the most debated topics. Though criminalised in 1861, abortion remained the most common birth control practice among working-class and upper-class women. Among the existing studies on abortion and birth control practices between the Victorian age and the Edwardian period, there is no evidence of a quantitative and qualitative linguistic analysis of their representation in the Edwardian press. This study aims at contributing to the existing body of research in historical news discourse and historical pragmatics by combining corpus linguistics and corpus-assisted discourse analysis to examine a corpus of letters to the editor on birth control published in the Edwardian British press, to show the recurrent linguistic patterns through which birth control was represented in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century news discourse.

**Keywords:** Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis, Historical News Discourse, Historical Pragmatics, Letters to the Editor, Well-being

## *Introduction*

The Edwardian period (1901-ca.1910) marked a significant transition in British society, characterized by a range of social, political, and technological changes. This era, though short, witnessed the emergence of several reforms that would later lay the foundation for the modern welfare state. From a growing emphasis on public health to education and labour reforms, the well-being of Britain's less affluent social classes increasingly

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became a focus of attention (Thompson 1984; Boyer 2019). These reforms aimed to address social inequalities and improve the living standards of the working class, but they also sparked public debate across various sectors of society (Priestley 2000). One of the primary platforms for such debates was the British press, which played a pivotal role in both reflecting and shaping public opinion on these transformative changes (Hampton 2004; Facchinetti *et al.* 2015).

The press of the Edwardian era was not only a mirror of societal concerns but an active agent in disseminating information on these reforms. Newspapers and periodicals reached a broad audience, and their coverage often extended beyond the elite, penetrating the lives of the working classes (O'Malley 2020). The well-being of society, in particular, became a pressing theme in the media, as it provided a lens through which the British public could engage with the broader socio-political transformations occurring around them. Through this medium, discussions on health, poverty, labour rights, and access to education proliferated, providing the public with knowledge and often provoking calls for further reforms (Bingham and Conboy 2015).

One of the most contentious issues disseminated through the Edwardian press was the subject of birth control, especially abortion. Although abortion had been criminalized under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act – punishable with severe penalties – its practice persisted across social strata, particularly among working-class and upper-class women. For many women, abortion remained the most common method of birth control, despite the legal and moral consequences associated with it. The unsanitary conditions and rudimentary medical techniques often employed in these procedures resulted in significant risk to the women involved, frequently leading to their death. These tragedies, in turn, generated scandals that were widely reported and sensationalized in the press, feeding the ongoing public debate on the issue (Friedman and Fann 2024; Michael-Berger 2023).

While extensive literature exists on the legal, medical, and societal dimensions of abortion during the Edwardian period, focused on content analysis or historical perspectives, the discourse surrounding birth control practices and abortion as it appeared in newspapers has not been thoroughly analysed from a linguistic perspective. By focusing on both quantitative and qualitative linguistic analyses, this research will analyse recurring linguistic patterns and themes used in discussions of birth control practices and abortion in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, attempting to answer two research questions:

Were birth control practices and abortion openly discussed in the letters to the editor of the Edwardian press?

Through which recurring linguistic features were they represented?

This essay aims to contribute to the study of historical news discourse (Claridge 2010) by applying the methodology of corpus linguistics and corpus-assisted discourse analysis to a small, specialised corpus, named BCPEP (Birth Control Practices in the Edwardian Press), consisting of letters to the editor – hereby referred to as LTEs – published in the British press during the Edwardian period. Following a corpus-assisted quantitative and qualitative approach (Partington 2004, 2010 and 2015; Partington, Duguid and Taylor 2013), the analysis will focus on the collocational patterns, concordances, and clusters (Hunston 2002) of a set of keywords extracted from the BCPEP corpus.

### *1. Context. Birth Control Practices and Abortion in Britain between the Victorian Age and the Edwardian Period*

From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the outbreak of World War I, Britain underwent significant social, legal, and cultural changes, particularly regarding the regulation and perception of birth control and abortion. During this period, the societal views on reproduction, morality, and women's autonomy were complex and deeply intertwined with legal and medical developments.

In Victorian Britain, discussions of birth control were generally considered taboo, particularly in middle- and upper-class circles, where strict moral codes prevailed (Knight 1977; Rodrick 1996; Rains 2021). For many working-class families, however, the need for contraception became increasingly pressing as industrialization led to overcrowded living conditions and economic instability (McLaren 1976). Despite the legal and societal restrictions, various birth control methods were used, including withdrawal, douching, herbal remedies, rudimentary condoms (Fisher and Szreter 2003). The availability and efficacy of these methods, however, were limited, especially for the poor (McLaren 1977a, and McLaren 1977b).

One of the most consequential legal developments affecting women during this period was the Offences Against the Person Act of 1861, which criminalized abortion at all stages of pregnancy. The Act made it a felony to procure an abortion, with penalties including life imprisonment for both the woman and any person aiding in the procedure (Brookes 2013). The criminalization of abortion placed women's reproductive decisions firmly under legal control, denying them autonomy over their bodies and subjecting them to significant health risks (Langer 1975). However, despite the legal restrictions, clandestine abortion – typically carried out in unsanitary conditions, often by untrained individuals, which led to a high mortality rate – remained a common practice among women, especially in the working class (McLaren 1993).

The lack of legal, safe reproductive options for women during this period significantly hindered their well-being and reinforced the gendered power dynamics that dominated Victorian and Edwardian society. However, by 1914, the growing awareness of the need for reforms in women's health and reproductive rights was beginning to take shape, setting the stage for future legislative changes (Cook 2007). This period of coded discussion prepares the Anglo-American women's health movements for reproductive rights that will follow after 1914, building on the implicit points vaguely and in coded fashion noted in the corpus data. Most notable were the campaigns of the US reformer Margaret Sanger (Berkman 2011), who spent time in the UK following threat of prosecution post 1914, and Marie Stopes (Debenham 2018), whose birth control clinics launched from 1920s onwards would push such issues onto social and political agendas.

### *2. Letters to the Editor in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century and Edwardian Society*

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the growth of literacy and the expansion of the printing industry contributed to a dramatic increase in newspaper circulation across Britain. As newspapers became more accessible to the working and middle classes, they increasingly served as a platform for public participation (Brownlees 2021). Letters to the editor became a critical element of this participatory culture, allowing readers not only to respond to articles and news coverage but also to raise new issues for public consideration, and to actively engage with current social, political, and moral issues (Brownlees, Del Lungo and Denton 2010). While this participatory aspect of the press reflected the growing democratization of public discourse, letters to the editor were often selected and published to advance the ideological agenda of the newspaper, often favouring letters that either contributed to ongoing debates or offered provocative perspectives that would engage readers by challenging or supporting the policies of the time (Hobbs 2019).

In the Edwardian era (1901-ca.1910), topics such as labour rights, women's suffrage, morality, education, and public health reforms featured heavily in letters to the editor, with a wide array of opinions being expressed. In this sense, these letters provided a snapshot of the concerns and priorities of British society at the time, while also giving a voice to those who might not have had access to other public platforms. Notably, discussion on perceived issues such as the decline of birth rate (Secombe 1990), or about the Midwives Act or women's suffrage, as reported in the sections below, were frequently shaped by public letters, which played a role in raising awareness and mobilizing support, contributing to the broader debate on societal well-being and women's health (Sauer 1978).

Academic interest in letters to the editor as a form of historical discourse has grown in recent years, particularly within the fields of media history, historical pragmatics, and corpus linguistics. Scholars have increasingly recognized the value of these letters as a source of public opinion, social engagement, and linguistic analysis. LTEs have been studied for their sociological, historical and political significance within the news discourse (Richardson and Franklin 2004; Nielsen 2008; Torres Da Silva 2012; Cavanagh and Steel 2019, and more), but, as already mentioned, rarely have they been the target of linguists. Significant exceptions are Pounds (2005 and 2006), Landert and Jucker (2011), Romova and Hetet (2012), Chovanec (2017), Sturiale (2018) and Martini (2021a, 2021c and 2023) on news values and evaluative parameters, and Martini (2021b, 2022 and forthcoming) on the linguistic representation of identity and ideology in LTEs. In particular, Pounds (2005 and 2006) and Chovanec (2017) focus on LTEs as tools to express democratic participation and public engagement of the readers; a specific focus on evaluative language used to voice criticism and appeal for action is provided by Pounds (2005 and 2006).

Evaluative words and phraseology refer to lexico-grammatical occurrences expressing the speaker/writer's opinions. According to the seminal definition given by Hunston and Thompson (2000), evaluative language reflects the speaker/writer's value systems and those of their community, constructs relationships between speakers and readers, and helps to organise texts. Partington, Duguid and Taylor (2013) claim that evaluative meanings can be either implicit or explicit and operate at word or phraseological level. Phraseology, according to Hunston (2011, 5) "describes the general tendency of words, and groups of words, to occur more frequently in some environments than in others". The concept of evaluative prosody, whereby evaluative meaning is expressed through larger textual environments, is directly connected to the concept of phraseology, intended as words that tend to co-occur together in similar co-texts, which is the basis of the corpus-assisted discourse analysis applied in this study (Partington, Duguid and Taylor 2013).

Bednarek (2010) and Bednarek and Caple (2019), among others, discuss newsworthiness as expressed through the use of evaluative language in the news discourse. Bednarek and Caple (2019) describe the most frequent news values and evaluative parameters. The news values according to which events are considered newsworthy are negativity, timeliness, proximity, prominence, consonance, impact, novelty, superlativeness, personalization. The most recurrent evaluative parameters, or "the standards, norms and values according to which we evaluate something through language" (171), are: un/importance, in/comprehensibility, im/possibility or in/ability, un/necessity, emotive, un/genuineness or in/authenticity, reliability, un/expectedness, evidentiality, mental state. Bednarek and Caple applied this theoretical framework combining language of evaluation and newsworthiness to hard news. This same framework is applicable to LTEs as well, since, according to Wahl-Jorgensen (2002), LTEs are selected according to similar, if not identical, news values, i.e., newsworthiness, timeliness, relevance, and entertainment.

### 3. Corpus Construction

The study presented in this article is the first stage of a more complex analysis of the language of birth control and abortion at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This first stage involves LTEs published in *The Times* only, in order to see how the most established and influential broadsheet paper of the time represented the topic under examination. Further stages of this same research will expand the analysis to local newspapers, analysing the results available in *The British Newspaper Archive*. Since birth control and abortion were taboo in everyday social interaction, despite being commonly widespread in practice, this stage of the research has met the result of this double standard in the representation vs. the practice of birth control and abortion in the Edwardian period. As Brookes (2013) claims, at that time abortion was synonymous with birth control, and specifically a type of birth control that did not require the collaboration of the male counterpart of the couple. Abortion was considered almost inevitable in the life of woman, but, since it was listed as a criminal offence, its practice was coated in silence and referred to only through coded references (Knight 1977). This resulted in the almost complete absence of LTEs openly mentioning the word *abortion* throughout the time period consulted in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times Archive*, which was comprised between 1<sup>st</sup> January 1900 and 31<sup>st</sup> December 1910, matching the time span of the Edwardian period.

When searching the Archive for LTEs using *abortion*, there are 176 matching results, with only one relevant to the meaning of *abortion* as “deliberate termination of pregnancy”, which will be examined in the section that follows. All the other occurrences are related to the more general meaning of failing to produce the intended result. This posed a problem for the corpus construction, as it became clear that different search words had to be used in order to obtain results that were still pertinent to the topic under examination, i.e., birth control practices and women’s well-being. The Archive was then searched combining the search words *birth*, *control*, and *women*; 187 results were obtained. Due to the limited number of LTEs, each of them was read to ascertain their relevance for the research. This resulted in a final total number of 74 texts, forming a small, specialised corpus of LTEs discussing women and birth practices in the Edwardian period of a total 45,981 tokens (running words in texts).

WordSmith tools 8.0 (Scott 2020) was then used to generate the wordlist, which was compared with the written section of the British National Corpus (BNC) XML Edition corpus (2007), a 100-million-word collection of samples of written and spoken language, including extracts from regional and national newspapers. The BNC corpus was chosen due to the absence of a reference corpus of LTEs published between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which would be the ideal reference corpus, the non-availability of BLOB-1931 and the non-suitability of CLMET. The comparison of the target corpus, which has been named Birth Control Practices in the Edwardian Period (BCPEP), with a larger reference corpus (BNC) of similar texts identifies the keywords of the target corpus, i.e., those words which are unusually frequent in the target corpus, and therefore more statistically relevant. Such comparison provides a clear quantitative indication of the core lexical items orienting the qualitative analysis (Scott 2020). Table 1 shows the first most frequent keywords of (BCPEP) by their ranking position on a 500 keyness scale.

Keyword	Freq.	%	Texts	RC. Freq.	P
MIDWIVES	94	0	13	178	0,0000000000
BIRTH	128	0	46	5.114	0,0000000000
EDITOR	77	0	72	3.826	0,0000000000
RATE	115	0	29	18.945	0,0000000000
MIDWIFE	26	0	10	296	0,0000000000
CHILDREN	108	0	29	41.953	0,0000000000
WOMAN'S	10	0	8	2	0,0000000000
MEN	88	0	28	34.973	0,0000000000
DISTRICTS	26	0	17	1.504	0,0000000000
FRANCHISE	21	0	9	714	0,0000000000
MOTHERS	31	0	19	3.113	0,0000000000
OUR	132	0	42	80.492	0,0000000000

Tab. 1 - Keywords of the BCPEP corpus. Created with WordSmith Tools 8.0 KeyWords

The first and second column show keywords and their frequency in the target corpus texts; the third and fourth columns indicate the percentage of the frequency and the number of texts in which each keyword occurs in BCPEP; the frequency of each keyword in the reference corpus (the written section of the BNC XML Edition corpus) is indicated in the fifth column; the last column shows the p value referring to the keyness value of the items under consideration.

As Table 1 shows, the most frequent keywords pertain to three semantic areas. For the large majority they are related to the profession of assisting women in childbirth (*midwives*, *birth*, *midwife*), and to family roles (*woman's*, *children*, *men*, *mothers*); some refer to statistics and hard data (*rate*, *districts*). *Franchise* adds an interesting linguistic element worthy of further examination, as, in this specific corpus, it refers to the right to vote, as well as *our* does, indicating an unusual occurrence of first-person plural adjectives and related nouns in the LTEs of BCPEP.

#### 4. Data Analysis

Concordance lines of the most frequent keywords in Table 1 were computed using WordSmith Tools 8.0 (Scott 2020), and their frequent collocations and clusters were examined applying a methodological framework that combines a quantitative and a qualitative approach. The quantitative corpus-driven approach (Tognini-Bonelli 2001) through Corpus Linguistics software-aided analysis allowed to obtain statistically significant results. When performed on the news, such combined methodological framework has been extremely useful to search for its objective features (see, for example, Sinclair 1994 and 2004; Tognini-Bonelli 2001; Baker *et al.* 2008; Partington 2010; Fotopoulos and Kaimaklioti 2016). To quantitatively significant results, i.e., to the most recurrent linguistic patterns, a qualitative corpus-assisted approach (Partington 2004, 2010 and 2015) was then applied through discourse analysis. This approach allows to have access to non-obvious meaning “constructed and reinforced by the accumulation of linguistic patterns” by extending the co-text of concordance list “nodes” (Partington and Marchi 2015, 220), which in this study are some of the most recurrent keywords.

A diachronic examination of results is also possible. The chronological order of publication of the LTEs is easily retrievable, as corpus files are renamed with their full date and page of publication. What follows is the analysis of the most significantly frequent linguistic characteristics of the keywords to answer the research questions posed at the beginning of the paper. The analysis will start with the sole letter explicitly mentioning *abortion*.

#### 4.1 *Abortion*

In a time when abortion was considered a common, although unspoken of and criminalized, birth control practice, it is certainly of some interest that only one published LTE ventures into explicitly mentioning abortion. Example (1) provides the text of the letter, that was published in *The Times* of 22nd October 1906:

Example (1) provides the transcription of the LTE above for greater readability:

(1) TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES. Sir,—Has it not occurred to Mr. Sidney Webb that possibly the Roman Catholics and Jews are right, and that theirs is the true solution of this problem? There is no mystery about it. It does not depend upon any “mystical” view of the sacrament of marriage. The Roman Catholic Church teaches and Roman Catholics believe that it is a **grievous moral offence to interfere with the course of nature by artificial means** such as are, as I understand it, indicated by Mr. Sidney Webb in his articles. The statistics show that this teaching has not been ineffectual. The law which makes it a **grave crime** to procure **abortion** is founded upon the same ethical doctrine. Of course the other problems of human poverty and misery will remain. What are the remedies for the various ills which arise from the wickedness and from the weaknesses, bodily, mental, and moral, of mankind? From the very nature of things the prosperity of every industry must fluctuate. There will be good times and bad times, busy times and slack times. Is it the fact that vast numbers of men and women, those who provide the lower kinds of labour, are compelled, when employed, to work for a wage which affords no margin for any saving, which is little better than a “starvation wage”? Speaking generally, does the individual labourer get a reasonable or fair share of the wealth which is produced, and can only be produced, by the co-operation of labour and capital? Is it possible for the State to interfere usefully, and without doing more harm than good; and, if so, how? These questions must remain to be answered, and will become more pressing from day to day. W. DECLINE OF THE BIRTH-RATE. (1906-10-22, 13)

Example (1) shows the extremely negatively connoted language associated to abortion, (*grievous moral offence, grave crime*) and the idea of the unnaturalness of the process (*interfere with the course of nature, artificial means*). The extended co-text reveals a tight relation between the strong opposition against abortion and the religious and moral beliefs of the author, rejecting the idea to go against nature and calling instead for unspecified interference of the state. This LTE was published in response to one long article by Mr. Sidney Webb, titled “Physical Degeneracy or Race Suicide?”, that had appeared divided into two parts in *The Times* on 11<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> October 1906, where the author elaborated on the possible reasons for the decline in birth rate made evident over the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the support of the results of a survey conducted among married couples and their choice to limit or not to limit their family size. Both parts of the lengthy article do not explicitly mention abortion. Rather, as it was customary at that time, they hint at practices to limit the number of children in order to afford better economical means, in this case using phrases such as “volitional interference” as in example (2) and “very extensive business” as in example (3):

(2) It is at any rate consistent with the hypothesis of volitional interference, in view of the fact that illegitimate children are, on an average, certainly less desired than legitimate, that, as already stated, the correlated illegitimate birth-rate should have fallen off in England and Wales more than twice as much as the legitimate, and twice as much between 1881 and 1901 as between 1861 and 1881.

(3) All this is inconsistent with the hypothesis that the decline is due to physical degeneracy, and consistent with that of its being due to deliberate volition. Common report that such deliberate regulation of the marriage state, either with the object of limitation of the family, or (which has the same result) with that of regulating the interval between births, has become widely prevalent during the last quarter of a century—exactly the period of the decline—reaches us from all sides—from doctors and chemists, from the officers of friendly societies and philanthropists working among the poor, and, most significant of all, from those who are engaged in the very extensive business of which this new social practice has given rise. What is needed to complete the demonstration is direct individual evidence. But this must be reserved for a subsequent article.

When allusive reference to abortion was made, it was through indirect linguistic constructions and euphemism. When direct reference was made, extremely negative evaluative language is detectable in the extended co-text of the concordance line, aimed at stigmatizing the procedure from a moral, religious, and ethical point of view. Due to the difficulty in retrieving LTEs explicitly discussing abortion between 1900 and 1910, further on-site archival research of LTEs in the British press is needed to document the most frequent indirect patterns used to refer to abortion and study the features of its linguistic representation in LTEs.

#### 4.2 *Midwives, Birth*

This section is focused on the most frequent keywords related to the professional assistance to childbirth (*midwives, midwife, birth*). As Table 1 shows, *midwives* is the most frequent keyword, with its most frequent left-collocates being grammar words (the definite article *the* and the preposition *of*), the noun *supply*, and the adjectives *central* and *trained*, and its right-collocates being *act* and *board*. The most frequent left-collocates of *midwife* are instead adjective phrases related to professional qualification (*trained, untrained, competent, qualified*). The keyword *birth* includes occurrences of its compound noun phrases *birth-rate* and its plural form *birth-rates*; the most frequently occurring lexical collocate is *decline*, in the cluster *decline of the*.

Due to the limited scope of this study, this section will discuss only the most frequent right-collocate and left-collocate of *midwives* (*act, supply*) and of *birth* (*birth-rate, decline*). Concordance lines for the most recurrent collocate *midwives + act* are displayed in Table 2.

Association. The Ridge, Corsham, Sept. 27. THE MIDWIVES ACT.
midwives, in order that the requirements of the Midwives Act of 1902 may be fully realised by
without solving the difficulties created by the Midwives Act as it applies to rural districts.
yours faithfully. LOVELL DRAGE. Hatfield, Herts. THE MIDWIVES ACT.
an instrument for good we now possess in the Midwives Act of 1902, provided that public
OF THE TIMES. 'Sir,-Most people are aware that a Midwives Act has recently been passed by
JOHNSTONE. Bignor-park, Pulborough, Sept. 29. THE MIDWIVES ACT.
one by individual effort since the passing of the Midwives Act -in itself a private member's
the hamlets unless heavily subsidized; and if the Midwives Act is to be administered in the
interest your leading article of Saturday on the Midwives Act, and I agree with you as to the
unfit persons led at last to the passing of the Midwives Act of 1902, an Act with which the
7 makes quite clear the enormous difficulties the Midwives Act will create in 1910, if it has
alternative plan of complying with the letter of the Midwives Act by endeavouring to obtain and
Dairy Bank, Cheadie, Staffordshire, Sept. 28. THE MIDWIVES ACT.
the Central Midwives' Board. Odesy, December THE MIDWIVES ACT.
that in 1902 an Act of Parliament was passed (the Midwives Act, 1902) providing that after 1910

Tab. 2 – Concordance lines for midwives + act. Created with WordSmith Tools 8.0 Concord

As shown in concordance lines, five occurrences refer to LTEs titles. They were all published in 1907, on 5<sup>th</sup> October, 1<sup>st</sup> November, and 25<sup>th</sup> December, and were all making reference to previously published articles in *The Times*. The use of the noun phrase as title suggests the intention to make the topic at once visible on the page and thus catch the attention of the readers. Moreover, when reading the letters, they are mostly concerned about the difficulty for less affluent people to have access to the service, both as far as prospective midwives and women in need of their assistance are concerned. Example (4) shows the conclusion of the letter published on 5<sup>th</sup> October 1907:

(4) The Central Midwives' Board has adopted the policy of efficiency. It has raised the standard of examination; it has lengthened the syllabus, and thereby the period of training; and it has refused the recognition of several old-established training schools. Without questioning the wisdom or necessity of such policy, the immediate result has been **an increase in** the training fees, **an increased difficulty in** obtaining suitable candidates, and **an increased difficulty in** obtaining training vacancies. Individual effort can do much, it has done much, to overcome these **difficulties**; but the time has, surely, arrived when the State may be expected to provide by law some financial assistance towards the **adequate supply of efficient midwives** to replace those which by law it removed from practice. I am faithfully yours, G. F. HOBHOUSE. Hon. Sec. Wilts Nursing Association. The Ridge, Corsham, Sept. 27. THE MIDWIVES ACT. (1907-10-05, 04)

It is worth noticing that the repetition of *increase* and *difficulty*, and of their derivatives *increased* and *difficulties*, adds emphasis to the negative connotation of the judgment expressed towards the Central Midwives Board for making the access to the qualification requested by the 1902 Midwives Act more restrictive. Example (4) mentions the need for state funding to ensure the number of midwives needed by the population. The left-collocate *supply + of (+ Adj)* is

indeed the second most frequent collocate of *midwives*, which indicates that two most recurrent linguistic lexical patterns refer to the official parliamentary act and to the consequences of its enforcement. Criticism on how the Act had been enforced is expressed also in a letter published the following year, on 31<sup>st</sup> October 1908, as shown in example (5):

(5) TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES. Sir,-May we beg a few lines of your space to make an appeal of a most urgent nature? It may be known to many of your readers that in 1902 an Act of Parliament was passed (the Midwives Act, 1902) providing that after 1910 no woman shall practise as a midwife unless properly qualified and registered. This was a most salutary and indeed necessary step for the protection of both mothers and infants from the terrible consequences resulting from incapacity and ignorance, for it is probably not generally known that 60 per cent of all births in England and Wales are attended by midwives the majority of whom were formerly untrained. But Parliament, while preventing incompetent women from practicing this profession, **did not see fit to take any step** towards providing **a sufficient supply of competent midwives**; and it was with a view **to making good this omission** that the Association for Promoting the Training and Supply of Midwives was formed. (1908-10-31, 18)

While acknowledging the decision to regulate the need for professionally trained personnel to assist in childbirth, the author laments the lack of policies to ensure a sufficient number of trained midwives to replace those who will have failed to comply with the legal requirements by the beginning of 1910. The author uses hedgingly connoted language (*did not see fit; omission*) to refer to the missing policies without conveying a stern judgment, as she is indeed making an appeal for funds for the Association for Promoting the Training and Supply of Midwife, which was privately established precisely to promote the implementation of the Midwives Act. This shows that when LTEs are used not for voicing a personal concern, but as a means to attain a specific goal, the negative connotation of the linguistic choices used is more covertly expressed through neutral lexical choices. Table 3 shows the concordance lines for the left-collocate noun phrase *supply + of* of the node *midwives*:

Association for Promoting the Training and <b>Supply of Midwives</b> , office, Dean Farrar-street,
Association for Promoting the Training and <b>Supply of Midwives</b> , Dacre-house, Dean Farrar-street,
stringently before there is a sufficient <b>supply of midwives</b> ready to take up rural work of a very
Association for Promoting the Training and <b>Supply of Midwives</b> , an association which is honoured by
MC LAREN. NORTHUMBERLAND. TRAINING AND <b>SUPPLY OF MIDWIVES</b> .
generosity" can do towards the training and <b>supply of midwives</b> , in order that the requirements of
by the Association for the Training and <b>Supply of Midwives</b> , Dacre-house, S.W. Facts and figures
advances have been made in the training and <b>supply of midwives</b> for the poor, and of those trained
difficult question of providing an adequate <b>supply of midwives</b> to meet the requirements of the Act,
to solve the difficulty and promote the <b>supply of midwives</b> . One has only this morning written,
understanding of the problems connected with the <b>supply of midwives</b> , On page 29 will be found the
Association for Promoting the Training and <b>Supply of Midwives</b> was formed. The association, which is

Tab. 3 – Concordance lines for supply + of + midwives. Created with WordSmith Tools 8.0 Concord

As the concordance lines in Table 3 show, most mentions of the left-collocate refer to the name of the Association for Promoting the Training and Supply of Midwife, with *supply*

occurring as coordinated with *training*. This explicitly refers to the need for training midwives to comply with the Midwives Act, and to grant women access to the fundamental help of midwives during childbirth, by reaching a *sufficient* or *adequate supply* of midwives. The use of *supply* is in itself indicative of the implicit connotative judgement; midwives are represented not as human beings, rather as some sort of good or service to be arranged and distributed, thus distorting the perception of their role. Moreover, as Table 1 shows, the plural form of the noun phrase *midwives* occurs more often than its singular form, *midwife*. Such linguistic occurrence reinforces the representation of this professional category as a collective, depersonalized and almost objectified entity. Example (6) shows how the issue was not limited to the training and its cost alone, rather it involved an economic downside:

(6) In many cases local authorities are fully conscious of the ill results that would accrue if the law were put in motion stringently before there is a sufficient **supply of midwives** ready to take up **rural work of a very unremunerative kind**; [...] (1907-09-25, 02)

The issue of rural villages is recurrent also in other letters, making it a point for the appeal to state funds to ensure that access to the required training could be affordable also to women coming from less affluent backgrounds, as shown by example (7):

(7) [...] Midwifery among the poor is of necessity **badly paid**; those who practise it are as a rule women of the same class as their patients, and it is impossible to expect that any large number will be able to afford even the minimum outlay of £20 to fit themselves for an employment so **uncertain** and so **unremunerative**. [...] (1904-10-31, 07)

Example (6) and (7) clearly point out the different social context of midwives coming from a poorer background by means of extremely negative connoted language (*badly paid*, *uncertain*, *unremunerative*) related to the economic expectation of the profession. Not only will these women not be able to pay for their training, but the prospect is of a scarcely remunerative profession. Poorer women are therefore at risk of being left with no professional assistance, or of having to resort to illegal help, thus putting their lives even more in danger.

Even if a more in-depth discussion of *midwife* and *birth* is left to other contexts where this research will be more extensively presented, some considerations are worth adding on the keyword *birth*, displayed in its concordance lines by Table 4 below:

one is tempted to attribute the increase in marriage and <b>birth-rate</b> and the decrease in infant mortality
enormous improvement in the conditions of child- <b>birth</b> among the poor. But it is becoming daily
at either end of the scale, showing that the crude <b>birth-rate</b> is higher in artisan than in merely
not do much towards stopping the yearly decreased <b>birth-rate</b> , but it is in our power to do a
4,700 women in this country die every year in giving <b>birth</b> to children. Certainly, including the
absolutely true that the operative causes of a low <b>birth-rate</b> have not affected rural districts,
neglected the development of humanity is crippled at its <b>birth</b> . We call upon all women who feel for
Fuller particulars on the effect of the suffrage on the <b>birth-rate</b> and infant mortality may be found
It is true that voluntary control of the <b>birth-rate</b> has not yet spread to a great extent to certain poor districts

Tab. 4 – Concordance lines for birth. Created with WordSmith Tools 8.0 Concord

With reference to the keyword list in Table 1, it is interesting to notice that *birth* – occurring in the compound noun phrase *birth-rate* and in its plural form *birth-rates* – is one of the most frequently occurring keywords in the entire corpus. *Decline* is the most frequent left-collocate of *birth*, occurring in the cluster the *decline of the*. When expanding to the co-textual reference of some concordance lines, linguistic evidence shows that the ongoing debate was kept alive, and newsworthy, in *The Times* around the reasons for the decline in family size. In particular, it was debated how such decline seemed not to have reached the poorest classes to the extent it had spread instead among skilled workers. Examples (8), (9), and (10) show extended co-textual reference for significant concordance lines of the keyword *birth*:

(8) [...] Then, as a profession, to be a mother involves **greater risk to life** than to be a soldier. It is computed that on an average **4,700 women in this country die every year in giving birth to children**. Certainly, including the years when there are wars, the mortality amongst soldiers has never reached that average. [...] AGNES GROVE. WOMAN SUFFRAGE. (1908-08-17, 07[a])

(9) Every human being who enters the world passes in through the gateway of a woman's body. While **women are held in contempt** and **their interests neglected** the development of humanity **is crippled at its birth**. We call upon all women who feel for this cause to declare themselves for us. [...] CONSTANCE LYTTON. Cell No. 2, Central Police Station, Newcastle, Oct. 11. WOMAN SUFFRAGE. DEPUTATION TO LORD PENTLAND. (right to vote) (1909-10-14, 6[b])

(10) It is true that voluntary control of the **birth-rate** has not yet spread to a great extent to certain poor districts, like Bethnal-green, in which the decline has only been **9 per cent.** in the above period; but there can be no reasonable doubt that if the change in this direction during the last 20 years equals that which has occurred in the last 20 years no social stratum will remain unaffected. ARTHUR NEWSHOLME. BRIGHTON - THE GOSPEL OF RECREATION. (1906-09-15, 11[a])

The authors of the examples above are two women and one man. Two different female voices are the authors of examples (8) and (9), taken from different LTEs, the titles of which all refer to woman suffrage and to the movement for obtaining equal voting rights. Example (8) and example (10) both make reference to hard data and statistics to voice their concern, with example (8) recurring to an appalling number (4,700). In example (8) negative emotive evaluative language (Bednarek and Caple 2019) (*risk, die, war*) is used to trigger an emotional reaction in the readers, while example (10) is limited to objective information and data, making no reference to emotivity. Example (9) uses strong negative emotive language (*contempt, neglected, crippled*) to appeal to the audience. In (8) the keyword *birth* is used both in its actual sense relating to giving birth to individuals, while in (9) it is used metaphorically. Example (10) employs the compound *birth-rate* pre-modified by the noun phrase *voluntary + control*, thus making explicit reference to the discussion on the decrease in birth rates and family size, and offering some considerations on related trends among the different social classes. It is worth mentioning that female voices are usually less frequent in LTEs, and it seems significant of a certain editorial policy that published LTEs dealing with female well-being, or lack of well-being, written by women. Women were thus given the right to voice their concerns directly, and, in view of the features of the LTEs discussed before, their right was recognised to use LTEs as tools of active citizenship, and to stimulate a debate in which they are protagonists.

### *Concluding Remarks*

LTEs are an instrument of newspapers to keep a specific subject matter alive in the news. They stimulate debate, usually reporting views in agreement with the newspaper's agenda, but at times stirring controversies by publishing contrasting viewpoints on the same subject from influential authors. Letters to the editor are, and were, also editorially controlled; sometimes they were written by the editors themselves if material was lacking for publishing in the paper that week; and when submissions were chosen for publication, they usually were done so to fit editorial agendas and views on suitability of topics (Nielsen 2010; Hobbs 2019).

Gatekeeping functions of editors could thus shape what and how and which topics were deemed acceptable for general consumption. This might also account for a dearth of items on the subjects if deemed too controversial (Vessey 2021). The results of the analysis conducted so far signal an interest in the agenda of *The Times* to keep the discussion alive on birth rates, and on midwives, when *The Times* archive is searched with *women + birth*.

The historical context of this debate shows that the British population had steadily declined for over a quarter of a century, with no other apparent reason than a voluntary control of family size. Couples resorted to different methods; with the help of midwives, abortion was a common practice of birth control at that time, despite the risks for women's health and life, and despite the fact that it was a criminal offence too. Corpus evidence shows that the Midwives Act was discussed as a reform for the well-being of women, both in terms of the perceived need to control the access to the profession of midwives, and to ensure women professionally trained help during childbirth. At the same time, the Midwives Act had the aim to remove many of those women who, for decades, had helped women, targeting specifically those who were under the general suspicion of performing abortions as well. However, strong criticism of the actual modalities in which the Act was enforced, particularly to the economic affordability of the training, is conveyed in the LTEs of the BCPEP corpus. Such criticism, expressed through the frequent use of negatively connoted language, is directed at the consequences of the Act for poorer women. Eventually, they would have neither professional midwives willing to assist them, nor untrained midwives, who would have been declared illegal after 1910, thus severely impacting the well-being of the majority of the female population.

The representation of midwives and their role seems to be connected with a view of society where a decrease in birth-rate is perceived as alarming by the authors of these LTEs, and it is thus made newsworthy by keeping it alive in the ongoing discussion in the press. The connection with birth control and the suffragist movement is also worth to being explored further, as corpus results showed that attempts were made to connect the decline of birth rate to the requests for women's rights. However, this same position was subverted by those LTEs advocating for women rights, and written by women themselves to support their claims from their own point of view. As a conclusive remark, it should be mentioned that the almost complete absence of direct linguistic reference to birth control practices in the LTEs of the corpus for a decade is a rather clear indication of what was to be selected as newsworthy, and what was to be silenced. If letters had been sent to stimulate debate over birth control practices, maybe even over abortion, their absence from published LTEs publicly available in newspapers archives implies that, clearly, they were not selected for publication.

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