

The Primacy of Intention and the Duty to Truth:
A Gandhi-Inspired Argument for
Retranslating *Hiṃsā* and *Ahiṃsā*
with Connections to
History, Ethics, and Civil Resistance

Todd Davies

Symbolic Systems Program &
Center for the Study of Language and Information
Stanford University

Paper available at web.stanford.edu/~davies

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The spirit of the paper

"There is no such thing as Gandhism. The opinions I have formed and the conclusions I have arrived at are not final. I may change them tomorrow. I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and nonviolence are as old as the hills. All I have done is to try experiments in both, on as vast a scale as I could do. In doing so, I have sometimes erred, and learnt by my errors. Life and its problems have thus become to me so many experiments in truth and nonviolence. By instinct, I have been truthful, but not nonviolent."

(Mahatma, Vol. IV, Meeting of the Gandhi Seva Sangh, 29 February to 6 March 1936, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 42)

Paper overview I: Nonviolence + 100

It has become harder over time to convincingly characterize people and actions as “nonviolent,” because

- (a) the scope of what is meant by “violence” has expanded through concepts such as “structural violence,” and
- (b) the word “violence” facilitates a focus on what can be observed, independent of what is knowingly intended.

A political turn in moral accountability has exacerbated these tendencies.

Paper overview II: Roots in Gandhi

Ahiṃsā derives from *hiṃsā*, and Gandhi translated them as most commonly as (non)violence.

Gandhi saw *ahiṃsā* as

- a positive concept – not merely the absence of violence;
- a desiderative – expressing intention first and foremost
- an unachievable ideal -- "perfect nonviolence" is impossible.

Nagler (2001) has called the translation of *ahiṃsā* as “nonviolence” ... “misleading.”

Paper proposes alternative translations:

- *Ahiṃsā*: “beneficence”
- *Hiṃsā*: “maleficence”

Paper overview III: A practical upshot

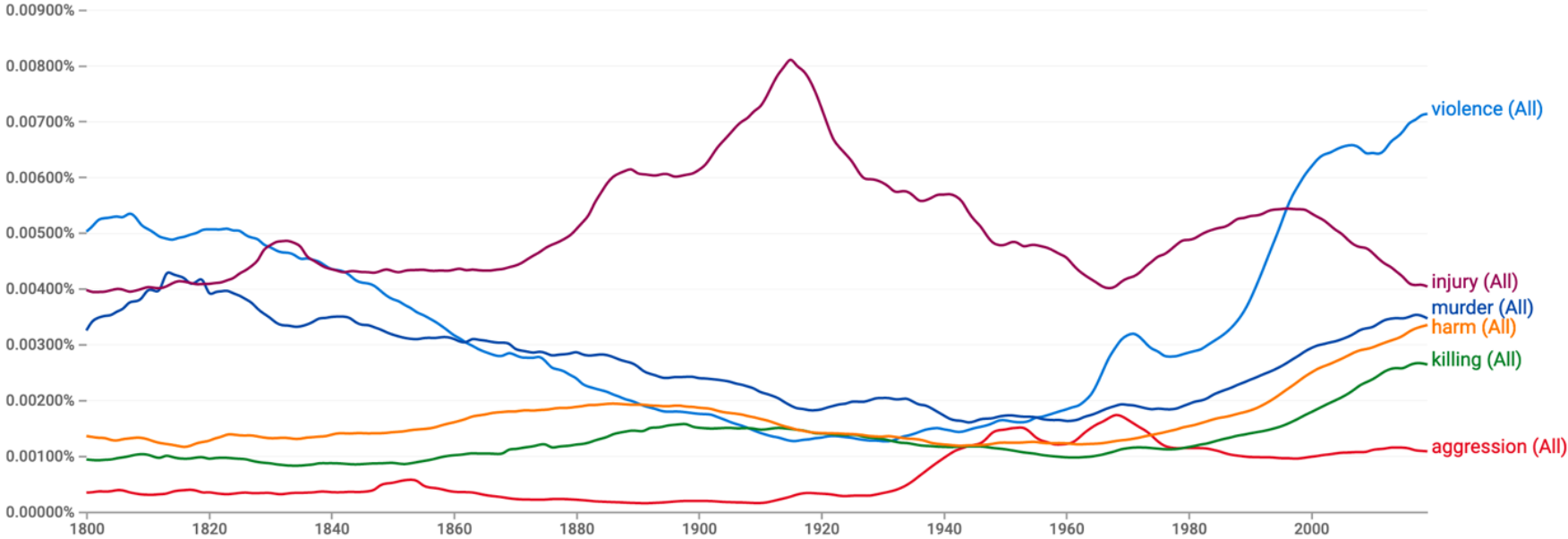
Nonviolence training for activists in North America tends to focus on techniques of resistance and other behaviors designed to achieve practical goals.

This is undoubtedly useful, and often personally transformative. But it fails to emphasize what Gandhi considered most important for aligning oneself with *ahimsā*: changing how one thinks about oneself and about other people.

What would “beneficence” training look like?

Figure 1

Ngram plot for “violence” and five other related words



I asked attendees of PJSA 2016, “Does this sentence make sense, or is it odd?” for the following four sentences:

- (1) The protest was somewhat violent. [8 – 3]
- (2) The protest was somewhat nonviolent. [0 – 13]
- (3) The verdict was somewhat unjust. [6 – 9]
- (4) The verdict was somewhat just. [6 – 8]

Figure 2

Ngram plot showing that “just” and “unjust” are graded antonyms

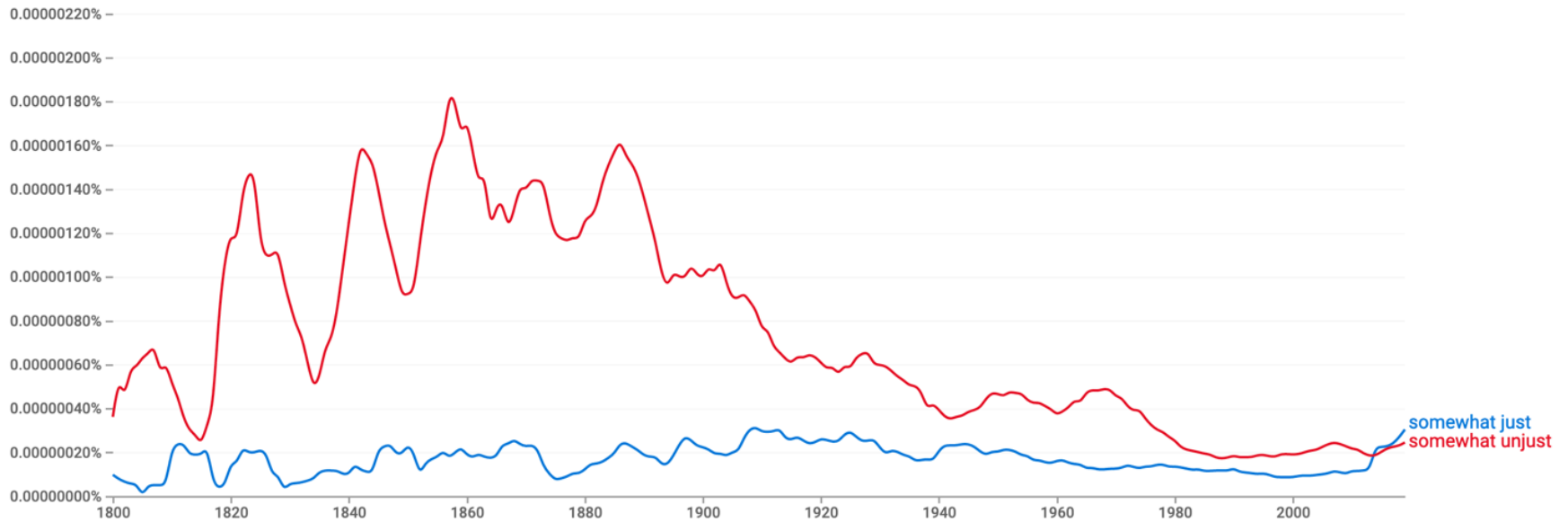


Figure 3

Ngram plot showing that “violent” and “nonviolent” are ungraded antonyms

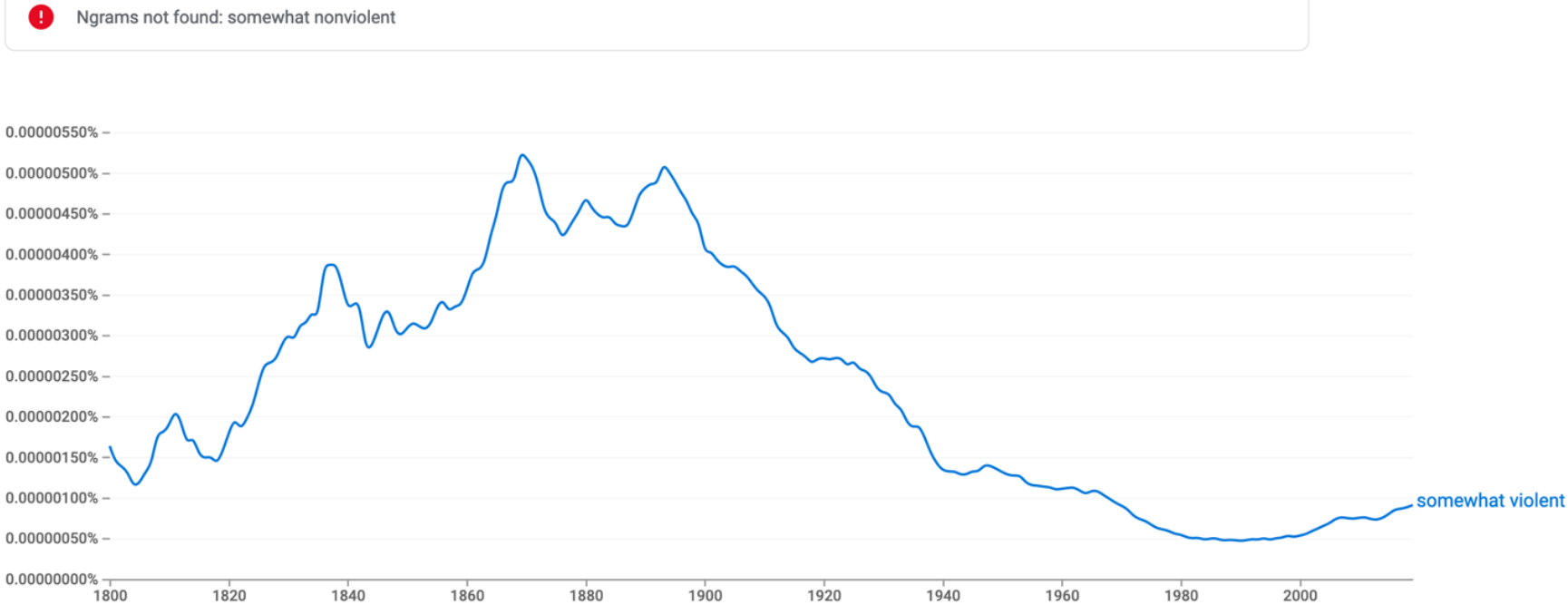


Figure 4

Ngram showing changes in usage of “nonviolence” and three related words

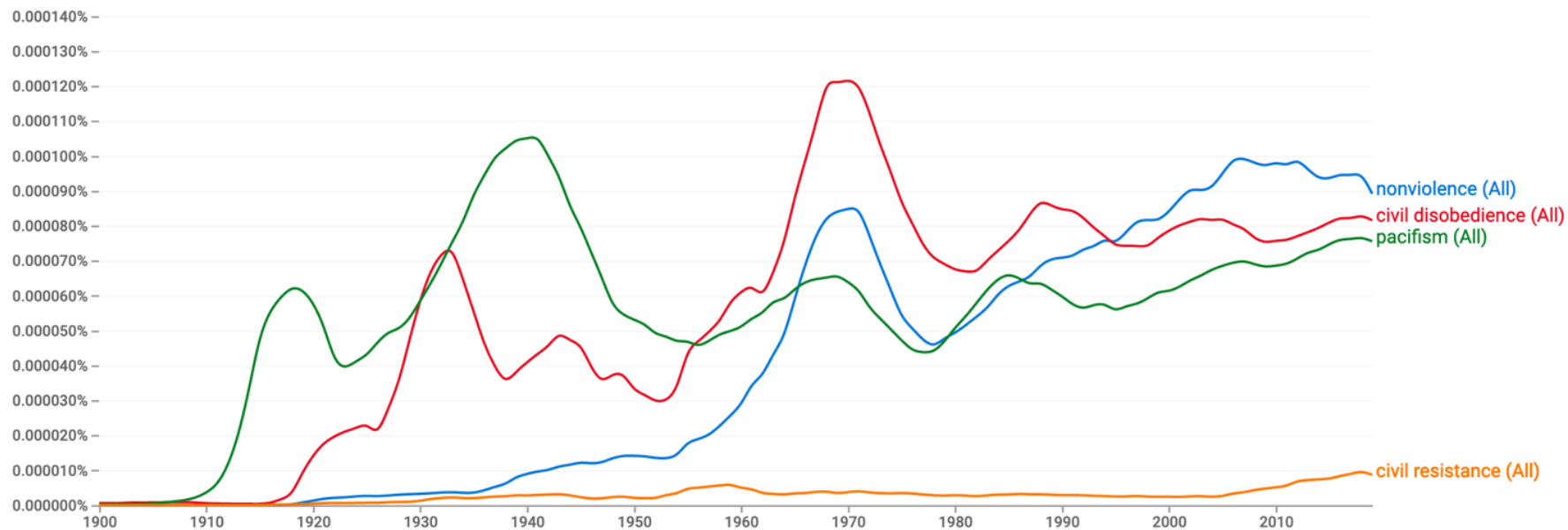


Figure 5

Ngram for modifiers of the word “violence” in use since the late 1960s

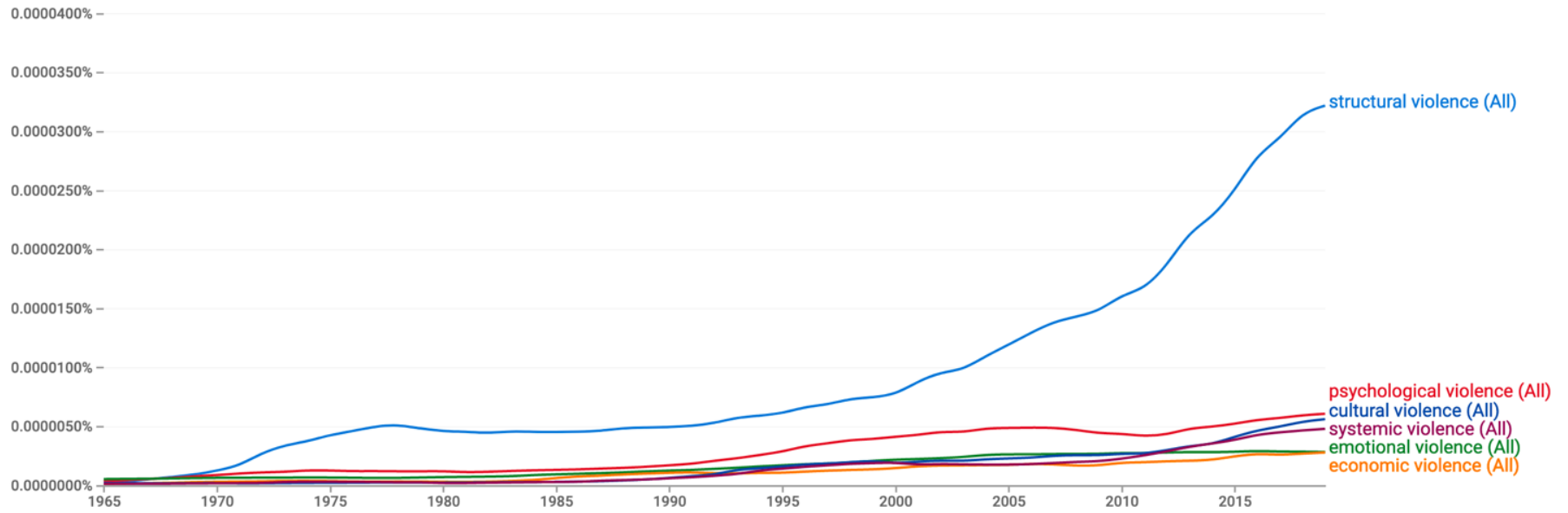


Figure 6

Ngram plot for “violence” versus “violent”

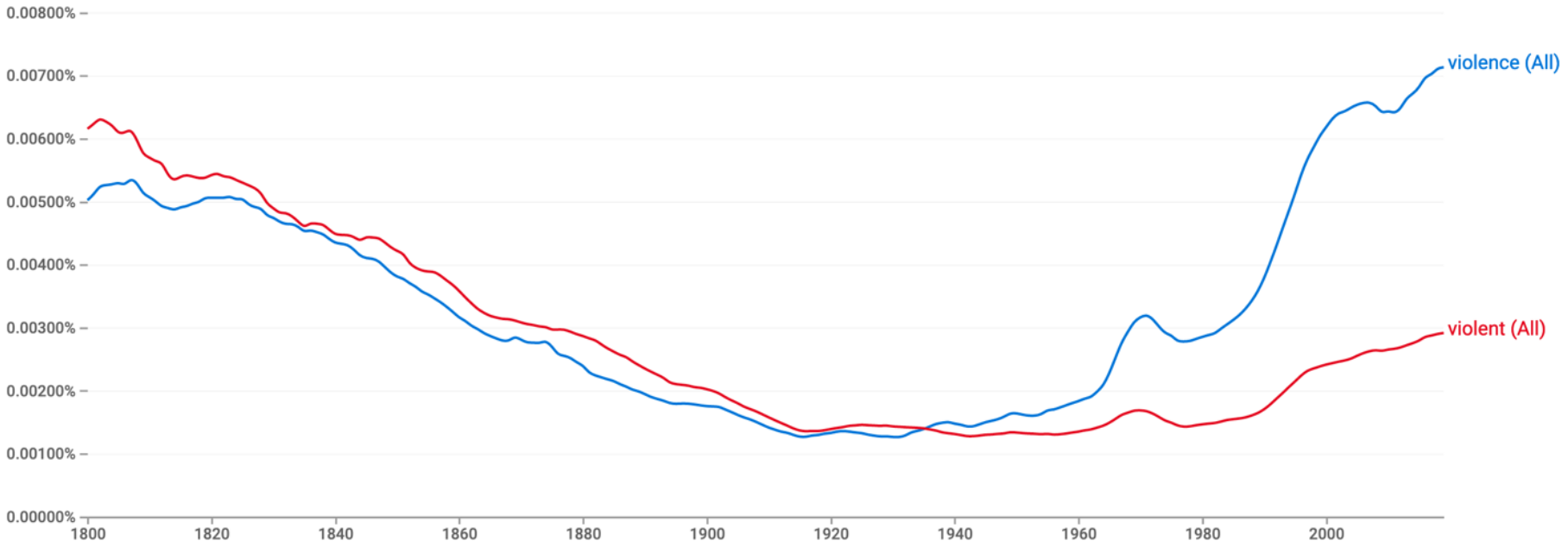
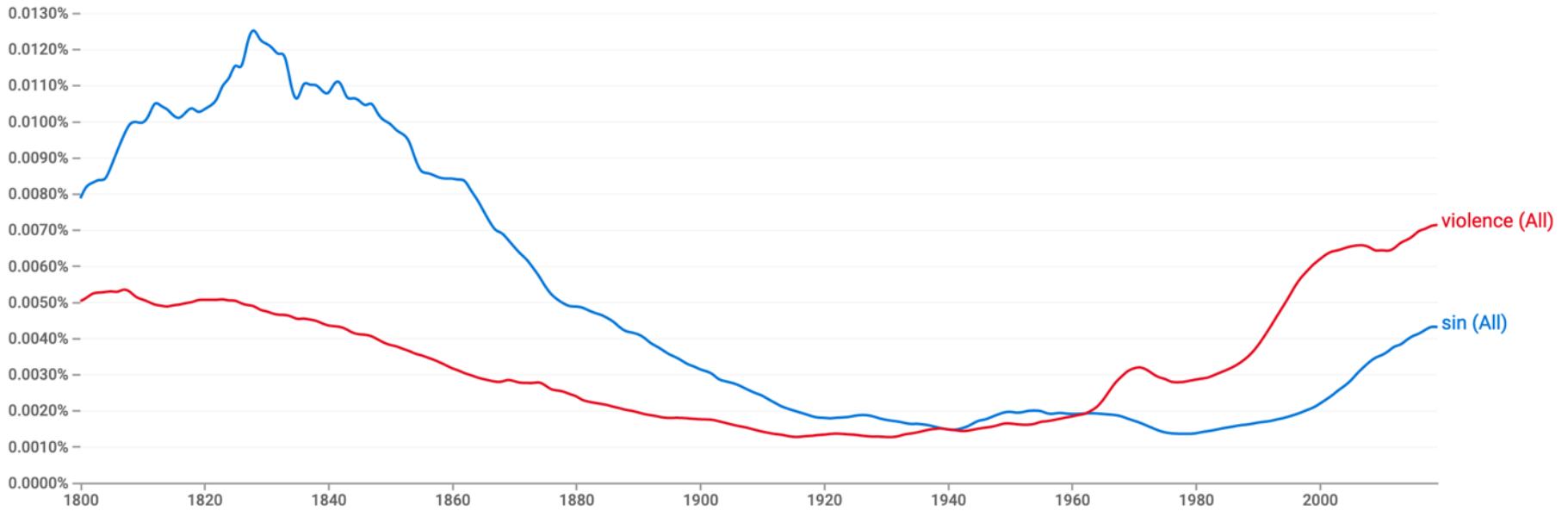


Figure 7

Ngram comparison for “violence” versus “sin,” showing the impact of the political turn in moral accountability



“Nonviolence of the mere body without the cooperation of the mind is nonviolence of the weak or the cowardly, and has therefore no potency. If we bear malice and hatred in our bosoms and pretend not to retaliate, it must recoil upon us and lead to our destruction. For abstention from mere bodily violence not to be injurious, it is at least necessary not to entertain hatred if we cannot generate active love” (*Young India*, 2 April 1931, excerpted in Gandhi, 2001, p. 86).

“whilst it is true that mental attitude is the crucial test of *ahimsā*, it is not the sole test. To kill any living being or thing save for his or its own interest is *himsā* however noble the motive may otherwise be. And a man who harbours ill-will towards another is no less guilty of *himsā* because for fear of society or want of opportunity, he is unable to translate his ill-will into action. A reference to both intent and deed is thus necessary in order finally to decide whether a particular act of abstention can be classed as *ahimsā*. After all, intent has to be inferred from a bunch of correlated acts” (“A Conundrum,” *Young India*, 18 October 1928, in Gandhi, 1999, pp. 109-110).

Figure 8

Ngram showing that usage of “beneficent” and “nonviolent” mirrors the political turn described in section 5

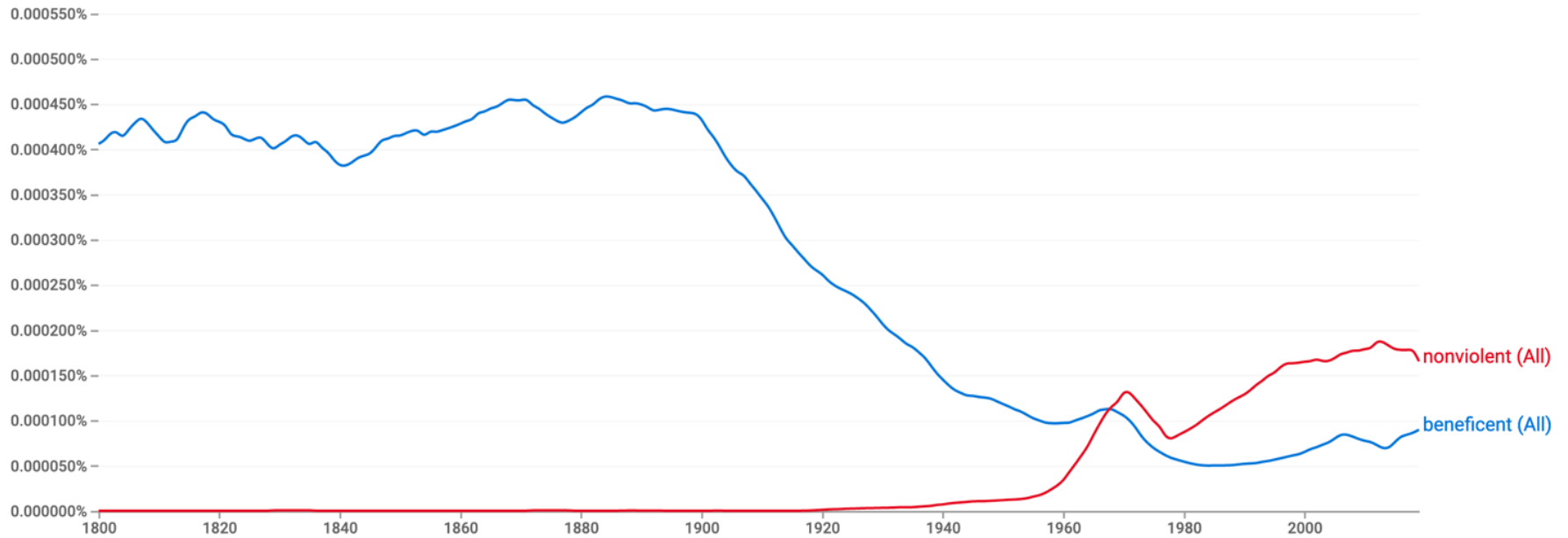
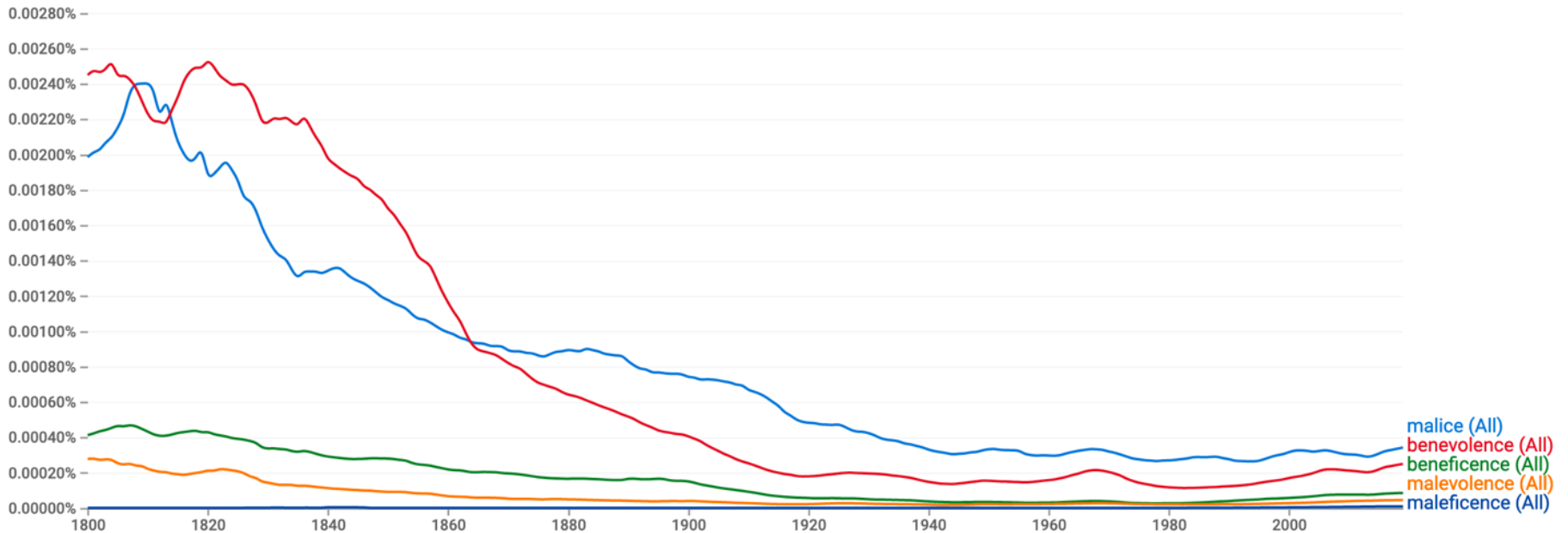


Figure 9

Ngram showing the decline in usage of “maleficence,” “beneficence,” and related words since 1800



“We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme”
(*Indian Opinion*, 8 September 1913, in Gandhi, 1964, p. 158 -- see note 7).