

Romanticization or Reality: *It Ends with Us* by Colleen Hoover Through Corpus Stylistics Perspective

Jesselyn Kaoneddy¹, Istiqomah², May Sastia³, Diantry Binarwati Habibie Nasution⁴, Rahmadsyah Rangkuti⁵

^{1,2,3,4,5} Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

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Corresponding Author:

Jesselyn Kaoneddy,
jesselyнкаoneddy@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

Corpus stylistics, which involves the analysis of electronic archives of written material, facilitates the understanding of connections between words. This research aims to provide linguistic evidence regarding the genre of Colleen Hoover's popular fiction, *It Ends with Us*, specifically, to ascertain whether it is a pure romance novel or incorporates aspects of literary realism. A descriptive qualitative approach, grounded in Mahlberg's (2013) corpus stylistics theory, is employed. The primary data for analysis are the four most frequently occurring verbs identified using AntConc. The collocations associated with each verb are subsequently categorized into "attempts to romanticize" or "narrations of reality" to determine the prevailing stylistic strategy. The research demonstrates that the novel utilizes a greater proportion of "realistic" words compared to "romantic" words, thereby indicating its alignment with literary realism. The narrative modifications are intended to heighten the story's engagement, rather than to romanticize domestic abuse or toxic relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Stylistics plays a big role in helping people understand language; naming parts of literary texts, understanding the coordination between each part. Therefore, the usage of terminologies and methodologies upon language in the real world became essential in fulfilling those purposes. Stylistics is trapped between two disciplines where one deals with the relation of language and its context—language is viewed as an active factor in the real world. In contrast, stylistics contribute in defining the usage of linguistic structures to reflect real life phenomenon, usually in literary works. A distinctive aspect of stylistics is its systematic grounding in linguistic analysis, which is based on theories that connect linguistic selections to cognitive structures and processes ('The Routledge Handbook of Stylistics', 2017). Corpus stylistic used corpus in analyzing literary texts, bridging the emphasis of linguistic description and literary appreciation (Mahlberg, 2013). Corpus in charge of dealing with digital preservation and archives of physical artefacts, it is also considered an interdisciplinary field between corpus linguistics and literary linguistics.

Corpus stylistic targeted linguistic phenomena based on samples of language which were archived electronically. These meticulously assembled collections, referred to as "corpora," may include written materials such as scholarly papers or news stories, or they may include transcriptions of spoken language, such as interviews or discussions. Researchers can search, present, and quantify linguistic features in these digital corpora by using computers to analyze them. Finding recurrent word patterns, which frequently disclose many word meanings, is a crucial component of this quantitative research. This method has had a big impact on dictionary development, especially for everyday words. The most prevalent and practical usages of terms can be highlighted in dictionaries by examining how frequently they occur in different patterns within corpora. (Odlin & Sinclair, 1994)

Realism (Shumway, 2017) pertains to the connection between literature and the actual world, highlighting the relationship between the written word and lived experiences, and asserts a specific connection with its perceived truths. It seeks to convey an accurate representation of particular aspects of reality. Consequently, the concept of life experiences varies significantly based on the individuals depicted in a realistic story, encompassing a vast spectrum of issues such as love, hatred, mortality, pride, avarice, poverty, failure, success, and the complexities of human struggle and sexuality. The representation of a diverse array of characters in realistic literature ensures a broad inclusivity in terms of plot, themes, and character development. Just as real individuals exhibit a wide range of humor, motivations, and tendencies, so too do the characters within these narratives.

Analysis of written and adapted popular fiction have been done many times in the past through different approaches, such as intrinsic element. Intrinsic elements can be used as a tool to identify character development like the research done by Oktaviano, Ramiro, & Fitriyah, which studied the characters in the film "Joker". There are also several previous research talked about the novel through psychological perspective (Bahadur Khadka, 2024; Kanishkaa, 2023; Salsabila, 2024; Shamam Ismail Otaiwi, Aliaa Abed Mohsen, & Marwan Khaleel Yousif, 2025) . One of them titled "Romanticizing Bad Guys: A Psychological Analysis of Ryle in Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us*" discussed how the novel has largely focused on how domestic violence is portrayed in the book. The background of Lily Bloom's intimate partner abuse and her struggle to break the cycle of assault. Shamam stated that the book romanticizes red flags and normalizes dangerous circumstances by sympathetically portraying abusive relationships. While most of the existing work focuses on Lily's victimization and resilience, less research has been done on the romanticization of Ryle, the abuser, and the psychological mechanisms through which readers deny or even rationalize his actions. However, this research focuses on whether Colleen Hoover romanticizes the abuse that occurs in the novel or portrays real events wrapped in fiction with additional dramatical narrations. While the previous studies focused on psychological approach interpretations of reader responses, this study differs in that it uses corpus stylistics to examine how language is used in the novels "*It Ends with Us*" constructs and reinforces unhealthy romantic ideals in domestic violence. This study seeks to analyze how language constructs and reinforces unhealthy romantic ideals in domestic violence by examining word choice, collocation, and narrative structure in an attempt to determine how stylistic choices inform perceptions of violence.

Other previous research talked about abusive relationships and how people underestimated the issue because romantic stories tend to simplify them (Dwiastuti & Yamin,

2020; Iadid, Hassannudin, & Shahira Bazlan, 2024). One of them titled “The Romanticization of Abusive Relationships in Popular Young Adult Fiction”. This research focused on how romanticization of relationships in young adult literature has centered on the portrayal of abusive relationships in bestselling novels such as *Twilight*, *After*, and *It Ends with Us*. Bratteng (2023) examines how these books portray manipulation, jealousy and possessiveness as romantic, and how this may influence young readers' perceptions of relationships and love. Romance novels also represent patriarchal gender attitudes in their presentation of routine masculine aggression and dominance as attractive attributes, although most existing research examines the psychological impact of these representations on adolescent readers. This study explores whether toxic relationships are romanticized in young adult literature or whether relationship problems occur in reality but are dramatized for the sake of entertainment in fiction.

On the other side, the research with the title “The Truth about Fiction as Possible Worlds” analyzed fiction as a portrayal of the world have looked at how literature produces a realistic world by blending imagination and the real world. Vernay sees the idea of fiction as a way to reframe reality with the idea that all creative writing is shaped by aspects of the real world but modified to make it interesting and entertaining of the reader's emotions. Unlike other studies that analyzed fiction through a philosophical lens, this study explores how the same thing can occur through stylistic perspective. The application of this theory can be seen in some of analysis done on ‘Animal Farm’ by George Orwell, where the storyline, characters, and settings, even though fun, are proven to be reflected from the Russian society that fight dictatorship of Lenin only to fall back to another dictator leader, Joseph Stalin (Angria & Siburian, n.d.; Bashir, Saeed, & Hamza, n.d.)

Analysis using words is not something uncommon, deictic word analysis was one of them. Giving meaning to deictic words in sentences can help unmasked the real intention of the sentence (Aulina, Amelia, Amanina Umar, Hasanah, & Rumandhani, 2023). Not only that, linguistic pattern also usually projected to identify representation in speeches (Simanjuntak, 2023). Meanwhile, this research used the collocation of the four most frequent verb since it can visualize major action done in the novel. Additionally, the words and collocation are collected using the corpus analysis toolkit, AntConc. AntConc is chosen due to the freeware license and easy operational, the system can conclude the corpora and its collocations automatically once the manuscript is uploaded as proven in the previous research done by Gondal. The previous research used the toolkit to understand the portrayal of language shifting in colonial era. Meanwhile, this research used the toolkit to study collocations and interpreted the results to see the major usage of narration in describing actions.

Given the prevalence of young adult fiction novels addressing toxic and abusive relationships, it is critical to investigate whether the representation of these themes in the narrative is solely for entertainment or conveys a message based on real-life experiences. Due to the limitations of human resources, this research only focused on four most frequent verbs in the “*It Ends with Us*” manuscript and their collocations as verbs have the biggest contribution to discover the indication of actions portrayed by the author, whether it is romanticized or just simple fiction narrations. As a note, the result of this research might not represent the author's sentimental feeling and opinion because this study is based on linguistic approaches. Unlike earlier psychological approaches, this study provides an original language analysis using a corpus from one of the world's most popular romance fiction novels. This study uses stylistic

analysis and a focus on collocations to examine how the novel constructs the romanticization or reality of relationships, providing a new perspective on whether the portrayal is purely fictional or reflects the author's experiences through literary realism in a research entitled **Romanticization or Reality: *It Ends with Us* by Colleen Hoover through Corpus Stylistics Perspective**

METHODS

This research used a qualitative approach in analyzing the literary text of *It Ends with Us* novel and the data will be presented using a descriptive method. This research is a descriptive qualitative method focused on presenting the phenomenon of situation between pure romance or reality reflected in fiction form Seliger W. Herbert (1989). The data of this research include verbs, collocations, and groups of words associated with romance. This research applied the data using AntConc software by Laurence Anthony. AntConc Software is Linguistics corpus analysis software used to analyze or process large amounts of text in determining patterns and word frequencies (Anthony 2004).

First of all, the researcher found the manuscript of the *It Ends with Us* novel that was converted into a plain file (TXT). TXT is the abbreviation for text file, which is a document that can easily decrypted by corpus tool. This file is used for information usage. For the corpus stylistics analysis, the researchers installed the AntConc software 4.3.1 Windows 2024. This research is used for corpus text analysis. Then, the researchers input the manuscript of *It Ends with Us* in AntConc Software to find the verbs and collocations. Furthermore, researchers selected four most frequent verbs used in the novel and analyzed their collocated words. To analyze, researchers categorized the selected words and their collocations to two groups: (a) 'attempt of romanticization' group of words and (b) 'narration for reality' group of words. The standard for romanticization is based on whether the chosen verb collocate with one of the words list sourcing from *relatedwords.io*, as shown below:

Table 1. Words Associated with Romance

life	age	date	kiss	story
court	love	action	hug	Italian
character	happy	novel	drama	fiction
relationship	comedy	ship	marriage	affair
sex	adventure	dating	companion	romance
mystery	sexual	fantasy	romantic	butterfly

The characterization for 'narration for reality' group of words is based on words that are excepted from the table and used as simple narration or statement to support the intrinsic element of novels, such as plot, setting, character, etc. After separating the data into two groups, the result of study presented using excel worksheet to indicate the usage of the collocated words. Ultimately, the data explained using a descriptive method to justify the role of the highlighted collocation words in the sentence.

The analysis done will be as below:

Table 2. Example of Know Collocations that Portray Reality

I absolutely hate confrontation. But	I	<u>know</u> we need to discuss the baby and our
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The data showed the usage of the verb *Know* in the sentence. *Know* is collocated with *I* to specify the subject in a dialogue and help understanding the situation when the dialogue happened between characters. This indicates that the sentence is categorized into 'narration for reality' because there is no correlation between the collocations and romance. Therefore, it is categorized as reality because the collocation contributes only to be a part of narration.

Table 3. Example of Have Collocations that Attempt Romanticization

"Please <u>have</u>	sex	with me." He's looking up at me with
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The data showed the usage of the verb *Have* in the sentence. *Have* is collocated with *sex* to specify the romanticization of words in the dialogue happening between the characters. This indicates that the sentence is categorized into 'attempt of romanticization' because there is correlation between the romance collocations. Therefore, it is categorized as romance because the collocation indicates the attempt of using the verb to create and visualize romantic events in the novel.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Using Antconc, researchers successfully retrieved 5370 different words used in building the narration of *It Ends with Us*. The class of each word are different; noun, verb, pronoun, adjective, adverb, conjunction, interjection. But as mentioned previously, only four most frequent verbs are chosen as the object of research since verbs are usually used to describe actions happening in the fiction, whether it is done by the characters or felt by the character. This separation helps us to understand the circumstances in the novel as well as the inner thoughts or feelings of the main character. Based on Antconc, those four most frequent verbs are; *have* (529 frequency), *Says* (413 frequency), *be* (403 frequency), *know* (387 frequency). Analysis of each word provided as below:

1. Have

The verb most commonly employed in the construction of the novel is *Have*; there are 22 words that predominantly collocate with this verb, as listed below:

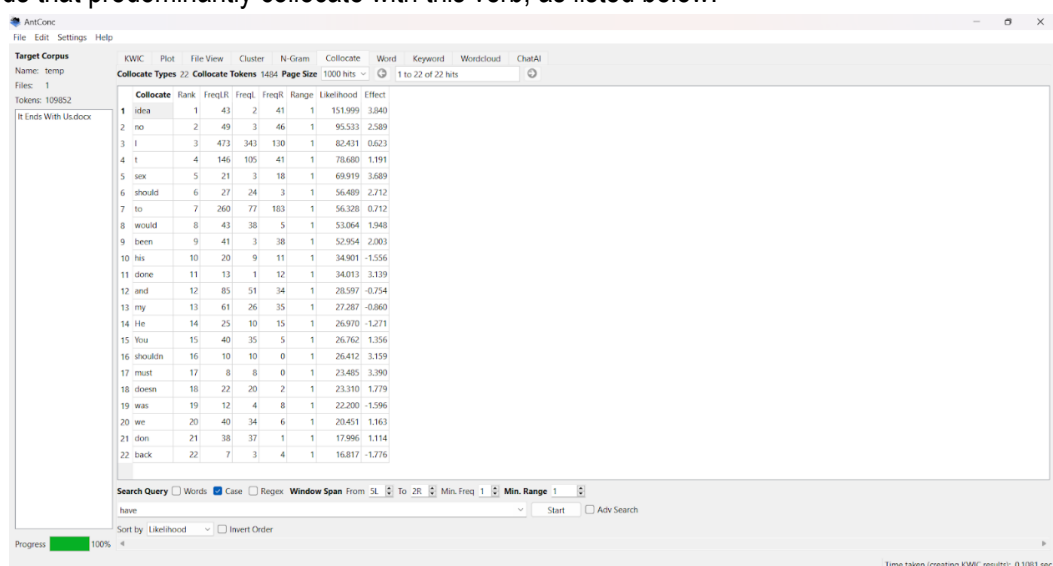


Figure 1. Have Collocations

Among the 22 collocations examined, the verb *Have* predominantly associates with terms that do not suggest the promotion of romantic activities, with the exception of one term, Sex. The majority of these collocations serve to enhance the narratives, thereby providing accurate visualization for the readers, such as:

Table 4. Have collocations (Reality)

he slams his head against mine so hard I <u>have</u>	to	get six stitches
Things are kind of . . . it's not really . . ." I <u>have</u>	no	idea how to explain our situation to my mother.
I cry myself to sleep every night because	I	<u>have</u> never felt so alone and so scared.

The first data indicated that the verb *Have* is collocated with the word 'to' to elucidate the consequences of one character's actions on another, specifically, Lily endured significant suffering and required six stitches due to her head colliding with another head. The application of the verb and its collocation in this context is primarily intended to illustrate the extent of the main character's suffering as a result of her ordeal. The subsequent data, however, is paired with a different term, *no*, which conveys a straightforward interpretation of the character's internal state, suggesting an inability to articulate their circumstances to another individual. In summary, both the first and second sentences exemplify the use of the verb *Have* alongside their respective collocations to elucidate either mental or verbal actions. Finally, the third sentence presented a collocation of the verb with the subject *I*, emphasizing the individual within the sentence. This construction also serves to express the internal feelings of *I*, thereby enhancing the readers' comprehension of the character's condition. In conclusion, nearly all collocations of *Have* function as part of the 'narration for reality' lexicon. Despite the predominant usage, there exist certain collocations of *Have* that endeavor to evoke a sense of romance, as illustrated below.

Table 5. Have Collocations (Romanticization)

he says through self-deprecating laughter. "Please <u>have</u>	sex	with me." He's looking up at me with
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Despite the word *sex* is included in the collocation list of 'attempt of romanticization' group, the collocation of *Have* and *sex* is used for the sake of creating a romantic image in reader's imagination. In this context, the character engages in a profoundly intimate relationship with another individual, to the extent that sexual activity is perceived as a casual occurrence. Furthermore, the entire sentence strives to convey a sense of gentleness and romance, thereby emphasizing the bond shared between the two characters.

2. Says

The verb *Says* ranks as the second most frequently used in the composition of the novel, accompanied by 12 words that primarily collocate with it, as detailed below:

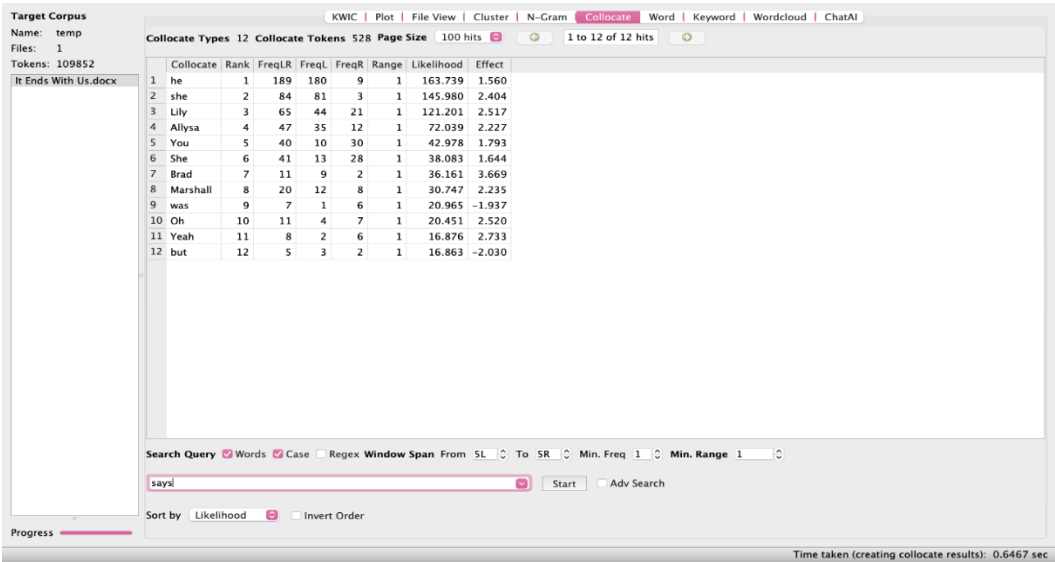


Figure 2. Says Collocations

Among the 12 collocations, the verb Says predominantly associates with terms that do not imply any intention of endorsing romantic occurrences. Most of the collocations aim to enrich the narratives, aiding in precise visualization for the readers, which includes:

Table 6. Says Collocation (Reality)

He made it at all. “You’re perfect,”	He	<u>says</u> , kissing me. Allysa brushes past us.
“That’s not what I’m apologizing for,”	he	<u>says</u> , “I’d never apologize for defending you,”
His voice cracks when	he	<u>says</u> , “You are my wife. I’m supposed to.

These collocations suggest that the term Says primarily functions to attribute dialogue to specific characters within the novel. This aspect is vital in how authors construct conversations and interactions between characters. The data revealed that the verb Says is frequently associated with the pronoun *He*. The use of *He* acts as a neutral mechanism for assigning dialogue, lacking any additional emotional connotation or dramatic embellishment. In the initial sentences, there is no excessive romanticization, even though an intimate act (kissing) is depicted. It communicates a moment of tenderness; however, the choice of language and structure reflects a realistic representation rather than an exaggerated or idealized interpretation of romance. The employment of the verb says instead of a more romantic alternative, the straightforward portrayal of the kiss between Lily and Ryle, along with Allysa's interruption, all contribute to a tone that is authentic and grounded, steering clear of any inclination to excessively glorify or romanticize the relationship. The second set of data avoids heightening emotions or idealizing actions. Instead, it offers a frank representation of a genuine dialogue between Lily and Atlas. Lastly, the third example conveys a sense of obligation or expectation, which does not convey deep romantic emotions. Rather, it suggests that Ryle acknowledges a societal or personal duty, prioritizing realism over idealization. This statement avoids glorifying

love or creating an overly romantic moment. Instead, it expresses a tense and conflicted sentiment in a clear and straightforward manner.

In summary, the simple application of Says removes any unnecessary embellishments, enabling the dialogue to maintain an authentic quality and remain free from romantic exaggeration. Across all three examples, the selected language emphasizes a genuine portrayal of interactions and emotions, avoiding an exaggerated or idealized perspective on love and relationships.

3. Be

The third most frequent verb used in the novel is *Be*, with 15 collocations on the word *Be* such listed below:

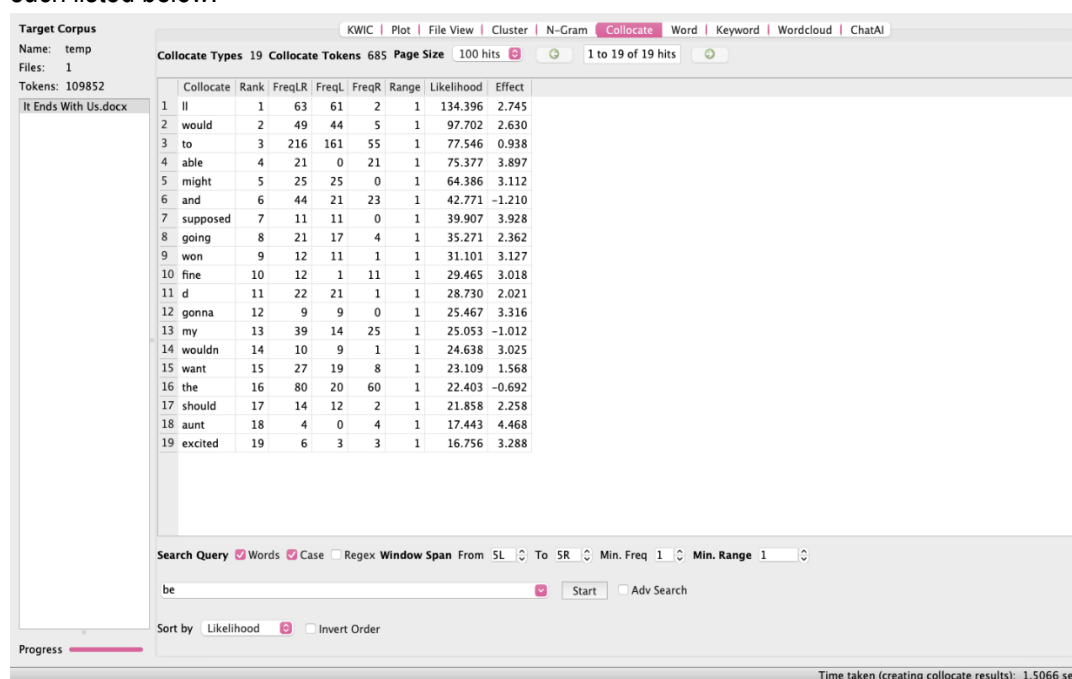


Figure 3. Be Collocations

Table 7. Be Collocations (Reality)

I smile a little too big. "Lily Bloom's. It'	ll	<u>be</u> a floral shop in about two months'
my face up to his. He grins at me. "You'	ll	<u>be</u> fine. Stop freaking out. "I shake my hands
door, then leans through the window. "That's	ll	<u>be</u> single for the rest of his life. "She

The verb *be* predominantly collocates with *ll*, which represents *will* in instances that highlight reality rather than the narrative perspective of romanticism. The term *be* has 15 collocations, including *I'll*, *would*, *to*, *able*, *might*, *and*, *supposed*, *going*, *won*, *fine*, *gonna*, *my*, *wouldn't*, and *want*. This word is frequently employed in expressions related to feelings and assertions. For instance, in "You'll be fine. Stop freaking out." This statement is realistic and avoids melodrama, providing reassurance and validation of the character's emotions. Similarly,

rather than being a dramatized or exaggerated remark about love or relationships, "That's why she'll be single for the rest of her life" serves as a straightforward observation about an individual's life.

The employment of the verb *Be* in this context preserves straightforward and utilitarian language, contrasting with a romantic narrative that would emphasize ornate language, grand expressions of affection, or intensely emotional dramatics. The verb *Be* does not convey theatrical or inflated language; instead, it emphasizes authenticity, certainty, and pragmatic feelings, reflecting the manner in which individuals communicate in daily interactions. Consequently, the overall tone of the text prioritizes common experiences, reality, and logical reasoning over an excessively romanticized or dramatized depiction of occurrences.

4. Know

The verb *Know* ranks as the fourth most commonly used in Colleen Hoover's novel *It Ends with Us*. The researchers identified 18 collocations associated with the term *Know*, which are enumerated below:

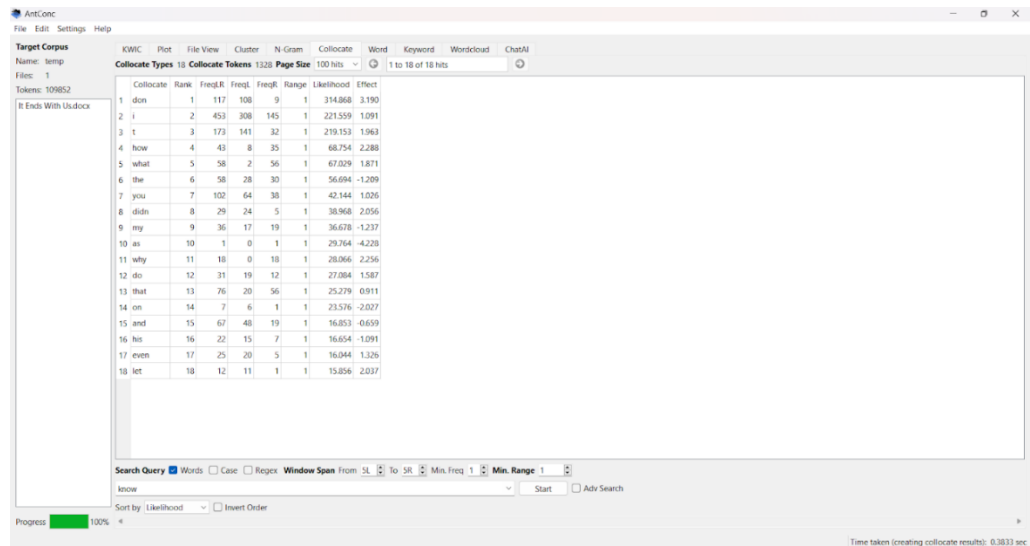


Figure 4. Know Collocations

Among the 18 collocations, the verb *Know* predominantly pairs with terms that lack any romantic connotation. This collocation suggests that the sentence falls under the category of 'narration for reality,' as there is no link between the collocations and romance. Consequently, a relationship exists between the circumstances and the emotions felt by the character. In the presented data, the verb pattern *know* combined with the collocation *don't* appears more frequently than other collocations, which are:

Table 8. Know Collocations (Reality)

Behind his head for a moment. Then he said,	don'	t know my real dad. He never had anything
"I		
looked down at me, then came back even	don'	t know how long we kissed, a long time.
harder. I		
your mother. That was hurtful. And I'm sorry,	don'	t know why I always feel like crying when
"I		

For the first data showed the application of the verb 'know' within the context of the sentence. 'Know' is collocated with 'don't' to specify the understanding of the condition when the dialogue happened between characters. The initial data indicates that the character is grappling with internal uncertainty, particularly regarding her true identity and the question of who her biological father is. The subsequent data illustrates the use of the verb 'know' within the context of the sentence. Here, 'know' is paired with 'don't' to clarify the circumstances surrounding the dialogue between the characters and their respective settings. The second set of data reveals that the character is undergoing a similar sense of uncertainty in her internal state. She is unsure about a significant aspect of her life, specifically concerning her past experiences, such as whether she has engaged in kissing for an extended period. The third data set again highlights the use of the verb 'know' in the sentence, where 'know' is combined with 'don't' to articulate the emotional nuances present in the dialogue between the characters. The scenario depicted in the third data set appears distinct, as it delves into the emotional turmoil faced by the character. She consistently weeps in response to distressing or disheartening events that occur in her life. Additionally, she experienced confusion regarding her own feelings and communicated these emotions to her mother.

This indicates that rather than portraying events in an unnecessarily romantic or dramatic manner, the text's general tone is more focused on truth, ordinary experience, and reason. Therefore, it is categorized as reality because the collocation contributes only to being a part of narration.

This study's findings indicate that Colleen Hoover's book *It Ends with Us* trends towards a realistic narrative of events rather than pure romanticization of the themes overall, and especially those involving relationships and domestic violence. Our analysis indicates that language use in the book is in favor of an unromanticized realistic story over an overstated and unrealistic one of problematic relationships through examination of most frequent verb use (have, says, be, and know) and their lexis. Examples of descriptive and practical sentences that utilize the verb "have" include the phrase "he slams his head into mine so forcefully that I require six stitches." Instead of attempting to romanticize violence, this sentence structure conveys a realistic portrayal of the events that transpired. The book's representation of abusive relationships as a genuine reflection of a specific kind of love, rather than an idealized or aspirational form of love, is suggested by the choice of such language. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on literary realism and its impact on readers' understanding of relationships. We were able to quantify and examine language patterns that indicate *It Ends with Us* values realism over idealization through corpus stylistics. In order to enhance the understanding of the novel's stylistic methods, further research could effectively broaden the analysis to include other linguistic elements such as modality, sentiment, and speech patterns specific to characters.

This study diverges from Young's conclusions, which indicate that Hoover idealizes abusive male figures through a psychological perspective. Conversely, this research illustrates that Hoover's writing style is consistent with literary realism, portraying authentic situations augmented with dramatic elements to enhance narrative engagement. Additionally, this study reinforces the idea that the 'romantic' aspects within the narrative are based on real-life experiences, modified for storytelling rather than invented to endorse abusive dynamics. This stands in opposition to Bratteng's claim that fiction frequently romanticizes abuse. Rather, this

research reveals that Hoover adopts a primarily realistic methodology. The protagonist's internal struggle is vividly expressed through her language, suggesting that romantic interpretations arise from the readers' viewpoints instead of the author's intentions. Ultimately, the findings of this study align with Vernay's research, which asserts that fiction reinterprets reality with alterations for increased interest. Specifically, this research indicates that Hoover is transforming her mother's historical experiences into an engaging novel.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us* presents a realistic depiction of relationships and domestic violence, as opposed to an exaggeratedly romantic view. Through a corpus stylistic analysis focusing on the four most commonly used verbs (have, says, be, and know) and their associated collocations, the research indicates that the language of the novel emphasizes narrative realism over romantic embellishment. The examination of the verb *Says* reveals that its collocations primarily serve as neutral markers of dialogue, rather than tools for enhancing emotional depth or creating intensified romantic scenes. Likewise, the verbs "be" and *Know* act as factual representations of the characters' thoughts and situations, thereby reinforcing a realism instead of an idealized portrayal of relationships. While *Have* does occasionally appear alongside romantic terms (such as *sex*), its overall usage frequency aligns more with the novel's descriptive and grounded narrative style, rather than an effort to romanticize complex relationships. Hoover refrains from using excessively dramatic or poetic language, offering a stark and unvarnished portrayal of domestic violence. This approach enables the narrative to capture the intricate realities of abusive relationships without glorifying them. The study adds to the wider conversation about literary realism and its impact on how readers view romantic relationships, illustrating that *It Ends with Us* does not idealize abuse but rather addresses it as a significant, real-life concern.

However, in this research, the corpus used in Antconc is a manually inputted corpus rather than one accumulated from different sources and data. Next research can delve deeper onto analysis based on corpora in online website for wider words comparison. This will enhance readers' perspective of language usage in a specific literary work with the usage in general corpora within different region and genre.

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