Framing Inequality, Uncertainty and Instability: A Corpus-based Analysis of 'Precarious' Derived Nouns

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Abstract

This paper presents lexical research on the noun affixation stemming from the adjective *precarious*, semantically defining individuals' insecurity and uncertainty in facing disparity in life and professional status. The analysis of the derived nouns *precarity*, *precariousness*, *precariat*, and *precarization* aims to offer valuable insight into the evolving nature of the English lexicon. These terms, rooted in discussing social and economic instability, have gained prominence in contemporary discourse, particularly in academic and media contexts. Their increasing usage reflects a broader societal concern with issues entailing inequality and precarious living and working conditions. Employing a corpus-based approach, the study examines their frequency of occurrence and contextual use as keywords in context (KWIC) along with the collocational patterns within the large language corpus The British National Corpus 2014 (BNC2014). An interdisciplinary exploration thus combines quantitative corpus linguistics with qualitative discourse analysis to uncover how *precarious* and its derived nouns frame inequality, uncertainty, and instability in contemporary societal discourse. The following research questions arise: 1) How frequently do the adjective *precarious* and its derived nouns *precarity, precariousness*, *precariat*, and *precarization* occur in BNC2014, and what collocates co-occur in the different contexts they are used? 2) How do *precarious* and its derived nouns contribute to framing inequality, uncertainty, and instability in academic or mainstream discourse? By addressing these questions, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the linguistic mechanisms that construct and intersect public realities, offering insights into the interplay between language use and societal change.

Keywords: Inequality, Precarious, Precarity, Precariousness, Precariat, Precarization

1. Introduction

The present research (Note 1) investigates the contemporary lexical nouns *precarity*, *precariousness*, *precariat*, and *precarization* deriving from the adjective *precarious*. Its semantic change is documented in authentic historical sources and etymological dictionaries tracing back its origins to the mid-seventeenth century in the Latin *prĕcārĭus*, which means "obtained by entreaty or prayer" and derives from *precārī* ("to pray") and *prex* ("prayer" or "entreaty") (Note 2). This etymological foundation reflects the initial semantic association of the lexeme with dependency and uncertainty, as something obtained through prayer is inherently unstable or contingent on the will of another. In social sciences, the term *precarious* connotes a shared human condition emphasising the inherent vulnerability of life and the social structures that exacerbate this vulnerability (Butler, 2004, p. 29). The lexicon surrounding *precarious* denoting social and economic instability—the derived forms of *precarity, precariousness, precariat, and precarization*—has garnered significant scholarly attention, for instance in sociology (e.g. Bourdieu, 1991, 1998; Butler, 1997, 2004, 2009; Standing, 2011), in political economy (e.g. Harvery, 2005; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008), in anthropology (e.g. Muehlebach, 2013; Millar, 2018), in gender and feminist studies (e.g. Federici, 2012; Lorey 2015), and in legal studies (e.g. Fudge & Owens, 2006).

To begin with the analysis of the lexical meaning of *precarity*, it refers to the structural conditions that produce and sustain instability "through the disguised (and thus misrecognized) imposition of systems of classification and of mental structures that are objectively adjusted to social structures" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 169). As an abstract and uncountable noun *precarity* functions as a reification of the adjective *precarious*, which suffix *-ity* signals a state or condition in critical theory and sociology. In particular, it semantically operates with political charge referring to an "induced condition" of people suffering from the lack of social and economic protection, thus becoming exposed to violence, disease, and risking to die (Butler, 2009, p. 25). This positions *precarity* not as a neutral descriptor but as a politically contingent, socioeconomically structured state, which meaning is loaded with institutional critique.

Precarity intersects with *precariousness* that implies a more generalised, ontological vulnerability (Butler, 2009, p. 33). It is lexically similar to *precarity* but semantically broader and more existential. Beyond the political and economic sphere, the term *precariousness* expands to encompass existential and social dimensions, in that the concept refers to a fundamental human condition, exacerbated by systemic inequalities and the fragility of social bonds (Butler, 1997, p. 28). This broader understanding thus underscores its relevance not only to labour but also to housing, healthcare, and other aspects of daily life. A deep analysis of the literature review about the concept of *precarity* has accordingly revealed the need to further investigate the facet of "psychological impacts stemmed from non-employment precarities". These indicate the negative impact of the social, economic, legal uneven distribution, which discriminates people's lives, thus suffering from a constant stress reflecting their mental vulnerability and insecurity (Hung, Lai, & Fung, 2024, p. 24).

Affixation processes have played a crucial role in expanding the English vocabulary, enabling the precise articulation of nuanced social realities. Three interrelated concepts have been delineated to extend the implications of the significance of *precarious*: a) *precariousness* as the universal condition of vulnerability affecting the human and non-human; b) *precarity* as the hierarchical distribution of this vulnerability in the labour market with "social positionings of insecurity"; c) "*governmental precarization*" as the deliberate political strategies that manage and exploit these vulnerabilities (Lorey, 2015, pp. 11-14). The negative consequences of these concepts would be accordingly acknowledged "if *precarity* and *precarization* could thus be analyzed in their functions as instruments of domination, and finally, if new modes of securing and protecting against *precarity* and *precarization* could be found in the recognition of an ineluctable state of *precariousness*" (Lorey, 2015, p. 7). Their conceptualisation also emphasises the further distinction between governmental *precarization*, concerning state policies that enforce insecurity, and social *precarization*, reflecting the lived experience of such policies (Lorey, 2015, pp. 89-90). Governmental and social *precarization* shed light upon the interplay between systemic forces and individual experiences, offering a nuanced framework for understanding inequality and instability.

The notion of *precarization* has been also framed through the metaphor epitomising a "dynamic field of forces" that mark how individuals are subjected to contingent distinctions under rules that have to be "constantly renegotiated among the strongest players". The implication results in "a kind of prism", which reflects a complete "restructuration of the capitalist class structure from one angle" (Porta, Hänninen, Siisiäinen, & Silvasti, 2015, pp. 3-4).

While *precarity* and *precariousness* highlight a state of instability, *precariat* denotes a specific social class characterised by precarious employment, and *precarization* refers to the systemic process of rendering conditions more unstable. The use of *precariat* has been pioneered to describe a growing social class characterised by chronic job insecurity, lack of labour rights, and minimal social protection (Standing, 2011, pp. 8-9). It includes "people who lack the seven forms of labour-related security": 1) "*Labour market security*", as they do not have the same opportunities as full time employees; 2) "*Employment security*", as they live unprotected from the norms about being employed or dismissed; 3) "*Job security*", as they cannot count on the increase of income or progression of their professional status; 4) "*Work security*", as they have no protection about the limitation of working hours, or in case of accidents or illness at work; 5) "*Skill reproduction security*", as they are deprived from the opportunity to improve their skills through apprenticeship or professional training experiences; 6) "*Income security*", as they are not covered by any professional assurance, including social; 7) *Representation security*, as they have no representative to protect their professional role (Standing, 2011, p. 10). It has been pointed out the exclusion of this group from the benefits of economic growth, framing the precariat as a distinct class shaped by the erosion of traditional employment structures. As the market has commodified labour, workers have seen trivialising their occupational status towards the introduction of "skilled labour precariat" characterised by flexible employment and a constant state of insecurity (Aşçı, 2018, p. 104). An in-depth analysis also considers

precariat as standing for "a rapidly growing segment of the working class and the bearer of the sharpest grievances against capitalism" (Wright, 2016, p. 134).

The linguistic productivity of *precarious* derived nouns, particularly through affixation processes (-*ity*, -*ness*, -*at, ization*), has enabled their widespread adoption across disciplines and languages. This adaptability reflects their utility in naming and framing the multifaceted challenges of modern life. Given the prevalence of their usage in mainstream press and academic literature, these terms encapsulate their multidimensional nature as focal points in discussions in the fields of labour rights, economic policies, and social justice. However, their usage also raises questions about how language shapes perceptions of inequality and instability. For instance, the lexemes *flexibility* (Note 3) and *gig economy* (Note 4) seem to mask the underlying *precarity* of non-standard work arrangements, in contrast with *precarity* and *precariat*, which explicitly criticise these conditions.

This study thus employs a lexical analysis using corpus linguistics intersecting with discourse analysis, based on querying the large language corpus The British National Corpus 2014 (henceforth BNC2014). By focusing on a different perspective from the studies carried out in the aforementioned research areas, it considers the distribution and frequency of use of *precarity, precariousness, precariat,* and *precarization* across various text modes, genres, and subgenres. The aim is to offer valuable insight into the evolving nature of the English lexicon and how these shape and reflect contemporary discourse on economic vulnerability and social instability. Their collocational patterns and contextual usage are thus observed to uncover the linguistic mechanisms contributing to their meaning-making and dissemination. These concepts are pivotal in understanding the multifaceted nature of insecurity and vulnerability in contemporary societies as, while lexically and morphologically related, they carry distinct linguistic and semantic nuances that reflect their origins, grammatical roles, and disciplinary usage.

2. Method

A corpus-based study intends to provide the analysis of lexical nouns derived from the adjective *precarious* investigating their frequency and contextual use as keywords in context (KWIC) within BNC2014. These are examined along with their collocational patterns (Cf. Brezina, Hawtin, & McEnery, 2021) through the corpus-analysis tool, #LancsBox X 5.0.3 (Note 5) and the collocation GraphColl tool (Note 6). The intersection between quantitative corpus linguistics with qualitative discourse analysis characterises this interdisciplinary exploration intending to uncover how these terms frame inequality, uncertainty, and instability in contemporary societal discourse. Two research questions were formulated: 1) How frequently do the adjective *precarious* and its derived nouns *precarity, precariousness*, *precariat*, *precarization* occur in BNC2014, and what collocates co-occur in the different contexts they are used? 2) How do *precarious* and its derived nouns contribute to framing inequality, uncertainty, and instability in academic or mainstream discourse?

3. Results

The frequency of occurrence, calculated and normalised per million words (PMW) and collocational metrics, were set for the collocational patterns with a useful span of five words L5/R5, Freq. (collocation) ≥ 5 & Log Dice ≥ 6 (or NaN) "Freq. (collocation)" = number Range (5.0, Infinity) and "Log Dice" = number Range (6.0, Infinity, NaN) (Brezina, McEnery, Wattam, 2015, p. 140). The following tables reproduce the collocates around different derived forms, beginning from *precarious*:

3.1 Analysis of the Adjective Precarious

Hits 392 (3,83) – Texts 299/88.171 – Collocates 1.437 – Key collocates 4

Table 1. Text: mode

Value	Size	Hits	Relative Frequency	Texts
Writing	91.275.763	382	4,19	291/86.920
Speech	11.029.483	10	0,91	8/1.251

From BNC2014, *precarious* occurs 392 times (3.83 PMW) across 299 texts, indicating moderate but consistent usage in contemporary English. It is mainly used in writing mode (4.19 PMW) compared to speech mode (0.91 PMW). This suggests that *precarious* is a more formal or specialised tool for critical analysis, as prevalent in written discourse rather than spoken language, with limited everyday usage in informal speech. However, the bias of the written-text corpus (89% of hits from writing) may underrepresent spoken discourse, where related terms like *precariousness* might differ in usage.

Table 2. Text: genre

Value	Size	Hits	Relative Frequency	Texts
Academic prose	19.701.027	171	8,68	91/2.879
Magazines	15.297.596	58	3,79	55/26.965
Fiction	20.432.736	70	3,43	64/1.069
Newspapers	20.338.500	64	3,15	63/50.210
Electronic language	5.291.594	11	2,08	11/2.381
Official documents	7.040.145	7	0,99	6/2.690
Informal speech	11.029.483	10	0,91	8/1.251
Written-to-be-spoken	3.174.165	1	0,32	1/726

The distribution across genres further supports the formal nature of *precarious*. It is most frequently found in academic prose with 171 hits (8.68 PMW) indicating its relevance in analytical and theoretical discussions in social sciences and humanities. Magazines (3.79 PMW), Fiction (3.43 PMW), and Newspapers (3.15 PMW) show similar but lower frequencies conveying broader cultural and journalistic engagement with the concept. Informal speech (0.91 PMW) and Official documents (0.99 PMW) exhibit minimal usage, reflecting a formal or analytical term rather than a colloquial or bureaucratic one. This aligns with the conceptual utility of the adjective in scholarly discussions of labour, economics, and social theory.

Table 3. Text: subgenre

Value	Size	Hits	Relative Frequency	Texts
Academic prose: social sciences	3.793.395	78	20,56	32/448
Academic prose: humanities	3.804.874	44	11,56	28/544
Newspapers: serious	6.774.016	39	5,76	38/11.576
Fiction: miscellaneous	11.339.846	37	3,26	33/593
Academic prose: politics/law/education	2.083.805	32	15,36	20/189
Magazines: education	956.930	16	16,72	13/888
Newspapers: mass market	6.788.865	16	2,36	16/20.761
Fiction: women's	2.391.089	12	5,02	11/127
Magazines: news	1.085.916	11	10,13	11/1.774
Academic prose: medicine	3.342.477	11	3,29	6/718
Fiction: sci-fi	2.126.331	10	4,70	9/91
Newspapers: regional	6.775.619	9	1,33	9/17.873
Electronic language: blogs	1.114.287	8	7,18	8/1.610
Official documents: House of Commons: Westminster Hall	1.206.789	6	4,97	5/38
Magazines: men's lifestyle	988.536	5	5,06	5/1.184
Informal speech: one-to-one talk	4.747.897	5	1,05	4/622

Informal speech: miscellaneous	6.281.586	5	0,80	4/629
Fiction: mystery	1.703.501	4	2,35	4/92
Academic prose: natural sciences	3.334.965	4	1,20	3/531
Magazines: sport	1.136.567	3	2,64	3/1.120
Magazines: motoring	2.919.507	3	1,03	3/6.485
Fiction: romance	385.075	2	5,19	2/24
Fiction: fantasy	1.124.972	2	1,78	2/56
Electronic language: product reviews	1.431.464	2	1,40	2/292
Magazines: science and technology	1.605.590	2	1,25	2/2.999
Magazines: music	1.672.274	2	1,20	2/3.910
Academic prose: technology/engineering	3.341.511	2	0,60	2/449
Fiction: adventure	94.490	1	10,58	1/4
Official documents: House of Lords: chamber	223.940	1	4,47	1/5
Fiction: horror	304.935	1	3,28	1/18
Magazines: TV and film	574.004	1	1,74	1/480
Fiction: historical	583.599	1	1,71	1/28
Electronic language: forums	1.022.820	1	0,98	1/200
Written-to-be-spoken: TV scripts	1.591.799	1	0,63	1/377

The distribution of *precarious* across different subgenres reveals key insights into its usage, particularly in academic, journalistic, and literary contexts. The results highlight that it is widely used in formal and analytical discourse while also making appearances in fictional and public-facing texts. The highest relative frequency of *precarious* appears in Academic prose, especially in Social sciences (20.56 PMW, 78 hits), Politics/law/education (15.36 PMW, 32 hits), and Humanities (11.56 PMW, 44 hits), This suggests that *precarious* is a well-established term in disciplines that deal with social and political structures, employment conditions, and economic stability. Its frequent use in these fields supports discussions on

precarious labour, economic uncertainty, and societal instability. It also appears in Academic prose: medicine (3.29 PMW, 11 hits) and Natural sciences (1.20 PMW, 4 hits), indicating that the concept may extend to discussions on healthcare access, scientific funding, and environmental uncertainties. Beyond academia, *precarious* is well-represented in Newspapers and Magazines, showing its presence in both serious and mass-market reporting serious newspapers (5.76 PMW, 39 hits), mass-market newspapers (2.36 PMW, 16 hits), regional newspapers (1.33 PMW, 9 hits), Magazines: education (16.72 PMW, 16 hits), Magazines: news (10.13 PMW, 11 hits). This indicates that *precarious* is commonly used in discussions of economic instability, political uncertainty, and social issues within mainstream media. The high relative frequency in education-related magazines suggests that precarious employment and funding in education are recurring themes. The term also appears in various fiction subgenres, with notable occurrences in Miscellaneous fiction (3.26 PMW, 37 hits), Women's fiction (5.02 PMW, 12 hits), Sci-fi (4.70 PMW, 10 hits), Mystery (2.35 PMW, 4 hits). This suggests that *precarious* is used to depict instability in personal relationships, economic conditions, or dystopian futures. Its presence in science fiction and mystery may indicate themes of societal collapse or risk, while its use in women's fiction could reflect narratives of social and economic vulnerability. Less frequent but still significant, its recurrence in horror, romance, fantasy, and adventure fiction shows that while the word is not central to these genres, it may still contribute to themes of risk and uncertainty. Interestingly, *precarious* occurs in some electronic language sources, including Blogs (7.18 PMW, 8 hits), Product reviews (1.40 PMW, 2 hits), and Forums (0.98 PMW, 1 hit). It could be argued that *precarious* is beginning to be used in online discussions, possibly in debates about job security, economic conditions, or personal experiences of instability. Finally, it is also present, albeit at low frequencies, in Official documents: House of Lords: chamber and Informal speech. Its limited use in informal speech (one-to-one talk: 1.05 PMW, 5 hits) further reinforces its tendency to be more of a formal, analytical term. Furthermore, the analysis of the graphical collocations tool, efficient for building and exploring linguistic collocations (Note 6), provides further insight into the contexts in which *precarious* appears.

Table 4. GraphColl tab: Key collocates of *precarious*

Key collocate	Frequency of collocation	Frequency in BNC2014	Log Dice	MI
position	52	17.425	6,6	9,6
employment	10	4.423	6,1	9,2
fragile	6	1.092	7,0	10,5
financially	5	967	6,9	10,4

The results indicate that *precarious* frequently collocates with *position* and *employment* by following it, whereas *fragile* and *financially* occur around it in distribution. The use in context of the adjective denotes economic and social uncertainty. In particular, the foremost occurrence of the key collocate *position* (Freq: 52, Log Dice: 6.6, MI 9.6) suggests that

precarious is not only of frequent use to describe instability in occupational or social standings but also its patterning is uniquely associated, as shown by the Mutual Information (MI) score. An instance is "Owing to the more precarious position of the French economy, unions had greater incentive to engage in solidarity with periphery countries" (AcaPleRa43.xml). Whereas when collocating with *employment* (Freq: 10, Log Dice: 6.1, MI 9,2), *precarious* is associated with job insecurity, due for instance to temporary contracts, and thus non-permanent, such as "In some regions, precarious employment, declining incomes and fewer government services have driven people to cities ill-equipped to cater for rapidly expanding numbers of job-seekers demanding a range of basic services" (AcaSocBk19.xml). As regards *fragile* (Freq: 6, Log Dice: 7.0, MI 10.5), it indicates a strong association with *precarious*, although as an in-frequent conceptual overlap, particularly in economic or structural contexts, such as in "In a class-based society, we can always take the dominative use of technologies for certain, whereas alternative uses aiming at liberation are much more fragile and precarious" (AcaHumBk18.xml). Concerning *financially* (Freq: 5, Log Dice: 6.9, MI 10,4), although its patterning seems in-frequent there is a strong association with *precarious* to reflect economic instability, as in "Newspapers were less willing to challenge the political and business elite, Mr Ram rez said, because falling revenues had left them financially precarious and vulnerable to political pressure" (NewSeTim3700.xml). Despite the Log Dice threshold (≥6) effectively filtering for statistically significant collocates, the interpretation of *financially* warrants caution in overgeneralising its low frequency with 5 hits.

Precarious appears predominantly used to express systemic instability, particularly in academic and journalistic contexts revealing a lexical network centred on socio-economic vulnerability. Semantically, its key collocates cluster around instability in labour (*employment*), socio-economic status (*position*, *financially*), and structural vulnerability (*fragile*), confirming Standing's (2011) conceptualisation of *precarity* as a condition of systemic insecurity.

3.2 Analysis of the Adjective "Precarity"

Hits 67 (0,65) – Texts 32/88.171 – Collocates 352 – Key collocates 2

Table 5. Text mode

Value	Size	Hits	Relative Frequency	Texts
Writing	91.275.763	67	0,73	32/86.920
Speech	11.029.483	0	0	0/1.251

The occurrences of the noun *precarity* in BNC2014 reveal its specialised and emerging use in contemporary English discourse. With 67 hits (0.65 PMW) across 32 texts, all written (0 hits in spoken texts), its formal, analytical nature appears reinforced. It seems significantly less frequently than the related adjective *precarious* (392 hits), thus reflecting a more recent status

primarily confined to academic and critical discourse. Its low frequency also indicates a relatively rare general usage.

Table 6. Text: genre

Value	Size	Hits	Relative Frequency	Texts
Academic prose	19.701.027	57	2,89	25/2.879
Magazines	15.297.596	10	0,65	7/26.965
Newspapers	20.338.500	0	0	0/50.210
Official documents	7.040.145	0	0	0/2.690
Fiction	20.432.736	0	0	0/1.069
Informal speech	11.029.483	0	0	0/1.251
Electronic language	5.291.594	0	0	0/2.381
Written-to-be-spoken	3.174.165	0	0	0/726

The limited presence of *precarity* in Magazines (10 hits, 0.65 PMW), the only other genre where it infrequently occurs, is in education-related content, suggesting a secondary use in journalistic or public discourse about educational policies or issues. Interestingly, *precarity* does not appear in Newspapers, Fiction, Official documents, Informal speech, Electronic language, or Spoken-oriented texts. This absence indicates that, unlike *precarious*, *precarity* has not yet permeated broader public discourse or everyday communication.

Table 7. Text: subgenre

Value	Size	Hits	Relative Frequency	Texts
Academic prose: social sciences	3.793.395	39	10,28	14/448
Academic prose: politics/law/education	2.083.805	10	4,80	5/189
Magazines: education	956.930	9	9,41	6/888
Academic prose: humanities	3.804.874	8	2,10	6/544
Magazines: news	1.085.916	1	0,92	1/1.774

A closer look at subgenres provides further clarity on the academic focus of *precarity*, highlighting its specialised origins in scholarly discussions. Social sciences (10.28 PMW) and Academic prose: politics/law/education (4.80 PMW) contain the highest frequency,

strengthening their theoretical and policy-related relevance. Humanities (2.10 PMW) also shows some presence, although less frequently than in Social sciences. Magazines: education (9.41 PMW) displays an unexpectedly high frequency, suggesting that *precarity* is becoming relevant and used in discussions about education and social conditions. The analysis of its key collocates provides additional information:

Table 8. GraphColl tab: Key collocates of *precarity*

Collocate	Frequency of collocation	Frequency in BNC Corpus	Log Dice	MI
consumerism	5	123	9,8	15,9
individualism	5	285	8,9	14,7

The collocates of *precarity* are sparse but highly revealing, pointing to its conceptual associations. Its key collocates are *consumerism* (Log Dice: 9.8, MI: 15.9) and *individualism* (Log Dice: 8.9, MI: 14.7): they link *precarity* to discussions on neoliberalism. In particular, the former suggests a discourse on economic instability and social inequalities related to capitalist consumption patterns, and the latter self-sufficiency, and the weakening of social safety. An instance is "In this section, Kristen and Upcoming Movement's performances of negative politics are brought closer together to explore their protests against precarity, individualism and consumerism in the context of outer East London" (AcaSocRa173.xml). The collocational patterning with *consumerism* seems to expresses critiques of economic systems where instability is linked to market-driven consumption, for instance, by referring to Lorey's analysis of neoliberal *precarization*. Whereas *individualism* appears to reflect debates about how structural insecurity erodes collective security, emphasising atomisation align with Standing (2011)'s view.

It is worth noting that, unlike *precarious*, *precarity* lacks collocates tied to concrete experiences (e.g. *employment*). Instead, it pairs with abstract, systemic concepts, reinforcing its theoretical framing. *Precarity* is lexically marked for critical discourse, appearing alongside terms of critique about socio-economic structures rather than describing individual experiences. Furthermore, while *precarious* is widely used across genres (e.g., newspapers, fiction), *precarity* is almost exclusively academic. This mirrors the divergence between everyday descriptions of instability (*precarious*) and systemic critiques (*precarity*).

A limitation of the analysis is revealed in the low frequency of *precarity*, with only 67 hits, which renders findings suggestive but not definitive. A larger corpus or diachronic analysis (for instance, comparing 1994–2014) might reveal trends in its adoption. Furthermore, the written bias highlighting the lack of spoken data obscures whether *precarity* is also used in verbal academic discourse, for instance as regards lectures, and interviews.

Precarity remains a term of critique, primarily used in scholarly discussions of labour, neoliberalism, and governance. Its absence in everyday speech and journalism suggests it has not yet entered mainstream vocabulary. As a result of 57 hits (2.89 PMW) in the text genre of

Academic prose, accounting for 85% of all occurrences, *precarity* supports its role as a theoretical concept in sociology, political economy, and critical theory (Standing, 2011; Lorey, 2015).

3.3 Analysis of the Noun "Precariousness"

Hits 43 (0,42) – Texts 33/88.171 – Collocates 238 –   Key collocates 0

Text: mode

Value	Size	Hits	Relative Frequency	Texts
Writing	91.275.763	43	0,42	33/86.920
Speech	11.029.483	0	0	0/1.251

BNC2014 reveals a formal and academic nature of *precariousness*, showing minimal presence in everyday discourse. The results suggest that the noun is a specialised term, primarily used in scholarly writing, particularly in social sciences and political discussions. It appears exclusively in writing (0.42 PMW, 43 hits), with no occurrences in speech (0.0 PMW). This aligns with its abstract and theoretical nature, making it unsuitable for casual or spoken communication.

Text: genre

Value	Size	Hits	Relative Frequency	Texts
Academic prose	19.701.027	31	1,57	21/2.879
Magazines	15.297.596	7	0,46	7/26.965
Fiction	20.432.736	4	0,20	4/1.069
Electronic language	5.291.594	1	0,19	1/2.381
Newspapers	20.338.500	0	0	0/50.210
Official documents	7.040.145	0	0	0/2.690
Informal speech	11.029.483	0	0	0/1.251
Written-to-be-spoken	3.174.165	0	0	0/726

Most frequently found in academic prose (1.57 PMW, 31 hits), which accounts for 72% of all instances, *precariousness* reinforces its use in scholarly discourse and presents notable occurrences in Magazines (0.46 PMW, 7 hits), suggesting limited but existing use in journalism, possibly in discussions about economic instability or labour conditions. In Fiction (0.20 PMW, 4 hits), the few occurrences show minor representation in literary contexts,

likely used to describe character conditions or social themes. Whereas, in Electronic language (0.19 PMW, 1 hit), the noun appears in digital discussions, although at a very low frequency. Ultimately, in Newspapers and Official documents (0 PMW), unlike *precarious* occurring in journalistic contexts, *precariousness* is absent from news reporting and government documents, indicating that it is not a widely used public or policy-related term.

Text: subgenre

Value	Size	Hits	Relative Frequency	Texts
Academic prose: social sciences	3.793.395	21	5,54	12/448
Academic prose: politics/law/education	2.083.805	5	2,40	5/189
Magazines: education	956.930	4	4,18	4/888
Academic prose: humanities	3.804.874	4	1,05	3/544
Magazines: news	1.085.916	2	1,84	2/1.774
Fiction: miscellaneous	11.339.846	2	0,18	2/593
Electronic language: product reviews	1.431.464	1	0,70	1/292
Fiction: mystery	1.703.501	1	0,59	1/92
Fiction: women's	2.391.089	1	0,42	1/127
Magazines: finance	2.714.231	1	0,37	1/3.201
Academic prose: technology/engineering	3.341.511	1	0,30	1/449

A closer look at subgenres provides a more detailed picture of *precariousness*, used primarily in academic and analytical contexts. Academic prose: social sciences (5.54 PMW, 21 hits) reveals the highest frequency, suggesting that the noun is strongly associated with discussions of economic instability, labour conditions, and societal risks. Academic prose: politics/law/education (2.40 PMW, 5 hits), indicates its relevance in legal and policy-related debates, likely in discussions of employment rights and social security. Whereas, Magazines: education (4.18 PMW, 4 hits) shows a notable presence, signifying that *precariousness* is being discussed in relation to job stability, funding, and conditions in the education sector. Concerning Magazines: news (1.84 PMW, 2 hits), it suggests that while the term is not widespread in mainstream journalism, it occasionally appears in analytical or opinion pieces.

Fiction subgenres (miscellaneous, mystery, women's fiction) have very low representation (0.18–0.59 PMW), showing that *precariousness* is occasionally used in storytelling, unlike *precarious*, which has a broader narrative function. Finally, Electronic language: product reviews (0.70 PMW, 1 hit) with a single occurrence suggests that the term is extremely rare in digital consumer discourse.

The provided data do not include specific collocates to meet the strict statistical thresholds (Frequency ≥5 and Log Dice ≥6), and the fact that 238 potential collocates were identified (with none meeting the significance criteria) indicates the term appears in varied syntactic environments without developing strong, fixed partnerships. It tends to function as an independent concept rather than forming set phrases, and the absence of statistically significant collocates may indicate it hasn't become conventionalised in specific constructions.

Precariousness is almost entirely confined to academic social sciences and political discourse, with little presence in news media or government documents. This strong academic bias aligns with its conceptual nature as an abstract nominalisation describing a state or condition. Unlike *precarious*, which appears across multiple domains, *precariousness* remains a concept-driven term that does not easily translate into everyday storytelling or speech. Its low frequency in Electronic language suggests it has not yet entered mainstream online discussions.

The results confirm that *precariousness* is a highly formal and specialised term, primarily used in academic discourse to discuss social, economic, and political instability. Its absence from spoken language, newspapers, and official documents suggests it has not gained widespread usage in public discourse. While it appears in magazines related to education and finance, its impact beyond scholarly discussions remains minimal.

3.4 Analysis of the Noun Precariat

Hits 8 (0,08) – Texts 5/88.171 – Collocates 52 – Key collocates 0

Text: mode

Value	Size	Hits	Relative Frequency	Texts
Writing	91.275.763	8	0,09	5/86.920
Speech	11.029.483	0	0	0/1.251

The analysis of *precariat* across different text modes, genres, and subgenres reveals that this term is highly specialised, with minimal usage across most domains. It appears in Writing but is absent in Speech, reflecting its status as a technical term used primarily in social and political discussions rather than everyday discourse. The term occurs exclusively in writing (0.09 PMW, 8 hits), and does not in speech (0.0 PMW, 0 hits). This confirms that *precariat* is primarily a written term, likely used in academic, journalistic, and political contexts rather than informal conversations.

Text: genre

Value	Size	Hits	Relative Frequency	Texts
Magazines	15.297.596	3	0,20	1/26.965
Newspapers	20.338.500	3	0,15	3/50.210
Academic prose	19.701.027	2	0,10	1/2.879
Official documents	7.040.145	0	0	0/2.690
Fiction	20.432.736	0	0	0/1.069
Informal speech	11.029.483	0	0	0/1.251
Electronic language	5.291.594	0	0	0/2.381
Written-to-be-spoken	3.174.165	0	0	0/726

The analysis of *precariat* in BNC2014 yields particularly striking results that warrant careful interpretation. With only 8 occurrences (0.08 PMW) across 5 texts, this term appears exceptionally rare in the corpus, suggesting it was still in the early stages of lexical adoption in 2014. Its minimal presence (8 hits total) indicates it was not yet conventionalised in mainstream English by 2014 and its use was restricted to very specific contexts. It may have been in the process of transitioning from specialised jargon to wider usage (Cf. Standing 2011, Chapter 5; Diamanti 2023, pp. 76-77). Examining Magazines (0.20 PMW, 3 hits) indicates some presence of *precariat* in journalistic discussions, likely in articles related to labour, economics, and social issues. The value Newspapers (0.15 PMW, 3 hits) signifies the occurrence of the noun in serious news discourse, possibly in reports or editorials discussing labour precarity and socio-economic issues. Academic prose (0.10 PMW, 2 hits) shows that the term is recognised in scholarly writing but is less prevalent than other related forms like *precariousness*. Concerning Official documents, Fiction, Electronic language, and Informal speech (0.0 PMW, 0 hits), the complete absence from these categories suggests *precariat* has not yet permeated policy-making, creative literature, digital discussions, or everyday spoken language.

Text: subgenre

Value	Size	Hits	Relative Frequency	Texts
Magazines: education	956.930	3	3,14	1/888
Newspapers: serious	6.774.016	3	0,44	3/11.576
Academic prose: social sciences	3.793.395	2	0,53	1/448

A deeper look at subgenres reveals that *precariat* is most commonly found in Magazines: education (3.14 PMW, 3 hits), indicating its use in discussions about job insecurity in the education sector, possibly related to adjunct faculty, contract teachers, or unstable academic employment. Whereas, in Newspapers: serious (0.44 PMW, 3 hits) it suggests a use in high-quality, analytical journalism, particularly in relation to economic instability and labour issues. The value Academic prose: social sciences (0.53 PMW, 2 hits) shows it is adopted reinforcing its relevance in labour studies, economic theory, and discussions on social inequality. As highly specialised, and not widely used, *precariat* is a niche social and political term with very low frequency in general discourse. It is mostly employed in education-focused journalism, serious news reporting, and social science academia. Unlike *precarious*, which appears in multiple domains, *precariat* has not entered fictional narratives, digital communication, or informal speech, making it a theoretical and analytical term rather than a widely preferred expression. While its use remains limited, its presence in serious newspapers, educational magazines, and social science academia suggests that *precariat* is gaining traction in discussions about economic insecurity and unstable labour conditions.

The results indicate that *precariat* is a highly specialised term primarily used in academic and journalistic discussions about labour precarity. Its absence from fiction, speech, and digital communication suggests that it has not yet been fully integrated into mainstream discourse, unlike related terms such as *precarity* or *precariousness*. However, its emerging presence in social sciences and serious journalism points out that its usage may continue to grow in discussions about the modern workforce and economic instability.

While no collocates met the strict statistical thresholds (Frequency ≥5 and Log Dice ≥6), the 52 potential collocates identified suggest the term appeared in varied contexts without yet establishing fixed partnerships. Additionally, it was likely being introduced and explained rather than used as an established vocabulary. A limitation of the analysis is that it is constrained by the very low frequency, which makes robust conclusions difficult. In this sense, a diachronic study would be needed to track its adoption curve.

3.5 Analysis of the Noun "Precarization"

Hits 3 (0,03) – Texts 2/88.171 – Collocates 22 -   Key collocates 0

Text: mode

Value	Size	Hits	Relative Frequency	Texts
Writing	91.275.763	3	0,03	2/86.920
Speech	11.029.483	0	0	0/1.251

The corpus analysis of *precarization* reveals an exceptionally limited usage pattern that warrants careful interpretation. Only 3 occurrences (0.03 PMW) across 2 texts in Writing appear in the entire 88-million-word BNC2014 corpus.

Text: genre

Value	Size	Hits	Relative Frequency	Texts
Academic prose	19.701.027	3	0,15	2/2.879
Magazines	15.297.596	0	0	0/26.965
Newspapers	20.338.500	0	0	0/50.210
Official documents	7.040.145	0	0	0/2.690
Fiction	20.432.736	0	0	0/1.069
Informal speech	11.029.483	0	0	0/1.251
Electronic language	5.291.594	0	0	0/2.381
Written-to-be-spoken	3.174.165	0	0	0/726

Across different text modes, genres, and subgenres *precarization* rarely occurs in English discourse, appearing exclusively in Academic prose (3 hits, 0.15 PMW) and reflecting a complete absence from all other genres, including spoken registers. This suggests the term was, as of 2014, strictly confined to specialised scholarly discourse and was actively developed in critical theory for instance by Isabell Lorey. This entails it was primarily circulating in European academic circles, and English-language adoption is still in its earliest stages.

Text: subgenre

Value	Size	Hits	Relative Frequency	Texts
Academic prose: social sciences	3.793.395	2	0,53	1/448
Academic prose: politics/law/education	2.083.805	1	0,48	1/189

The deeper analysis across the subgenre of Academic prose confirms its specialised use. When contrasted with related derived nouns from *precarious* (392 hits), well-established in the lexicon, p*recarity* (67 hits) appears already more common, p*recariousness* (43 hits) reflects a conventional nominalisation, p*recariat* (8 hits) is beginning to emerge, and p*recarization* (3 hits) is the most marginal of all. This hierarchy suggests a possible pathway for conceptual terminology: a theoretical process noun (*precarization*), an abstract state noun (*precarity*), a social group noun (*precariat*), and a general adjective (*precarious*).

The characteristics of *precarization* denote its realisation as a conceptual borrowing from European critical theory with the *-ization* suffix marking through a process of nominalisation.

Its confinement to academic prose indicates it had not undertaken any lexical simplification. Although the interpretation of the term is limited by its extremely low frequency, these findings provide a reference point for tracking the potential future diffusion of this noun. They at least reflect the "lexical lag" between theoretical innovation and general use.

4. Discussion

The analysis was considered by formulating two research questions: the first considering the degree of frequency of occurrence in BNC2014 of the adjective *precarious* and its derived nouns *precarity, precariousness*, *precariat*, and *precarization*, and what collocates co-occur in the different contexts they are used; the second ascertaining how *precarious* and its derived nouns contribute to framing inequality, uncertainty, and instability in academic or mainstream discourse.

The results confirm that *precarious* is a versatile and predominantly written, formal term, often associated with employment and financial instability, with strong representation in academic and journalistic discourse, particularly in social sciences, law, and political contexts, where discussions on socioeconomic conditions are common. The collocational analysis further supports its role in expressing instability, in a broader range of narratives, and particularly in work and financial security contexts. However, its low occurrence in informal speech indicates that it remains largely a term of intellectual and media-driven discourse rather than everyday conversation. Future research would be necessary to compare these findings with spoken corpora or diachronic data to track shifts in its societal resonance.

Concerning *precarity*, it appears to function as a specialised term in critical academic discourse, closely tied to critiques of neoliberalism, consumerism, and individualism. Its minimal presence outside academia suggests it remains a "term of art", with a particular meaning in the academic field, rather than a mainstream lexical item. Future research would be needed to investigate its diffusion in journalism or policy discourse post 2014, particularly after the rise of the debate around gig-economy. *Precarity* is a rare but potent term in academic critiques of systemic instability, with little penetration into everyday language, as a lexical marker of scholarly discourse on inequality.

The term *precariousness* emerges from this analysis as an established but low-frequency academic term that has not crossed over into general usage. Its distribution suggests it functions as a conceptual tool in scholarly discourse rather than as a widely-used lexical item. The absence of strong collocational patterns indicates it operates as an independent concept rather than forming set phrases, maintaining its status as a specialised nominal conceptualisation of the more common adjective *precarious*. Future research would necessarily aim to examine whether its usage has expanded in more recent corpora, particularly in social sciences and humanities disciplines where discussions of instability have intensified.

The 2014 BNC data encapsulate *precariat* at what appears to be the very beginning of its lexical journey in English. Its minimal presence and unusual genre distribution, more journalistic than academic, suggest it was still in the process of transitioning from specialised sociological terminology to wider usage. This interpretation provides a valuable point of

departure for surveying how such conceptually important neologism enter and spread through the English lexicon. The subsequent rise in frequency of the term would likely reveal much about how economic and social changes drive lexical innovation.

The analysis of *precarization* at what appears to be the very earliest stage of potential lexical adoption in English. Its extreme rarity and exclusive academic usage suggest it is primarily known to specialists working with European critical theory. This depiction provides valuable reference for investigating how complex sociological concepts cross linguistic and disciplinary boundaries. The evolution in the use or loss of the term in subsequent years would offer important insights into the mechanisms of adoption of specialised theoretical vocabulary.

5. Concluding Remarks

This study examined the frequency, distribution, and collocational patterns of *precarious* and its derived nouns *precarity*, *precariousness*, *precariat*, and *precarization* within BNC2014. The research aimed to determine how these terms function within different textual domains and to what extent they contribute to framing discussions on inequality, uncertainty, and instability in both academic and mainstream discourse. The findings highlight that *precarious* is the most versatile and widely used term, appearing predominantly in formal written discourse, particularly in academic and journalistic contexts. Its strong collocational ties to employment and financial instability reinforce its role in discussions on socioeconomic *precarity*. However, its low frequency in informal speech suggests that it remains largely confined to intellectual and media-driven discourse rather than everyday language. Future research could expand this analysis by comparing these findings with spoken corpora to identify shifts in its usage over time. The analysis of *precarity* reveals its status as a specialised academic term, particularly associated with critiques of neoliberalism, consumerism, and individualism. Unlike *precarious*, *precarity* has not yet gained widespread usage beyond academic discourse, reinforcing its role as a conceptual marker of systemic instability rather than a mainstream lexical item. Future research could investigate its diffusion into journalistic and policy discourse post 2014, particularly in light of the gig economy debate and broader economic shifts. Similarly, *precariousness* appears as an established but low-frequency academic term that has yet to transition into mainstream usage. Its distribution suggests that it serves as an abstract, conceptual tool within scholarly discourse rather than as a commonly employed lexical item. The absence of strong collocational patterns indicates that it does not form set phrases, reinforcing its role as a nominal conceptualisation of the adjective *precarious*. Examining its usage in more recent corpora, particularly in social sciences and humanities, could provide insights into whether discussions of economic and social instability have led to its increased adoption. The findings on *precariat* indicate that it was in the early stages of lexical integration at the time of BNC2014. Its minimal presence and predominantly journalistic distribution suggest that it was still transitioning from a specialised sociological term to a broader conceptual label in mainstream discourse. Given its growing relevance in discussions about labour precarity, investigating its increasing usage in contemporary corpora could provide valuable insights into how economic and social changes drive lexical innovation. Finally, *precarization* is

observed at the very earliest stage of potential adoption in English. Its extreme rarity and exclusive academic use suggest that it remains confined to specialised theoretical discussions, particularly within European critical theory. This finding presents an opportunity to examine how complex sociological concepts cross linguistic and disciplinary boundaries and whether *precarization* has gained broader recognition in the years following BNC2014.

Overall, the results confirm that while *precarious* is a well-established and widely used term, its derived nouns exhibit varying degrees of lexical integration and specialisation. The study underscores how economic and social discourse shapes language evolution, and future research could investigate the ongoing adoption of these terms in response to shifting labour conditions, economic crises, and policy debates.

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Notes

Note 1. As a corpus-based research, this paper develops and extends the preceding analysis in Diamanti, L. (2023). Precariat, Precariousness, Precarity: A Linguistic Analysis of Insecurity of Life and Employment. In E. Marino & B. Majoul (Eds.), *Gitanjali and Beyond Special Issue: Precarious Lives, Uncertain Futures.* A Journal of the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScoTs), Edinburgh, Issue 8, Summer 2023, 60-83.

Note 2. Cf. *Online Etymology Dictionary* "Precarious (adj.) 1640s, "depending on the will of another", from Latin *precarious* "obtained by asking or praying", from *prex* (genitive *precis*) "prayer, request"". https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=precarius

Note 3. Collins Dictionary provides in Meaning no. 2 of "flexible" synonymous adjectives such as "adaptable or variable" with the example of "*flexible working hours*". https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/flexible

Note 4. As it can be read in the Collins Dictionary, "The gig economy is a job market which consists of short-term or part-time work done by people who are self-employed or on temporary contracts". https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/gig-economy

Note 5. Brezina, V. & Platt, W. (2024) #LancsBox X [software], Lancaster University, https://lancsbox.lancs.ac.uk/

Note 6. GraphColl tool https://www.clarin.eu/content/graphcoll