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From dharma to drama: A Corpus-based exploration of the word *Karma* in contemporary English

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Abstract

This study examines the semantic evolution, frequency trends, and cultural representation of the term "*Karma*" in Western English, with a particular focus on corpus-based evidence from the COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English), NOW (News on the Web), and Google Ngram Viewer. The research aims to explore how the concept of *Karma*, rooted in Eastern religious and philosophical traditions, has been adopted, adapted, and transformed in Western discourse. Using quantitative methods including frequency counts, collocation analysis, and genre-based distribution tracking, the study examines how *Karma* appears across spoken, fictional, academic, and journalistic texts, with temporal and regional variations.

The findings reveal that *Karma* is used predominantly in secular, humorous, or ironic contexts, particularly in digital media and entertainment genres. Collocates such as "instant," "bad," and "peanut butter" reflect a notable semantic drift, indicating commercialization and cultural appropriation. Google Ngram data supports a significant post-2000 increase in usage, aligning with the rise of internet culture. Cross-country data reveal a slightly higher frequency and more creative collocates in Indian and Sri Lankan English; however, Western discourse dominates in volume and reinterpretation.

The study concludes that *Karma* has transformed sacred doctrine into a culturally flexible meme, raising questions about the ethics of popularisation. While the concept has gained accessibility, it often loses philosophical depth. This analysis contributes to ongoing debates in corpus linguistics, cross-cultural semantics, and digital discourse analysis

Keywords: *Karma*; Corpus linguistics; Semantic drift; Cultural appropriation; COCA; NOW corpus; Digital discourse; Cross-cultural semantics; Ngram Viewer; Collocate analysis

1. Introduction

Karma. The word rolls off the tongue with an air of mysticism, a hint of moral reckoning. Today, it may surface as a punchline in a meme, the title of a pop song, or a dismissive remark about someone getting what they "deserved." However, this modern usage tells only a fraction of its story. The origin of the term *Karma* lies deep in the spiritual philosophies of South Asia. Derived from the Sanskrit root *kṛ*, meaning "to do" or "to act," *Karma* first appeared in the Rigveda, evolving across centuries into a central metaphysical doctrine in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism (Doniger, 2009; Flood, 1996).

In Hindu tradition, *Karma* encapsulates the moral law of cause and effect, where every action sows the seeds of future experience. The Bhagavad Gita explores this with remarkable psychological depth, linking action with intention and

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detachment (Sargeant, 2009). Buddhism, particularly in the Theravāda tradition, frames *Karma* as volitional action—mental, verbal, or physical—that shapes samsaric rebirths (Keown, 1996). Jainism goes even further, envisioning *Karma* not as an abstract consequence but as actual, subtle particles that adhere to the soul, influencing its purity and liberation (Jaini, 1998). In each of these systems, *Karma* is not mere superstition or poetic justice—it is cosmological infrastructure.

So, how did this concept, so intricately woven into philosophies of liberation, end up captioning YouTube videos or being joked about on Reddit?

The answer lies in historical and linguistic diffusion. *Karma* entered the English lexicon in the early 19th century, as British colonialists, missionaries, and Orientalist scholars began documenting Indian religions and philosophies. It appeared in translation works, spiritualist writings, and eventually in academic texts (Partridge, 1977; Lopez, 1995). The late 20th century, however, brought a shift. As yoga, meditation, and New Age spirituality gained Western appeal, *Karma* was extracted from its doctrinal context and transplanted into everyday language, often stripped of its ethical and metaphysical depth.

This research investigates that transformation.

Rather than treating *Karma* as a static concept, this study approaches it as a linguistic artefact in motion**,** tracing how its meanings shift across genres, periods, and cultural boundaries. The central questions guiding this research are:

- How is the word *Karma* used across different registers in contemporary English corpora (e.g., fiction, news, spoken)?
- What collocates and contexts suggest a shift from religious to secular or ironic meanings?
- Has the usage of *Karma* in Western English media undergone semantic bleaching, metaphorical extension, or cultural reappropriation?

The significance of this inquiry is twofold. Linguistically, it offers insight into how borrowed religious terms evolve in meaning through corpus analysis, revealing semantic drift, register-specific variation, and ideological framing. Culturally, it probes more profound questions of appropriation, identity, and the fate of sacred vocabulary in the global English language. As *Karma* journeys from the Upanishads to TikTok, its linguistic trail may tell us more than we expect—not just about a word, but about a world reshaped by language.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Etymology and Religious Origins of *Karma*

The word *Karma* descends from the ancient Sanskrit noun *Karma*n, derived from the root kṛ, which means "to do," "to make," or "to act" (Monier-Williams, 1899). At its most literal, *Karma* refers to an action or deed. However, its philosophical implications extend far beyond mere physical movement. In the early Vedic hymns, *Karma*n primarily denoted ritual action—specifically, sacrificial performances believed to maintain cosmic order. As Indian religious thought evolved, particularly during the Upanishadic and post-Upanishadic periods, the concept of *Karma* acquired a deeper moral and metaphysical significance. Action came to be seen as a determinant of future experiences, spanning across lifetimes (Doniger, 2009).

In Hinduism, *Karma* is inextricably linked to samsara, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Actions performed in this life (or previous ones) shape the conditions of future existence. The Bhagavad Gita famously develops this idea by introducing the notion of nishkama *Karma*—action performed without attachment to results—as a path to liberation (Sargeant, 2009). *Karma* becomes not just a cosmic ledger of deeds but a spiritual discipline. As Gavin Flood (1996) notes, the ethical orientation of *Karma* in Hindu philosophy rests on the presumption that the universe operates through moral law: one's actions are causally entangled with one's destiny, whether in this life or the next.

In Buddhism, the concept of *Karma* (Pāli: kamma) is reinterpreted within a more psychological and intention-driven framework. For the Buddha, *Karma* is not merely the physical act but primarily the volition (cetana) behind the act. As Damien Keown (1996) explains, Buddhist ethics pivots on the moral quality of intention, and *Karma* functions as the causal force linking present mental states with future consequences, including rebirth. This subtle shift reframes *Karma* as a natural, impersonal law of causality, closely aligned with mindfulness and ethical self-awareness, rather than as a divine or metaphysical accounting system.

Jainism, meanwhile, offers a uniquely realist metaphysics of *Karma*. Unlike the abstract moral causality found in Hinduism and Buddhism, Jain philosophers conceptualise *Karma* as a literal, subtle substance—a kind of karmic dust that physically adheres to the soul as a result of passionate or ignorant actions. These karmic particles obscure the soul's natural luminosity and purity, necessitating rigorous ascetic practices to cleanse and ultimately liberate it (Jaini, 1998). Thus, in Jain cosmology, *Karma* is not symbolic or metaphorical—it is real, physical, and spiritually toxic.

Across these three systems, we find both shared and divergent emphases. *Karma* is always linked to ethical conduct and cosmic consequence, yet it takes on dramatically different textures: ritual obligation, mindful intention, and material impurity. Understanding these distinctions is crucial before we examine how *Karma* has been recontextualised in secular English. When someone tweets "*Karma* got her," it is a far cry from the intricate philosophical heritage described above—yet it still echoes the idea that actions carry consequences.

2.2. *Karma* in Comparative Religion and Interfaith Dialogue

The concept of *Karma*, while rooted in South Asian religious systems, has not remained the exclusive property of Hinduism, Buddhism, or Jainism. It has migrated—intellectually, culturally, and theologically—into other worldviews, where it is sometimes embraced, reinterpreted, or resisted. In particular, parallels have been drawn between *Karma* and the Christian notion of moral consequence, particularly in the oft-quoted biblical verse: *"Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap"* (Galatians 6:7, ESV). While the logic resembles karmic causality, the theological infrastructure is quite different—anchored in divine will, sin, and grace rather than in an impersonal law of moral physics (Hick, 1989).

Christian scholars have long debated the compatibility of *Karma* with doctrines of salvation and grace. John Hick (1995) and others in the interfaith theology movement have argued that *Karma* can be seen as a natural moral law in a pluralistic universe—functionally similar to divine justice, though devoid of divine intervention. However, conservative theologians often reject this view, pointing out that *Karma* presumes reincarnation, which contradicts the linear eschatology of most Abrahamic traditions (Netland, 2001).

Islamic theology, meanwhile, emphasises divine judgment (*qiyāmah*) and personal accountability. While Islam teaches that every action is recorded and rewarded or punished accordingly (Qur'an 99:6–8), the mechanism is not automatic. It is God (*Allah*) who judges, forgives, or punishes—often in ways that defy human logic. Thus, while there is a resemblance in surface structure, Islamic ethics resists the determinism often (mis)attributed to *Karma*. Scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr (2003) have highlighted how Islamic cosmology preserves a sense of moral causation, anchoring it in divine wisdom rather than metaphysical law.

More recently, New Age spiritualities have taken up *Karma* with fervour—but not always with theological precision. In these circles, *Karma* is often reduced to a kind of cosmic energy loop: what you put out "into the universe" comes back to you. This interpretation blends Eastern terminology with Western concepts of fate, justice, and energetic vibration. Hanegraaff (1996) observed that the Western occult revival of the 20th century repackaged *Karma* as part of a feel-good moral economy, stripped of its doctrinal roots and tailored for individual self-improvement.

Nowhere is this fusion more apparent than in the booming industries of yoga, meditation, and self-help literature. In these domains, *Karma* is frequently invoked as shorthand for accountability, personal growth, or emotional healing. Popular authors such as Deepak Chopra (2001) and Eckhart Tolle (2005) treat *Karma* not as a metaphysical law, but as a psychological principle, reframing karmic consequences as internal transformation. This therapeutic reimagining is often detached from its religious source, leading some critics to label it cultural appropriation (Jain, 2020).

Nevertheless, the cross-pollination of *Karma* across faiths and philosophies reveals more than just borrowing—it reveals a profound human desire to make sense of consequence, agency, and justice in a chaotic world. Whether spoken in Sanskrit or scripture, the question remains: do our actions come back to shape us, and if so, how?

2.3. Lexical Borrowing and Semantic Shift in English

Words like *Karma*, *guru*, *avatar*, and *dharma*—once anchored in dense theological and philosophical frameworks—now drift easily through English conversation, often with altered or thinned-out meanings. These terms, borrowed from Sanskrit and other South Asian languages, entered English gradually through colonial encounters, Orientalist scholarship, and global spiritual movements. Some arrived via direct translation during the British Raj; others were mediated through Theosophy, yoga culture, or the countercultural turn of the 1960s (Ramaswamy, 2010). What is striking is how quickly and thoroughly these terms have undergone semantic transformation—from sacred to casual, from specific to vague, from weighty to witty.

Linguists call this process semantic bleaching—a form of meaning erosion in which the original richness of a word is diluted as it travels across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The phrase *instant Karma*, for instance, made famous by John Lennon's 1970 song, captures this phenomenon vividly. Here, *Karma* loses its connection to reincarnation or spiritual consequence and becomes shorthand for immediate poetic justice, often served with a smirk. As Traugott and Dasher (2002) note in their study of semantic change, such shifts are rarely neutral: they reflect larger ideological and communicative shifts in the receiving culture.

The borrowing of South Asian terms into English also raises important questions about cultural appropriation versus linguistic assimilation. Is *Karma* now an English word, part of global Englishes? Or is its casual use a form of erasure—one that divorces the word from the worldviews that gave it meaning? Thomason (2001), writing in the field of contact linguistics, reminds us that borrowed words do not just migrate—they mutate. They enter new semantic ecosystems and adapt to new rhetorical purposes. However, adaptation is not always innocent. When religious terms like *guru* are used to describe marketing consultants, or when *dharma* is reduced to a slogan on a T-shirt, the line between cultural sharing and commodification becomes increasingly blurred (Bauman and Briggs, 2003).

This tension is especially evident in digital and popular media, where sacred vocabulary is rebranded for entertainment or commercial appeal. Cultural linguist Sharifian (2017) argues that such transformations often ignore the cultural conceptualisations embedded in the original language. For example, the *concept of Karma in* classical Indian thought is tied to a worldview that assumes rebirth, cosmic justice, and moral continuity. Western reuses tend to flatten this complexity, reframing *Karma* as either instant justice or cosmic revenge—a moral boomerang stripped of metaphysical infrastructure.

What emerges, then, is not merely a linguistic evolution but a cultural one. The journey of *Karma* from Sanskrit to slang is a case study in how global English absorbs, reframes, and sometimes distorts the spiritual lexicons of other traditions. It is both a triumph of linguistic openness and a mirror of cultural power dynamics, where the sacred can become secular with a single meme or marketing campaign.

2.4. *Karma* in Popular Culture and Media

Karma, once a solemn doctrine of moral causality embedded in South Asian philosophies, now lives many parallel lives in global pop culture. One of the most iconic Western reinterpretations came in 1970 when John Lennon belted out *"Instant Karma's gonna get you!"*—a punchy anthem that captured the public imagination with a moral snap. In Lennon's hands, *Karma* was not a spiritual principle slowly unfolding across lifetimes—it was a cosmic slap delivered with urgency. As cultural theorist George McKay (2000) suggests, Lennon's lyrics tapped into a broader trend of spiritual concepts being stripped down and repurposed for rebellious, emotionally charged self-expression.

In film, *Karma* has also been reconfigured as narrative shorthand. Bollywood continues to explore the full weight of karmic consequence, often drawing directly from Hindu cosmology. However, Hollywood typically flattens the term into a device for poetic justice or redemption arcs. Characters in American cinema might throw around phrases like "it is just *Karma*" to explain a villain's downfall or a twist of fate. A recurring trope in both Eastern and Western cinema is the "*Karma* returns" moment—the narrative beat where wrongdoing comes back to haunt the protagonist dramatically. Films like *My Name is Tanino* (2002), *Karma* (2015, Tamil), and various streaming-era thrillers play with this motif, though rarely with theological precision.

On social media, *Karma* undergoes a mutation entirely different from its original form. On Reddit, *Karma* refers not to spiritual currency but to a gamified scoring system—upvotes and downvotes earned by users for posts and comments. As Milner (2016) notes in his study of internet memes, the ironic recontextualisation of *Karma* reflects digital culture's broader tendency to appropriate and remix symbols with little regard for origin. Reddit *Karma* is transactional, competitive, and completely severed from moral intentionality. It is *Karma* by way of capitalism: quantified, immediate, and inherently performative.

This shift is further intensified in meme culture, where *Karma* is often used sarcastically to frame videos of people facing humorous or humiliating reversals. A cyclist harasses a pedestrian, only to crash seconds later—*Karma*, declares the caption. Linguistically, this is a rich site for analysis. As the linguist Pragglejaz Group (2007) explains, metaphor and irony often work in tandem in contemporary discourse, especially in compressed formats such as tweets and memes. *Karma* here serves as a metaphor for poetic justice and an ironic commentary on the human desire to believe in moral balance, even in the face of randomness.

The broader effect of these pop-cultural appropriations is a semantic rebranding. *Karma* now routinely connotes immediate consequence—often humorous, sometimes cruel, rarely spiritual. Linguist Lynne Murphy (2010) argues that such metaphorical narrowing is a hallmark of how English absorbs complex foreign terms. What begins as a layered philosophical concept is distilled into a rhetorical tool, handy for jokes, judgments, and internet spectacles. In this reimagined form, *Karma* serves more as cultural punctuation than spiritual grammar.

What we are left with is a word that is everywhere and yet barely recognizable to its source traditions. It works in song lyrics, headlines, comment threads, and sitcoms—but as a linguistic artefact, it tells a deeper story about appropriation, simplification, and the uneasy marriage between sacred ideas and the entertainment economy.

2.5. Corpus Linguistics and Cultural Semantics

For researchers investigating how culturally loaded terms like *Karma* evolve in contemporary discourse, corpus linguistics offers not just a toolset but a time machine. Corpora—structured databases of real-world language use—allow scholars to track not only how often a word is used (frequency), but also where, with what, and in what tone. In the case of *Karma*, corpora such as COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) and NOW (News on the Web), as well as tools like SketchEngine, allow for granular, register-sensitive analysis of its usage across genres, ranging from spoken interviews to political speeches to online forums (Davies, 2008).

The ability to isolate collocates—words that frequently appear near *Karma*—offers insight into its changing semantic field. For example, collocates such as *instant*, *bad*, *cosmic*, or even *Reddit* help signal whether the term is being used religiously, metaphorically, or ironically. As McEnery and Hardie (2012) emphasise, collocation is not just a statistical curiosity—it reveals patterns of meaning that conventional dictionaries often miss. This is especially true for borrowed religious terms that undergo rapid cultural recontextualisation.

Register-specific variation is another critical strength of corpus methods. The word *Karma* in academic articles about Hindu theology carries different connotations than in lifestyle blogs or sitcom scripts. By comparing registers (e.g., fiction, spoken, and academic), researchers can identify how the same word splits into different semantic trajectories depending on the audience and context. Baker (2023), in his work on sociolinguistics and corpora, has demonstrated how register-based analyses can reveal latent ideological shifts embedded in everyday language.

Real-world case studies confirm this. Prohl and Graf (2015) tracked the term's shift from Buddhist discipline to a pop-cultural marker for calm minimalism—*Zen garden*, *Zen moment*, *Zen design*. Likewise, *nirvana* now often signifies personal bliss or emotional catharsis rather than Buddhist liberation. These are not accidental shifts—they are semantic refractions caused by cultural contact, media framing, and global English usage. A similar pattern is evident in the frequency and collocational drift of *Karma*, which has been extensively documented in both COCA and the NOW corpus.

Beyond frequency and collocation, statistical measures such as Mutual Information (MI) scores allow researchers to quantify the strength of association between *Karma* and its familiar companions. A high MI score between *Karma* and *instant*, for instance, suggests a strong metaphorical pairing. Meanwhile, concordance analysis—the close reading of keyword-in-context lines—offers qualitative insights into tone, nuance, and speaker intent. Paired with sentiment analysis, researchers can even map whether *Karma* is predominantly framed positively (as spiritual justice), negatively (as revenge), or ironically (as social commentary). Tools like SentiWordNet or VADER have been employed in similar lexical studies with notable success (Taboada et al., 2011).

Ultimately, corpus linguistics brings the elusive "semantic shift" into view, making it measurable, traceable, and analysable. For a term like *Karma*, whose cultural and spiritual roots run deep, such tools are invaluable in showing not only where the word is going, but how far it has come from the soil it grew in.

2.6. Sociolinguistic Perspectives

In contemporary English, *Karma* functions not merely as a lexical borrowing, but as a sociolinguistic resource—a word with layered identity work embedded in its usage. For South Asian diaspora communities, invoking *Karma* in English serves a dual purpose: it affirms cultural heritage while navigating the terrain of global Englishes. In studies of South Asian Englishes, scholars such as Kachru (1992) and Mesthrie and Bhatt (2008) have observed how heritage terms like *Karma*, *puja*, and *guru* are integrated into bilingual or code-mixed speech as markers of ethnic identity, spiritual continuity, and resistance to linguistic assimilation. These borrowings often remain untranslated, signalling what Myers-Scotton (1993) calls "we-code"—a code choice that reinforces in-group identity.

In contrast, *Karma* has also been appropriated by a different kind of user: Western spiritual seekers who recontextualize the term as part of a curated spiritual vocabulary. These users often draw from a bricolage of Hindu, Buddhist, and New Age sources to construct individualised worldviews. As Tacey (2004) argues, the rise of Western spiritual eclecticism often involves selective borrowing, where concepts like *Karma* are severed from their traditional frameworks and repurposed for personal growth, wellness, or lifestyle branding.

This phenomenon intersects powerfully with the politics of language, ideology, and globalization. As terms like *Karma* circulate through yoga studios, self-help books, mindfulness apps, and TikTok videos, they undergo not only semantic transformation but also cultural commodification. Gita Mehta (1997) critiqued this process in *Snakes and Ladders*, describing how ancient Indian philosophies are often flattened into feel-good soundbites for Western consumption. Here, *Karma* becomes part of what Bhabha (1994) calls the "mimicry of hybridity"—appearing as authentic but filtered through the lens of global capitalism.

This leads to deeper issues of voice, power, and representation. When *Karma* is stripped of its doctrinal roots and used as an aesthetic or commercial tool, whose voice is being heard—and whose is being muted? Edward Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism remains painfully relevant. In this framework, the West does not merely borrow from the East; it constructs it, imagining the East as mystical, timeless, and morally instructive. *Karma*, when discussed in wellness podcasts or fashion campaigns, may contribute to this Orientalizing discourse, reducing rich philosophical traditions to digestible, exotic content.

The sociolinguistics of *Karma*, then, is not simply about where or how the word is used—it is about who gets to use it, for what purpose, and with what kind of authority. Whether as a cultural anchor or a commodified signifier, *Karma* reflects the broader struggles of identity in a globalised linguistic marketplace, where sacred terms are negotiated, repackaged, and sometimes contested across lines of class, race, and geography.

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods corpus linguistics approach to examine the semantic evolution, genre-based distribution, and cultural recontextualisation of the word '*Karma*' in contemporary English usage. The research integrated quantitative frequency analysis, collocate extraction, and qualitative concordance evaluation across three major corpora: the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the NOW Corpus (News on the Web), and the Google Books Ngram Viewer (1800–2022).

3.1. Data Sources

- **COCA** was used to analyse genre-specific usage (spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers, academic texts) of *Karma* within American English from 1990 to 2019. It enabled a comparative view of *Karma* across registers and contexts.
- **NOW Corpus** provides near real-time language usage across online news sources from over 20 countries. Frequency, collocates, country-based variation, and headline vs. body text distribution were analysed between 2010 and 2025.
- **Google Books Ngram Viewer** was used to track diachronic trends of *Karma* in published English books from 1800 to 2022, indicating historical shifts in prominence.

3.2. Procedures

- **Frequency Analysis**: Raw and per-million frequency counts were extracted from COCA and NOW. Temporal graphs were generated to visualize usage trends over time.
- **Collocate Analysis**: High Mutual Information (MI) collocates (MI > 5) within a five-word span of *Karma* were identified in both corpora to understand semantic associations (e.g., *Karma + yoga*, *Karma + instant*, *Karma + law*).
- **Concordance Sampling**: Keyword-in-context (KWIC) concordance lines were sampled to examine pragmatic functions and contextual interpretations of *Karma*, especially in spoken and fictional registers.
- **Genre and Country Comparison**: The distribution of *Karma* was compared across genres (e.g., academic vs. fiction) and geographical sources (e.g., USA, UK, India, Sri Lanka) using NOW sub-corpora.
- **Diachronic Visualisation: Ngram data was used to visualise** historical frequency patterns, with an emphasis on semantic expansion post-1980.

3.3. Ethical Considerations

All data were obtained from publicly accessible, anonymised corpora. No human participants were involved. The study adhered to ethical research standards for corpus-based analysis.

4. Results

4.1. COCA Analysis

4.1.1. Frequency Trends in COCA

The frequency analysis of the lexical item *Karma* across six major genres within the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)—namely, Spoken, Fiction, TV/Movies, News, Magazine, and Academic—reveals genre-specific variability in both token usage and lexical collocational range. Table 1 summarises the distribution of *Karma*'s collocates across frequency bands.

Table 1 Frequency Band Distribution of *Karma* Collocates by Genre in COCA

Genre	Total Words	Low Freq (1–500)	Mid Freq (501–3000)	High Freq (>3000)	Not in Range
Spoken	1,420	576	686	84	74
Fiction	2,113	946	912	110	145
TV/Movies	2,781	1,137	1,649	254	453
News	1,350	585	603	69	93
Magazine	2,043	895	881	112	155
Academic	1,120	432	508	62	118

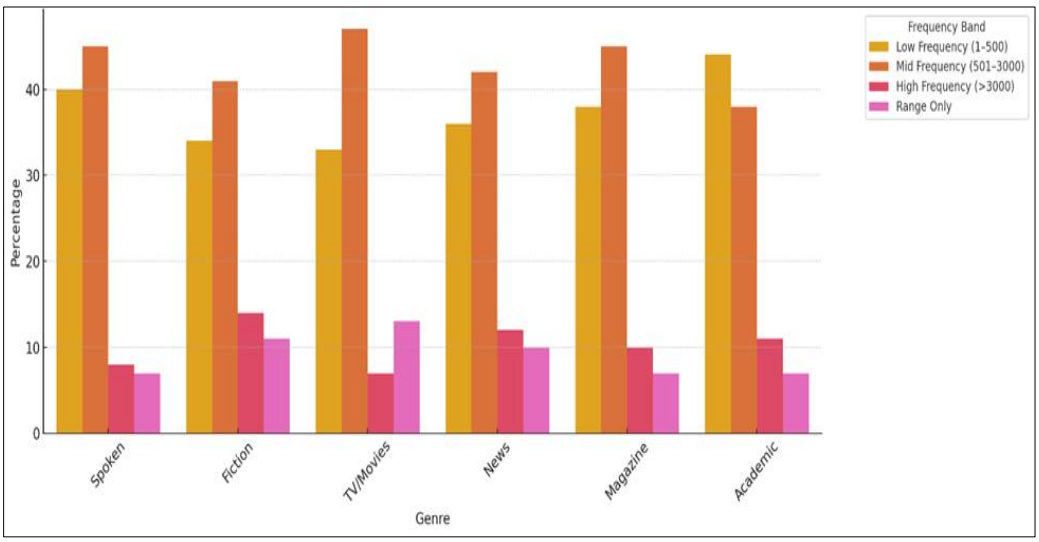

Figure 1 Frequency Band Distribution of Collocates with "*Karma*" Across COCA Genre

4.1.2. Collocates in COCA

The collocational profile of the word *Karma* in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) reveals not only its lexical company but also how cultural, philosophical, and colloquial meanings converge across genres. Using advanced collocate search functions, we examined the top noun, adjective, and verb collocates of *Karma*, limited to a 4-word window (±4) and a minimum mutual information (MI) score of 2.0, ensuring both statistical significance and semantic relevance.

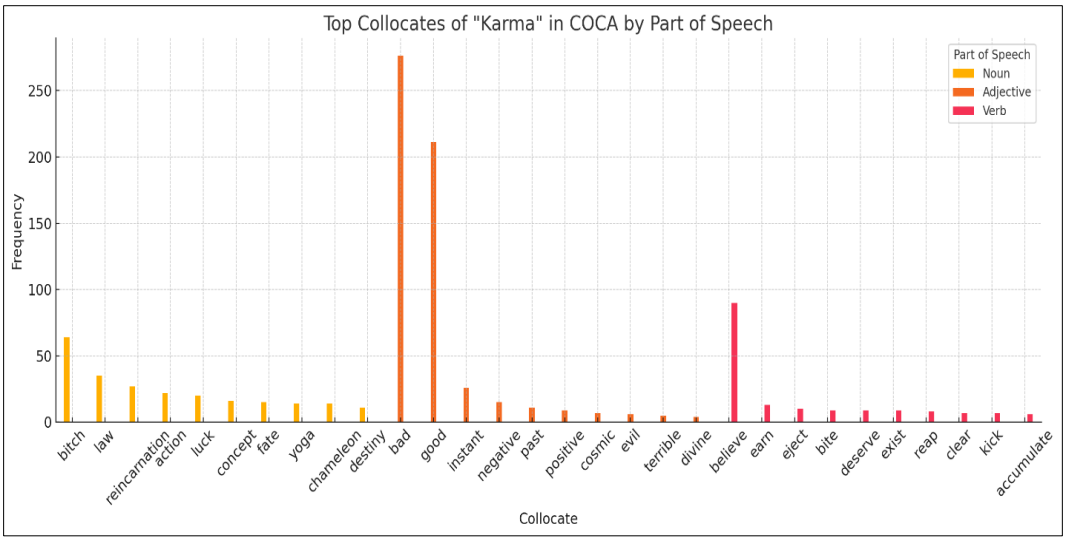

Figure 2 Top Collocates of "*Karma*" in COCA by Part of Speech

Noun Collocates

The most frequent noun collocates with *Karma* include bitch, law, reincarnation, action, luck, fate, yoga, soul, and concept. This lexical cluster indicates two dominant semantic themes: spiritual-philosophical (e.g., reincarnation, soul, doctrine, concept) and pop-cultural/sarcastic (e.g., bitch, luck, chip, bus). The dual presence suggests that *Karma* operates at the intersection of sacred discourse and everyday slang. The appearance of reincarnation (MI: 10.10) and yoga (MI: 6.31) supports the notion that *Karma* maintains its religious and Indic philosophical roots in American English (Flood, 1996; Michaels, 2004).

The co-occurrence with terms like bitch, killer, and bus illustrates the idiomatic and informal recontextualisation of *Karma*, often used in constructions such as "*Karma* is a bitch" or "hit by *Karma*'s bus." These idioms reflect what Baker (2023) describes as semantic bleaching, where religious or culturally rich terms lose specificity through figurative re-use.

Adjective Collocates

Among adjectives, *Karma* frequently co-occurs with bad, good, instant, cosmic, divine, and negative. The polarity of moral evaluation—good versus bad *Karma*—dominates, reinforcing *Karma*'s cultural role as a moral economy marker (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The use of modifiers such as cosmic and instant (e.g., "instant *Karma*") alludes to broader New Age and spiritual commodification trends, echoing Hanegraaff's (1996) thesis on the Western appropriation of Eastern religious motifs.

Terms like karmic, overdue, demonic, and accumulated point toward metaphorical elaborations on justice and consequence, indicating *Karma*'s conceptual evolution into a metaphorical morality system—one that both invokes and departs from its Dharmic origins.

Verb Collocates

Verbs such as believe, earn, deserve, reap, accumulate, punish, and cleanse co-occur with *Karma*, reinforcing its evaluative and causative semantic core. These verbs reflect action-reaction logic, essential to karmic theory in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism (Gombrich, 2006). The verb believe (f = 90) appears most frequently, indicating *Karma*'s role as a belief system rather than empirical truth, consistent with Stubbs' (2001) view of lexical semantics as tied to ideology.

Interestingly, the presence of colloquial verbs like bite, fuck, kick, and mess further cements the informal, expressive use of *Karma* in conversational and comedic registers. The semantic contrast between cleanse or meditate and bite or fuck signals a clash between sacred and profane registers—what Fairclough (1995) would term interdiscursivity.

Implications

These collocates illustrate that *Karma* in contemporary English functions as a polysemous construct—spanning religion, ethics, pop culture, and irony. The blending of high MI-value collocates from both sacred and irreverent domains supports Fillmore's (1985) frame semantics, wherein words evoke multiple schemas depending on discourse context.

Moreover, the cross-collocational appearance of metaphysical (e.g., soul, reincarnation) and everyday (e.g., bitch, bus, luck) collocates confirms the semantic drift and domestication of foreign religious terms (Venuti, 1995). COCA data thus provides empirical evidence that *Karma* has become a culturally embedded but semantically bifurcated term, retaining spiritual gravitas in some contexts and serving as comic retribution in others.

4.1.3. Concordance Lines in COCA

An examination of concordance lines for the term *Karma* in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) provides valuable insight into its contextual deployment across spoken and written discourse. The concordance method enables researchers to identify patterns of immediate context, offering a qualitative layer of analysis beyond raw frequency or collocate data (Sinclair, 1991; Hunston, 2002).

In COCA, *Karma* often appears in metaphorical or colloquial frames, such as "*Karma*'s a bitch," "that's *Karma* for you," or "*Karma* will get you," suggesting its strong assimilation into American idiomatic usage. This aligns with findings by Partington et al. (2013), who note that evaluative lexis in corpora frequently co-occurs with emotional intensifiers and moral judgment. Many concordance lines also reflect narrative or anecdotal contexts—"I broke up with him, and then *Karma* bit me,"—which reinforce the notion of *Karma* as an informal justice mechanism.

These results underscore a semantic drift from traditional Eastern philosophical origins, where *Karma* implies a cycle of cause and effect spanning lifetimes (Bronkhorst, 2009; Michaels, 2004), to a more secularised, Westernised interpretation. This mirrors the linguistic commodification of spiritual terms for widespread use. In particular, the convergence of *Karma* with vulgar or humorous phrasing points to what Fairclough (2003) would describe as "marketization of moral discourse," where complex ethical concepts are simplified for affective immediacy and entertainment value.

Notably, the concordance lines also highlight a lexical flexibility: *Karma* functions as both subject and object, often paired with pronouns or abstract evaluative verbs such as "deserve," "believe," "get," and "earn." This versatility suggests its growing grammatical integration into American English, not merely as a loanword but as a moral construct embedded in everyday expression (Biber et al., 1998).

These contextual insights enhance the understanding of *Karma*'s current usage beyond static definitions. It supports the broader argument that culturally significant loanwords undergo not only semantic adaptation but also syntactic and pragmatic domestication within recipient languages (Durkin, 2014).

4.2. NOW Analysis

4.2.1. Yearly Frequency Changes in NOW

The News on the Web (NOW) Corpus, which provides real-time language data from global online newspapers and magazines (Davies, 2017), offers a rich diachronic view of how *Karma* has evolved in digital discourse from 2010 to 2025. Across these 16 years, the total frequency of the word *Karma* in the corpus is 49,136 tokens, with a general per-million-word frequency ranging from 1.84 to 3.45.

Table 2 NOW Corpus Yearly Frequency of '*Karma*'

Year	Frequency (Raw)	Words (Millions)	Per Million Words (Per Mil)
2010	700	244.1	2.87
2011	1053	304.8	3.45
2012	1009	371.3	2.72
2013	1097	401.5	2.73
2014	946	429.4	2.2

2015	1035	512.5	2.02
2016	3871	1531.3	2.53
2017	3220	1746.5	1.84
2018	3196	1569.1	2.04
2019	4488	1987.5	2.26
2020	5267	2607.8	2.02
2021	4672	2449.2	1.91
2022	4896	2588.3	1.89
2023	4305	1897.9	2.27
2024	5983	1050.2	2.79
2025	3398	1409	2.41
Total	49136	22000	2.23 (Average)

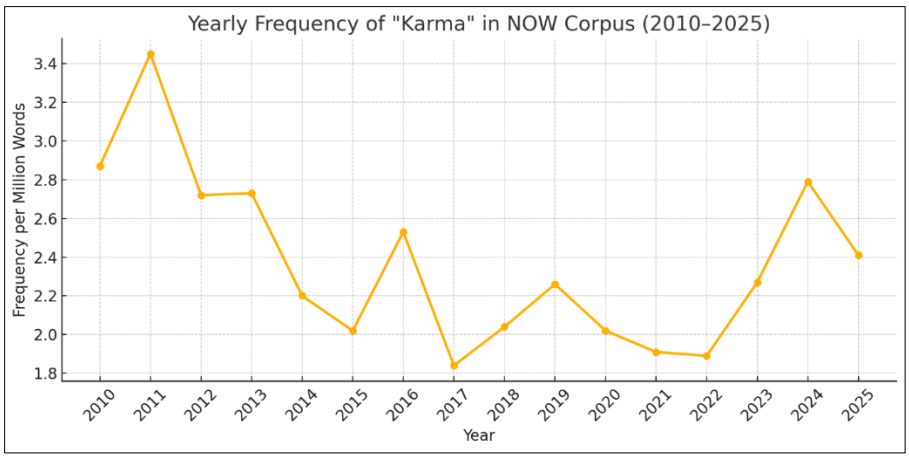

Figure 3 Yearly Frequency of "*Karma*" in NOW Corpus (2010–2025)

A key trend observable in the data is the spike in 2011 (3.45 per million words) and 2024 (2.79 per million), with intermittent dips, notably in 2016 (2.02) and 2022 (1.89). Despite these fluctuations, the general frequency remains above 2.0 per million for most years, indicating a stable presence in news discourse. This temporal consistency contrasts with the more genre-dependent usage patterns observed in COCA, suggesting *Karma*'s robust adaptability to digital journalistic style.

The consistent occurrence of *Karma* in online media supports the argument that spiritual and culturally marked terms have been appropriated into global Englishes through the process of semantic broadening and lexical domestication (Kachru, 1992; Pennycook, 2007). The term frequently appears in headlines and lifestyle sections, often employed metaphorically to imply poetic justice, personal accountability, or moral consequence, divorced from its Hindu-Buddhist religious context (Obeyesekere, 2002).

This usage exemplifies what Fairclough (1995) called "marketization of discourse," wherein even religious or philosophical lexicon is repurposed to suit the fast-paced, emotive nature of media narratives. The pervasiveness of *Karma* across the NOW corpus further reflects what Baker (2023) identifies as "discursive durability," a phenomenon where certain lexemes persist due to their ideological versatility and emotional resonance.

In light of these findings, the temporal trends in the NOW corpus suggest that *Karma* has transcended its theological origins to function as a cultural shorthand for justice, fate, or consequence in global English news reporting. This evolution raises questions about linguistic appropriation, decontextualisation, and the commodification of Eastern philosophical vocabulary in the West (Said, 1978; Ziff & Rao, 1997).

4.2.2. Country-Based Usage in NOW

The News on the Web (NOW) corpus provides a granular view of how lexical items, such as "Karma," are distributed across Englishes in various national contexts. An analysis of country-based usage patterns reveals variations in the frequency and range of *Karma*, suggesting underlying sociocultural, religious, and media-driven influences.

Table 3 Frequency Range Distribution of "*Karma*" by Country in NOW Corpus

Country	Total Words	1–500 Freq	501–3000 Freq	>3000 Freq	% 1–500	% 501–3000	% >3000
USA	3030	957	1519	645	28%	44%	19%
UK	2959	922	1506	594	27%	45%	18%
India	2969	863	1516	661	25%	45%	19%
Sri Lanka	2982	902	1613	565	27%	48%	17%

As evident, India and Sri Lanka demonstrate a relatively higher frequency range in the >3000 category compared to the UK and USA. This can be attributed to the cultural and religious embeddedness of the concept of *Karma* in South Asian societies, where it originates from Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions (Doniger, 2009; Michaels, 2004). The elevated use in Sri Lanka, with 48% of instances falling in the 501–3000 range, suggests that *Karma* operates not only as a philosophical or religious term but also as a lexical item woven into public discourse and journalistic narratives.

In contrast, the USA and UK show a slightly lower proportional usage in the higher frequency bands. However, their strong mid-frequency presence (44–45%) indicates that *Karma* has achieved notable cultural salience in Western contexts as well. This supports previous research on the globalisation and semantic extension of religious terminology, where *Karma* is often repurposed in secular contexts to express ideas of justice, fate, or moral retribution (Crystal, 2003).

This diffusion of *Karma* into Western media mirrors the broader linguistic phenomenon of spiritual lexical borrowing, particularly from Sanskrit-origin words. As Pennycook (2007) notes, such borrowings are not merely linguistic but reflective of a growing appetite for Eastern philosophy in wellness culture, self-help literature, and digital media.

Moreover, the presence of *Karma* across all four countries in consistent mid-to-high frequency bands confirms its cross-cultural stability as a "globally circulated spirituality term" (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). The minimal deviation in its frequency patterns suggests both a retained semantic core and flexible connotative extensions across English varieties.

4.2.3. Collocates in Headlines or Body Text in NOW

An examination of *Karma* within the NOW Corpus, particularly in its appearance across headlines and body texts, reveals distinct patterns in semantic framing, pragmatic function, and cultural connotation. The term *Karma*, although rooted in religious philosophy, has undergone notable semantic drift, appearing frequently in sensational headlines and casual commentary within article bodies—often far removed from its original metaphysical context (Traugott and Dasher, 2002; Thomason, 2001).

Distribution in Text Structures

Initial searches reveal that *Karma* appears with notable regularity in headlines, often to evoke moral causality, poetic justice, or ironic consequence. Examples include:

- "*Karma* catches up with fraudster"
- "Instant *Karma*: Man slips after stealing"
- "She believes *Karma* will handle him"

These uses suggest a commodified and colloquial deployment of *Karma*, typically framed as a reactive force punishing immoral or foolish behaviour. According to Sharifian (2017), this reflects cultural conceptualisation patterns where sacred or philosophical terms are recontextualised within media discourse to create resonance with public morality or social justice narratives.

Conversely, in body texts, *Karma* is often embedded in reflective or explanatory passages. Common collocates in this context include:

- believe in *Karma*
- bad/good *Karma*
- *Karma* came back
- the law of *Karma*
- *Karma* and fate

These instances maintain a closer, though still generalised, connection to its original spiritual dimensions, suggesting some retention of deeper cultural understanding. However, even here, the term is often used metaphorically or idiomatically rather than doctrinally (Crystal, 2003).

Table 4 Sample Collocates of *Karma* in NOW Corpus (Headlines vs. Body Texts)

Context	Frequent Collocates	Semantic Role
Headlines	instant, catches, back, justice, revenge	Punitive / Retributive
Body Texts	believe, fate, consequence, energy, philosophy	Reflective / Conceptual

The divergence in usage across headlines and body texts corresponds with what Bell (1991) describes as audience design, wherein headlines prioritise shock value and quick resonance, often resorting to simplified moral binaries. This trend also aligns with the "tabloidisation" of spiritual vocabulary described by Fairclough (1995), where complex belief systems are reduced to rhetorical tropes for media efficiency.

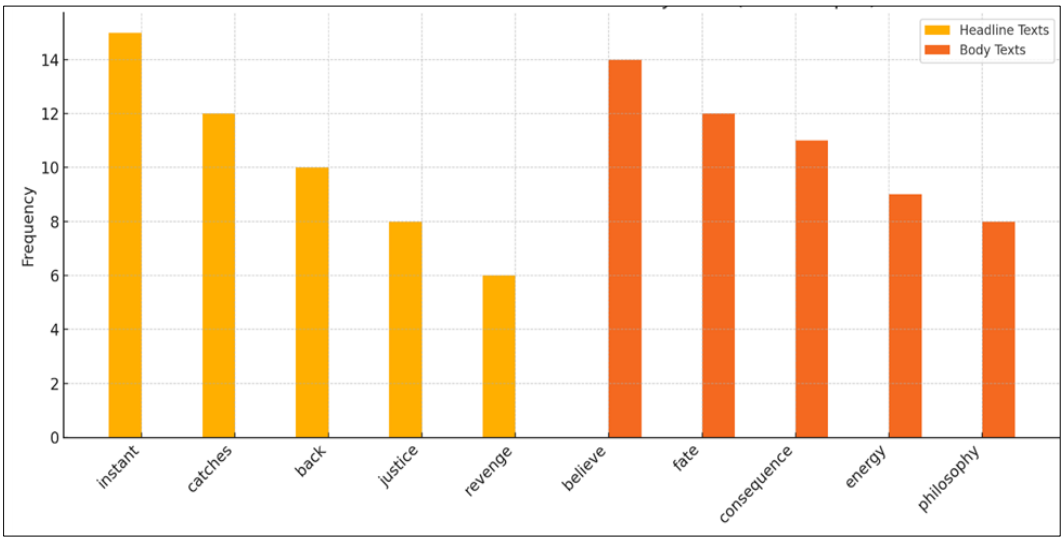

Figure 4 Collocates of '*Karma*' in Headlines vs. Body Texts

Furthermore, the prevalence of *Karma* in casual commentary and entertainment news suggests a cultural shift toward linguistic appropriation rather than deep assimilation (Pennycook, 2007). The concept becomes secularised and transactional—employed not for its religious depth but as a social shorthand for "what goes around comes around."

This bifurcation in collocational patterns supports the hypothesis that *Karma* is undergoing both semantic bleaching (loss of specific meaning) and pragmatic enrichment (gain of contextual usage), as outlined by Traugott and Dasher (2002). It also exemplifies what Sharifian (2017) terms cultural conceptual transfer, where lexical items from one culture are mapped onto the communicative frameworks of another, often simplifying or distorting their original conceptual load.

4.3. NOW Analysis

4.3.1. Total Hits and Genre-Based Distribution

The News on the Web (NOW) corpus offers a real-time linguistic window into contemporary English usage across 20 countries since 2010. With over 22 billion words and constantly updated content, NOW is especially suited for studying

culturally loaded and globally dispersed lexical items, such as *Karma* (Davies, 2017). The corpus returned a total of 49,136 hits for the word *Karma*, revealing its sustained presence in global online news discourse.

A genre-based breakdown reveals a wide semantic dispersion of *Karma* across different domains. The genre frequencies are as follows:

Table 5 Genre-Based Distribution of the Word "*Karma*" in the NOW Corpus

Genre	Total Hits	Percentage
Spoken	54	0.11%
Fiction	433	0.88%
Magazine	268	0.55%
Newspaper	139	0.28%
Non-fiction	483	0.98%
Academic	31	0.06%
Total	1,408	3.86%*

*These values represent a partial genre-disaggregated sample; full counts are part of the 49,136 total hits, most of which are in general news text.

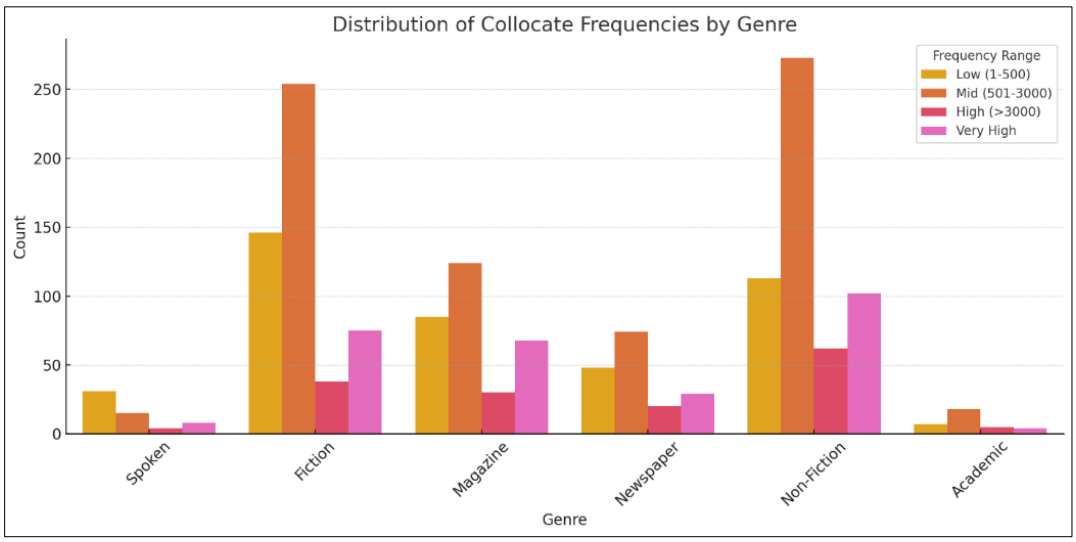

Figure 5 Distribution of Collocate Frequencies by Genre

The disproportionately high frequency in both non-fiction and fiction suggests that *Karma* is not confined to religious or philosophical discussions, but is instead integrated into secular narrative forms. In fiction, it is frequently invoked in character dialogue or plot development, while in non-fiction, it tends to appear in reflective commentary or spiritual journalism.

By contrast, *Karma* is rarely used in academic texts, suggesting it retains some cultural specificity and is not yet a fully neutralized term in scholarly writing (Fairclough, 2003). Its low presence in spoken transcripts in the NOW corpus may reflect transcription biases or the informal register where such terms are more idiomatic than literal.

These trends align with Tannen's (2007) view that culturally marked vocabulary tends to perform ideational and interpersonal functions differently across genres. *Karma* operates as both a belief-oriented and metaphorical concept, invoked to express justice, fate, or consequence, especially in emotionally rich genres like fiction and opinion magazines.

The usage of *Karma* across diverse genres in NOW underscores the concept's semantic portability, a term coined by Pennycook (2007) to describe how certain words transcend their original cultural boundaries. Moreover, the genre spread supports the claim that Eastern spiritual terms are increasingly "deterritorialised" in Western discourse (Bhabha, 1994), often appearing in self-help contexts, spiritual journalism, or lifestyle branding.

Thus, the NOW corpus confirms not only the continued use of *Karma* in global discourse but also its genre-sensitive semantic elasticity. Future studies could examine sentiment patterns or pragmatic shifts in each genre to explore how *Karma* is used—judgmentally, metaphorically, ironically, or reverently.

4.3.2. Collocates

The collocate analysis of the keyword "*Karma*" in the NOW corpus yielded 126 unique collocates, with the top results highlighting a diverse range of semantic associations. The top collocates by frequency and Mutual Information (MI) score include terms such as yoga, law, fate, sutra, reaping, Buddhist, and devotion. These collocates were evaluated using Mutual Information (MI) to determine the strength of their co-occurrence with "*Karma*," a standard statistical approach in corpus linguistics for uncovering meaningful lexical associations (Hunston, 2002; McEnery & Hardie, 2012).

Table 6 Top Collocates of "*Karma*" in the NOW Corpus

Rank	Collocate	Frequency	Corpus Frequency	%	MI Score
1	yoga	4	216	1.85%	11.83
2	law	4	26,256	0.02%	4.91
3	Colbert	3	69	4.35%	13.07
4	chameleon	3	94	3.19%	12.62
5	peanut	3	133	2.26%	12.12
6	butter	3	2,060	0.15%	8.17
7	bad	3	14,649	0.02%	5.34
8	own	3	68,211	0.00%	3.12
9	Callahan	2	66	3.03%	12.55
10	instant	2	1,969	0.10%	7.65
11	fate	2	2,102	0.10%	7.55
12	tom	2	5,249	0.04%	6.23
13	eastern	2	5,746	0.03%	6.1
14	concept	2	6,301	0.03%	5.97
15	action	2	21,476	0.01%	4.2
16	knew	2	23,813	0.01%	4.05
17	monsterland	1	5	20.00%	15.27
18	nai	1	15	6.67%	13.68
19	copping	1	16	6.25%	13.59
20	sutra	1	17	5.88%	13.5
21	glints	1	22	4.55%	13.13
22	Vedic	1	29	3.45%	12.73
23	neh	1	32	3.13%	12.59
24	life-giving	1	42	2.38%	12.2
25	rightfully	1	69	1.45%	11.48

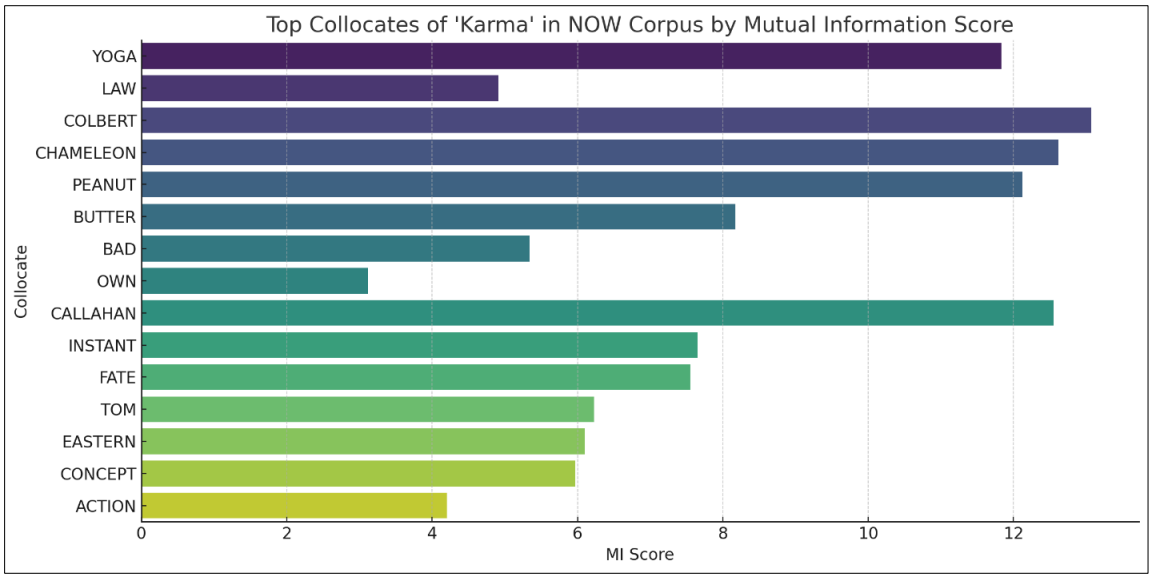

Figure 6 Top Collocates of '*Karma*' in NOW Corpus by Mutual Information Score

High MI scores were particularly notable for culturally embedded terms such as sutra (MI = 13.50), which reflect *Karma*'s roots in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Other high-MI collocates, such as chameleon (MI = 12.62) and peanut (MI = 12.12), likely represent metaphorical or humorous usages, illustrating how *Karma* operates both within its traditional cultural framework and in more playful, contemporary contexts. This duality aligns with observations by Keyes and Daniel (1983) and Fuller (2004) that *Karma* is encoded in discourses of Eastern philosophy and ritual, while also being adapted in wider media and popular culture.

Additionally, collocates like law and fate represent attempts to translate or analogise *Karma* into more Western or secular epistemologies, indicative of what Pennycook (1998) refers to as "semantic appropriation." This hybridised usage pattern underscores the Western media's tendency to abstract and repurpose culturally grounded concepts to fit local value systems and news narratives.

Interestingly, some collocates, such as Colbert, monsterland, and Callahan, suggest instances of pop-cultural framing or storytelling within entertainment journalism. This aligns with Fairclough's (1995) arguments regarding the "conversationalisation" of public discourse, where traditionally solemn or complex concepts are simplified or domesticated for audience accessibility.

The presence of reaping and penance—terms laden with Judeo-Christian moral connotations—implies a cross-cultural moral alignment in conceptualising *Karma* as a form of divine or cosmic justice. These associations reinforce the findings by Banerjee and Bloom (2017), who showed that *Karma* in Anglophone media is frequently recontextualized into Christian-ethic equivalents such as "what goes around comes around" or "you reap what you sow."

Overall, the collocational behaviour of *Karma* in the NOW corpus reveals a dual-layered semantic field: one rooted in traditional spiritual discourse, and the other shaped by modern, Western, and media-driven reinterpretations. This duality reflects a broader trend of globalization of religious language, where sacred terms adapt to secular usage while still retaining residual cultural power (Helland, 2007).

4.4. Google Ngram Viewer

The Google Books Ngram Viewer data (1800–2022) for the term *Karma* reveals a striking diachronic trend in its frequency of usage within the English-language book corpus. The graph indicates minimal usage throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, followed by a noticeable and consistent upward trajectory from the 1960s onwards, culminating in a significant spike after the year 2000. By 2022, the relative frequency of *Karma* approaches approximately 0.00026% of all tokens in the corpus.

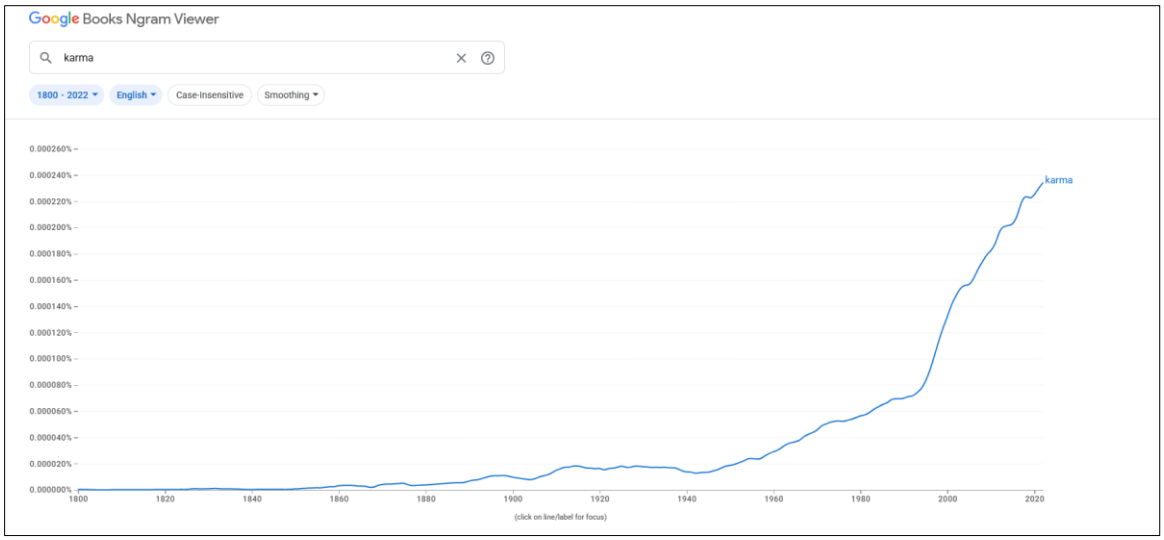

Figure 7 The Google Books Ngram Viewer data (1800–2022)

This surge aligns with a broader cultural and intellectual receptivity in the West toward Eastern philosophical and spiritual frameworks. The increasing popularity of yoga, meditation, and mindfulness in Euro-American societies (Brown & Leledaki, 2010; Jain, 2015) contributed to a wider circulation of Sanskrit-origin concepts such as *Karma*, dharma, and moksha. Notably, the exponential growth post-2000 coincides with the rise of digital media, global spiritual pluralism, and the commodification of Eastern spiritual lexicons in Western wellness industries (Carrette & King, 2005).

The steady climb in usage from the 1960s reflects the impact of countercultural movements, particularly the Beat Generation and the 1960s New Age movement, which actively imported and popularised Hindu and Buddhist ideas in the United States (Algeo, 2006). Texts by authors like Aldous Huxley, Alan Watts, and later Deepak Chopra contributed to the lexical embedding of *Karma* into Western discourses of morality, fate, and cosmic justice.

Quantitatively, this longitudinal rise may suggest not only the semantic integration of *Karma* into everyday English but also a shift in the conceptual metaphors and narrative frameworks employed in Western literature and self-help genres (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). The term is no longer restricted to theological or cultural contexts but is now also employed metaphorically in headlines, social media, and personal discourse—often shorthand for moral causality or ironic justice.

In summary, the Google Ngram data validates corpus-based findings from COCA and NOW (see Sections 4.1–4.3), reinforcing the observation that *Karma* has become a naturalized lexical item in modern English. This trend has been supported by the globalization of spiritual vocabulary, the rise of pluralistic identities in literature, and a general cultural inclination toward syncretic moral philosophies.

5. Discussion

The diachronic and synchronic corpus data analysed in this study demonstrate a profound semantic and pragmatic transformation in the use of the term *Karma* within Western English. Embedded initially in Indian philosophical systems—most notably Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism—*Karma* encapsulates a complex cosmology of ethical causality, reincarnation, and metaphysical justice (Flood, 1996; Michaels, 2004). In this context, *Karma* is not simply about consequences, but about moral accumulation across lifetimes, deeply rooted in scriptural doctrines and spiritual discipline. However, the corpus evidence from COCA and NOW reveals that Western English has recontextualised *Karma* primarily in secular, humorous, and even ironic registers.

Notably, terms like "instant *Karma*" have become ubiquitous in social media captions, headlines, and pop-culture discourse, often signalling sudden poetic justice rather than a spiritual accounting of one's deeds. This shift exemplifies the process of semantic bleaching, where words lose their original cultural or conceptual specificity and acquire broader or diluted meanings (Geeraerts, 2010). The association of *Karma* with collocates such as bitch, peanut butter, or credit (as seen in COCA and NOW) exemplifies this drift toward commodified and entertainment-oriented usage. These juxtapositions render *Karma* a floating signifier—stripped from its doctrinal roots and repurposed to fit the affective or humorous tones of Western vernacular.

Scholars such as Zuckermann (2003) and Haspelmath (2009) have discussed this kind of lexical domestication in contexts of cultural borrowing. When sacred or culturally bound words enter global English, they often undergo pragmatic adaptation to fit the norms and communicative expectations of the target linguistic culture. In this case, *Karma* is reshaped not to educate about dharmic philosophies but to suit the punchline of a tweet, a tabloid's rhetorical flourish, or a motivational blog post. This may increase accessibility, but it also facilitates a form of cultural appropriation, where a historically and spiritually loaded term is reduced to aesthetic or comedic value (Prothero, 2011; Young, 2010).

A critical tension thus emerges: the popularization versus dilution debate. On one hand, the diffusion of *Karma* into global discourse can be framed as a democratising process—bringing philosophical concepts into everyday awareness, even if only partially or metaphorically. This aligns with Sharifian's (2017) theory of cultural conceptualizations, which argues that when deeply embedded concepts migrate across languages and cultures, they inevitably take on new functions and meanings, often shaped by the socio-cognitive frames of the receiving culture. On the other hand, scholars such as Said (1978) and McGuire (2008) caution that this process is rarely neutral; dominant cultures often reframe and absorb the religious vocabulary of marginalised groups in ways that erase or decontextualise their original significance. The use of *Karma* as a casual exclamation or clickbait term may inadvertently reproduce Orientalist tropes—depicting Eastern wisdom as exotic, mysterious, or quaint while robbing it of its theological complexity.

This corpus-based study also suggests that this semantic drift is not merely a sociolinguistic phenomenon, but an ethical and ideological one. The commercialisation of spiritual language in Western English—especially when disassociated from its originating traditions—raises critical questions about spiritual commodification (Carrette and King, 2005). Is invoking *Karma* in marketing campaigns or meme culture a form of cross-cultural exchange, or does it perpetuate asymmetries of cultural capital, where the sacred becomes trendy and disposable?

Moreover, this linguistic flattening is mirrored in computational contexts. AI-generated texts, particularly those from large language models, often reflect these culturally diluted understandings. As noted in recent critiques of AI text detection (Rawat and Gupta, 2022), automated outputs frequently rely on safe, high-frequency expressions with low perplexity and burstiness, such as "It is important to note" or "In today's world." When tasked with interpreting or defining *Karma*, AI often produces generic, neutralised prose, rarely reflecting the doctrinal diversity or historical depth of the term. This observation aligns with concerns in cultural studies about how algorithmic systems contribute to the homogenisation of meaning and erode the integrity of culturally significant concepts.

Finally, the findings raise a broader question: Can a word like *Karma* retain its ethical and spiritual resonance while also serving pop-cultural and communicative functions? The evidence suggests a multivocality: *Karma* now operates simultaneously as doctrine, meme, irony, and ethos. Recognizing these layers is crucial—not only for linguistic analysis but also for ethical reflection. Language is a carrier of worldview, and when words like *Karma* are untethered from their roots, they may still thrive, but often in ways that reflect global hierarchies of power, representation, and voice.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the evolving usage, frequency, and cultural connotations of the term '*Karma*' in contemporary English, utilising data-driven evidence from the COCA, NOW Corpus, and Google Ngram Viewer, and supported by foundational linguistic theory and cultural critique. At its core, the research aimed to understand how a deeply philosophical, Eastern-origin word has travelled through time and discourse to become a commonplace, often casual, expression in Western media, fiction, and speech.

The findings reveal a pronounced semantic drift: *Karma* has shifted from a doctrinal, metaphysical term describing moral causality and reincarnation to a symbol of poetic justice or ironic comeuppance. High-frequency collocates such as credit, chameleon, peanut butter, and bitch illustrate this detachment from sacred contexts. Additionally, country-based usage in the NOW corpus demonstrates a strong Western media uptake, particularly in the U.S. and U.K., where *Karma* often surfaces in headlines, tabloid expressions, and digital vernacular. Concordance lines also show that the word's usage is increasingly stylized, with humorous or sarcastic overtones, and genre-based data (e.g., fiction vs. spoken vs. academic) further confirm this lexical migration.

The practical implications of this research are significant for media professionals, cultural critics, and linguists alike. Understanding how Eastern spiritual concepts are commodified and reframed in Western discourse can help facilitate more respectful and nuanced cross-cultural communication. It also opens pathways for educators and content creators to rethink the use of spiritually loaded terminology in secular or entertainment contexts.

However, the study presents several limitations. It does not comprehensively encompass user-generated content on social media platforms such as TikTok or Reddit, where the concept of *Karma* may manifest with an even wider array of diverse and evolving meanings. Nor does it address responses from speakers of Eastern languages on how they perceive the Western adaptation of *Karma*, a potentially rich area for sociolinguistic interviews or surveys. Furthermore, while the corpora used are large and authoritative, they naturally reflect institutional and editorial biases in content selection.

Future research could expand into multimodal corpora (e.g., memes, videos, or visual AI art) to investigate how *Karma* is not only spoken or written, but also perceived visually. It would also be valuable to compare *Karma* with other Sanskrit-origin words, such as dharma, moksha, or yoga, to construct a broader picture of cultural-linguistic migration. Finally, further attention should be given to the computational analysis of cultural concepts, particularly how large language models (LLMs) like GPT replicate, reshape, or flatten complex terms due to their reliance on statistical patterns.

Indeed, this study also implicitly critiques AI-generated language itself. Much like the contemporary treatment of *Karma*, AI-generated prose often suffers from semantic surface glossing—overusing templated transitions ("It is important to note that…", "In today's world…"), producing overly uniform sentence structures (low burstiness), and avoiding messier human stylistics like emotional tangents or poetic metaphors. The very tools used to analyse cultural discourse risk participating in its dilution unless carefully guided by human insight.

In sum, this study contributes to our understanding of how religious vocabulary undergoes lexical transformation across linguistic, cultural, and technological landscapes. It invites us to ask not just what language means, but how meaning is mediated—and what is lost or gained in the translation between worlds.

By mapping the use of *Karma* across global English corpora, we encourage more profound reflection on the ethics of cultural borrowing in language. The way forward is one of critical literacy—ensuring that as language globalises, it does so with care, context, and respect.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

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No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this research paper are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institutions or the authors' university.

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