

At one time, use of the word "energize" was limited to theological and metaphysical realms, evoking a property of the spirit or the soul. These days, it's the province of political pundits and late-night motivational gurus. Here are some findings based on corpora research in early 2013.

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Distinct usage patterns over the centuries

Data from the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) reveals that use of the word "energize" was infrequent during the 19th century, but that usage started increasing by the late 20th century. In fact, almost 60% (58.6%, or 51 of 87 instances) of the COHA instances of "energize" occur in the decades 1980, 1990, and 2000. Interestingly, the frequency counts for Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) for the periods 1990 and 2000 are much higher than those for the same timeframes in COHA, but these differences may be due to content differences and some overlap between the two corpora.

	COHA	COCA
1810	0	
1820	0	
1830	0	
1840	1	
1850	6	
1860	2	
1870	0	
1880	2	
1890	1	
1900	3	
1910	3	
1920	3	
1930	0	
1940	3	
1950	2	
1960	5	
1970	5	
1980	12	
1990	16	199
2000	23	275
2010-2012		71
ALL	87	545

Figure 1: COHA results for "energize" per decade, 1810-2000

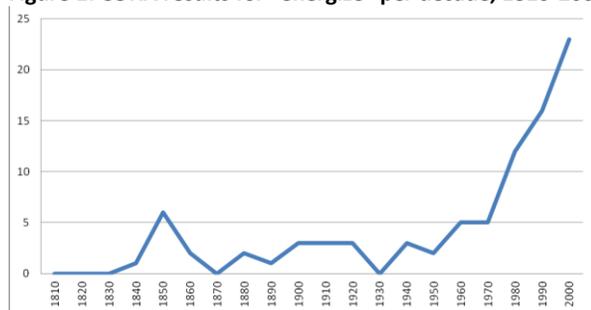


Figure 1 shows the COHA results as a trend line over the decades from 1810 onward. However, the data is sparse, with many decades registering 0 instances, and the sudden 'spike' for the 1850s might be a bit misleading, since most (4/6 instances) are from a single book ("*Rational Cosmology: or, The eternal principles and the necessary laws of the universe.*")

Figure 2 (below) shows the results clustered by 50-year increments (where possible) using raw frequency data. The COHA 50-year increments show relatively minor but continued pattern of increase. Figure 3 is an attempt to 'normalize' the frequencies, as relative trends for each dataset: the COCA line represents frequencies on a per year basis, while the COHA line represents

frequencies per decade, with a starting point that denotes average per-decade frequency for the entire period 1810-1979. So although Figure 3 is not strictly statistically sound (comparing per-year to per-decade), it does highlight the general “upward” trend.

Figure 2: COHA and COCA results summarized

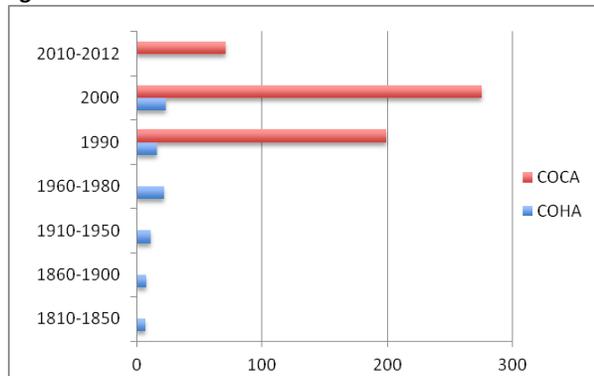
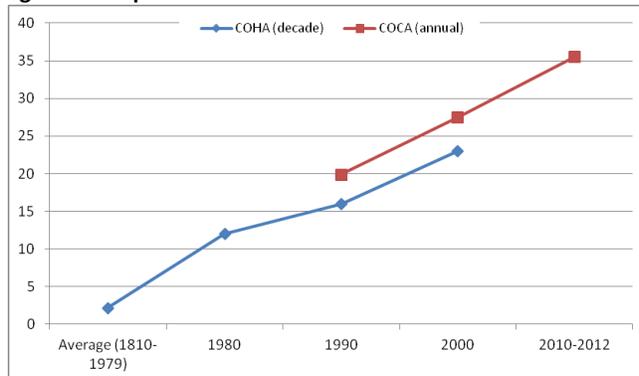


Figure 3: Frequencies as trend lines



Given the general trend since the 1990s, it seems apparent that ‘energize’ is not going to fall out of use any time soon. However, its uses have changed over the years, with the most notable differences in usage between the 1800s and now.

Transitive and intransitive constructions

Despite the sparse data from COHA, distinct differences in the meaning of “energize” can be seen. During the 1800s we find ‘energize’ used intransitively more frequently than in later years. For example, the first instance found in COHA is an extract from “*Essays, Second Series*” by Ralph Waldo Emerson:

[1844] Manners aim to facilitate life, to get rid of impediments and **bring the man pure to energize**. They aid our dealing and conversation as a railway aids travelling, by getting rid of all avoidable obstructions of the road and leaving nothing to be conquered but pure space.

The phrasing is hard to follow and the context cannot be understood without looking further into the full text. The quote is from a chapter on “Manners” in which Emerson discusses what seems to be the difference between the affectations that pass for ‘manners’ and honest sincerity and integrity—but the writing style is so archaic and circuitous that even in the larger context, it’s difficult to get a sense of that particular phrase (“bring the man pure to energize”—it may be that this should be read as “purify and energize the man.”) At any rate, the intransitive constructions sometimes collocate with other verbs, such as ‘arouse’ and ‘resist,’ as in the following examples involving “laws of motion, matter, and inertia” from four excerpts from “*Rational Cosmology...¹*” (book mentioned previously as the cause of the ‘spike’ shown in Figure 1):

[1858] call them laws of motion. **Dead matter** can not move any way, nor **energize** at all, and thus no thinking about matter, no insight of it,

antagonism is carried out of its position. In the static, both activities equally **energize** and **resist each other**, and the degree of the energies which rest against each

each other is the measure of the force. In the dynamic, both **activities energize** and **resist**, and thus constitute a force; but one activity is of superior

¹ Book by Laurens Perseus Hickok, D.D, an “American philosopher and divine... [member of Anglican clergy whose theological writings have been considered standards for faith, doctrine, worship, and spirituality and whose influence has permeated the Anglican Communion in varying degrees down through the years]” per Wikipedia.

heat-generation permeates the entire area of the universal sphere. These original **agencies** now perpetually **energize**, not that they may constitute new materials, and augment the existing creation,

These examples suggest the meaning of ‘energize’ as akin to ‘life force,’ possibly something that can be initiated internally by an individual, or which may depend on a ‘divine power.’ The realm of these examples seems to be in the metaphysical or spiritual dimension, especially given other collocates such “universal sphere” and “existing creation” in the above. For example, in this extract from an article in *New England and Yale Review* magazine, the eloquent speech issued from the pulpit by preachers must be backed by “divine power” that energizes [them] in order to have true ‘power’ (presumably, power over the ‘souls of the faithful’).

[1859] " an eloquent man, mighty in the Scriptures. " But let it never be forgotten that these forces, whose sum is eloquence, are, at best, only the conditions of the power of the pulpit, and not the power itself-that back of them there is a **Divine Power** which must **energize them**, or they will be impotent. As the bodies which lay about the prophet in the valley of vision, though covered with " sinews and flesh, " yet had " no breath in them, " so will these forces of the pulpit be powerless, until the " breath of the Almighty " shall come into them; then shall " they live, and stand up upon their feet, an exceeding great army, " mighty in God.

By the early 1900s, it’s **knowledge** that can ‘inspire and energize’

[1909] value of **knowledge** is here overlooked, i. e., **its power** to **inspire** and **energize**, a value that literature possesses to a high degree. Assuming that they are

Later still in the 20th century, the meaning has become more solidified. In this excerpt from an editorial in *The Nation* magazine, it’s Lloyd George who may be counted upon to ‘energize the working forces of the Government.’

[1916] The Premier is a man of marked and versatile ability, is capable of arousing high enthusiasm as well as bitter animosity, and has a driving power possessed by few. If he retains his health, **he** may fairly be counted upon to **energize** the **working forces of the Government**. In particular is foreshadowed legislation curtailing the manufacture and sale of liquor; with other measures designed to cut down waste, penalize luxury, and heighten efficiency.

This example is also prototypical of the uses that are found in later years and recent times, in which the subject may ‘energize’ another, in this case an abstract or collective noun serving as object, ‘the working forces of the Government.’

Context and its influence on meaning

The meaning of ‘energize’ changes depending on collocates in two distinct ways. Starting around the 1900s, ‘energize’ starts being used to describe the physical effect of electrical current as in this excerpt from a *New York Times* article:

[1903] lead mine in North Wales. An **alternating current** of high potential is used to **energize** the **ground** thought to contain mineral deposits. The current is taken from terminals to two metal rods pushed an inch or two into the earth. These act as distributors of the electric force, which is detected by means of a delicate telephonic receiver attached to another pair of rods stuck in the earth in any required position...."

A second example from COHA is from *Electric Power Equipment*, a book published by McGraw-Hill:

[1927] "Transformers of this type have no primary winding but use the **current** carried by the cable or bulbar to **energize** the **core** (see Fig. 128). Through-type transformers are usually regarded as suitable for instrument use if the ratio is 500:5 amp., or larger. ..."

This new context for “energize” coincides with the emergence of electric utilities in the US, whose output “exploded from 5.9 million kWh in 1907 to 75.4 million kWh in 1927.”²

Within this same general timeframe, we find the original meaning of ‘energize,’ as in this example from Time Magazine about famine in what was then the USSR:

[1923] Further reports indicate that thousands of tons of grain are being exported over the Finnish border and from Odessa and Novorossysk on the Black Sea. There can be but one conclusion—that the Soviet government prefers exporting grain to feeding its starving peasants. # This policy is slowly leading ten or fifteen million people—among them three million children—towards certain starvation. Accordingly the American Relief Association is between the devil and the deep sea. Choosing the sea, its members can cast off for America with the cries of three million starving ringing in their ears. Or **they** can remain **to energize a nation** which is financially fattening itself by exporting the life blood of its people. Either alternative is inhuman.

However, these ‘meanings’ may not be that different; it’s just a difference in context. The underlying concept—bringing something to life, initiating, activating—all these words mean *something* causes *something* else to occur, and this seems to be the case whether in the context of electrical current causing the core in a transformer to start holding a charge [I think?] or an action by a politician running for office [making unions a target] causing the labor movement to get the vote out for the opponent, as in this excerpt from USA Today:

[2011] He thinks **making unions a target** might **energize** the **labor movement** for the 2012 elections. # In last year’s congressional elections

Recurring collocations and what we can infer from them

I was surprised to learn that the catch-phrase “energize the economy” goes back to early 1960s, having thought that this was a more recent development (‘recent’ meaning 20-30 year timeframe, rather than half a century.) But here’s one of the first instances of “energize” collocating with “economy,” in a news item from the Christian Science Monitor:

[1963] Washington In his State of the Union message President Kennedy has declared -- to a Congress more receptive than last year's--that the tide of world events is finally running favorable to the free-world alliance. But he immediately adopted the stance once taken by Sir Winston Churchill, declaring with an eye on the sluggish economic front, that " we have only begun. " To **energize the economy** he asked for tax cuts totalling \$13,500,000,000, phased over three calendar years. He proposed tax reforms to produce \$3,500,000,000. President Kennedy's whole 5,500-word message -- delivered in person to Congress--was cautiously optimistic. The Cuba crisis had been surmounted, the Western powers are growing in strength, the Soviet-China alliance has been sundered, he noted. But again he warned that the price of victory would be costly--more defense spending, a continuing foreign-aid program. On the domestic side he proposed a

It seems that every ‘economic slow-down’ in the 50 years since has resulted in the application of this phrase. Here’s another example from COHA:

[1998] denies the rest of Asia a huge engine for growth. A revived **Japan** would **energize** the **economies** of East Asia and much of the world. Japan would import more

In addition to “economy” and “economies,” other frequent collocates of ‘energize’ involve abstract, amorphous, or collective notions—“the public,” “the nation,” for example. Here are some of the most frequent (leaving out determiners, adjectives, or adverbs that also appear with these.)

- base [Democratic or Republican]
- Black voters
- Democrat
- Evangelical christians
- GOP
- guests
- nation
- public
- Republican

² Smithsonian National Museum of American History <http://americanhistory.si.edu/powering/past/h1main.htm>

- economy/ies
- entire cities
- gun lobby
- labor movement
- soul [COHA only]
- voters

With the exception of “soul” (“energize the/his/your/her soul”) these collocates appear in both COHA and COCA. Verb collocates include “inspire,” “underlie,” “resist,” but these seem to be rare, except for instances from COHA from the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Observations about the types of discourse

The word “energize” is used widely and in many different environments, but especially in political discourse, discussions involving the economy, and also physical health and personal growth, insofar as the COCA examples.

However, during the 1800s, we find the word “energize” was used mostly in the context of spiritual, religious, or philosophical matters as shown in the examples in b), above. One of the differences between the 1800s and contemporary usage might be due to the different sources used in COHA and COCA. For the decades 1810s through 1850s, COHA has 0 extracts from newspapers (per Mark Davies’ source spreadsheets), while many of the examples from COCA are from news items—so this may have some bearing on the differences.

Sketch of the meaning of ‘energize’ based on usage

To “*energize*” means to *empower, motivate, or harness (the energy of)* an individual, group, or other entity—including abstract or collective entities—to change in a particular way or move in a particular direction; ‘direction’ in this sense may be intangible, such as a direction of thought. *Energize* can also mean to *excite or stimulate*, or to cause one to be *engaged* with a particular pursuit, school of thought, or belief system.

For example, ‘energize the economy’ means [to execute policies that will] stimulate all aspects of the quantifiable (yet still intangible entities) such as money supply, job market, inflation rate, value of the dollar, and so on, to effectively meet the needs of the society as a whole—with adequate jobs, food, shelter and so on.

To ‘energize the [Republican | Democratic] base’ means to motivate members of the political party to take some action, adopt some belief, develop more interest in a particular candidate or agenda item, or to vote in a certain way or for a particular candidate.

However, based on the COHA results from the 1800s, “energize” would mean something more like “bring to life,” or “inspire.” The source (Agent) of energize might be spiritual, the self, or supreme being. This meaning still does persist in late-night infomercials selling herbal remedies and vitamins, or featuring motivational speakers who promise to “energize” our lives.

References

Davies, Mark. (2008-) The Corpus of Contemporary American English: 450 million words, 1990-present. Available online at <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>.

Davies, Mark. (2010-) The Corpus of Historical American English: 400 million words, 1810-2009. Available online at <http://corpus.byu.edu/coha/>.