Debating Evil

Using Word Embeddings to Analyze Parliamentary Debates on War Criminals in the Netherlands

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Contents

1. The case: collaborators and war criminals in the postwar Netherlands
2. The questions: can we quantify and reconstruct developments in vocabulary? Can we link them to discursive shifts or actual historical events?
3. The problem: word embedding models (WEMs) and historical change

The case

- The Netherlands were occupied by Nazi Germany 1940-1945
- After 1945 about 100k people were prosecuted for collaboration and war crimes
- Last two prisoners released in 1989
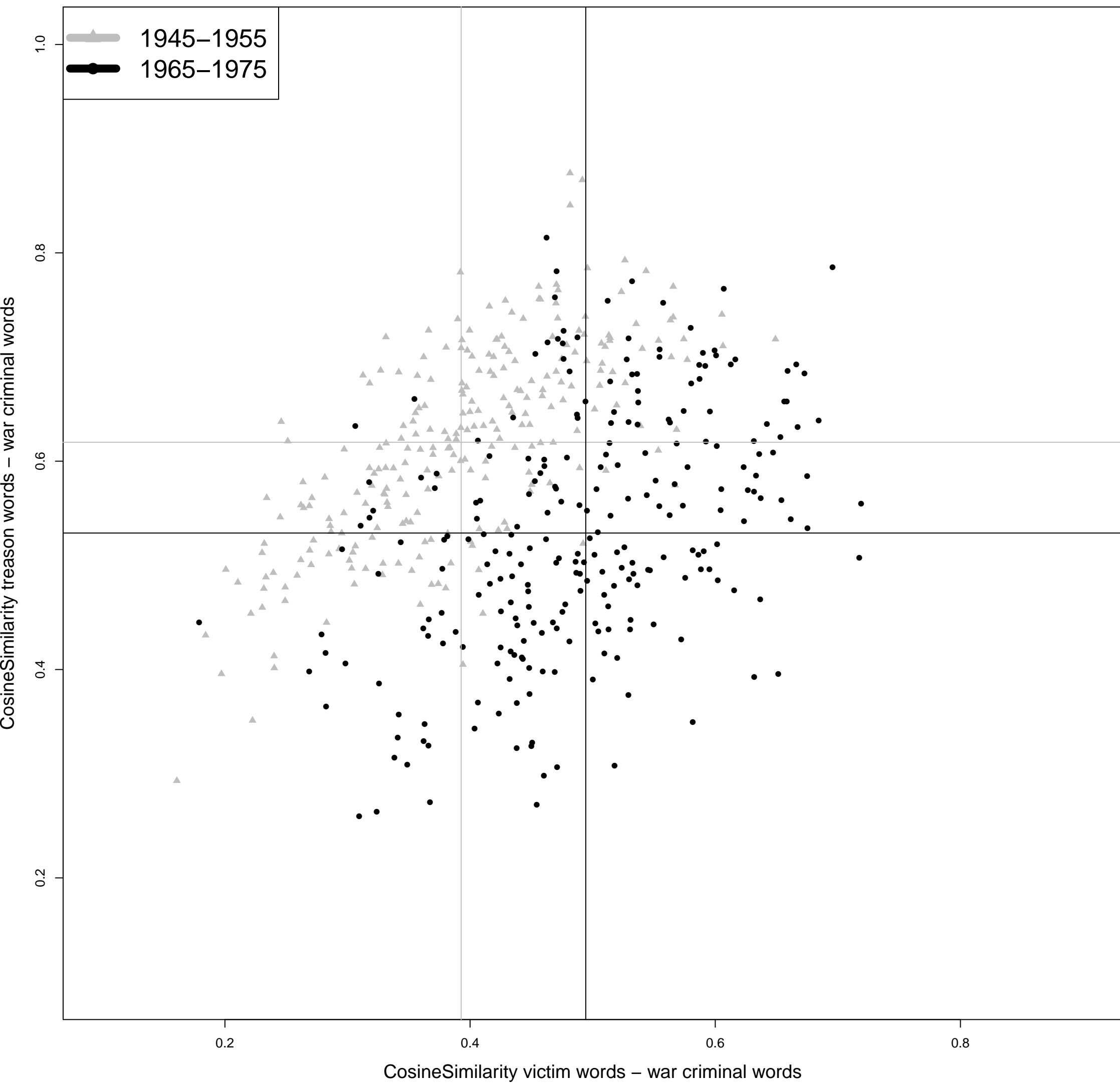- Intense political controversy between 1945-1989

The question

- Can we quantify and reconstruct developments in preferred parliamentary vocabulary?
- How does this relate to...
  - ...actual historical events?
  - ...established notions in Dutch historiography?

The problem

- WEMs are a powerful tool: investigate relations between words in large text corpora
- But: vectors from one trained model cannot be compared to those trained in another model
- This makes research into **change through time** problematic (and that is what we do)
- Can we compare word vectors in different models by using shared reference points?

Closeness of 250 war criminal related words in vector space (1945–1955 & 1965–1975)

Legend:
- 1945–1955
- 1965–1975

x-axis: CosineSimilarity victim words – war criminal words

y-axis: CosineSimilarity treason words – war criminal words

Closeness of 250 war criminal related words in vector space (1945–1955 & 1965–1975)

Legend: 1945–1955, 1965–1975

X-axis: CosineSimilarity life imprisonment words – war criminal words

Y-axis: CosineSimilarity death penalty words – war criminal words