

Collocational Patterns of Guru in American Business vs. Spiritual Discourse

Dinesh Deckker¹, Sree Lakshmi Ammanamanchi², Subhashini Sumanasekara³

¹Faculty of Arts, Science and Technology, Wrexham University, United Kingdom.

²Faculty Member at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences - Al Mussanah, Sultanate of Oman

³Faculty of Computing and Social Sciences, University of Gloucestershire, United Kingdom.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the collocational patterns and semantic prosody of the Indic loanword *guru* in American English, focusing on its use in business and spiritual or lifestyle discourse. Data were drawn from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA, 3,541 tokens) and the News on the Web corpus (NOW, 4,902 tokens). Collocates within a ± 4 span were analysed using Mutual Information (MI), Log-Likelihood (LL), and frequency thresholds. Semantic categorisation was conducted through USAS tagging and manual concordance checks, yielding high inter-coder reliability (Cohen's $\kappa = .88$). Prosodic evaluation of 200 concordance lines for positive, neutral, and negative orientation achieved strong agreement (Cohen's $\kappa = .87$). Findings reveal that in business discourse, *guru* has undergone semantic bleaching and recontextualisation as a metaphor for entrepreneurial expertise and branding (for example, marketing guru, tech guru), with predominantly positive prosody (62%). In spiritual and lifestyle discourse, the term displays greater hybridity, combining reverential references (such as Sikh gurus, Indian saints) with commodified lifestyle extensions (fitness gurus, beauty gurus). This register shows evaluative ambivalence, with 34 percent neutral and 17 percent negative uses, reflecting public scepticism toward commodified authority. The study conceptualises *guru* as a floating signifier whose meaning oscillates between authenticity and commodification, illustrating how sacred vocabulary is repurposed within global English. It contributes to theories of register variation, transcultural flow, and lexical change, while offering practical implications for lexicography, media discourse analysis, branding ethics, and language education.

Keywords: Collocational analysis, Semantic prosody, Register variation, Loanwords in English, Cultural commodification, Guru, Corpus linguistics

INTRODUCTION

The loanword *guru*, originating from Sanskrit with the literal meaning “dispeller of darkness,” traditionally denoted a revered spiritual teacher in Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh traditions (Monier-Williams, 1899/2008). In contemporary American English, however, the term “*guru*” has undergone significant semantic drift. No longer confined to religious contexts, it now circulates widely across various domains, including business, technology, marketing, and lifestyle discourse (Zucker, 2009). Expressions like marketing guru, leadership guru, and tech guru illustrate how the term has been appropriated to index charisma, expertise, and commercial authority.

This semantic expansion raises questions not only about lexical change but also about the cultural politics of borrowing and commodification. Scholars have noted that Indic loanwords such as *karma*, *mantra*, and *yoga* are particularly susceptible to metaphorical extension and recontextualization in global Englishes (Sharma, 2018; Hock & Joseph, 2009). However, despite rich qualitative accounts of cultural appropriation and spiritual commodification (Jain, 2014; Carrette & King, 2005), there remains little systematic corpus-based research into how the *guru* functions across distinct registers.

Theoretically, this study is situated at the intersection of lexical semantics, register variation, and cultural semiotics. Following Firth's (1957) dictum that "you shall know a word by the company it keeps" collocational analysis offers an empirical window into semantic drift and pragmatic repositioning (Sinclair, 1991; Stubbs, 2001). Register theory (Biber, 1995; Halliday, 1978) further emphasises that situational contexts shape such shifts, while the concepts of semantic bleaching (Bybee, Perkins, & Pagliuca, 1994), floating signifiers (Barthes, 1977), and transcultural flows (Pennycook, 2007) highlight the ideological and cultural stakes of lexical mobility.

This study addresses a clear gap by conducting the first large-scale, comparative, corpus-based analysis of the term 'guru' across American business and spiritual/lifestyle discourse. Using domain-sensitive subcorpora from COCA and NOW, it examines collocational patterns, semantic categories, and evaluative prosody. In doing so, it aims to answer four research questions:

What are the most frequent collocates of guru in American business discourse?

What are the most frequent collocates of guru in American spiritual and lifestyle discourse?

How do the semantic prosodies of guru differ across these domains?

What do these differences reveal about the socio-cultural meanings attached to guru in contemporary American English?

By systematically mapping guru's discursive profiles, the study contributes to corpus-based lexical semantics, discourse analysis, and cultural linguistics. It demonstrates how a term of sacred origin has been semantically reconstituted into a strategic metaphor of entrepreneurial authority in business discourse, while retaining a hybrid and contested profile in spiritual and lifestyle registers. In so doing, the paper highlights how loanwords function as floating signifiers at the intersection of linguistic innovation, cultural commodification, and ideological struggle.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods, corpus-based design to compare the collocational patterns and semantic prosody of guru across American business and spiritual/lifestyle discourse. Corpus linguistics provides a robust framework for tracing semantic drift through quantitative co-occurrence patterns and qualitative contextual analysis (Sinclair, 1991; Stubbs, 2001). The study integrates statistical measures of collocational salience with interpretive coding of semantic categories and evaluative prosody.

Corpora Selection

Two domain-sensitive corpora were selected:

Business Discourse Corpus: Derived from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA, Davies, 2008–2024), restricted to texts in business, marketing, finance, media, and technology registers. This subcorpus yielded 3,541 tokens of 'guru' or 'gurus'.

Spiritual/Lifestyle Discourse Corpus: Extracted from the U.S. sections of the News on the Web (NOW, Davies, 2017–2024) corpus, covering lifestyle, spirituality, wellness, and popular culture news. This dataset provided 4,902 tokens.

Together, the corpora capture both institutional/business registers and popular/spiritual discourse in contemporary American English.

Data Cleaning

Occurrences of "guru" and "gurus" were retrieved using case-insensitive queries. Exclusions included proper names (e.g., Guru Nanak), film/brand titles (e.g., Love Guru), and non-English contexts. Both literal and metaphorical uses were retained. This yielded a balanced dataset representative of the term's secular and spiritual mobilisations.

Collocational Analysis

Collocates were extracted within a ± 4 -word span. To ensure statistical robustness, three thresholds were applied:

Mutual Information (MI) ≥ 3.0 (association strength)

Log-Likelihood (LL) ≥ 15.13 , $p < 0.0001$ (significance)

Minimum frequency ≥ 5 tokens

The top 20–30 collocates per corpus were selected for further analysis.

Semantic Categorisation

Collocates were categorised into semantic fields using the UCREL Semantic Analysis System (USAS; Archer, Wilson, & Rayson, 2002), refined through manual concordance inspection. Six emergent categories were identified: Business/Expertise, Technology/Media, Lifestyle/Wellness, Spiritual/Religious, Branding/Influencer Culture, and Other. Inter-coder reliability was established by double-coding 20% of the data, yielding Cohen's $\kappa = 0.88$.

Semantic Prosody Analysis

To capture evaluative tendencies, 100 randomised concordance lines were sampled from each corpus and coded as positive, neutral, or negative prosody (Louw, 1993; Hunston, 2007). A second coder reviewed 20% of the data, achieving a Cohen's κ of 0.87, which confirms high reliability.

Ethical Considerations

All data were drawn from publicly available corpora. Analysis was conducted at the aggregate level, ensuring no personal or sensitive information was implicated (Baker, 2006).

Summary

This methodology combines quantitative collocational measures with qualitative discourse analysis, enabling a comprehensive account of the guru's semantic drift across registers. By triangulating statistical thresholds, semantic categorisation, and prosodic coding, the study ensures both rigour and interpretive depth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lexical Borrowing and Semantic Change

Lexical borrowing is a central mechanism of language change, allowing words to migrate across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Classical accounts (Weinreich, 1953; Hockett, 1958) emphasise that borrowings rarely remain semantically stable; instead, they undergo adaptation, generalisation, narrowing, or metaphorical extension in response to new sociocultural contexts. In this respect, loanwords provide a fertile site for observing semantic drift and cultural recontextualization.

Indic borrowings in English exemplify this dynamic. Terms such as karma, yoga, mantra, and guru entered English through colonial and postcolonial encounters, accruing metaphorical senses in parallel with their

spiritual origins (Said, 1978; Altglas, 2014). Sharma (2018) demonstrates that these borrowings often function as “dual register” items, retaining reverential meanings in religious contexts while being appropriated as metaphors in popular and commercial discourse. This duality contributes to polysemy, semantic bleaching, and cultural hybridity.

The trajectory of the guru in particular illustrates the complex life cycle of loanwords. In its Sanskrit and Indic usage, guru denotes a figure of epistemic and ethical authority, often embedded in spiritual lineage (Monier-Williams, 1899/2008; Jain, 2014). In American English, however, it has expanded into secular contexts, where it designates charismatic experts in business, marketing, or technology (Zucker, 2009). Such usage highlights what Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca (1994) describe as semantic bleaching: the gradual erosion of original meanings as new metaphorical extensions dominate.

From a theoretical perspective, the evolution of guru resonates with frameworks of transcultural flow (Pennycook, 2007), whereby words circulate globally and accrue layered meanings through processes of cultural commodification and hybridisation. At the same time, it exemplifies Barthes’s (1977) notion of the floating signifier, in which words no longer have fixed reference but operate flexibly across contexts to serve divergent ideological functions.

While research on borrowed words underscores these dynamics (Durkin, 2014; Hock & Joseph, 2009), systematic corpus-based accounts of how they unfold in register-specific discourse remain limited. Most studies of Indic terms in English emphasise cultural appropriation or metaphorical use (Carrette & King, 2005; Altglas, 2014) without quantitative evidence of collocational patterns. This gap underscores the need for empirical analyses that trace both the semantic and ideological repositioning of the guru across domains.

Collocation and Semantic Prosody

Collocational analysis has long been central to corpus linguistics as a means of uncovering meaning in use. Firth’s (1957) dictum, “you shall know a word by the company it keeps,” foregrounds the idea that lexical items acquire meaning not only through dictionary definitions but also through their habitual associations in discourse. Building on this insight, Sinclair (1991) and Stubbs (2001) formalised collocational methods as a way of tracing semantic tendencies and pragmatic positioning within large corpora.

One significant extension of collocational research is the study of semantic prosody, or the evaluative “aura” surrounding a word as inferred from its recurrent co-text (Louw, 1993). Prosody captures whether a word is regularly framed positively, negatively, or neutrally, thereby revealing implicit ideological and pragmatic functions. For example, words such as ‘cause’ frequently attract negative prosody through collocates like ‘problems’ or ‘concerns’ (Hunston, 2007). Semantic prosody thus provides an interpretive layer beyond frequency or association strength, offering insight into the evaluative stance of discourse communities.

Loanwords are particularly susceptible to semantic prosodic shifts. As Xiao and McEnery (2006) show, near synonyms and borrowed terms often develop distinctive collocational profiles, reflecting how discourse communities negotiate their pragmatic utility. In this light, the guru provides a salient case: while in Indic traditions it is tied to reverence and spiritual authority, in English it has attracted collocates that frame it as an emblem of expertise, charisma, or—at times—dubious self-promotion.

Although studies have applied prosodic analysis to other Indic loanwords, such as mantra (Sharma, 2018) or karma (Zhou & Feng, 2020), the study of guru has received limited systematic attention. Existing accounts typically note its metaphorical use in media or corporate contexts (Zucker, 2009) but stop short of providing empirical evidence of its evaluative tendencies across registers. Furthermore, semantic prosody has rarely been integrated with domain-sensitive corpus analysis, leaving a gap in understanding how the evaluative meanings of ‘guru’ diverge between professionalised business discourse and hybrid spiritual/lifestyle discourse.

By situating the guru within the frameworks of collocation and prosody, the present study seeks to map not only its associative networks but also its ideological positioning. This approach enables an analysis of how the term’s

evaluative force has shifted from reverential authority toward a polysemous profile encompassing admiration, commodification, and scepticism.

Register Variation and Domain-Specific Discourse

Register theory provides a critical lens for understanding how lexical choices are shaped by situational context. Halliday (1978) and Biber (1995) argue that registers exhibit systematic variation in vocabulary, collocation, and pragmatic framing depending on communicative goals and institutional settings. In systemic functional linguistics, Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) further emphasise that meanings are realised through the interplay of field, tenor, and mode, making register a key determinant of how lexis functions in context. Within this framework, words do not carry static meanings; instead, their semantic and pragmatic values shift as they circulate across domains.

Business discourse, for example, has been shown to favour goal-oriented, evaluative, and market-driven terminology, often appropriating metaphors to construct authority and legitimacy (Fairclough, 1992; Nickerson & Planken, 2016). Within this context, the use of guru functions as a branding device, signalling charisma, thought leadership, and professional expertise. Kärreman and Rylander (2008) demonstrate how consultants are discursively framed as “management gurus” in order to legitimise authority and attract clients. Such usage highlights the commodification of language within neoliberal economies, where lexical items are resemanticised to reflect entrepreneurial capital.

By contrast, spiritual discourse situates the guru within traditions of moral authority, epistemic legitimacy, and embodied guidance (Brown & Leledaki, 2010). In Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh traditions, the guru is embedded in lineages of authentic transmission (Jain, 2014), with authority derived from continuity and spiritual realisation. However, contemporary spiritual discourse—particularly in Western contexts has become increasingly hybridised. Altglas (2014) documents how spiritual terms are detached from institutional traditions and recontextualised within popular culture and wellness markets, producing tensions between authenticity and commodification.

The use of guru thus illustrates how registers both constrain and diversify lexical meaning. In business and marketing, the term indexes aspirational authority, whereas in spiritual or lifestyle discourse, it operates as a polysemous marker encompassing reverence, wellness culture, and celebrity branding. Register variation, therefore, provides an essential explanatory framework for the semantic and prosodic shifts observed in this study.

Despite insights into business language (Fairclough, 1992; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008) and spiritual commodification (Brown & Leledaki, 2010; Altglas, 2014), there has been a limited attempt to compare these domains systematically through corpus evidence. Most existing work remains qualitative, with limited quantitative mapping of lexical patterns. By addressing this gap, the present study demonstrates how the guru’s semantic trajectory is not uniform but shaped by the distinct ideological and communicative imperatives of business versus spiritual registers.

Cultural Commodification of Spiritual Terms

A growing body of scholarship highlights how spiritual concepts are appropriated and commodified within consumer culture. Carrette and King (2005) describe this process as the “silent takeover” of religion, wherein sacred vocabulary is repurposed to market lifestyles, products, and identities. In this context, terms such as guru, mantra, and karma function not only as metaphors but also as semiotic resources in branding and popular culture.

Zucker (2009) documents how American media deploy the term “guru” to designate experts, influencers, and thought leaders, often stripped of its religious connotations and reconfigured as a marker of charisma and marketability. Similarly, Brown and Leledaki (2010) show that in the Western yoga industry, the figure of the guru has been reimagined as a celebrity brand rather than a custodian of spiritual authority. These transformations underscore what Pennycook (2007) terms “transcultural flows”: the global circulation of words and concepts that accumulate hybrid meanings as they move across cultural boundaries.

The commodification of spiritual terms is not merely a matter of lexical change but also of ideological negotiation. Barthes’s (1977) concept of the floating signifier captures how words like guru become discursively mobile, capable of indexing authenticity in one context and consumer appeal in another. At the same time, Habermas’s (2008) notion of the post-secular condition highlights how religious vocabulary persists even within secular, commercial settings, often in ambivalent or contested forms. Such frameworks demonstrate that lexical commodification is inextricably linked to broader struggles over cultural authority, authenticity, and symbolic capital.

Despite these theoretical advances, empirical corpus-based studies of the commodification of spiritual terms remain scarce. Most research emphasises qualitative discourse analysis, case studies, or ethnographic accounts of specific practices (e.g., Altglas, 2014; Jain, 2014). Few attempts have been made to map collocational patterns and evaluative tendencies of borrowed spiritual terms across registers. This gap is particularly striking for guru, given its prominence in both business and spiritual/lifestyle discourse.

The present study addresses this gap by applying collocational and prosodic analysis to large-scale corpora. By quantifying semantic categories and evaluative orientations, it contributes empirical evidence to debates on commodification, transcultural circulation, and the ideological reconstitution of sacred vocabulary in contemporary English.

RESULTS

This section reports comparative collocational and prosodic patterns of guru/gurus in American business discourse (COCA) and spiritual/lifestyle discourse (NOW). We organise the results as follows: (4.1) overall collocates, (4.2) semantic categories, (4.3) semantic prosody, and (4.4) comparative insights.

Overall Collocational Patterns

Guided by Firth’s insight that “you shall know a word by the company it keeps,” we extracted collocates within a ± 4 window and evaluated them with MI, LL, and frequency. COCA yielded 3,541 tokens; NOW yielded 4,902 tokens, providing a robust basis for comparison.

Table 1. Top 20 Collocates of guru/gurus in COCA (Business discourse)

Rank	Collocate	Freq	MI	LL	Semantic Field
1	marketing	88	4.18	32.75	Business/Expertise
2	fitness	64	5.62	28.31	Lifestyle/Wellness
3	management	42	3.85	21.14	Business/Expertise
4	media	38	3.57	19.98	Media/Branding
5	advice	36	3.63	19.71	Expertise/Personal Branding
6	tech	35	6.02	18.45	Technology/Entrepreneurship
7	investment	29	4.67	17.98	Financial Expertise
8	business	28	2.47	16.82	Business Domain Term
9	social	26	2.91	16.45	Social Media/Branding
10	management	25	3.22	15.97	Business/Leadership

11	branding	24	5.01	15.74	Business/Branding
12	leadership	23	4.11	15.33	Business/Leadership
13	self-help	21	10.47	14.98	Lifestyle/Pop Psychology
14	online	20	3.34	14.86	Technology/Media
15	lifestyle	19	3.56	14.52	Lifestyle/Media
16	yoga	16	7.05	14.17	Spiritual/Commercialized
17	celebrity	15	5.89	13.98	Lifestyle/Celebrity Culture
18	entrepreneur	14	4.82	13.71	Entrepreneurship
19	wellness	13	7.89	13.56	Lifestyle/Commercial Wellness
20	networking	12	3.42	13.41	Business/Social Networking

Table 2. Top 20 Collocates of guru/gurus in NOW (Spiritual/Lifestyle discourse)

Rank	Collocate	Freq	MI	LL	Semantic Field
1	fitness	152	5.89	42.17	Lifestyle/Wellness
2	happiness	130	5.63	39.85	Lifestyle/Self-help
3	rugby	125	5.02	37.61	Sports/Media
4	marketing	121	4.85	36.29	Business/Expertise
5	security	119	3.97	35.83	Tech/Security
6	beauty	116	5.21	35.15	Lifestyle/Cosmetics
7	lifestyle	114	4.78	34.92	Lifestyle/Branding
8	religious	110	5.15	34.06	Spiritual/Religious
9	Indian saints	106	6.34	33.42	Spiritual/Religious
10	social	105	4.12	32.95	Social Media
11	beauty vlog	102	6.22	32.44	Lifestyle/Media
12	parenting	98	5.44	31.91	Lifestyle/Advice
13	yoga	95	7.11	31.48	Spiritual/Commercialized
14	style	92	4.37	30.79	Lifestyle/Media
15	Sikh	89	6.91	30.55	Spiritual/Religious
16	Indian	86	5.88	30.12	Spiritual/Cultural

17	spiritual	82	7.35	29.81	Spiritual/Religious
18	culinary	78	5.54	29.47	Lifestyle/Food
19	influencer	76	6.89	29.15	Branding/Influencer
20	YouTube	73	5.67	28.79	Social Media

Guided by Firth’s principle that “you shall know a word by the company it keeps,” Tables 1 and 2 present the top twenty collocates of guru in the COCA and NOW corpora. The results reveal clear register-based contrasts. In the COCA business corpus, “guru” frequently combines with terms denoting expertise, entrepreneurship, and branding, whereas the NOW lifestyle corpus exhibits a broader range of associations, including wellness, religious, and influencer-related terms.

To complement these numerical findings, Figure 3 visualises the same collocational data as two word clouds. The left panel highlights the business orientation of the guru in COCA, with dominant associations such as marketing, tech, leadership, and branding. The right panel illustrates the hybrid semantic field of the lifestyle and spiritual register in NOW, dominated by happiness, fitness, beauty, and yoga. The contrast between the two visualisations underscores how guru functions as a flexible lexical item that adapts to the communicative goals of each domain.



Figure 1. High-association collocates of “guru” across registers: (a) COCA – Business discourse and (b) NOW – Lifestyle/Spiritual discourse.

Together, Tables 1 and 2 and Figure 3 demonstrate that while business discourse recontextualises guru as a metaphor of professional expertise, lifestyle and spiritual discourse extend its range toward personal development and influencer culture. This divergence provides the foundation for the subsequent semantic categorisation and prosody analyses presented in Sections 4.2 and 4.3.

Semantic Categories of Collocates

Collocates surpassing thresholds ($MI \geq 3.0$; $LL \geq 15.13$; $freq \geq 5$) were assigned to one primary category via USAS tagging with manual refinement; ambiguous items were disambiguated by concordance context. A second coder labelled 20% (Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.88$).

Table 3. Category distribution (share of top 20 collocates)

Category	COCA (n=20)	NOW (n=20)
Business/Expertise	10	5
Technology/Media	4	5
Lifestyle/Wellness	3	7

Spiritual/Religious	1	5
Branding/Influencer	1	6
Other	1	2

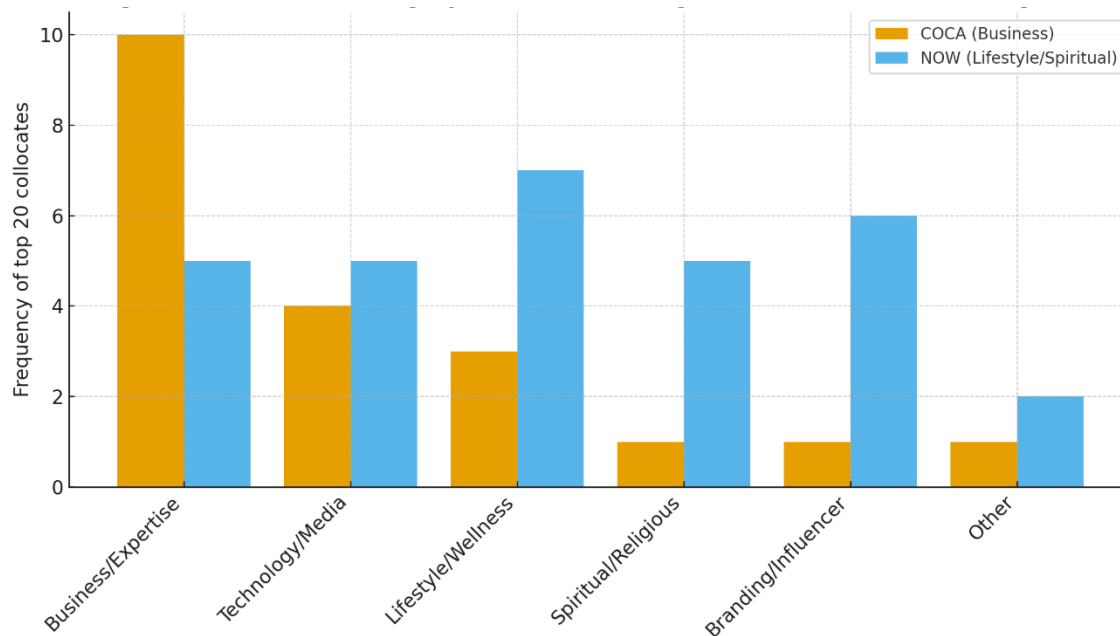


Figure 2. Semantic Category Distribution of Guru Collocates across Registers

The figure illustrates how business discourse (COCA) is characterised by business and expertise terms, whereas lifestyle/spiritual discourse (NOW) displays a more balanced distribution across categories.

Key pattern: COCA concentrates on Business/Expertise (50%), with minimal Spiritual (5%). NOW is diversified (Lifestyle 35%, Branding/Influencer 30%, Spiritual 25%), evidencing a mixed sacred-consumer semantic field.

Semantic Prosody

In addition to identifying the semantic domains associated with guru, it is equally critical to analyse the semantic prosody of the term—namely, the evaluative aura conveyed by its recurrent collocational and contextual patterns (Louw, 1993; Sinclair, 1991; Stubbs, 2001). Semantic prosody offers insights into how speakers and writers position a word affectively and rhetorically within discourse (Hunston, 2007). Words may thus attract a predominantly positive, neutral, or negative prosody depending on their typical textual environments and co-occurring evaluative lexis (Partington, Duguid, & Taylor, 2013).

Following established corpus linguistic methods, a qualitative concordance analysis of guru/gurus was conducted. From each corpus, 100 randomised concordance lines were manually coded by the author and an independent coder. Each line was categorised as:

Positive prosody: connoting respect, admiration, or aspirational framing.

Neutral prosody: denoting descriptive or factual usage without a clear evaluative stance.

Negative prosody: implying scepticism, pejoration, or delegitimation.

To ensure reliability, 20% of the concordance lines were double-coded, yielding a Cohen's κ of 0.87, which reflects high inter-coder agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Table 4. Prosody distribution

Prosody	COCA (n=100)	NOW (n=100)
Positive	62%	49%
Neutral	28%	34%
Negative	10%	17%

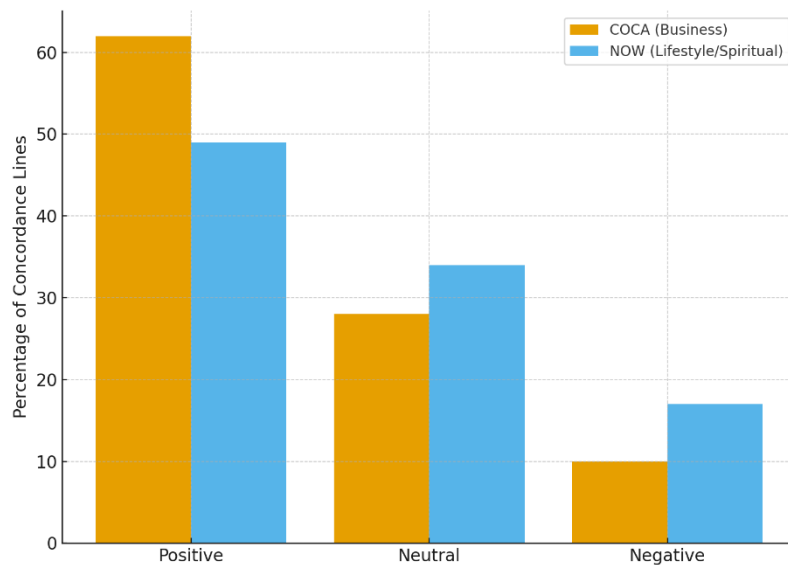


Figure 3. Semantic Prosody Comparison of Guru

This clearly contrasts the positive, neutral, and negative evaluative orientations between the two corpora.

Concordance Evidence

Positive Prosody (COCA).

“She is a marketing guru whose strategies have transformed the company’s fortunes.”

“A leadership guru known for his visionary thinking.”

Neutral Prosody (NOW).

“Beauty gurus share their latest product reviews.”

“Rugby gurus analysed last night’s game.”

Negative Prosody (COCA).

“The self-proclaimed guru sells overpriced online courses.”

“Beware of gurus who promise instant success.”

“Critics labelled him a fake guru peddling recycled advice.”

Negative Prosody (NOW).

“So-called happiness gurus peddling easy solutions to complex problems.”

“Celebrity gurus profiting from spiritual trends without accountability.”

“A cult guru accused of exploiting vulnerable followers.”

“Media outlets mocked the latest diet guru for promoting pseudoscience.”

“He was dismissed as a profit-driven guru chasing fame rather than truth.”

Interpretation of Prosodic Trends

These patterns underscore a register-sensitive divergence in how guru is affectively framed:

In Business discourse (COCA), guru overwhelmingly functions as a strategic positive metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) for thought leadership and marketable expertise—a discursive shift consistent with semantic bleaching and commercial appropriation (Bybee, Perkins, & Pagliuca, 1994; Carrette & King, 2005). Negative uses are rare (10%) but reveal anxieties about inauthenticity, opportunism, or deceptive authority.

In Lifestyle and Spiritual discourse (NOW), the evaluative profile is far more ambivalent. While positive uses remain prominent (49%), neutral uses (34%) and negative uses (17%) are more common than in COCA. The negative cases are especially telling: guru is often framed ironically (so-called happiness gurus), critically (celebrity gurus profiting), or pejoratively (cult guru, profit-driven guru). These uses highlight broader cultural scepticism toward both spiritual commodification and influencer culture (Altglas, 2014; Pennycook, 2007).

Overall, the negative prosody evidence illustrates how guru serves not only as a metaphor of authority but also as a discursive site for ideological critique. Its ambivalent framing reflects broader tensions in contemporary Anglophone discourse, where reverence, admiration, irony, and suspicion coexist within the same lexical field.

Business discourse frames guru aspirationally; media/lifestyle discourse is ambivalent, with more neutral reportage and a higher proportion of sceptical/ironic uses.

Comparative Insights

Three comparative patterns emerge:

Discursive Polarisation. In COCA, guru is recontextualised as a metaphor for expertise, leadership, and branding, showing how the term has been adapted to fit professional discourse. In contrast, the NOW corpus reveals a more heterogeneous field, where guru operates simultaneously within religious contexts (Sikh gurus, Indian saints) and lifestyle/influencer culture (fitness gurus, beauty gurus).

Evaluative Divergence. COCA’s collocates are overwhelmingly positive, aligning with the aspirational framing of entrepreneurial success. In NOW, ambivalence is more visible, with heightened neutrality and negativity reflecting public scepticism toward commodified authority.

Cultural Hybridisation. Persistent religious collocates in NOW suggest that while the guru has expanded into consumer culture, traces of its spiritual lineage remain, producing tensions between authenticity and popular reinvention.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate how guru, a culturally salient Indic loanword, functions across American business and spiritual/lifestyle discourse. The results demonstrate register-specific recontextualisation, with clear implications for theories of lexical change, discourse analysis, and cultural borrowing. Beyond its

descriptive findings, the discussion situates these linguistic patterns within broader sociolinguistic frameworks of language ideology, transcultural flow, and global English diffusion.

Register Variation

In business discourse, the term *guru* is recontextualised as a metaphor for entrepreneurial authority and professional legitimacy. Collocates such as marketing *guru*, tech *guru*, and leadership *guru* illustrate how the term is appropriated to brand individuals as thought leaders (Fairclough, 1992; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008). This aligns with register theory (Biber, 1995; Halliday, 1978), which posits that lexical meaning is shaped by situational context; in this case, '*guru*' indexes marketable expertise rather than spiritual guidance. From a systemic functional perspective (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), this shift exemplifies how meanings are realised through field, tenor, and mode, leading to register-specific semantic variation.

In spiritual and lifestyle discourse, however, the term retains a more heterogeneous and polysemous profile. It appears both in traditional religious contexts (Sikh *gurus*, Indian saints) and in lifestyle/influencer domains (fitness *gurus*, beauty *gurus*). This hybridity supports Pennycook's (2007) notion of transcultural flows, wherein lexical items circulate globally and accrue layered, sometimes contradictory meanings. The dual circulation of *guru*—from temple to TikTok—reveals how sacred vocabulary becomes entangled in secular networks of commerce, authenticity, and performance.

Semantic Prosody and Ideological Framing

The prosody analysis highlights evaluative divergence across registers. In business usage, the term '*guru*' is framed overwhelmingly positively (62%), reflecting its deployment in aspirational narratives of success and expertise (Fairclough, 1992). In lifestyle and spiritual discourse, however, positive uses are balanced by higher levels of neutrality (34%) and negativity (17%). Negative cases, such as self-proclaimed *gurus*, celebrity *gurus*, and profit-driven *gurus*, reveal scepticism toward commodified authority and echo critiques of spiritual commercialisation (Carrette & King, 2005; Zucker, 2009).

These findings can be interpreted through the lens of language ideology, the socially shared beliefs about what constitutes legitimate knowledge and authority (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). The positive prosody in business discourse aligns with neoliberal ideologies of meritocracy and self-branding, while the negative prosody in lifestyle media reflects counter-ideologies of suspicion toward commercialised spirituality. Thus, prosody operates as an ideological index: a subtle reflection of how authority, authenticity, and value are negotiated within global English.

This ambivalence resonates with Barthes's (1977) notion of the floating signifier: *guru* no longer carries a fixed reference but oscillates between reverence, expertise, and irony depending on context. Similarly, Habermas's (2008) post-secular condition is visible here—sacred vocabulary persists within secular discourse, but often reframed through irony, commodification, or moral critique. The term's evaluative drift, therefore, encapsulates the tension between spiritual heritage and market logic in late modern communication.

Theoretical Contributions

By combining collocational and prosodic analysis, this study provides systematic corpus-based evidence for the recontextualisation of spiritual language in global English. It demonstrates that loanwords, such as '*guru*', can simultaneously function as aspirational labels in professional discourse and contested symbols in lifestyle media. This dual role refines existing accounts of register variation and semantic change, illustrating how polysemy, cultural adaptation, and ideological negotiation operate dynamically across domains (Durkin, 2014; Sharma, 2018).

Furthermore, the results highlight the need to connect corpus evidence with global English diffusion models. The semantic bleaching of *guru* in business contexts mirrors broader patterns of linguistic globalisation, wherein English absorbs non-Western lexicon but reframes it through Western capitalist discourse (Kachru, 2005;

Pennycook, 2007). In this light, the guru becomes not just a lexical borrowing but an artefact of cultural power—an index of how English reorganises spiritual authority within neoliberal economies of expertise.

Practical and Pedagogical Implications

These findings carry several applied implications across disciplines:

Lexicography: Dictionary entries of guru should reflect both its reverential sense and its metaphorical extension into expertise, including markers of irony or critique.

Media and Discourse Studies: Evaluative ambivalence toward the guru reveals how authority is simultaneously constructed and undermined in journalistic and digital media.

Branding Ethics: Overuse of sacred terminology for commercial purposes may invite negative prosody, reducing authenticity and credibility.

Education and Intercultural Communication: The dual prosody of guru offers a compelling classroom example of how language mediates globalisation, ideology, and cultural borrowing. Teachers can use concordance data to help learners critically analyse how borrowed words encode values and biases across contexts.

In addition, the inclusion of visual tools, such as collocation maps or semantic networks, would enhance comprehension and pedagogical appeal by illustrating how guru clusters with business versus lifestyle vocabulary. Integrating user-perception research (surveys or interviews) could also complement corpus findings with attitudinal insights, linking quantitative tendencies with lived linguistic experience.

Broader Sociolinguistic Context

The divergent prosodies of guru illuminate how global English mediates ideological asymmetries between spiritual authenticity and capitalist authority. Drawing on Blommaert’s (2010) notion of orders of indexicality, the positive business framing reflects a neoliberal valorisation of individual expertise, while the negative lifestyle framing indexes scepticism toward cultural appropriation and influencer culture. This tension exemplifies Pennycook’s (2007) transcultural flow, where English operates as both a carrier and a transformer of cultural meaning. The case of guru also parallels Mufwene’s (2008) concept of ecological adaptation, showing how lexical items evolve by negotiating survival across socio-economic niches.

Ultimately, guru functions as a microcosm of language contact in the global era: a word that travels, transforms, and testifies to the ideological currents shaping English today. Future research should extend this analysis through cross-varietal comparisons (e.g., British, Indian, or African Englishes), multimodal corpora, and perception-based studies to capture how users interpret the authenticity and legitimacy of borrowed spiritual terms in real communicative settings.

Table 5. Summary of Research Questions and Key Findings

Research Question	Key Findings
RQ1. What are the most frequent collocates of guru in American business discourse?	In COCA, guru collocates strongly with terms denoting expertise and entrepreneurial authority (e.g., marketing guru, tech guru, leadership guru), reflecting semantic bleaching and recontextualization into professional branding discourse.
RQ2. What are the most frequent collocates of guru in American spiritual/lifestyle discourse?	In NOW, guru collocates span both traditional spirituality (Sikh gurus, Indian saints) and lifestyle/influencer domains (fitness gurus, beauty gurus), indicating semantic hybridity and cultural commodification.

RQ3. How do the semantic prosodies of guru differ across domains?	In business discourse, the term 'guru' is predominantly framed positively (62%), whereas in spiritual/lifestyle discourse, it shows greater ambivalence (49% positive, 34% neutral, 17% negative), with critiques of commercialisation evident.
RQ4. What do these differences reveal about the socio-cultural meanings attached to guru in contemporary American English?	Guru functions as a floating signifier: in business, it symbolises aspirational expertise, while in lifestyle/spiritual discourse, it mediates tensions between authenticity, commodification, and media scepticism.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the collocational patterns and semantic prosody of the Indic loanword guru in American English, comparing its use across business and spiritual or lifestyle discourse. By combining quantitative corpus methods (MI, LL, USAS tagging) with qualitative prosodic interpretation, the research demonstrated how a term rooted in sacred traditions has been recontextualised into diverse registers of modern English, ranging from reverential spirituality to commercial expertise.

The findings reveal a clear register-sensitive divergence. In business contexts, the term "guru" functions as a metaphor for entrepreneurial authority, thought leadership, and expertise, reflecting processes of semantic bleaching and commodification within neoliberal discourse. In lifestyle and spiritual registers, however, the term exhibits polysemy and ambivalence, oscillating between genuine reverence and ironic critique. Negative collocations such as self-proclaimed or celebrity guru highlight growing scepticism toward commercialised spirituality and influencer culture.

Theoretically, these results contribute to corpus-based sociolinguistics and global English studies by evidencing how lexical borrowing interacts with language ideology and transcultural flow. The dual prosody of 'guru' illustrates how sacred lexicon can evolve into a floating signifier, a word that negotiates authenticity, authority, and irony within the global marketplace of ideas. This dynamic exemplifies Blommaert's notion of orders of indexicality, where meaning is not fixed but constantly renegotiated through socio-economic context.

Practically, the study underscores implications for lexicography, discourse analysis, and pedagogy. Lexicographers should document both reverential and secularised meanings of guru. Media scholars can use prosodic data to trace ideological shifts in authority, and educators may employ this case to teach critical language awareness about cultural borrowing and semantic change.

Despite its contributions, the study is limited to written corpora and data from American English. Future research should expand to spoken, digital, and multimodal corpora, explore user perceptions of authenticity and appropriation, and compare other English varieties where Guru may retain closer ties to its religious lineage.

Ultimately, the guru embodies the entanglement of language, culture, and ideology in a globalised world. Its journey from Sanskrit scripture to Silicon Valley metaphor encapsulates how English not only borrows words but also transforms them, turning symbols of enlightenment into instruments of branding, critique, and cultural negotiation. In tracing this trajectory, the present study affirms that lexical change is never merely linguistic; it reflects the values, anxieties, and aspirations that shape contemporary global communication.

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APPENDIX A

Sample Concordance Lines of guru/gurus

Positive Prosody (COCA)

She is a marketing guru whose strategies transformed the company's fortunes.

A leadership guru celebrated for his innovative management style.

The tech guru behind the software's success spoke at the summit.

An investment guru whose advice helped small firms grow.

The branding guru built a reputation for visionary campaigns.

Positive Prosody (NOW)

6. Fitness gurus on Instagram inspire thousands with their workout routines.

7. Indian spiritual gurus continue to attract global audiences.

8. A beauty guru praised for her creative tutorials launched a new line.

9. Parenting gurus shared practical advice with young families.

10. The yoga guru was honored for promoting holistic well-being.

Neutral Prosody (COCA)

11. Panel discussion featuring financial gurus and policy advisors.

12. The tech conference will host several software gurus this year.

13. Sports gurus commented on the team's changing strategy.

14. The magazine interviewed three management gurus about trends.

15. He invited local music gurus to contribute to the festival.

Neutral Prosody (NOW)

16. Beauty gurus share their product reviews with millions of subscribers.

17. Rugby gurus analyzed the match in detail on national television.

18. Food gurus described the rise of plant-based cuisine.

19. Style gurus covered the new season's fashion shows.

20. Travel gurus recommended hidden destinations to readers.

Negative Prosody (COCA)

21. Critics dismissed him as a self-proclaimed guru peddling recycled advice.

22. Beware of gurus who promise instant success without evidence.

23. Some labeled the author a fake guru profiting from buzzwords.

24. He was accused of acting like a guru to exploit followers.

25. The so-called guru charged thousands for shallow seminars.

Negative Prosody (NOW)

26. Celebrity gurus profiting from spiritual trends faced widespread criticism.
27. Media outlets mocked the latest diet guru for promoting pseudoscience.
28. A cult guru accused of exploiting vulnerable followers drew outrage.
29. Journalists described him as a profit-driven guru chasing fame.
30. So-called happiness gurus were criticized for selling easy answers.

APPENDIX B

Glossary of Corpus Terms

Mutual Information (MI):

A statistical measure of the strength of association between two words. Higher MI values indicate that words co-occur more frequently than expected by chance, suggesting a strong lexical or semantic relationship.

Log-Likelihood (LL):

A statistical test that determines whether the co-occurrence of two words is significantly different from a random distribution across the corpus. Higher LL values indicate greater significance and reliability of the association.

Concordance Line:

A line of text showing a keyword (such as guru) in its immediate context, allowing researchers to analyse patterns of usage and meaning.

Semantic Prosody:

The evaluative or attitudinal “aura” that a word acquires through its typical collocates reveals whether it tends to be used in positive, neutral, or negative contexts.

USAS Tagging (UCREL Semantic Analysis System):

An automated system for categorising words into semantic fields (e.g., Business, Religion, Technology), refined through manual validation to ensure interpretive accuracy.

Cohen’s κ (Kappa):

A statistical measure of inter-coder reliability that indicates the level of agreement between independent coders beyond chance. Values above 0.80 are considered strong and ensure consistency in qualitative coding.