Corpus linguistic techniques are increasingly being used by critical discourse analysts who are interested in issues of inequality and the representation of disadvantaged groups. This talk will report on how concordancing was used to analyse a corpus of 144 transcribed oral history interviews in order to explore the issue of constraint on the speakers' goals and experiences. The analysis is of the expression "I couldn't". Using the realist social theory developed in particular by Margaret Archer, the talk will explore the ways in which "I couldn't" is deployed by these speakers to refer to constraints of three main kinds: physical (pertaining to the body and material objects); structural (pertaining to the distribution of resources) and cultural (pertaining to social norms and expectations). I aim to illustrate the advantage of maintaining an analytical distinction between the discursive and the material, so as to explore the interplay between them.