

# Usage on the move: Evolution and re-revolution

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*One of the problems involved in using corpora to investigate language change is that many corpora are synchronic, particularly spoken ones. To observe change, a combination of methods is the most fruitful approach. As well as the evidence of corpora, grammars and usage manuals of former decades and centuries reveal not only how standards of correctness and good style in relation to speaking and writing were perceived in their time, but also how some of the present-day debates relating to particular points of usage have a long history, including features of recent Americanisation. Such investigations, along with the evidence of field notes contribute to a more nuanced picture of current changes in English.*

**KEYWORDS:** language change, corpora, spoken English, Americanisation, grammar



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

I am not alone in using the metaphor of *on the move* in the title of this paper with regard to language change. An article in *The Times* newspaper of 26 August 1965, commenting on the admission of new words and the omission of old ones in a newly published dictionary, was headed *Words on the Move*, while an important paper several decades later by Leech (2003) on changes in modal verb usage was entitled *Modality on the Move*. We feel instinctively that language moves and shifts like the tide, but, gazing at the tide, it is not always immediately clear if it is coming in or going out again; you often have to watch it for a while to perceive its movement and direction. The same is true of language change; the question is whether the forms that enter current usage and

the controversies that usually accompany them are indeed new or whether they represent a return of older forms and older arguments. In this article, I want to look at some recent changes in English usage and the debates that surround them in terms of their newness or, as is often the case, their surprising longevity.

In an excellent article in the inaugural issue of this journal, Aleksandrova et al. (2017) comment on language change, noting, among many other things, that grammar changes somewhat slower and more conservatively than other aspects of the English language. This is certainly the case, since the vocabulary admits new words at a seemingly breathtaking rate. In just the last quarter of 2016, for example, the *Oxford English Dictionary*

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(hereafter ‘OED’) recorded a staggering 500 new words (OED, 2016). More accurately, one should say 500 new ways of using old words or putting old words and existing morphemes together to create new meanings and senses, but the point still holds: the vocabulary builds rapidly, while grammar appears to evolve only slowly. Other issues must also be taken into account, such as changes in punctuation, pronunciation and spelling, spelling generally being perceived as having got ‘stuck’ somewhere along the historical line, with the result that it is often out of kilter with present-day pronunciation. But spelling itself may well now be faster on the move, especially under the influence of e-communication (e.g. text-speak: *sth 4 u = something for you*).

There can be no doubt that the arrival of broadcast and Internet media have influenced punctuation, spelling and levels of formality in lexical and grammatical choice. These developments are a given, to the extent that it is no longer novel to talk about ‘media discourse’ (e.g. O’Keeffe, 2006) or ‘Internet

linguistics’ (e.g. Crystal, 2011). And lest we think that the influence of the broadcast media on the language is only a very recent preoccupation and one that is universally frowned upon in letters to the editor and posts on social media, we should note that Trueblood (1933), for instance, saw the growth of spoken mass media as a positive thing, promoting ‘good’ speech amongst the population. But that was in the era when received pronunciation was just about the only accent heard on British radio.

Outside of the broadcast media, social and political events have also shaped the language. For example, displacements of populations during World War II in Britain enlivened a debate amongst mother-tongue teachers concerning speech standards in education. UK wartime evacuations from cities to rural areas highlighted differences in accents and dialects. In response to this, Compton (1941) advocated the training of young people to speak in an ‘*easy, clear, reasonably exact, and friendly*’ way, without the influence of the ‘*dead hand of the elocutionary tradition*’ (Compton, 1941, p. 6-7).

Long-term shifts from more formal, hierarchical uses of language to more spoken, informal, egalitarian and colloquial ways of communicating reflecting social changes have been referred to as the ‘*conversationalisation*’ of discourse (Fairclough, 1995). In this article I will look at

some aspects of these types of changes in my own variety, British English (hereafter BrE), and focus on examples of grammatical change and some pronunciation phenomena which seem to be on the move and try to contextualise them in terms of the debates around them. However, the delicate interrelationship between grammar and lexis (the lexico-grammar) for which corpus linguistics has provided such robust evidence (Sinclair, 1991) means that it is often impossible to talk about grammar in isolation as particular grammatical features often seem to attach to particular elements of the lexicon. Nor indeed is it always possible to talk just about spelling or punctuation. New phenomena frequently exhibit several features of change simultaneously.

In discussing and exemplifying change and shifts in perceptions of what is 'standard', 'correct' or 'acceptable', I hope to show that some recent phenomena that periodically upset purists have a long and sometimes quite ancient pedigree, and are more a case of 'what goes around comes around' than forays into innovative linguistic territory.

## 2. OBSERVING CHANGE

In recent years, linguists have come to rely more and more on corpus information to underpin statements about usage. Massive computerised collections of texts such as the *British National Corpus* (BNC), the *American National Corpus*

(ANC) and publishers' corpora which provide the evidence for large-scale projects such as dictionary compilation or the creation of more empirically-sourced language teaching materials are now standard tools of our trade. Reference and pedagogical grammars have also turned to corpora for examples to support grammatical descriptions and prescriptions (Biber et al., 1999; Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Carter et al., 2011). It is hardly conceivable that a major publisher would nowadays launch a big dictionary or grammar which was not firmly grounded in corpus evidence. And indeed, we now have the largest instantly accessible corpus ever to exist: the World Wide Web, which is providing new opportunities and tools for corpus linguistic investigations (Hundt et al., 2007).

Corpora such as the BNC and ANC are immensely useful resources for cross-variety comparisons. We can see at the click of a mouse, for example, that American English (hereafter AmE) commonly uses *pled* as the past tense of the verb *plead* (as in *she pled guilty*), while BrE prefers *pleaded*, that AmE often uses *fit* as the past simple form of *fit*, while BrE prefers *fitted*, and so on. *Prefers* is the key term here: *pled* was recently used in the report of a criminal trial by a BrE speaker on BBC radio, and in many cases, BrE forms and AmE forms co-exist in BrE usage. In my own work I have been able to observe and ratify differences between AmE and BrE in the use of response tokens such as

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*absolutely, great, wonderful, etc.* (McCarthy, 2002). Likewise, interesting comparisons have been drawn out between Irish English and BrE, through corpora such as the *Limerick Corpus of Irish English* (L-CIE) and the BrE *CANCODE* corpus (O'Keeffe & Adolphs, 2008).

One problem with the corpora that have supported the groundwork for dictionaries, grammars, teaching materials and other language resources, as well as cross-varietal comparisons, is that they tend to be synchronic, that is to say, they function as snapshots of their target language or variety at a given moment in time. This is largely due to the funding limitations on corpus projects, especially those most expensive of enterprises which involve the collection, transcription and annotation of spoken data. To observe language change, one ideally needs what is referred to as a *monitor corpus*, i.e. a corpus to which data is continually added, thus enabling comparisons to be made between its earlier and more recently acquired data. The 450-million word *Collins/COBUILD Bank of English* corpus, which grew over some three decades, is a good example (Collins, 2016).

30 years or more is a reasonably good span for observing language change, especially with regard to vocabulary and everyday, non-technical usage. An example of a corpus study which spans a period of 30 years (1961-1992) is that of Leech and Smith (2006), which evidences changes in such areas as tense-aspect, voice and modality, both diachronically and in comparison across varieties (BrE and AmE). Colloquialisation and (for BrE) Americanisation are seen as key factors in the changes discussed. But even with the best of monitor corpora, the centuries before the advent of audio recording technology leave us with very little evidence of spoken usage other than that recorded in literary attempts at capturing everyday speech, in the evidence regarding pronunciation that metre and rhyme in poetry can reveal, in the recording of pronunciation in dictionaries and in linguists' past discussions of spoken usage. These last-mentioned discussions often give us evidence of spoken norms as linguists compared them with what were typically seen as the desiderata of fine and elevated styles, i.e. the texts of great writers.

Two other approaches offer ways into the problem of garnering longer-term evidence of changes in usage. The first is to examine reference and/or pedagogical dictionaries, grammars, usage manuals and language teaching materials written over a long period of time, preferably centuries, to see what changes appear to have taken place. This is particularly useful in the case of grammar since,

as has already been asserted, grammatical change can be quite slow in comparison with lexical change. In the case of English, grammars survive and are available for consultation going back as far as over 400 years ago (e.g. Bullokar, 1586); these take us on a journey from early classifications of parts of speech, via Latin-oriented descriptions and prescriptions in the 18th century, to what we have today. In this article I will call on some of those past authorities as witnesses not only of what was considered correct and standard in their day but also as a reminder that some of the debates that still vex both purists and those of a more easy-going disposition are as old as the hills.

The second alternative approach is good, old-fashioned fieldwork. This consists of reading and listening with one eye or ear on *what* is being communicated and the other eye or ear on *how*. I have personally filled notebooks and card-indexes over the last 40 years with jottings to remind myself of things I have read or (over)heard which have struck me as unconventional, new, creative or infelicitous (in the sense that they impede easy communication or interpretation). In the absence of my own monitor corpus, these field notes have proved invaluable and have been one of the spurs to prompt me to write the present paper.

No single approach of the ones I have outlined (corpus research, reference to earlier authorities, fieldwork) is sufficient in itself to enable us fully to

understand the trajectory and pace of changes in usage over time, and public reactions to them, but used in interaction one with the other they bring to the surface some interesting insights about changes in BrE and how they are received.

### 3. THE AMERICANISATION OF ENGLISH

#### 3.1 Global influence of AmE

The influence of American usage on other varieties of English has long been acknowledged and is hardly surprising, given the global economic dominance of the USA, reinforced in recent decades by its predominant role in Internet technologies and popular culture. The term *Americanisation* is well established in the literature with regard to changes in BrE (e.g. Leech, 2003), as well as, for example, changes in Australian English (Sussex, 1989; Taylor, 2001), Nigerian English (Awonusi, 1994) and Euro English, the English spoken by Europeans (Modiano, 1996). I make no value judgement of the term *Americanisation*, and my field notes of recent years simply substantiate and replicate many of the observations made by the scholars cited above, with regard to the spread of its phonology, lexis and grammar.

It is hardly surprising that the dominant place of American English in the media, both in terms of American films and TV as well as on the Internet and its allied technologies, means that people in the English-speaking world and in the global

community of English users are increasingly exposed to an explosion of data manifesting American ways of using the language. My smart phone does not give me an option of 'airplane mode', only 'airplane mode', and several of the programmes (or should that be programs?) installed on my computer, give me only ENG-US as a choice of operating language as an English-speaking user. However, as previously stated, BrE forms and AmE forms often co-exist, with one form not necessarily completely replacing the other.

### 3.2 Observations from the BrE field on the recent shifts towards AmE

Recent influences of AmE on BrE which seem to be becoming more marked include the pronunciation of words that have risen to prominence in the news or which have become buzzwords in the media in general. I report these more fully in (McCarthy, 2017). These include shifts in word stress, e.g. 'research' (BrE) is now routinely heard as *research* (AmE), *Baghdad* (BrE) is often rendered in BrE as AmE *Baghdad*. There also sound changes, e.g. BrE *schedule* /'fedju:l/ is fast being replaced by AmE /'skedʒu:l/, while BrE *leverage* /'li:vərɪdʒ/ is heard more and more as AmE /'levərɪdʒ/.

On a broader scale, the standard BrE convention of replacing weak-form schwa (ə) before a vowel sound with strong-forms /u:/ and /i:/ in *to* and *the*, respectively, is being noticeably superseded

among educated native users in radio and TV broadcasting by schwa plus glottal stop. Recent examples from BBC radio commentators include 'driving to /ðə?/ office', 'quarter /tə?/ eight' and '/ðə?/ increase in national insurance contributions'. The 'new' pronunciation is characteristic of AmE but has also long existed in some Scottish and international dialects of English (which in turn have exerted historical influence on AmE), so, from a British Isles perspective, the increase in use of the AmE forms represents, in a partial sense, a homecoming.

An example of grammatical number teaches us another lesson about change. Online dictionaries from the major publishers give *accommodation* (in the meaning of somewhere to live or stay) as an uncountable noun in BrE, but as countable in AmE. I have noticed an increase in the occurrence of plural *accommodations* in BrE. *Google Ngram Viewer* (Google, 2017) shows the singular and plural to be of almost equal occurrence in AmE, the plural form having risen in frequency between 1900 and 2008 to approach more closely the frequency of the singular-uncountable. In BrE, the singular-uncountable form is still more frequent than the plural by a great margin; however, there is a discernible rise in the plural form between 1990 and 2008. Yet the picture is not so simple as to suggest an impending takeover of a longstanding and deeply rooted BrE form by the AmE form. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites an example of

plural *accommodations*, in the sense of a place to stay, as far back as 1722, and, in a somewhat broader meaning of any item required for personal comfort or convenience, the plural form goes back to the 17th century (OED, 2009). It seems that forms, like the tide, can come in and go out, then come in again.

An example of AmE and BrE forms existing side-by-side with no clear evidence yet as to whether one form will triumph are the variant constructions with *likely*. BrE traditionally uses *likely* as an adjective, as in, for example, '*It is likely to happen soon*' (compare '*It is sure/certain to happen soon*'). AmE tends to treat it as an adverb, as in '*It will likely happen soon*' (compare '*It will surely/certainly happen soon*'). I have recorded numerous examples of the AmE form used by BrE speakers in recent years in the broadcast media and newspapers. *Likely* is a very ancient word that has admitted a range of possible constructions, as attested examples in the *OED* from the mediaeval period onwards show, with both adjectival and adverbial usage. BrE has long accepted the adverbial usage of *likely* when modified by *most* or *very*; the BNC has examples such as: '*...he will most likely fail to do it*' and '*He will very likely be quite ruthless about this*'. However, the adverbial construction with a modal verb (usually '*What is considered acceptable in one era may be judged unacceptable in another, and vice-versa*' will) is still considered by many to be AmE, and the

excellent *Collins Online English Dictionary* declares it to be '*unacceptable to most users of British English*' (Collins, 2017). This perception may well change (is likely to change?/will likely change?), and the change could occur quite quickly.

### 3.3 Acceptability over time

What is considered acceptable in one era may be judged unacceptable in another, and vice-versa. An oft-cited case is the occurrence of double periphrastic comparatives for emphasis in Shakespeare's works (e.g. Blake, 2002, p. 46-47). More than 20 of these occur across the works; they include *more hotter*, *more kinder*, *more rawer* and others that now sound infelicitous in modern standard English but which are heard among many BrE and AmE dialect speakers. In the Renaissance era, such double comparatives seem to have been a feature of '*elevated registers and upper class speech*' (González Díaz, 2003). They then dropped relatively quickly out of educated usage, so that by the 18th century, the grammarian James Greenwood (Greenwood, 1753, p. 116) declared them to be not '*good English*' and the grammarian Bishop Lowth described them as *improper* (Lowth, 1762, p. 27).

In fact, double comparatives represent a venerably ancient element of grammar, attested back to Old and Middle English; their exclusion from the canon of correct English is one of the casualties of

social attitudes, prescriptive approaches to usage founded in Latin models of grammar and notions of economy, logic and objection to tautology (Włodarczyk, 2007). The point here is that non-standard dialects often preserve ancient forms and are often unfairly stigmatised as corruptions or illogicalities when viewed through the lens of the modern educated standard. There would seem to be no inherent reason why a form such as *'more hotter'* should not be available as a useful device for emphasis; it is simply a matter of current convention, and the tide that originally brought in the use of double comparatives could come in again as easily as it went out.

Allied to the question of comparatives is the widespread use of the superlative form when comparing only two entities, as in *'Which country is biggest, America or Russia?'* Purists and traditionalists would only allow *'Which country is bigger?'* in this example, and such has been the case for a very long time (e.g. Nesfield, 1898, p. 160). The BNC has a number of examples of superlative adjectives followed by *'of the two x ...'* (e.g. *'Norway is the best of the two teams'*, *'the eldest of the two sons'*), and in my field notes I have recorded numerous such examples of superlatives used to compare two entities (e.g. *'Which would be best for the starter, red or white [wine]?'*; *'Which boy's the oldest, Jim or Ben?'*). Once again, this issue has been around for a very long time.

Bullokar (1586), more than 400 years ago, in his *Pamphlet for Grammar*, acknowledges, when discussing the use of the superlative for groups: *'...though we English use the superlative also when we compare but two things together'* (modernised spelling and orthography). The debate as to whether such usage is acceptable or (in)correct is alive and well 400 years later on the Internet, as any casual online search will reveal. In my experience, uses of the superlative to compare two entities pass by unnoticed in everyday discourse and would rarely, if ever, cause a problem of comprehensibility. The currently non-standard uses of both comparative and superlative might easily become standard if the processes of conversationalisation and democratisation of the language which the discourse of social media reinforces continue at their present pace.

### 3.4 Features already assimilated?

The question mark in the title of this section is chosen to indicate the degree of uncertainty which often prevails in statements about current shifts in usage; we may feel confident that a specific element of usage is on the move, but yet unclear as to the degree of acceptance of any particular change among the wider population. Nonetheless, some grammatical features that were considered non-standard in previous decades seem to have become so frequently used across the population, especially in the spoken language, that continued debates over their acceptability would seem, to



say the least, to be fighting a rear-guard action. That is not to say that the debates do not and will not continue; they are evidence of the constantly expressed strong feelings that the general, non-specialist population experiences in the face of linguistic change. The tension between non-standard and standard forms reflects the diverse identities within society, regional, social and cultural. Standard and non-standard grammars are both necessary and desirable; they exist in a dialectical relationship, and one influences the other. There is never likely to be a point in history when such tension ceases, and the co-existence of standard and non-standard forms is to be celebrated and understood as a manifestation of who we are as human beings.

The next sub-sections examine some phenomena connected with the grammatical expression of number and quantity, an area of particular interest in terms of current changes.

### 3.5 Less versus fewer

A case of change that has caused public debate is the *less/fewer* distinction. *Less* traditionally colligates with uncountable nouns (*less information, less traffic*) and *fewer* with countables (*fewer cars, fewer teachers*). The five million word CANCODE spoken corpus of BrE, whose data was mostly collected between 1990 and 2000 (for details of the corpus and its compilation, see McCarthy, 1998) shows a virtually equal

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distribution of *fewer* and *less* followed by a plural noun. Thus, we find instances of *‘less people’* and *‘less doctors’* alongside *‘fewer people’* and *‘fewer doctors’* in the same dataset. Furthermore, the online tool *Google Books Ngram Viewer* (Google, 2017), shows a consistent decline in the use of *fewer* plus a plural-countable noun in its British data for 1988 to 2008.

My field notes record an ever-increasing use of *less* where previously *fewer* would have been preferred (e.g. *‘less jobs for young people’*, *‘less cars on the road’*, *‘far less birds in the fields nowadays’*). Henry Fowler states that plurals *‘will naturally not take less’* but does allow its use with a few plurals (e.g. *clothes, troops*), which he sees as *‘equivalent to singulars of indefinite amount’* (Fowler, 1926, p. 321), pointing perhaps towards a psychological dimension to number, which will be returned to below. Since Fowler’s time, and although the 2009 CD-ROM edition of the OED consulted for this paper refers to *less* plus a plural noun as *‘frequently found but generally regarded as incorrect’*, it is probably safe to say that for a considerable proportion of the

population, the use of *less* + plural noun is normal.

An interesting article in the *Guardian* newspaper in 2006 discussed a problem which, I recall from personal discussions with friends around that time, taxed the grammatical tolerance of many people. Supermarkets in the UK had taken to offering separate, faster checkout points for shoppers who only bought a small number of goods. A major supermarket chain, following protests from customers, changed its express checkout signs from ‘6 items or less’ to ‘6 items or fewer’ (Mullan, 2006). Another article, published on the BBC’s website on its Magazine page in 2008, refers to a different supermarket chain displaying the time-saving service as available to shoppers with ‘10 items or less’ to check out. This also generated public protest, leading that supermarket to adopt the clever solution of avoiding the *less* versus *fewer* problem altogether by changing its signs to ‘Up to 10 items’ (BBC, 2008). Such public kerfuffle reminds us that feelings often run high over issues of grammatical correctness and that unease can be felt when people feel the sands of convention and formality are shifting beneath their feet. Grammar is a public property; it does not reside within the exclusive domain of grammarians’ descriptions and prescriptions.

However, we are once again dealing with a form that has existed for a long time, with the OED attesting examples going back to the Mediaeval

period. In the 16th century poet and dramatist John Lyly’s *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*, which has a postscript to the work entitled *To The Gentlemen Scholars of Oxford*, we find: ‘I thinke there are fewe universities that have lesse faultes than Oxford, many that have more, none but hath some’ (Lyly, 1579/1868, p. 208).

### 3.6 Amount of versus number of

Another feature related to number and countability that is frequent in speech, even though the traditional standard might prevail in writing, is the ever-increasing use of *amount of* with a plural countable noun, as in ‘there’s seven times the amount of cars on the road that there was ten years ago’ (CANCODE corpus). Traditionally, *amount of* is reserved for uncountable nouns (e.g. *amount of time, petrol, etc.*), while *number of* is the appropriate expression before countables (*number of years, people, etc.*). Yet of 329 occurrences of *amount of* in the CANCODE corpus, 77 (23%) are followed by plural countable nouns. The nouns include *hours, matches, schools, times, ships, votes, students, bottles, cats, dogs, years, shoes, documents, criminals, things, kids*. What might be happening here, though we cannot be sure, is that speakers conceive psychologically of plural numbers of particular entities as being more like indistinguishable masses or inseparable groups, rather than individuals, echoing Fowler’s sanction in respect of *less* with certain plural nouns, mentioned above. As before, this is a

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feature that simply passes unnoticed in everyday informal speaking, but it is one that may stick out like a sore thumb in formal writing. Written standards often take a long time to catch up with changes in the spoken language, but with the ever-increasing trend towards informality and conversationalisation in writing online, especially in social media, the pace of change has probably already accelerated.

### 3.7 There is versus there are

Continuing the theme of number, an example from a late-19th century grammar manual brings side-by-side the previous discussion of *less* versus *fewer* and the usage of *there is* versus *there are*. Nesfield (1898) presents the example sentence: ‘*Today there is less than eight hours of full daylight*’, then goes on to correct it: ‘*for is less, say are fewer*’. One may argue that the use of ‘*less than eight hours of full daylight*’ is another example of a

psychological perception of the phrase as referring to an ‘amount’ of daylight rather than a ‘number’ of hours, which would make singular *there is* acceptable. However, Nesfield was dealing with late 19th century norms and especially written norms, and his particular focus in the section cited was on the *few* versus *little* distinction. Nowadays, the evidence suggests that *there is* and *there are* are themselves on the move, with contracted *there’s* being increasingly used with a plural complement in spoken language, both in more formal contexts such as broadcast journalism and commentary as well as in informal conversation.

In a random sample of 200 occurrences of contracted *there’s* in a sub-corpus of social and intimate conversations within the *CANCODE* corpus, 46 (23%) occur before a plural complement. The phenomenon is especially noticeable with numerals (*there’s two of them*, *there’s four courses*, *there’s hundreds of x*, *there’s millions of x*), with quantifiers followed by a plural noun (*there’s loads of x*, *there’s so many x*, *there’s not many x*, *there’s a few x*, *there’s some x*), as well as a selection of everyday concrete nouns (*chairs*, *bits*, *houses*, *people*).

Admittedly, this is a limited dataset and the data were collected in the 1990s, but the examples are very suggestive of a shift that I have increasingly noticed in both the media and general conversation. And the shift does seem to be lexico-

grammatically patterned, as the examples of numbers and quantifiers suggest.

The use of *there is* with a plural complement in speaking, as opposed to writing, was recognised by Fowler (1926), in what remains probably the most influential manual of English grammar and usage ever written. Fowler saw the problem as reflecting what we would nowadays call the real-time or 'online' nature of speaking, i.e. that the speaker launches into the clause and its verb before the message is fully planned. He is far less tolerant of writers who fail to meet the conventional standards of number concord, condemning them as '*indecently and insultingly careless*' (Fowler, 1926, p. 391). For Fowler, the *there is* versus *there are* distinction is a symptom of a much wider set of problems relating to number concord, but it is clear that the *there is* plus plural complement question is far from new.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This paper has only scratched the surface of current language change, with just a small number of examples of shifts in usage. It has concentrated on two principal areas of language controversy: American influences and the tensions between what are perceived or accepted as standard and non-standard norms, particularly in relation to notions of grammatical number, and particularly in the spoken language. Clearly the lexicon will also continue to change, and will grow at a prodigious

rate as technological and social change prompt new communicative needs, and pronunciation will also continue to shift. Such changes are unstoppable and need not be regarded as threats.

What is most striking when examining current trends is just how many of them represent, in Shakespeare's words, '*ancient quarrels*'. Anyone who goes in search of the debates surrounding a contemporary grammatical controversy should not be surprised to find that they have been the subject of strong opinion for centuries. Like the tide, they come in, they go out, they come back in again. Repeatedly they reveal tensions between the common usage of the plain people and attempts to spread what are considered more elevated, educated or eloquent norms of correctness.

The tensions that emerge are the very ones that keep language moving. At some points in history, prescriptive norms gain the upper hand and are woven into education, at others, a grass-roots force for change emerges, such as we have witnessed with the advent of global social media and the emergence of English as a world lingua franca. The immediacy of social media and online discourse has naturally resulted in more voices being heard, and, although we write upon keyboards, what emerges so often is a blend of speaking and writing. Little surprise, then, that grammar and usage are on the move perhaps as never before.

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