Language prescriptivism : attitudes to usage vs. actual language use in American English

Kostadinova, V.

Version:	Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License:	[Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)
Downloaded from:	[https://hdl.handle.net/1887/68226](#)

Cover Page

The handle http://hdl.handle.net/1887/68226 holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Kostadinova, V.
Title: Language prescriptivism : attitudes to usage vs. actual language use in American English
Issue Date: 2018-12-18

CHAPTER 3

The language features: selection and previous studies

3.1 Introduction

The linguistic features I focus on in the present study are: *ain't*, the discourse particle *like*, non-literal *literally*, negative concord, pronouns in coordinated phrases, and the split infinitive; in this chapter I discuss each of these in more detail. These features differ from one another in various respects, and are analysed from the three different perspectives mentioned in Section 1.6 above. In addition to these, the part of the analysis that focuses on the influence of prescriptivism on actual use includes a number of additional language features, also commonly treated as usage problems. In this way, an attempt is made both to zoom in on the influence of prescriptivism on the six features mentioned above, and to zoom out to present a bird's eye view of the influence of prescriptivism, by accounting for multiple language features. Before presenting the methodological approach taken to the three-pronged analysis of these features, I will first discuss the selection of the six linguistic features. The selection process is covered in the first section of this chapter, where I also introduce the Hyper Usage Guide of English (HUGE) database. The subsequent sections are devoted to

each of the six features in turn. In these sections, I will provide brief accounts of each of them on the basis of previous studies.

3.2 Selection of usage problems

A useful tool developed for the analysis of usage problems is the Hyper Usage Guide of English (HUGE) database, compiled by Straaijer (2014) at Leiden University, in the context of the Bridging the Unbridgeable project. The HUGE database contains 77 usage guides, both British and American, and a total of 123 usage problems. In the database compilation process, the 77 usage guides were searched for entries on each of the 123 usage problems; the relevant entries were subsequently entered into the database, and tagged for a range of additional information (for more on the database, see Straaijer 2015, 2018). The database allows users to search for particular usage problems in various ways. It also allows users to explore the frequency with which a particular usage problem is treated in usage guides on the basis of the number of entries and guides that discuss that problem. Table 3.1 was produced using these search options, and shows the number of guides which discuss each of the usage problems in the database. While this ranking applies to all the usage guides in the database (i.e. both British and American), it nevertheless gives a good indication of what the most commonly treated usage problems in American English are. This ranking was the first step in the selection of the usage features investigated here.

Feature	Guides	Feature	Guides	Feature	Guides
shall / will	65	*-ic / -ical*	42	superlative comparison	26
different to / than / from	63	*lend / loan*	42	*-lily* adverbs	26
who / whom	63	*me / myself*	42	*hoi polloi*	25
lay / lie	63	*each other / one another*	41	*contemporary*	24
only	62	*it is I / it is me*	41	*likely*	24
split infinitive	62	*reason is because*	41	*could of*	24
I* for *me	61	*if / whether*	41	*dare*	23
singular *they*	59	*your / you're*	41	*more warmer*	23

less / fewer	58	*one of those who*	40	*in / under circumstances*	21
none **in plural context**	55	*one ... one / he*	39	*'d rather*	21
data is / are	54	*them / their +* V-*ing*	39	*there's*	21
disinterested / uninterested	53	*ain't*	39	*corporeal / corporal*	20
neither ... nor ... are / is	53	*compare with*	39	*learn / teach*	20
try and / to	53	*hopefully*	38	*as well (as) ... or better than*	19
like / as	52	*than I / me*	38	*pretty*	19
nouns of multitude	52	*former / latter*	38	*the two first*	19
very unique	52	*equally as*	38	*upon*	16
apostrophe	52	*decimate*	36	double passive	16
a / an	52	*alternative*	36	*thusly*	16
both ... and	52	*flaunt / flout*	35	*like / the way*	15
between / among	51	*off of*	35	*have went*	15
slow / slowly	51	false attraction	35	split auxiliaries	15
who(m) / which / that	51	*on to / onto*	34	*off / from*	14
preposition at end of sentence	50	*either is / are*	34	*quicker / more quickly than*	14
aggravate	50	*most perfect*	34	omission of relative pronoun	14
snuck and *dove*	50	*whose / of which*	34	*gay*	14
dangling participle	49	*(not) as / so far as*	33	*thankfully*	14
was / were	49	*may / might*	33	*demonstrative them*	14
me **for** *I*	49	*from thence*	32	*meet with / meet up with*	13
foreign plurals	49	*like / as if*	31	*all that / so easy*	12
due to / owing to	48	*either of them / each of them*	31		

effect / affect	48	***But / And***	31	*at / in*	11
infer / imply	47	*have to / have got to*	30	*less / least*	9
literally	47	comma splice	30	*when*	8
alright / all right	46	subject-complement	30	*get thither*	6
this / these sort of	46	*averse to / from*	29	*evenings* and *Sundays*	4
compound subject	45	*in / into*	29	*at (the) university*	4
double negatives	44	*spoonsful*	29	*momentarily*	1
that / which	44	*either ... or ... (or ...)*	28		
mutual	43	*providing / provided*	28		
can / may	43	*family is / are*	27		
farther/further	43	*very / much amused*	26		

Table 3.1: Usage problems in HUGE, sorted by the number of guides that discuss them; features included in the analysis of prescriptive influence in texts (cf. Section 6.8) are given in bold

The second consideration in the selection process was to include a variety of usage problems. The difference among usage problems can be conceptualised on the basis of a number of criteria, as I have discussed elsewhere (Kostadinova 2018b), and which I will briefly outline here. First, usage problems may differ on the basis of the various strands of prescriptivism distinguished by Curzan (2014: 24–39). Thus, there are usage problems which relate to the standardising function of prescriptivism, and these usually involve distinguishing between standard and non-standard variants, such as *ain't* and negative concord. In addition to standardising usage features, there are usage features characteristic of stylistic prescriptivism; these features relate to different levels of formality and style in language usage. A good example of a standardising prescriptivism-related feature is the split infinitive. Second, a particular type of usage problems can be distinguished in the context of those features which are relatively recent and ongoing changes in the language, and, as a result of the development of new functions or uses, are seen as incorrect or unacceptable. These include the use of *literally* as a modifier of non-literal expressions, and the use of the discourse particle *like*. A third distinction has been made by Albakry (2007), who distinguishes

between "weakly dispreferred" features, of which the split infinitive is an example, and "strongly dispreferred" ones, such as *literally*. One of the aims of the present study is also to ascertain which of the six features are strongly dispreferred and which weakly. The selection of the six features was thus done in such a way that each of these distinctions is exemplified by one of the language features. Beyond these considerations, the choice was to some extent arbitrary, and the selection was made in order to keep research within manageable bounds, as each of the features selected is studied in depth from three different perspectives.

For one part of the analysis of prescriptive influence, specifically for the case of the split infinitive, additional features were used in order to 'measure' or operationalise the influence of prescriptivism on individual texts. This approach is based on two assumptions (cf. Hinrichs et al. 2015). The first assumption is that prescriptive influence can be detected more specifically not by focusing on large sections of large corpora, but by focusing on individual texts. The second assumption is that if individual texts have been influenced by prescriptivism, this influence will affect a number of prescriptively targeted features, not just one. The additional features selected were: sentence-initial *and/but*, singular *data*, *hopefully*, *less* with plural nouns, *these kind/sort of*, *try and* (instead of *try to*), plural *none*, passives, *shall*, and *whom*. The frequency of occurrence of these features was counted for separate texts in the corpora used, in order to see whether the occurrence of a prescriptively targeted feature correlates significantly with that of other such features (this is explained in more detail in Section 4.4).

In the following sections of this chapter, I will discuss each of the six variants separately, in alphabetical order. For each variant, I summarise the most important aspects of its use as reported in previous studies. More specifically, I address the variation in the use of each particular feature, the known factors which influence that variation, and the contexts of use of each particular feature as evidenced in previous accounts. Finally, I also address the extent to which prescriptivism has been discussed in relation to each feature.

3.3 *Ain't*

Ain't is a non-standard feature that is regularly mentioned in descriptive grammars of the twentieth century. Curme (1935: 248), for instance, discusses it as a variant for *am I not?* or *am not I?* in colloquial speech. He further notes that "colloquially *ain't* is

often felt as a useful contraction in *ain't I?*, but it is elsewhere shunned" (Curme 1935:
248), an observation largely in line with the opinion expressed by many usage guide
writers (see Section 5.2). Curme (1935: 250) also mentions *ain't* as a less common
variant pronunciation of *hain't*, with dropping of *h*. Jespersen (1940: 431) describes
the use of *ain't* for *han't* "as a vulgarism (h dropped)", while Quirk et al. (1985:
129) note that "*ain't* is a non-standard contraction commonly used (esp in AmE) in
place of *am not*, *is not*, *are not*, *has not*, and *have not*". The account of the use and
perception of *ain't* in Biber et al. (1999: 167–168) is informed by corpus evidence
of its use, and, consequently, the authors provide some more details regarding the
actual use of *ain't*, such as its frequency distribution across different genres; these
details are further discussed below. Biber et al. (1999: 167–168) repeat the same
characterisation of *ain't* as non-standard, although they also add that it is "relatively
widespread in use" and that it "applies to all persons and may correspond to *be* and
have". In Biber et al. (1999: 1122), *ain't* is also covered as part of the grammar of
conversation. Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1611) note that "in present-day English,
ain't functions as a negative form for all present tense forms of *be* and *have*". In
summary, all of these grammars mention the non-standard use of *ain't*, and Biber
et al. (1999) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002) more directly address its status as
a proscribed feature. The former, for instance, describe it as a "paradigm case of a
frequent though unacceptable form" (Biber et al. 1999: 167), while the latter note that
"its effective proscription has been one of the greatest successes of prescriptivists"
(Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1611). Examples of the most common uses of *ain't*
are given in (5)–(7).

(5) He thinks he **ain't** a man any more. (1987, fiction, COHA[1])

(6) He **ain't** saying that to my face. (2006, spoken, COCA)

(7) You **ain't** said yes yet. (1932, fiction, COHA)

The correspondence of *ain't* with forms of *be not* and *have not* is likely related
to its derivation, which has been discussed in a number of studies (Jespersen 1940:
433–434; McDavid 1941; Stevens 1954; Cheshire 1981: 366–367; Anderwald 2002:
117–121). These accounts of its derivation and historical development sometimes
contain important information about the social evaluations of *ain't* across history. As

---

[1]COCA is the Corpus of Contemporary American English, and COHA the Corpus of
Historical American English. See Section 4.4 for details on the corpora.

mentioned above, according to Jespersen (1940: 431) one line of development of *ain't* is as a form of *have not*, through *han't*, where *ain't* can occur as a vulgarism, with the *h* dropped. Jespersen (1940: 434) finds that "in the 19th and 20th c. *an't* and *ain't* are frequent for *is not* as representing vulgar speech". McDavid (1941: 59) notes that "both [aj ejnt] and [aj ant] represent normal phonological developments in different dialect areas"; however, he continues, "the social prestige of the dialects in which the latter was the normal form is responsible for the odium of vulgarity attached to the former, and the influence of normative grammar and pseudologic completed the work of depriving Standard English of one of the inherited forms of the negative paradigm of the verb *to be*". This is similar to Huddleston and Pullum's observation on the success of prescriptivists on stigmatising *ain't*. Denison (1998: 195–197) includes *ain't* among non-standard contractions, also noting that in the eighteenth century *ain't* was found in the colloquial speech of the educated upper classes. This illustrates that *ain't*, like most other usage problems, is another example of the arbitrariness of the attitudes and social stigma associated with it, which is in part revealed by the more nuanced way in which *ain't* could be used in the past (see also Denison 1998).

Ain't has been looked at rather extensively in studies of non-standard varieties of English, such as non-standard British English (Cheshire 1981, 1982; Anderwald 2002), African American English (Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1969; Weldon 1994; Howe 1997; Howe and Walker 2000; Walker 2005), Puerto Rican English (Wolfram 1974), Appalachian English (Wolfram and Christian 1976), and Southern White non-standard English (Feagin 1979, cited in Howe and Walker 2000). These studies have shown that *ain't*, generally and predominantly, corresponds to present forms of *be not* and *have not* (Cheshire 1981: 365–366; Weldon 1994; Howe 1997: 270; Kjellmer 1997: 169; Anderwald 2002; Walker 2005; Wolfram and Schilling 2016: 385. *Ain't* cannot function as an equivalent for the full verb *have* (Cheshire 1982: 366; Anderwald 2002: 116–117). In African American English *ain't* has also been found to correspond to *did not* (Weldon 1994; Howe 1997: 273; Walker 2005; Wolfram and Schilling 2016: 386), and sometimes other forms such as *do not* (cf. Howe and Walker 2000: 119–123; Walker 2005: 2). In non-standard British English, Anderwald (2002: 146–149) found that it is quite rare, but not impossible, for *ain't* to correspond to a variety of other auxiliaries, and, sometimes, modals. Some, such as Labov et al. (1968: 178), argue that "*ain't* is merely a negative marker, with no current relation to *isn't*, *aren't*, etc. from which it is historically derived". However, it has been shown that "*ain't* is basically restricted to negating *have* and *be* and occurs largely in the present tense, just as in non-standard varieties of English" (Walker 2005: 2).

In terms of factors influencing the use of *ain't*, previous studies have focused on type of auxiliary, tense, type of subject, presence of negative concord, type of clause, and aspect. In the context of non-standard British English, Cheshire (1981: 368) has found that *ain't* is most frequent as a variant of auxiliary *have not*, followed by *ain't* as a variant of copula *be not*, and it is least frequent as a variant of auxiliary *be not*. These findings are also in part supported by Anderwald (2002: 124), whose data show that *ain't* for *have not* is more frequent than *ain't* for *be not*, auxiliary and copula taken together (see also Anderwald 2004: 186). Weldon's results show a similar pattern of occurrence for *ain't* in African American English, although she also shows that the preference for *have not* over *be not* is not statistically significant. Walker's data on Early African American English show that *ain't* for *be not* is preferred in this variety, unlike in non-standard British English (Walker 2005: 12). Howe and Walker (2000: 114) present useful data about the proportion of *ain't* for *be not* and *have not* in a number of American English varieties; their data show that *ain't* in African American English does not exhibit any pronounced preference for one auxiliary over the other, while Southern White non-standard English favours *ain't* for *be not* over *ain't* for *have not* (Feagin 1979: 226, cited in Howe and Walker 2000). Wolfram and Christian's (1976: 116) data on Appalachian speech also show a slight preference of *ain't* for *be not* over *ain't* for *have not*. All these findings taken together suggest that *ain't* for *be not* may be more frequent than *ain't* for *have not* in general American English, although, given that these studies are all based on vernacular speech, we may expect the situation to be different in the corpus data analysed in the present study. Howe and Walker (2000: 116–117) also look at how tense and aspect affect the variation of *ain't*, finding that "*ain't* is basically restricted to present temporal reference, and with respect to aspect has essentially the same distribution as *be + not*". In terms of person and number, Wolfram (1974: 154) found that *ain't* more frequently corresponds to *are* and *is* than to *am* in Puerto Rican speech. Weldon's African American data did not produce significant results for the type of subject and grammatical number constraint, while Walker (2005) found that both *ain't* and *not*-contraction are more likely with subjects realised by pronouns in Early African American English. Presence of negative concord was found to positively predict the occurrence of *ain't* in American English varieties (Wolfram 1974: 154; Wolfram and Fasold 1974: 162; Weldon 1994: 379; Walker 2005), while this was not the case in non-standard British English data (Cheshire 1981). Constraints relating to type of clause were found to be significant in non-standard British English, with *ain't* being more likely with tag questions, as opposed to declarative clauses, but this correlation

has not been shown in American English data. Finally, aspect has been shown to be significant in Early African American English (Walker 2005), but not in African American English (Weldon 1994); this may have been influenced by the difficulty in coding for this constraint, or the use of different definitions of stativity (Walker 2005).

All of these studies have shown that *ain't* is overwhelmingly used in non-standard varieties of English in the United States, specifically African American English. In the context of these uses, *ain't* has been found to be more likely to correspond to *isn't* or *aren't* than to *am not*, and it is favoured in clauses with negative concord (Wolfram and Fasold 1974: 162; Wolfram 1974: 154). These results are particularly interesting from the point of view of the higher acceptability of *ain't* when used in the first person singular, observed in the treatment of this feature in usage guides (see Section 5.2), because they suggest that this attitude may not necessarily be reflected in the usage patterns of *ain't*. I return to a discussion of this topic in Chapter 8. These constraints were not found to play a role in studies of *ain't* in non-standard British English, where syntactic environment was found to be the significant constraint, with *ain't* being more likely to occur in tag questions than in declarative sentences (Cheshire 1981: 369). Weldon (1994: 375), in her study of *ain't* as a negation feature of African American Vernacular English, found that, in the environments for copula *be*, there were no statistically significant constraints on the use of *ain't*, that is "*ain't* is insensitive to person-number distinctions in copular environments".

While these studies have revealed a great deal about the intralinguistic variation of *ain't*, and have provided some information about the social variation of *ain't*, they are unclear about the influence of prescriptivism on the variation patterns of this feature, although each of these studies does mention its stigmatised status. Most of these studies have not looked explicitly at any prescriptivism-related constraints on the variation of *ain't*, with the exception perhaps of Anderwald (2002: 124), who notes that the "status of high stigma might explain the relatively low occurrence of AIN'T as well as of neg concord, compared to other non-standard forms".

3.4 The discourse particle *like*

The discourse particle *like* is in many respects an atypical usage problem: it is a fairly recent target of prescriptive criticism (see Chapter 5), it is a case of robust linguistic change in progress, and it is a discourse level feature, rather than a grammatical or a lexical feature. Discourse level features are quite rare in the prescriptive canon, but the

case of *like* represents a complex process of variation and change (cf. D'Arcy 2006, 2007), which makes this word particularly salient for prescriptivists, and, indeed, for ordinary speakers. In linguistic accounts of the use of this feature, a distinction is often made between two general uses of *like*: the traditional uses, "regularly attested in dictionaries", exemplified in (8)–(10) below, and the newer, "conversational" uses in (11)–(14) (Schourup 1983: 28; D'Arcy 2006: 339).

(8) I **like** all the pretty trees. (2004, magazine, COCA)

(9) My cousin and I would fight **like** cats and dogs. (2004, magazine, COCA)

(10) She was combing her hair, just **like** you saw then. (2008, spoken, COCA)

(11) I was at my friend Ron's house and then somebody just said, **like**, guess who I did it to, and everybody was **like**, who, . . . (2004, academic, COCA)

(12) I don't think he was, **like**, five times braver than me. (2007, academic, COCA)

(13) Is there some way I can, **like**, throw a bouquet to him at the hearing today? (1992, fiction, COCA)

(14) There is more, but they're not going to tell us, **like**. (2004, academic, COCA)

A significant number of linguistic studies have accounted for various aspects of the development and the sociolinguistic variation of these newer uses of *like*. In an early discussion of the discourse particle *like*, for instance, Underhill (1988: 234) argues that while this use of *like* is not considered grammatical in standard English, "it is neither random nor mindless". Underhill's account distinguishes between *like* functioning as an approximator and as a hedge, but mostly focuses on its function as a marker of focus and new information; he uses the term "discourse particle". Another function of *like* is the discourse marker function. Fuller (2003) provides a good summary of the difficulty in ascertaining the functions of the discourse marker *like*; her overview, however, seems to suggest that there are two different functions: the approximating function, to indicate "looseness of meaning", and the focusing function (Fuller 2003: 369). While some cases are clear uses of one or the other of these functions, in others the function of *like* may be more elusive. A crucial criterion in ascertaining whether a particular case of *like* functions as a discourse marker is whether it changes the propositional meaning of an utterance, which is not always clear-cut. Furthermore, the functions of certain uses of *like* are difficult to analyse from this perspective, because this use is highly subjective. A third conversational function of *like* is the

quotative *like* (e.g. Blyth et al. 1990; Romaine and Lange 1991; Dailey-O'Cain 2000; Macaulay 2001). A useful classification of these and other uses of *like* is provided by D'Arcy (2007: 387), who distinguishes between the following functions of *like*: quotative complementiser (11), approximative adverb (12), discourse particle (13), and discourse marker (14). D'Arcy (2007) calls these uses of *like* "vernacular uses".

These varied vernacular uses of *like* are also characterised by a difficulty in ascertaining clear functional boundaries between the various uses. However, all of these uses seem to be perceived as wrong and inappropriate from the point of view of prescriptive ideology. Consequently, I will not be concerned with distinguishing between these three, and will essentially focus on all these vernacular uses together; in what follows I will use the term "discourse particle" to refer to all of these uses.

In terms of sociolinguistic constraints on the use of discourse marker *like*, Fuller (2003: 370) found that in the more formal interviews in her data, speakers tended to use *like* more frequently than in her casual conversation data, contrary to expectation. She suggests that while the interviews might not have been experienced as formal speech events by the speakers, this could also be explained by the pragmatic usefulness of *like* in interviews. Fuller (2003) also found that female speakers used discourse marker *like* more than male speakers, but also that use of discourse marker *like* varies depending on the conversation context, or, more specifically, the rapport between the interlocutors. Fuller (2003: 375) concludes that "while *like* may be a marker of casual speech and age group, it is also – and perhaps primarily – part of the natural repertoire of many speakers, who use it strategically yet unconsciously in their everyday speech". Fuller (2003: 369) also mentions that discourse marker "*like* has long had the connotation of being a marker of superficiality and lack of intelligence [...], and as a stereotype of the (inferior) dialect of American English".

In the context of the usage guide tradition, the discourse particle *like* represents a newer usage problem. It is certainly not an old chestnut, as shown by the fact that it is not included in the list of usage problems in the HUGE database. However, since the social stigmatisation of the discourse particle *like* is fairly widespread, and the form is a salient problematic usage, the form was included in this study precisely for these reasons. In the context of this feature, I will try to investigate whether and how forms which are newer in the language and negatively evaluated by speakers are included in usage guides.

3.5 Non-literal *literally*

From a descriptive point of view, *literally* is "a case of semantic change in progress" (Israel 2002: 424).[2] Alongside the basic use of *literally* to mean 'in the literal sense', or 'word for word', as in example (15) below, the word has come to be used as a modifier of non-literal expressions, exemplified in (19). The function of *literally* is that of a stance adverbial (Biber et al. 1999: 767), or a metalinguistic adjunct (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 775), used to clarify how a word or phrase is to be understood. Speakers can use *literally* as a stance adverbial "to convey their judgements and attitudes, to claim the factual nature of what they are saying, and to mark exactly how they mean their utterances to be understood" (Biber et al. 1999: 767). This subjective attitudinal component in the use of *literally* is what accounts for the variation observed in its use in present-day English (Powell 1992). Quirk et al. (1985: 618–619) cover *literally* under adverbials denoting metalinguistic comment. They make the point that "metalinguistic comment is inextricably mixed up with expressions of degree" (Quirk et al. 1985: 619). For instance, in cases such as *He almost stole the money*, "we cannot be sure whether it means that he came close to stealing it or acted in such a way that it could almost be called 'stealing'" (Quirk et al. 1985: 619). As a result, these adverbs – and, according to Quirk et al. (1985: 619), "this is especially true of *literally*" – are used as emphasisers.

(15) The Gaelic word for whiskey, Usquebaugh, **literally** means "water of life." (1990, academic, COCA)

(16) I was seated next to Al Giddings, an underwater photographer who once **literally** pulled another photographer from the jaws of a great white. (2006, magazine COCA)

(17) DeLauro is not alone, says Dr. Judy Kuriansky, who **literally** wrote the book on the subject, called "How to Love a Nice Guy." (1991, newspaper, COCA)

(18) Obsessing over healthy food is a decades-long pastime in L.A. Local grocery stores such as Erewhon and Whole Foods Market and restaurants such as Real Food Daily **literally** feed the frenzy, making the city a breeding ground for people attracted to a "pure" lifestyle. (2001, magazine, COCA)

(19) I don't even know who these people are, and suddenly they have **literally** exploded into the American consciousness. (2009, spoken, COCA)

---

[2]This section is an extended version of a similar section included in an article on *literally*, to appear in *English Today* (Kostadinova in press).

The variation in the use of *literally* is in a sense reflected in the existing accounts of these uses (Powell 1992; Israel 2002; Nerlich and Domínguez 2003; Calhoun 2015). Powell (1992), for instance, distinguishes between five different categories of use, while Nerlich and Domínguez (2003) distinguish between three groups of uses, further subdivided into more specific uses. Despite the differing classifications, they do reflect the general pattern of variation in the use of *literally*. The variation among classifications of the use of *literally* is also likely to be a consequence of the highly subjective and metapragmatic nature of most of the uses. In what seems to be the earliest detailed analysis of the present-day uses of *literally*, Powell (1992: 337) examines "five categories of contemporary use" and compares the basic use of *literally* – what she refers to as "folk definitional" use – to four other types of uses, which are historically speaking later, and have developed from the basic use. Crucially, Powell (1992) argues, "a normative attitude of aptness accompanies all uses". The five uses Powell distinguishes are: 1) *literally* in folk definitions, used to refer to what something means, how something is read, meant, interpreted or translated, or as an equivalent of *technically*; 2) *literally* with lexemes denoting extreme cases, including number expressions of exceptional quantity; 3) *literally* in dual readings, where it modifies a conventionally idiomatic or figurative expression, and it signals that the expression should be interpreted literally; 4) *literally* with formulary constructions as a semantic innovator; and 5) *literally* with non-literal expressions, as an aesthetic justifier. These uses are exemplified in (15)–(19), respectively. According to Powell, the most interesting cases are those where *literally* is used to comment on a non-literal reading: "contrary to what one might expect, this use is neither odd nor paradoxical; rather, it illustrates that the lexeme exhibits great continuity of function in both literal and non-literal environments" (1992: 337).

In the first use, *literally* signals that the expression it modifies should be taken in the strictest sense of the word. It is usually used to refer to what something means, as in (15) above. Historically, this use is the oldest, and was found predominantly in contexts related to the interpretation of the Bible and other sacred texts (Israel 2002; Nerlich and Domínguez 2003), where the difference between literal and figurative readings had important moral implications (Powell 1992). Even though in this use the compositional meaning of the lexeme *literally* is the strongest, a crucial component of this use is the attitudinal dimension entailed, which refers to the speaker's attitude to the fit of word-to-word or word-to-world (Powell 1992: 341). It is this attitudinal component that accounts for the development of the newer uses of *literally*, including those with non-literal expressions. The second use of *literally* is with expressions

denoting extreme cases, where "the presence of *literally* is intended to force a non-hyperbolical – that is, a literal – meaning", while simultaneously increasing the "rhetorical emphasis on the extreme case" (Powell 1992: 342). This use encompasses the frequent occurrence of *literally* with number expressions, where it "signals not only that the approximation is accurate in its range, but also that the speaker judges this number to be significant in its largeness" (Powell 1992: 342). In other words, insisting that what one means is what one is saying "is to acknowledge that it might not sound believable, and so, to emphasize that it is remarkable" (Israel 2002: 425). This use is illustrated in (16). The third use of *literally* is in cases where it forces a dual reading of an expression. Here, the expression modified by *literally* is a formulary, or idiomatic, expression which conventionally has a non-literal reading. In this case, *literally* is used to signal to the interlocutor that an expression that is conventionally interpreted figuratively should in this case be interpreted literally (Goatly 1997: 174). The sentence in (17) provides a common example. These readings are described as dual because the function of *literally* here is both to force a literal reading of an otherwise idiomatic or figurative expression, and to express that it is precisely because of that that the expression is particularly apt. The fourth use of *literally* identified by Powell (1992) seems to be in a way related to the third use, but is crucially distinguished by an element of creativity and semantic innovation. In this use, "*literally* serves both truth conditional and aesthetic functions" (Powell 1992: 344). According to Israel (2002: 425), *literally* is used "to draw attention to an apt or clever choice of words" or to emphasise "the peculiar suitability of a given choice of words for the described situation". This seems to be particularly the case for the creative uses of *literally*, as exemplified in (18). In this example, the speaker uses *literally* to modify the expression *feed the frenzy* to suggest creatively that the supermarkets support people's diet and nutrition concerns by providing suitable products. While, of course, the writer is not suggesting that frenzy is being literally fed, she uses this formulary expression in order to make an aesthetic or a creative point. The reader is thus forced to think of this expression in a new way (hence Powell's term "semantic innovator"). Finally, the fifth use of *literally* in Powell's categorisation is the use of *literally* with non-literal expressions which cannot be literally true. When used with metaphorical expressions, "the function of *literally* is to encode the speaker's aesthetic judgment that the message, as expressed, is not merely warranted by its capacity to satisfy conditions of applicability but is especially tellable" (Powell 1992: 345). When used with hyperbolic expressions, the function of *literally* is "to tell the reader that the hyperbolical mode itself is justified by the conditions it applies to and

that the lexeme that encodes it is a particularly apt one" (1992: 346). In other words, when *literally* is used with hyperbolic or metaphorical expressions, it signals that "the conventionalized non-literal meaning [of a figurative expression] ... is being used in a strict sense" (Brugman 1984: 34, cited in Israel 2002: 429). This use is exemplified by (19), where the word *exploded* is used figuratively. (Powell 1992: 346) observes that *literally* does not seem to be used with original or unusual metaphors, because in such cases it would be redundant.

Beyond more casual observations on the frequency of variant uses of *literally*, actual data on patterns of use are rather limited. McCarthy and Carter (2004) found that 91% of all occurrences of *literally* in a corpus of British English conversations are used with hyperbolic expressions. Contrary to this high rate of hyperbolic *literally*, data from the British National Corpus show that the use of *literally* with hyperbolic expressions is fairly limited, with fewer than 10% of the total number of occurrences of *literally* being used as a modifier of hyperbole (Claridge 2010: 109). These are cases in which the expressions modified by *literally* cannot be factually true. In these cases, Claridge observes, "[i]t is almost as if the hearer was invited by the use of *literally* to imagine the scene visually, creating a graphic and/or humorous, slapstick-like effect" (Claridge 2010: 110).

This process of change in the use of *literally* has been noticed and commented on by a relatively high number of language commentators and usage guide writers (Israel 2002; Nerlich and Domínguez 2003; Calhoun 2015). The word has been discussed in a series of blog posts and online articles,[3] it has been used for comic effect in popular sitcoms,[4] and its inclusion in the *Oxford English Dictionary*[5] was reported in newspapers. The word's status as a usage problem is further strengthened if we look at usage guides; my initial analysis showed that this was a salient usage problem at least as early as the first edition of Strunk's *The Elements of Style* (1918) (Kostadinova 2015), although additional analysis showed that Bierce (1909) is a usage guide which discusses the use of non-literal *literally* even earlier (cf. Section 5.2.3). In other words, the process of change that *literally* is undergoing can be described as a change above the level of consciousness. As such, *literally* lends itself to an investigation of the relationship between prescriptive accounts of language, and actual processes of language variation and change.

---

[3]See, for example, Jesse Scheidlower's piece for *Slate*, available online at https://slate.com/human-interest/2005/11/the-trouble-with-literally.html.

[4]Most notably in the animated television series *Archer*, created by Adam Reed.

[5]See entry on *literally* in *OED Online*, available at www.oed.com.

3.6 Negative concord

Negative concord is the linguistic term for what usage guide writers refer to as
"the double negative", the phenomenon of using two (or more) negative forms in
one clause to express one underlying negative meaning. In linguistic literature, the
term "double negative" is reserved for cases where two negative forms are used to
express two underlying negatives (cf. Seright 1966; Baker 1970: 171; van der Wouden
1997: 182). These latter cases are sometimes covered under the term "litotes" in
usage advice literature. Here, I am exclusively concerned with the former kind of
construction, i.e. negative concord. While negative concord, as defined by Labov
(1972a), can refer to cases with two or more negative forms in the same clause, my
investigation will be devoted only to cases with two negative forms, as illustrated in
(20)–(23).

(20) I've got a snug estate, and **don't owe nobody** anything (1811, fiction, COHA)

(21) I don't know very much. **Nobody never** learned me. (1870, fiction, COHA)

(22) I **don't know no one** else that reads so good. (1962, fiction, COHA)

(23) I **didn't do nothing**. (2007, magazine, COCA)

Similar to *ain't*, negative concord is a salient non-standard feature, which, Walker
(2005: 1–2) argues, may account for the fact that it is almost always dealt with in
studies of the systems of negation in non-standard varieties of English, such as African
American English. According to Wolfram and Schilling (2016: 162), both negative
concord and *ain't* are among "[a] number of socially marked language variants in
American English [which] transcend local communities of speakers". This is also
confirmed in work on vernacular universals, which often includes negative concord
(e.g. Nevalainen 2006b). According to other similar descriptions, negative concord is
a "supraregional", "transnational" diagnostic feature of "substandard culture" in the
English-speaking world (Gramley and Pätzold 1992: 309, 377, cited in Howe 1997:
271). Aside from it being a characteristic non-standard feature, "negative concord
with indefinites has a long history in the English language", and although it has been
found to be more common in historical data, negative concord constructions still occur
in English (Howe 1997: 271–272), although not in standard varieties. According to
Ukaji (1999: 285), "the copying of Neg into a subordinate clause seems to have
fallen into disuse in Standard English in the first half of the seventeenth century",

although this appears to have been a process that started in the fourteenth century (Iyeiri 2001, cited in Nevalainen 2006b: 259). The disappearance of negative concord from the standard variety during the seventeenth century has also been confirmed by Tieken-Boon van Ostade (1982, 2008a), who shows that by the time normative grammarians started formulating the rule on negative concord, this variant had already disappeared from standard use (see also Nevalainen 2006b: 264). However, the codifiers focused emphatically on formulating this rule partly as a result of the idea that English usage should be logical, and its rules should be formulated on a rational basis (cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1982), and partly as a reaction to the use of negative concord by the lower classes, which Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2008a) argues must have been fairly frequent during the eighteenth century. Negative concord has since remained a feature of many varieties of non-standard English.

The social indexicality of negative concord seems to have developed early in the history of this variant. Nevalainen (2006b) shows that the disappearance of negative concord in the period between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries was led predominantly by upper-class male and socially mobile speakers, while at the same time being mostly resisted by lower-class male speakers. Sociolinguistic studies of variation in non-standard varieties of twentieth-century English confirm the high frequency of negative concord, both in non-standard British English (Cheshire 1982; Anderwald 2002, 2005) and in American English (Wolfram 1969; Labov et al. 1968; Wolfram 1974; Wolfram and Christian 1976; Feagin 1979; Howe 1997; Howe and Walker 2000), although the rates of use of this feature have been found to vary. Thus, Labov et al. (1968: 267) show that the extent to which the negative concord rule applies may vary considerably among working-class speakers. On the other hand, the rule appears to be categorical for African American pre-adolescents and teenagers in New York (Labov et al. 1968: 276) and in Detroit (Wolfram 1969: 157). In terms of other non-standard varieties of English, Howe (1997: 272) provides a useful overview of findings from sociolinguistic studies reporting figures on the frequency of use of negative concord: Feagin (1979: 232) found 75% cases of negative concord among urban working-class whites in Alabama; Labov et al. (1968: 277) found negative concord at a rate of 81% in their interviews with white youth gangs from New York, and, in her study of working-class Reading English, Cheshire (1982: 65) found that negative concord was by speakers in frequencies ranging from 51% to 89%. Smith (2001) studied negative concord in the context of the relationship between non-standard British varieties and transplanted non-standard American varieties.

This brief overview confirms that while this variant continues to be socially

stigmatised, it is still often found in non-standard varieties of English, and more specifically relevant to the present study, in non-standard American English. In this respect, its inclusion here is meant to investigate further whether the attitudes to this variant in usage guides have changed in the course of the twentieth century, and whether these attitudes are somehow reflected in patterns of actual language use of the variant, as well as what kinds of attitudes can be found towards this variant among native speakers of English in the United States (see Section 4.4 for an explanation of how the analysis of this variant was operationalised).

3.7 Pronouns in coordinated phrases

The use of pronouns in coordinated phrases, also referred to as "compound subjects and objects" (Boyland 2001) or "conjoined NPs" (Denison 1998), is another area where usage varies, and has been a frequent topic of prescriptive criticism. Pronoun case more generally is frequently discussed in the usage guide literature, but it is important to distinguish the forms I am concerned with here from other points of usage which are also concerned with pronoun case, but are of a somewhat different nature. Pronoun case is treated in usage guides in three different contexts. The first involves instances in which a pronoun follows a linking verb, where the problematic distinction is between *This is he* and *This is him*. The second context in which the variation in pronoun case is addressed is the case of pronouns after conjunctions, in constructions such as *He is older than she vs. He is older than her*. Finally, the third case in which pronoun forms can vary is coordinated phrases, such as those exemplified in (24)–(27) below. In the present study, I focus only on these cases.

(24) **Schultz and I** hiked in deeper and made a small spike camp. (1994, magazine, COCA)

(25) You know, **Bernie and me** used to talk, and he'd say "Hey Jerry, I know you feel the same way". (2001, spoken, COCA)

(26) Mr. Pena charged **a friend and me** $150 for the entire day. (2008, newspaper, COCA)

(27) "What in my consciousness attracted that interaction?!" she asked **Jack and I**, who were waiting at my mother's apartment. (2007, fiction, COHA)

The use of *me* in coordinated subjects is considered incorrect, and is often

associated with children's speech. The use of *I* in coordinated objects, however, is considered an affectation, or hypercorrection, which displays a kind of hubris on the part of the speaker: in trying to sound too correct, speakers who say *between you and I* instead of *between you and me* end up committing an 'error'. Such 'errors' in pronoun case seem to be more likely to occur when pronouns are used in coordinated phrases. As Pinker (2014: 97) puts it, speakers usually "effortlessly choose the right case whenever a pronoun is found in its usual place" in the structure of the sentence, "next to the governing verb or preposition". However, "when the pronoun is buried inside a coordination phrase, writers are apt to lose sight of the governor and give the pronoun a different case" (Pinker 2014: 97). Pinker (2014: 206) explains these kind of examples by drawing on arguments related to the nature of a coordinated phrase, which is headless, and, consequently, he argues, the "harmony" between its parts may not be part of speakers' "intuitive grammars". In other words, as soon as the pronoun is separated from the governing preposition or verb by the coordinator *and*, speakers' intuitions about pronoun case may not be as strong. On the basis of historical data on pronominal usage, Tieken-Boon van Ostade (1994: 226) has hypothesised a process of natural language change in pronominal case that "may perhaps be described as a continuing loss among speakers of English of their sense of case distinction". This kind of variation in the use of English pronouns, which results in the use of pronominal subject forms where one would expect object forms, is attested in early Modern English. Hock and Joseph (2009: 192) cite instances of "an innovated system with different case marking conventions", such as these examples from Shakespeare's plays: *You know my father hath no child but I*, *Let fortune go to hell for it, not I*, and … *all debts are cleared between you and I*, where the rule about pronoun case "is getting relaxed, requiring objective marking only on pronouns that are directly preceded by the verb or preposition". This means, that "in vernacular or untutored Modern English, uninfluenced by the rules of prescriptivists … adjacency plays a role in case marking" (Hock and Joseph 2009: 192). Hock and Joseph (2009) seem to be suggesting that as soon as prescriptivism exerts some influence on the use of pronouns in coordinated subjects and objects, this influence may interfere with the more unconscious influence of adjacency in case marking. The alleged influence of prescriptivism is believed to have resulted in creating linguistic insecurity in speakers, who, as a result, may have tended to hypercorrect pronoun usage in cases such as *between you and I*. The extent of the influence of prescriptivism on the actual use of these features, however, remains unclear. Despite this influence, however, Denison (1998: 109) argues that variation in pronominal usage in coordinated phrases remains

common among educated speakers of English, despite being considered non-standard.

In a study that provides further insights into the cognitive processes that account for pronoun usage in English with a focus on "compound subjects and objects that incorporate a first person pronoun", Boyland (2001: 383) shows that hypercorrection of this sort cannot always be accounted for by sociolinguistic prestige factors alone. In a survey of the attitudes of speakers towards object *x and I*, as well as a small-scale corpus-based study of the occurrence of this variant in online language, Boyland (2001) found that cases of hypercorrections can often be accounted for by priming due to frequency effects, rather than being the result of a conscious attempt on the part of the speaker to sound more prestigious. This is an important contribution to the discussion of hypercorrect usages such as *between you and I*, because it shows that the use of this construction may not always be the result of pressures from "above" the level of consciousness, but may well be "below" the level of consciousness, and under the influence of priming. This conditioning in the use of *between you and I* may therefore not always be a conscious attempt to sound like speakers from a perceived higher social class, but a tendency to be influenced by the linguistic input from peers: "frequent exposure to a construction changes adults' intuitive judgements" (Boyland 2001: 390). In her corpus linguistic analysis, based on online forum data, Boyland analysed 227 instances of the occurrence of *x and I*, and found that only 9 instances, or less than 4%, are cases where *x and I* occurs in an object environment.

In the context of the present study, I will analyse the treatment of pronouns in coordinated phrases in American usage guides, and analyse the patterns of actual use of these variants, in order to investigate whether prescriptivism has had any measurable influence on their use.

3.8 The split infinitive

The split infinitive is a usage problem concerning the placement of an adverb which modifies a full infinitive, as exemplified in (28)–(30) below, where the first example illusrates what is perceived as an unacceptable usage, and the other two examples show the acceptable variants. The split infinitive is an 'old chestnut' among usage problems (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2015: 57). The origins of its proscription are somewhat controversial, and go back to the nineteenth century. The origin of the split infinitive itself can be traced back to the appearance of the *to*-infinitive in Anglo-Saxon English (Bryant 1946). This allowed for the particle *to* to be separated

from the verb, and as a result of the general tendency for adverbial modifiers to immediately precede the word they modify, separating the *to* from the verb started to become common (Bryant 1946). The usage problem most likely originated in the early nineteenth century; the earliest record of a complaint against split infinitives comes from a 1834 letter to the editor, citing the Teutonic origin of English as an argument against split infinitives (Perales-Escudero 2011: 318).

(28) ...warns of "the chaos that could only result if members of the armed services were **to freely talk** on pending policy and security questions to the representatives of the press." (1968, fiction, COHA)

(29) She was now permitted **freely to study** the face. (1920, fiction, COHA)

(30) Mrs. Petrovic encourages parents to spend as much time as possible with children, and **to talk freely** about customs and situations here and back home. (2000, newspaper, COCA)

This usage problem, however, seems to have lost popularity among sticklers and in general discussions on usage correctness. As early as 1927, usage commentators pointed to the superfluity and ridiculousness of the rule, especially in the context of its accordance with the natural flow of the English sentence structure (Curme 1927; Bryant 1946). In certain cases, the position of the adverb in an infinitive phrase is not merely a matter of usage or of a style norm, but also interferes with its meaning. In such cases, the split infinitive has a meaning that is different from the meaning a similar non-split infinitive would convey, as exemplified by the opposition between *He failed completely to understand it* and *He failed to completely understand it* (Curme 1927: 341). Curme (1927) further notes that the reason why the use of the split infinitive construction has grown despite the opposition against its use is because of its "intrinsic merit" (Curme 1927: 342). Curme (1927) relates the development of the split infinitive to two different ways in which adverbs can be used to modify verbs in English. When the verb is preceded by an adverb, the stress is on the verbal activity, while when we want to emphasise some other aspect about the verbal activity, rather than the activity itself, we position the adverb after the verb. Curme (1927: 341) provides the following examples to illustrate this point: in the first case we have *He almost succéeded* while in the second case we have *When he acts he acts prómptly*, where the accents denote stress. Curme (1927: 342) points out that "this twofold position of the adverb with differentiated meaning is a marked feature of English

expression and in the last centuries has gradually been becoming more fixed" and "has furthered the development of the split infinitive". Somewhat later, Malone (1941: 52) observes that the split infinitive is "a mere matter of word-order [which could] be found as early as the fourteenth century, but did not become frequent until about 100 years ago, and even now is rare in popular speech, its use being chiefly literary [and] its professional standing has grown better".

Fischer (2000) provides important insights into the historical development of the split infinitive in the context of the reversal of the grammaticalisation process of infinitival *to*. She notes that the increased number of the split infinitives since the fourteenth century were indicative of a "disturbed" process of grammaticalisation. After the fourteenth century, with the construction becoming more frequent, it became characteristic of the personal style of certain authors (Calle-Martín and Miranda-García 2009: 347). They further note that the use of the split infinitive decreased during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, only to pick up again during the eighteenth century. They consider this a significant case of the variant resisting prescriptive pressure against its use. Even though they found a large majority of non-split infinitives, but they also observed "a significant decrease of non-splitting constructions" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "thus coinciding with the actual spread of the construction" (2009: 351). These observations are also reflected in the work on infinitival *to* and the split infinitive of Fitzmaurice (2000a,b), who shows that negative split infinitives are becoming more frequent in present-day English. With regard to these infinitives, Fitzmaurice argues that the use of the negative split infinitive is a case of stylistic levelling, where, due to the mixing of different varieties in spoken media registers, certain features change their status from colloquial to conventional, and become unmarked (Fitzmaurice 2000a; see also Kato 2001). In addition, she considers the increase in the use of negative split infinitives to be a case of "de-grammaticalisation" of infinitival *to* (Fitzmaurice 2000b).

Additional studies looking at the split infinitive confirm to some extent the findings by both Fitzmaurice (2000a) and Calle-Martín and Miranda-García (2009). Leech et al. (2009: 263) found that the frequency of occurrence of split infinitives has increased in both British and American English corpus data, on the basis of the BROWN family of corpora, while Davies (2010a) found that the proportion of infinitives split with a *-ly* adverb has increased in the Corpus of Contemporary American English relative to infinitives immediately followed by an *-ly* adverb. Similar trends are observed in Fischer (2007), whose analysis is also based on the BROWN family of corpora. Building on the previous research, I will attempt to take

the study of the influence of prescriptivism on the use of the split infinitive one step further, and analyse whether and how the treatment of the feature has changed in usage guides, and whether and how this relates to its increased frequency of occurrence in actual use data.

3.9 Conclusion

In this chapter I introduced the HUGE database compiled at Leiden University, which contains a collection of usage guides, as well as entries on 123 usage problems. On the basis of the most commonly treated usage problems, as well as a number of other criteria, I explained how I selected the usage features for this study. Subsequently, I provided a brief background for each of these features, summarising the most important aspects of the variation in their use. These aspects are important because they may reasonably be expected to influence the treatment of these features in usage guides, as well as their patterns of use and speakers' attitudes towards them. Now that I have established the points of departure for the present study, as well as the background information on each of the features investigated, in the next chapter I will describe the details of the three-pronged methodological approach.