Grassroots prescriptivism

Lukac, M.

Appendix A

English Today features

Apostrophe('')s, who needs them?[1]

The improper use of the possessive apostrophe has for a long time been a subject of concern among the authors of usage guides in English. Apostrophes do not represent any sounds, and since nouns in the genitive, and plural nominative and accusative nouns with few exceptions sound the same, their spelling distinctions are purely grammatical (Bryant et al., 1997, p. 93). Because the sign exists only in the written language, its usage has been rather unstable ever since it was first introduced to the English language in the sixteenth century to mark dropped letters (Little, 1986, pp. 15−16), and it was not until the eighteenth century when the possessive apostrophe was first introduced (Crystal, 2003, p. 68). The usage guide database HUGE (Hyper Usage Guide of English), which is built by Robin Straaijer as part of the 'Bridging the Unbridgeable' project that Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade wrote about in an earlier issue of *English Today*, proves that apostrophe 'misuse' is the most popular topic in the field of language advice when it comes to punctuation. The apostrophe holds its own among numerous disputed items, such as ending sentences with prepositions, using me for I, who for whom or splitting infinitives. The first historical reference to the apostrophe in the HUGE database appears in *Reflections on Language*

[1] Lukač, M. (2014). Apostrphe('s), who needs them? *English Today*, *30*(3), pp. 3─4.

Use by Robert Baker in 1770 and it continues to be discussed to the present day. The discussion of the mark's 'misuse' has been widely popularised by the publication of Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* in 2003.

The apostrophe keeps stirring emotions both from the proponents of the sign's 'correct' usage and from the opposition who are advocating its abolishment. The debate participants are represented online in groups such as the Apostrophe Protection Society or, on the other side, on a website with the resonating name, Kill the Apostrophe. Last year, the Mid-Devon District Council banned the use of apostrophes from their street signs with the purpose of avoiding confusion. The news spread like wildfire. Similar relevance was attributed a year earlier to Waterstones [sic] decision to drop the apostrophe and adapt to the digital world with a more versatile and practical spelling. Companies such as Waterstones, Barclays Bank, Boots, Harrods, Lloyds Bank and Selfridges are not the only ones who decided to abandon the mark. The apostrophe seems to be generally impractical in the world of new media, especially on Twitter, which limits the users' posts to 140 characters. Recent analysis of the language used on Twitter by Brandwatch analytics (www.brandwatch.com) showed that all of the five most frequent grammatical mistakes are attributed to apostrophe omission, respectively *im*, *wont*, *cant*, *dont* and *id*. At the same time there seems to be a proliferation of complaints about the 'greengrocer's apostrophe' (cf. Beal, 2010), found used in the penultimate position with plural noun forms such as the following:

> Sir, We do not need to fear the extinction of the apostrophe (report, Aug 21). A local college is advertising 'study opportunities including National Diploma's, Degree's and Master's programmes'. (*Times*, 22 August 2006)

Although there never appears to be a shortage of complaints about the apostrophe that reappear in newspapers on slow news days, language professionals seem not to judge such misuses as particularly serious. Garrett and Austin (1993) studied attitudes towards apostrophe mistakes among British and German students of English. The apostrophe-related mistakes never scored higher than a mid-point on a five-point scale ranging from 'unimportant' to 'very serious'. In certain contexts, such as in the case of computer-mediated communication, the stigma against apostrophe omission has been entirely lifted. Nevertheless, the prophets of the apostrophe's death might still have to hold their breath until we can actually observe changes in all registers of the English language. In formal contexts, such as job applications, the apostrophe and other disputed usage items continue to represent cultural shibboleths that distinguish the educated from the uneducated (Bryant et al., 1997, p. 107). In the scope of our research, 'misused' apostrophes provide exactly the kind of arena for public discussions which allows us to investigate the implications of the in- and out-group dichotomy that separates the inner circle of the standard language users from its less proficient users. So what do you think of this disputed usage item? Let us know by leaving a comment at the 'Bridging the Unbridgeable' blog at http://bridging theunbridgeable.com/english-today/.

Grammar Advice in the Age of Web 2.0: Introducing the new (and keeping the old) language authorities[2]

When I launched an online survey last December with the aim of learning about people's practices of looking up usage advice, I anticipated that searching for answers to grammar questions would not differ considerably from what are currently most common practices in searching for any kind of information. The answers are, as a rule, simply looked up online. From a group of 189 respondents, among whom the majority were university-educated language professionals such as linguists, editors, journalists and translators, more than half reported that they preferred consulting online rather than printed sources. The respondents below the age of 25 who reported looking up usage advice in printed books were few and far between (11%). The question that can be consequently raised is what implications this finding has for the future of the printed usage advice literature, which includes usage guides, all-in-one reference books we are researching in the context of the 'Bridging the Unbridgeable' project. What is more, the number of sources that are available on the Internet is growing exponentially, and we need to probe more deeply into the matter to ask which of the available sources are in fact consulted.

Through search engines, the web itself is often consulted on usage questions and is used as a linguistic corpus, a freely available source of hundreds of billions of words of text, many of which are written in English. The numbers of 'hits' produced by searches are then seen by users

[2] Lukač, M. (2016). Grammar Advice in the Age of Web 2.0: Introducing the new (and keeping the old) language authorities. *English Today*, *32*(2), pp. 2–3.

as indicators of general usage preferences. If you are unsure about the plural form attorney generals, you can quickly find out that there are over 3 million instances of attorneys general found online, but very few attorney generals. Search engines are just a point of departure. Further analysis of the popularity of specific websites, however, helps to uncover the identity of linguistic authorities online.

To begin with, what we find online in many ways mirrors the situation in the printed usage advice literature, namely that the prominent publishing houses are still key players on the market. The most popular online usage advice sources are online dictionaries, which are used by 95% of the survey respondents. Albeit many of the popular online dictionaries nowadays are user-generated collaborative dictionaries such as UrbanDictionary.com and Wiktionary.com, in which a handful of dictionary editors is replaced by a large-scale usage panel of lay user-authors (Cotter & Damaso, 2007), the dictionaries that are considered to be the most reliable are those whose names were established well before the internet age, The *Oxford Dictionaries Online* and *MerriamWebster*. Whereas there is no doubt that the reputation of *Oxford Dictionaries Online* owes much to its name and the fact that the 'Oxford Dictionary' remains synonymous for many with the 'great Dictionary' (Winchester, 2003, p. 2), online dictionaries also score highly on their free accessibility, ease of use, and the speed with which they provide answers to usage questions. These three characteristics are surely of considerable importance in the context of new media. Other online sources with offline equivalents are publishing style guides such as the *Chicago Manual of Style*, *APA* and *MLA* style guides, all three of which

provide guidelines for academic writing, and style guides of media houses, including the Guardian and Observer style guide and the *BBC News Styleguide*. The latter category, although intended as in-house manuals that promote the uniformity of journalistic and broadcasting styles, are widely consulted by members of the general public and by a number of outside institutions.

In recent years much has been said about the use of corpora, databases of naturally occurring language, for purposes other than linguistic research. Corpus resources that are representative either of a specific genre or of an entire language variety and that often comprise millions of words, such as the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies, 2008-) and the British National Corpus (2007), include what no other language source does, a plethora of 'real world' examples of text. Nevertheless, those using such sources belong to a minority of respondents (28%). In spite of the richness of context and the nuanced insight into usage that language corpora facilitate, they do not cater to what most people expect when searching for advice on usage, namely clear, quick guidance which will enable them to make a choice between alternatives, compare with or compare to, affect or effect, disinterested or uninterested...

Real innovations in the usage advice market occur in two different types of online sources. The first is collaborative platforms, Wikipedia, Q&A websites and forums, where a consensus as to what constitutes acceptable usage is negotiated among individuals. Language professionals, translators and editors report that they regularly consult their peers on questions of usage on specialised online platforms. They turn

to their own professional community for advice, and it is this community that for them holds the highest position of authority. Lay users also engage in discussions on usage, for example in the process of creating Wikipedia entries on problematical features. These entries are under the watchful eye of many author-editors, and as a consequence, include critically processed content of good quality (Lukač, 2017). For all that, Wikipedia is still considered to be a relatively unreliable source. The second innovation is grammar websites created by single authors. Some of the respective online sources are so immensely popular that their authors have become household names. The number of people surveyed who are familiar with the podcast *Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing* is comparable to the size of the group which is still familiar with Fowler's *Modern English Usage*.

If anything, the results of the survey have shown that the established names on the usage advice market have found their place also in new media. Even so, the web allows for a dialogue between experts and lay people alike, who are now provided with platforms for potentially negotiating bottom-up what constitutes correct usage. Moreover, the web allows new players to enter the market, create their own audiences, and position themselves as linguistic authorities. If you would like to assist in exploring this topic further and comment on who (if anyone) is a linguistic authority today, visit our website at https://bridging–theunbridgeable.com/english-today/.

Appendix B

Bridging the Unbridgeable blog entries

Jafaican: 'Ali G would understand it perfectly'[3]

In recent years, linguists across Europe have described new language varieties spoken by young people living in multicultural and multilingual communities of large cities. In Germany the variety is referred to as *Kiezdeutsch* ('neighbourhood German'), in Norway as *kebabnorsk* ('kebab Norwegian'), in the Netherlands as *straattaal* ('street language'). Professor Paul Kerswill gave a talk yesterday at Lancaster University on the UK print media representations of the London multiethnolect, Jafaican ('fake Jamaican'). The innovative features of Jafaican include, most prominently, pronunciation, vocabulary and non-standard spelling. A stereotypical utterance thus produced by a speaker of Jafaican would be, 'Raaass man, me gwan me yard see me babymother/babyfather', or in plain English, 'I'm off home to my better half'.

According to Kerswill, there are two sides of the coin when it comes to media reception of Jafaican. The variety is often stigmatised and related to 'bad social practices', such as teenage abortions, stabbings and gun crime. David Starkey (in)famously related Jafaican to the 2011 riots (Pullum, 2011), and, more generally, to the violent, nihilistic gangster youth culture on the rise. Right-wing populists even warn of

[3] Lukač, M. (2013, January 25). Jafaican: 'Ali G would understand it perfectly' [Blog post]. Retrieved from (https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/%202013/01/25/2677/).

the ‘dangers’ of Jafaican as a potential replacement of its native British counterpart, Cockney.

More positively, many describe Jafaican as a product of natural language change, and even as cool, contemporary and classless. The London-based magazine, *Time Out*, humorously included Jafaican among the three dialects of London English (next to Estuarine and Mockney). The TripLingo app, a tool for deciphering slang in a number of languages, included Jafaican in the TripLingo (2012 Olympics) UK edition.

Although speakers of Jafaican have little awareness of the impact of their variety and of its exact place among the London speech communities, Jafaican seems to be opening a range of discourses. How do people establish relationships between language and social practices? What is the nature of the ‘backwash effect’ of minority languages on the majority language? And, more generally, what is the future of multicultural language varieties? Kerswill’s research doubtlessly provides plenty food for thought.

Out with whom, in with the split infinitive[4]

One of our blog authors recently tackled the ‘whom issue’ (Maud, 2013), and it made me wonder if this word is really dying out. Our readers will also remember several posts featuring the split infinitive, the pedants’ pet peeve.

[4] Lukač, M. (2013, April 11). Out with *whom*, in with the split infinitive [Blog post]. Retrieved from (https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/2013/04/11/out-with-the-whom%20-in-with-the-split-infinitive/).

I have decided to explore the actual usage of *whom* and the *split infinitive* (separated by one adverb only) in British and American English from the first half of the twentieth century onwards. I investigated the changes in British English for the period 1931–2006 (corpora used in the analysis: BLOB-1931, LOB, FLOB, BE06) and in American English for the period 1960s–2006 (corpora used in the analysis: Brown, Frown, AE06).

Here are the results (the data for American English in 1931 are not available):

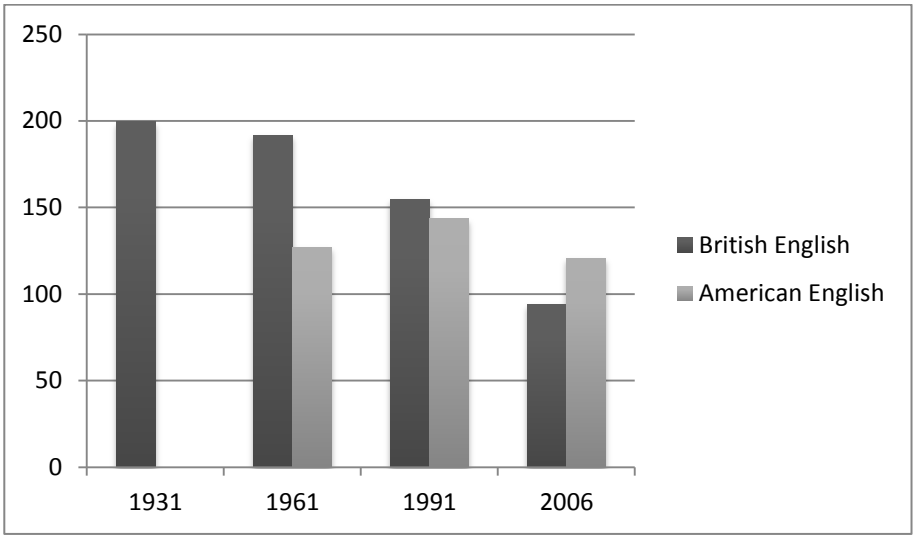


Figure 8.1 The use of *whom* in British and American English (frequency PMW)

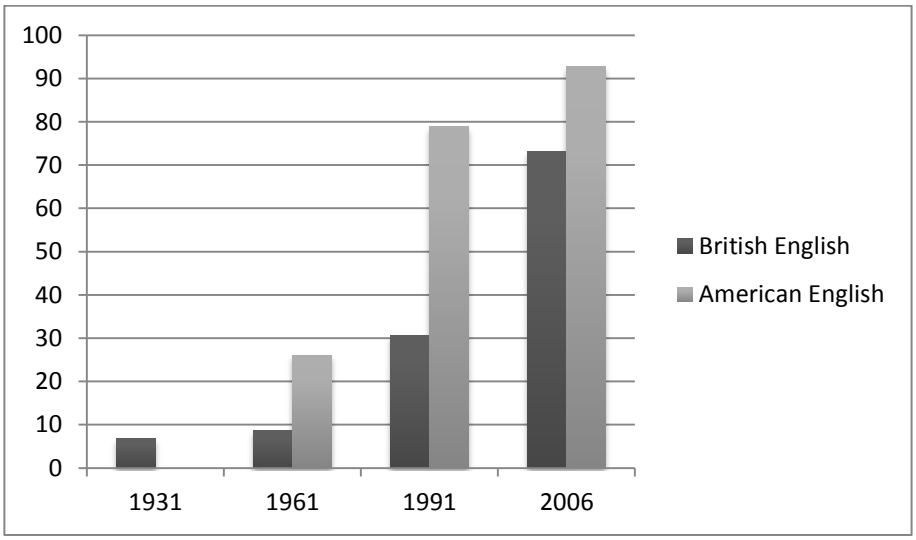


Figure 8.2 The use of the split infinitive in British and American English (frequency PMW)

Whom has indeed been losing popularity in British English since the 1930s, and the decrease in use is getting sharper. Things are not as straightforward in American English, where it seems that *whom* witnessed a revival in the beginning of the 1990s, which was again followed by a decrease in use.

Things are, on the other hand, rather unambiguous when it comes to the split infinitive. This grammatical construction is on the rise. The increase in use was not as dramatic in British English in the period between the 1930s and the 1960s, but it has rocketed since then. A similar trend can be identified in American English: a high increase between the 1960s and the 1990s, with a continuing rising trend. What do you think, which other constructions and/or words are on the rise, and which ones are on their way to extinction?

David Crystal and the history of English spelling, or how the Internet is killing off silent letters[5]

The Hay Festival of Literature and Arts, which is held annually in Wales, was a prolific place this year for discussions about language use. Professor David Crystal gave a wonderfully engaging talk at the event, presenting his latest book *Spell it Out: The Singular Story of English Spelling* (Crystal, 2013).

The *Daily Mail* reported on the event in an article with a catchy title 'Receipt without 'p', rhubarb without the "h": How the Internet is killing off silent letters' (2013). Crystal explains the history of English spelling in his talk, a history of waves of variation and novelty, and of various people who kept 'messing it up'. The French changed the simply spelled Anglo-Saxon word CWEN into QUEEN, the Flemish typesetters are responsible for the 'H' in GHOST, and the educated users of Latin for the 'B' in DEBT (lat. DEBITUM). Crystal goes on to explain how English spelling is continuing to evolve today through the use of the Internet. The silent letters, such as the 'H' in RHUBARB, are disappearing online in a medium that allows for writing and publishing without the filtering, editing process.

David Crystal was not the only one at the Hay festival to tackle the issues of spelling, language and pedantry. Simon Horobin, English professor at the Magdalen College, Oxford, addressed the language pedants in his talk, suggesting that there is nothing sacrilegious about

[5] Lukač, M. (2013, June 3). David Crystal and the history of English spelling, or how the Internet is killing off silent letters [Blog post]. Retrieved from theunbridgeable.com/2013/06/03/david-crystal-and-the-history-of-english-spelling-or-how-the-internet-is-killing-off-silent-letters/.

'thru', 'lite', and even the lack of spelling differences among 'they're', 'their', and 'there', *The Telegraph* reports Wallop, 2013)

What caught my attention were the reactions from the readers, who seem to have less tolerant attitudes towards usage than the linguists. The best rated comments on the David Crystal article all express concern about 'language wreckage' and the lack of education, whereas the results of the poll on the importance of grammar in *The Telegraph* speak for themselves (Does grammar matter? Yes: 3,646 votes or 93.37% and No: 259 votes or 6.63%).

The history of txt spk and Queen Victoria[6]

For years the language of instant messaging or text speak (txt spk) has been targeted in the popular media as hard evidence of the on-going decline in literacy. In 2003, *The Daily Telegraph* published an article about a 13-year-old girl who allegedly wrote an English essay in txt spk shorthand, which baffled her teacher (Cramb, 2003). The article stated that the girl's essay began with the sentence:

> *My smmr hols wr CWOT. B4, we usd 2go2 NY 2C my bro, his GF & thr 3 :- kds FTF. ILNY, it's a gr8 plc.*
>
> Translation: *My summer holidays were a complete waste of time. Before, we used to go to New York to see my brother, his girlfriend and their three screaming kids face to face. I love New York, it's a great place.*

[6] Lukač, M. (2013, July 21). The history of txt spk and Queen Victoria [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/2013/07/21/the-history-of-txt-spk-and-queen-victoria/.

In a 2007 article for the *Daily Mail*, John Humphreys compared txt spk 'vandals' with Genghis Khan, and accused them of 'pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary.' Other accounts of the ongoing moral panic caused by the vile instant messaging shorthand are numerous. For years, scholars have been challenging such widespread txt spk misconceptions. One of the leading scholars in this field is David Crystal, who gave a number of talks and wrote a book *Txtng: the Gr8 Db8* in an attempt to dispute the myths of the new communication technologies.

Contrary to popular beliefs, Crystal claims that the language of instant messaging does operate according to rules, many of which have existed for decades or even centuries. According to Crystal (2008, p. 27) 'Texting may be using a new technology, but its linguistic processes are centuries old.' This claim has recently acquired a new dimension, with the uncovering of 20 notes hand-written by Queen Victoria in the last four years of her life (Styles, 2013).

The letters addressed to Victoria's Commissioner at Balmoral, James Forbes reveal the Queen's fondness for using abbreviations such as 'wh' for 'which', 'shd' for 'should', 'abt' for 'about' and 'wd' for 'would'. Spokesman Andrew Currie commented: 'The writing is quite untidy and the abbreviations are interesting—a sort of early form of texting that suggest Queen Victoria was 100 years ahead of her time' (Nash, 2013).

This fascinating collection soon to be auctioned off is definite proof of Queen Victoria's fondness of shorthand and rebuses alongside many of her contemporaries, among them the celebrated author Lewis

Carol. Such historical finds again show what linguists have been claiming for years: instant messaging shorthand is hardly a novelty, it has existed for centuries, and it has always been limited to a specific context and/or medium.

Who's to blame for literacy levels in England and Northern Ireland[7]

Although each new generation always seems to be worse than the previous one from time immemorial, those criticizing the young kids of today finally have some evidence to support their claims. The newest OECD Survey of Adult Skills ('Boosting skills essential for tackling joblessness and improving well-being, says OECD', 2013) shows disappointing results for levels of literacy and numeracy in England and Northern Ireland. Out of 24 countries where the survey was conducted, England and N. Ireland came in fifteenth on literacy (and young Americans were the lowest ranking among their peers!). An even more striking fact is that the literacy levels of young people are no better than of those who are leaving for retirement. The question that many seem to be asking is 'Are schools going backwards?'

The variables which were found to positively correlate with low literacy levels were: lower levels of education, ethnicity (Black), not having 'very good' general health, lower parental level of education, no computer experience in everyday life, occupation (services and shop and market sales), and job industry (human health and social work). For

[7] Lukač, M. (2013, October 24). Who's to blame for literacy levels in England and Northern Ireland [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com–/%202013/10/24/whos-to-blame-for-literacy-levels-in-england-and-northern-ireland/.

details see the report published by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2013).

The results have been widely discussed in the British media during the past weeks. Poverty and inequality are mentioned as possible reasons for the low performance on the survey of the British 16–24 year olds (Adams, 2013). Professor Chris Husbands, director of the Institute of Education, and Angel Gurría, OECD secretary-general, sent similar messages concerning the results which should hopefully be addressed: 'People are being left behind'. An obvious discrepancy exists between young people's potentials and skills acquired through the education system. Although the British system seems to work just fine for the high flyers, the question is what happens with all groups of children.

But, yes, a number of commentators blame sloppy shop signs, misspelt movie names, youth slang, and the 'dumbing down' effect of social media, which require us to express our thoughts in 140 characters or fewer. A *Telegraph* reporter (Doughty, 2013) also seems to blame neologisms: 'every time a *selfie* derivative arrives in the dictionary, another sonnet dies'. I am afraid that the grammar police will continue barking up the wrong tree of youth slang and computer mediated communication for some time. It is actually those who do not use computers on a daily basis that tend to score lower on literacy tests.

'Could care less' or 'couldn't care less'[8]

'Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn,' are Rhett Butler's famous last words to Scarlett O'Hara. Could you imagine a modern remake of *Gone with the Wind* in which Rhett would rather say 'Frankly my dear, I could care less'? ('God, no!', you say?)

Although the phrase *I COULD care less* is often criticised by the language guardians, editors, and usage guide writers, you might be surprised to find out that it has been around for almost as long as the 'original' expression it is often 'mistaken' for: *I COULDN'T care less*. The 'corrupted' *I COULD care less*, started being used already in the 1950s, as can be observed from the Corpus of Historical American English (Davies, 2010-), although, at that time, it was usually preceded by negative personal pronouns: 'No one COULD CARE LESS what a camel was like than young ladies at tea'. By the 1960s, the explicit negation was dropped altogether and nowadays sentences such as: 'I COULD CARE LESS what you feel or think about me' are part of accepted usage. Except for looking at language data from different corpora to tell us about when this particular usage appeared, a sure sign of it gaining ground are the complaints about it in letters to the editor. Sure enough, the first letter on the topic of *COULD care less* was published in the *Lawrence Daily Journal-World* on October 20, 1960.

What is so controversial about this expression? Its critics claim that it is not logical and that it is even absurd. If you use the expression *COULDN'T care less*, you are stating that you do not care at all,

[8] Lukač, M. (2014, March 24). 'Could care less' or 'couldn't care less' [Blog post]. Retrieved from (https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/2014/03/24/could-care-less-or-couldnt-care-less/).

therefore, caring less would be impossible. Its corruption *COULD care less* implies that the speaker does care, which implies the opposite of what she is trying to say. William Safire goes a step further in his *I Stand Corrected* stating that the expression *COULD care less* has become so widespread that a reversal has occurred in using '[the proper form] would be regarded as the sort of thing a visiting Martian might say'.

Regardless of such line of criticism, linguists offer several good explanations for why such a change occurred and why the expression is not illogical as it may seem to some. In her book *Talking Voices*, Deborah Tannen (2007, p. 52) explains that *COULD care less* is not the only example of its kind. Negations in phrases are occasionally dropped in speech, without affecting the hearer's understanding of the implied meaning. Other examples of this kind are:

'I won't pay more than I can help'	instead of	'I won't pay more than I cannot help' (more than I must)
'until every stone is unturned'	instead of	'until there is no stone left unturned'

Another argument has been put forward by Deborah Tannen and other linguists, such as Rebecca S. Wheeler (8.3 below), who claim that the entire formula is altered by dropping the negation and that it signals sarcasm.

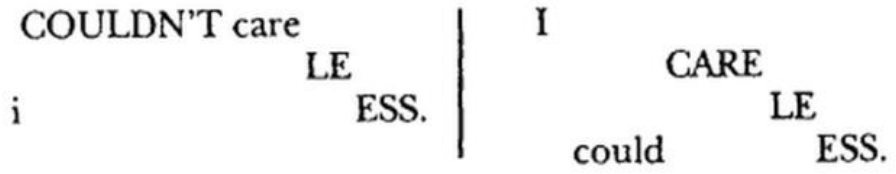


Figure 8.3 Two versions of pronunciation of *I couldn't care less* (From Wheeler, 1999, p. 7)

By shifting the emphasis in the sentence, the speaker reveals sarcasm, as in saying 'Oh yeah, as if there were something in the world I care less about'. Steven Pinker advocates the same position (Pinker, 1994b).

What are your thoughts on the usage of COULD care less? Does its acceptability vary depending on the context?

Censoring the 'G-word'[9]

Within the political correctness (PC) movements, many words addressing discrimination ended up on the banned list throughout the years. However, the PC vocabulary has a number of opponents as well, who rightfully claim that the PC movement is occasionally used to hide actual discrimination and inequality (Krugman, 2012), and, at other times, that it tends to go too far (you can easily find some entertaining PC dictionaries and word lists online, http://www.funny2.com/dictionary.htm).

The latest word to stir the PC controversy is 'girl', after BBC presenter Mark Beaumont used it to described a 19-year-old judo champion, Cynthia Rahming (Mardsen, 2014), in a documentary on the Commonwealth Games. The champion herself stated that she was not of-

[9] Lukač, M. (2014, June 30). Censoring the 'G-word'[Blog post]. Retrieved from https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/2014/06/30/censoring-the-g-word/.

fended by the word, but the BBC executives disagreed and decided to censor it. Two camps have been formed since, one supporting the BBC's censorship decision, and the other referring to it as another PC battle that had gone too far. HuffPost UK blogger B.J.Epstein stresses the differences in using the word 'girl' and the male equivalent 'boy': 'I would never refer to colleagues as "boys", nor would I call grown men "boys", and yet people, especially men, continually do this to me and to other women.'

On the other side, the Tory MP Phlip Davies criticised the censorship decision by saying that: 'We are going to end up in a situation where nobody is going to dare say anything lest some politically correct zealot deems it offensive.'

This discussion is neither new nor brought up by this incident alone. In 2004, the Ofsted head, David Bell, gave a speech to mark the International Women's Day, in which he stressed how language plays a significant role in discrimination, 'The use of the word "girl" is often used as an insult, meaning "not up to it" or "can't hack it" or "inadequate". It is naïve to think that this has no effect on girls.'

American and British author, Bonnie Greer (2004), gave a statement on this topic at the same time, saying that she found the phenomenon of calling grown up women 'girls' rather typical of the UK, and that it was among the most shocking things she had discovered after moving from the US in the 1980s.

To truly judge potential discrimination by using this seemingly neutral word, we need to go back to the context in which it was used. Mark Beaumont was taken aback after being floored by the judo cham-

pion, when he was heard saying 'I am not sure I can live that down – being beaten by a 19-year-old girl.' In this case, I would agree with Guardian's Naomi McAuliffe (2014) when she concludes that Beaumont was making a joke about feeling emasculated after a defeat by a young woman. Surely he should not have felt too surprised or emasculated since he did take on one of the best black belts in the country – regardless of her gender and young age.

Railway station or train station?[10]

One of the pet peeves of the British English-speaking language pedants has traditionally been the usage of Americanisms, which we have written and surveyed our readers about in our previous posts. In my research of the complaints about language use, I can safely say that criticism of Americanisms constitutes one of the major complaint trends among those who speak or model their speech on British English. 'Fall' is replacing 'autumn', 'bus' ran over 'omnibus', 'Mother's Day' is celebrated instead of 'Mothering Sunday'. Another phrase which seems to be on its way out is 'railway station' soon to be replaced by 'train station'. The BBC style editor Ian Jolly (2014) gives an account of the BBC's (accepted) usage of 'train station' and the audience's predominantly negative response to it. 'Railway station' predates 'train station' and it has been used almost exclusively in both American and British English prior to the 1930s when according to the data taken from the Corpus of Historical American English 'train station' first started to

[10] Lukač, M. (2014, November 12). Railway station or train station? [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/2014/11/12/railway-station-or-train-station/

occur in wider usage in American English. The increase in frequency of ‘train station’ in American English seems slightly more delayed in the chart taken from the Google Ngram Viewer, but it clearly shows that in 1986 the frequency of ‘train station’ matched ‘railway station’ and its use has been soaring ever since.

Figure 8.4 The frequency distribution of *train station* and *railway station* in American English according to the Ngram Viewer

The same phenomenon seems to be now reflected in British English. In the British National Corpus, covering the period between 1980s and 1993, ‘train station’ is used mostly in spoken language, which is the door through which change usually enters language. According to the Google Ngram Viewer, the situation has dramatically changed since then. Those who are opposing the American invasion will be glad to see that ‘railway station’ is still in the lead, however, only by very few instances.

Figure 8.5 The frequency distribution of *train station* and *railway station* in American English according to the Ngram Viewer

One complaint from *The Times* about the usage of the phrase says: 'I recently heard Agatha Christie's Miss Marple instruct a taxi driver to take her to the "train station". Not in 1950s England, I think.' With BBC on board and corpus evidence, I wonder if it will survive in wider usage until 2050.

The future of English[11]

At the turn of the calendar year, we are usually making (soon-to-be-broken) resolutions and speculating about the future. It comes as no surprise that linguists have been exchanging their views on the future of English in the previous weeks, John H. McWhorter (2015) in his widely shared article, 'What the World Will Speak in 2115', and Bas Aarts and Laura Wright, together with an evolutionary biologist, Mark Pagel, in an episode of the BBC's *Word of Mouth*, 'How is English going to change in the future?' (O'Dea, 2015).

[11] Lukač, M. (2015, January 23). The future of English [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/2015/01/23/the-future-of-english/.

To predict the future, as we might expect, the linguists turn to the past and the present changes affecting the English language. They all agree on certain aspects of the future evolution of the language: English is going to be more simplified, informal and regularised.

For a more nuanced description, we can take a look at some of the changes that are likely to occur based on the ongoing developments. As Mark Pagel describes, certain words are changing rather slowly, such as pronouns and numbers, whereas lexical words, such as nouns and verbs are changing considerably more rapidly. Bas Aarts is among the researchers analysing the changes in English through the use of corpora of naturally occurring language by tracking the increase and decline in the frequency of words and phrases. One such well-described change in the work of Geoffrey Leech is the decline in the usage of modal verbs (*shall, may, must, ought to*) and the increase in the usage of semi-modals (*be going to, have to, be to, need to, be supposed to*).

As a learner of English as a foreign language, I was taught (almost) never to use stative verbs in the progressive. It seems things are not so straightforward in spoken usage; to *be believing*, *wanting*, *wishing*, and notoriously *loving it* is on the rise due to colloquialisation and the function of progressives in hedging: 'You're being unreasonable' seems less harsh and face-threatening than 'You are unreasonable'.

The examples along the line of 'the doom of *whom*' do sound quite familiar. Some relatively newly emerging topics also include the development of comment clauses (such as *I think*) to pragmatic markers, and the perceived change in the usage of present perfect in spoken British English, also known as the emergence of the 'footballer's per-

fect': 'They've been brilliant, they were absolutely brilliant.' Paul Lambert (manager Norwich Town).

Many of these changes stem from spoken language and are likely to infiltrate written language over time. Whether they 'make it' into the written and standard varieties and whether the perceived changes are truly new and widely occurring phenomena, such as the 'footballer's perfect', remains to be seen.

During my recent stay at the University of Freiburg, I was introduced to a number of studies on frequency effects in language which might offer insights to major processes influencing language change such as obsolescence, grammaticalisation, and lexicalisation. Considering the growing number of studies and interesting findings in this field, one thing is clear, the future certainly does not look boring.

#Fundilymundily the language of the UK general election 2015[12]

With the UK general election just behind us, the talk of the language used in the debates still lies ahead. Last night, on the grammar phone-in of the BBC Radio 5's *Up All Night*, the presenter Dotun Adebayo discussed the use of political phrases, buzzwords and clichés in the run-up to the election with his regular guests on the program, Terry Victor, the co-author of *The Concise Partridge Dictionray of Slang and Unconventional English*, and Nevile Gwynne, the author of the highly prescriptive Gwynne's Grammar. The program is a rich source of complaints

[12] Lukač, M. (2015, May 11). #Fundilymundily the language of the UK general election 2015 [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/2015/05/–11/fundilymundily-the-language-of-the-uk-general-election-2015/.

about perceived grammar mistakes, so it will certainly be a topic of future posts.

Callers submitted their favourite examples of obfuscating political doublespeak including *spare room subsidy* (as means of avoiding the word *tax*), *cost of living crisis* and the *squeezed middle*. On the same subject, in comparing the speech of politicians during a televised debate with a corpus of spoken British English, Tony McEnery and Robbie Love (2015) from Lancaster University discuss in an article the large discrepancies between the two. *Austerity*, for example, became such a high-frequency word in the analysed debate that it matched the frequency of the pronouns *your* and *these* in normal speech.

Although public pleas for simpler language and the plain English movement in politics seem to be consistent, some of the *Up All Night* listeners complained about the usage of colloquial English and slang expressions among politicians. Ed Miliband was criticised for saying 'Hell yes' and 'That ain't gonna happen' in a BBC interview, David Cameron was criticised for using the same infamous 'non-word' *ain't,* and Russel Brand's speech in political discussions was described as lazy for his 'dropping the *t*s from the English language'.

One of the main goals of the politicians' public appearances is appealing to the majority of their potential voters. Avoiding giving specifics and making obligations is, however, yet another important goal manifested in obfuscating lingo. This all creates an interesting mixture of occasional colloquialisms, which seem unnatural coming from the (often public-school) educated politicians, and ambiguous muddled jargon.

This election showed that politicians can also become linguistic innovators, sometimes inadvertently. The Scottish Labour MP Jim Murphy created the word *fundilymundily* while trying to pronounce *fundamentally* in a live BBC debate. Since then, an *Up All Night* caller claims, the word has entered common usage in Scotland. To check the life of this new word and the contexts in which it can be used, search for #fundilymundily on Twitter.

Murphy's Law and other mistakes prescriptivists make[13]

Linguists often debunk language prescriptions on the basis of their inaccuracy and their authors' misunderstandings of linguistic concepts (cf. Tieken, 2015b). One of the most commonly confused and wrongly exemplified prescriptions is the one against passive constructions, the so-called passivophobia. *Language Log*'s Geoff Pullum, Mark Liberman and Arnold Zwicky have diligently recorded and discussed many instances (http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/grammar/passives.html# passive-postlist) of the wrongly defined and exemplified passive constructions in the period between 2003 and 2013 in 72 blog entries (and counting). Pullum (2010) went on to publish a full-length article 'Fear and Loathing of the English Passive' in the journal *Language and Communication*. Examples of passivophobia gone wrong include Michael Gove's memo on letter writing (Forsyth, 2013):

[13] Lukač, M. (2015, July 28). Murphy's Law and other mistakes prescriptivists make [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/2015/07/28/muphrys-law-and-other-mistakes-prescriptivists-make/.

> Use the active, not the passive voice. Ministers have decided to increase spending on the poorest children. Poorer children are not having a harder time under this Government.

The BBC's News Styleguide (Allen, 2003),

> There were riots in several towns in Northern England last night, in which police clashed with stone-throwing youths. Youths throwing stones clashed with police during riots in several towns in Northern England last night.

and the fourth edition of the *Elements of Style* (Strunk & White, 1999):

> There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground. Dead leaves covered the ground.

None of the underlined sentences includes a passive construction. Existential clauses (*There were riots*…) in particular seem to be subject to wrong analyses.

Another type of an error found in prescriptive corrections runs even closer to the surface—the *incorrection*—a correction that includes a mistake itself. To explain how *incorrections* work John Bangsund (1992) of the Victorian Society of Editors in Australia introduced Muphry's Law, the editorial application of the better-known Murphy's law, which he defines in four points:

- if you write anything criticising editing or proofreading, there will be a fault of some kind in what you have written,
- if an author thanks you in a book for your editing or proofreading, there will be mistakes in the book,
- the stronger the sentiment expressed in (a) and (b), the greater the fault,

- any book devoted to editing or style will be internally inconsistent.

Here is an example taken from the recently published *Style manual for amendments* to bills of the UK's Office of the Parliamentary Counsel (2015) spotted by a Twitter user (Greenhill, 2015):

> The Lords of Commons Public Offices ("PBOs") have recently agreed to bring their punctuation styles more closely into line. So now, in both Houses, amendments will –
>
> - use double quotes;
> - not end with a full-stop.

Many more examples are available if you look up #MuphrysLaw on Twitter. For more instances of prescriptive fallacies, you can tune into British Council's YouTube channel and listen to the talk by Michael Rundell (British Council English and Exams, 2014), editor-in-chief of the Macmillan Dictionary. He discusses the extreme prescriptivists' lack of consideration for register variation, introduction of etymological and logical fallacies, and made up rules (including further discussion on passivophobia).

Migrants: the language crisis[14]

Our blog posts are almost always devoted to usage guides, their respective authors, usage problems, and our readers' attitudes towards usage. Sometimes, however, these topics touch on more general social debates.

[14] Lukač, M. (2015, September 15). Migrants: the language crisis [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/2015/09/15/migrants-the-lang uage-crisis/.

In popular and scholarly publications on English usage from the 1970s onwards it has become quite common to discuss how we talk about people and how our way of referring to a particular group reflects their place in society. Are we referring to *air hostesses* or *cabin crew*, *actresses* or (*female*) *actors*, *the handicapped* or *the disabled*, *immigrants*|*migrants*|*refugees*|*boat, people*|*expats*? Anne Curzan devotes an entire chapter of *Fixing English* to the nonsexist language reform. The *Guardian*'s David Marsh takes on sexist and racist language in the ninth chapter of *For Who the Bell Tolls* with the title 'Political Incorrectness Gone Mad'. (There are many more possible references, but these two are lying on my desk.) Another battle is currently being fought against the language of intolerance. Although the migrant crisis is much more tangible than the *language* migrant crisis, words used surrounding social and political issues are essential when they contribute to people's actions or lack thereof.

Language used with the purpose of objectifying people is not a new phenomenon and neither is the commentary on it. A research group at Lancaster University conducted a study that focused on the construction of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK press over the period 1996—2006 (http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/projects/rasim/). Their findings might have as well been derived from the current news reports and the ongoing discussions. Just as Costas Gabrielatos and Paul Baker report in 2008, people's migration is still referred to in terms of natural disasters. 'Tidal waves' are threatening Europe, people are 'swamping' the UK according to Michael Fallon, Secretary of State for Defence, and a

'swarm of people' is jeopardizing the British economy and the country's high living standards according to the Prime Minister.

Charlotte Taylor, a linguist from the University of Sussex, gives an interesting insight (2015) into the usage of different terms for describing human migration from the Corpus of Contemporary American English. Whereas the word 'expat(riate)' commonly co-occurs with 'American' and 'British' – 'immigrants' are 'illegal', 'undocumented', 'Mexican' and 'Chinese'. Although chosen over the problematic word '(illegal) immigrant', the word 'migrant' is hardly neutral, and its negative semantic prosody seems to be on the rise judging from the current debates.

Some media houses have, however, recognised the linguistic problem and the fact that using particular words might foster social inaction. *The Guardian* (Marsh, 2015) has expressed its concern over the use of the word 'migrant', which denies people their humanity and identity, and is also highly unspecific. Al-Jazeera (Malone, 2015) has refused to use the word 'migrant' altogether.

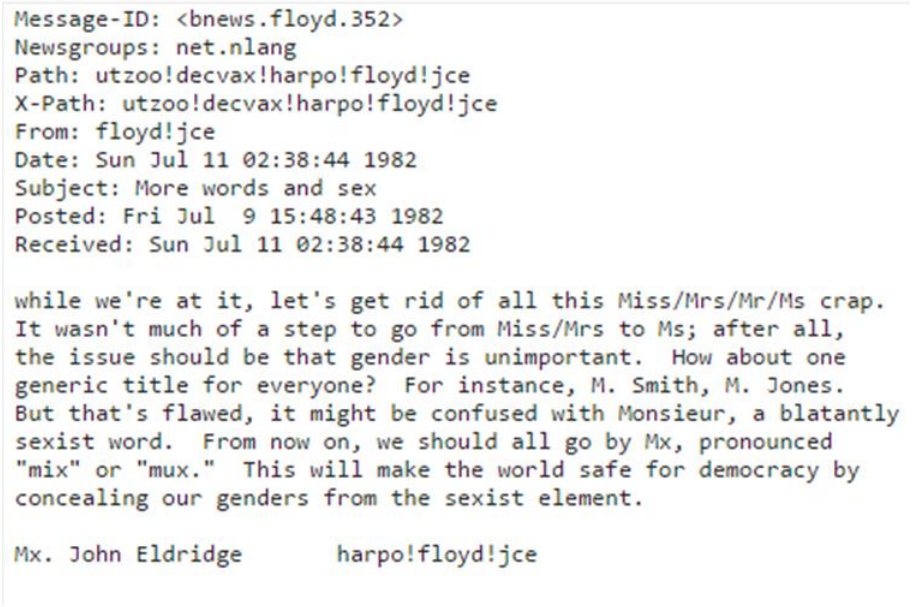
Whereas some might view such actions as 'political correctness gone too far', it is worth recalling that the same kinds of arguments were voiced when sexism, ageism, and racism were first challenged on a linguistic level. Francois Gemenne of the Centre for Ethnic and Migration Studies (University of Liege) summed it up appropriately in the Al-Jazeera discussion (): 'The language that we are using is really shaping the public perception of the situation.'

Adding the *Mx*: Gender-neutral titles and pronouns[15]

In the Q&A section of the *Chicago Manual of Style Online* (http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/qanda/latest.html) a question was posed about editing out *they* as a personal pronoun in reference to a transgender person. Here is the disputed sentence: 'During Harry's senior year, they were one of five contestants.' The answer provided on the website was 'since the author makes a point of explaining the use of they/them', 'to edit it out would be overstepping.'

We've written several times on this blog about the *singular they* usage problem, and we featured a blog post summarizing the findings of Klazien Tilstra's BA thesis on the changing attitudes towards the pronoun's usage. In the sentence above, however, singular *they* is not used as a generic pronoun, but as a pronoun in reference to a person not comfortable being addressed with masculine or feminine pronouns. Although it might catch some readers' attention, this usage is nothing new in the transgender community, along with the usage of the honorific *Mx* – a title devoid of gender qualifications following the M* pattern (*Mr*, *Ms*, *Miss*, *Mrs*). *Mx* is widely accepted by many UK companies and organisations and it has been in use since the 1970s. Here is a snippet from the 1982 Google Group Usenet archive advocating the usage of *Mx*, and giving guidelines on the title's pronunciation.

[15] Lukač, M. (2015, November 6). Adding the *Mx*: Gender-neutral titles and pronouns [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/2015/11/06/adding-the-mx-gender-neutral-titles-and-pronouns/.



```
Message-ID: <bnews.floyd.352>
Newsgroups: net.nlang
Path: utzoo!decvax!harpo!floyd!jce
X-Path: utzoo!decvax!harpo!floyd!jce
From: floyd!jce
Date: Sun Jul 11 02:38:44 1982
Subject: More words and sex
Posted: Fri Jul  9 15:48:43 1982
Received: Sun Jul 11 02:38:44 1982

while we're at it, let's get rid of all this Miss/Mrs/Mr/Ms crap.
It wasn't much of a step to go from Miss/Mrs to Ms; after all,
the issue should be that gender is unimportant.  How about one
generic title for everyone?  For instance, M. Smith, M. Jones.
But that's flawed, it might be confused with Monsieur, a blatantly
sexist word.  From now on, we should all go by Mx, pronounced
"mix" or "mux."  This will make the world safe for democracy by
concealing our genders from the sexist element.

Mx. John Eldridge       harpo!floyd!jce
```

Figure 8.6 A conversation from the 1982 Google Group Usenet archive advocating the usage of *Mx*

This is a case in point of what Curzan in *Fixing English* (2014) refers to as politically responsive prescriptivism (‘rules/judgements that aim to promote inclusive, nondiscriminatory, politically correct, and/or politically expedient usage’) – you can read more on this topic in Stan Carey’s post (2015) on the *Macmillan Dictionary Blog*.

Although its usage is still in the process of being spread and accepted, *Mx*’s time is quite certainly coming (the *OED* is considering adding an entry for it [Eleftheriou-Smith, 2015]). As pointed out in the Merriam-Webster blog (‘A gender-neutral honorific’, n.d.), it wasn’t until 1986 that the *New York Times* fully adopted *Ms*, now the default form of address for women.

The descriptive backlash[16]

Last month *The Independent* published a story (Gillett, 2015) featuring an email etiquette rule by Jonathan Tisch, a hotel magnate. According to Mr. Tisch, the one word you should never use to start emails is 'I'. Referring to mentors, teachers and your own education is a common strategy when formulating prescriptive rules, and Mr. Tisch is no exception. He explains that this particular piece of advice was handed down to him by his former boss and mentor who claimed that 'whenever you're writing a letter — and now it applies to emails today — never start a paragraph with the word 'I,' because that immediately sends a message that you are more important than the person that you're communicating with.' What was interesting about this piece is the commentary that followed under the article itself and in social media. The like-minded readers were among the minority and most commenters expressed their disagreement ('I don't know about you but I know that I enjoy using a nice perpendicular pronoun every now and again.') or lack of interest ('Useless article') in the prescriptive advice.

In the survey Ingrid Tieken and myself conducted in 2015, we asked our respondents (some of them, we presume, including our readers) about their experiences in publicly voicing complaints about language. Most of them replied that the complaints they voiced were not complaints on 'wrong' usage, but on the pedants' complaints themselves.

[16] Lukač, M. (2016, January 31). The descriptive backlash [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/2016/01/31/the-descriptive-backlash/.

Although there is no doubt about continuing needs for usage advice, the tables are steadily turning with the backlash against prescriptive advice on the rise.

Can your local accent hold you back?[17]

Do people need to change their local accents to get on in life? The answer is 'yes' according to those advocating a prescriptivist approach to language use who often emphasise that in professional settings and in job interviews local accents and nonstandard English can hold you back. Local accents seem to be a real obstacle for trainee teachers in the UK according to a recent study conducted by Dr Alex Baratta, a lecturer at the University of Manchester. Baratta interviewed trainee teachers both from the northern and the southern English universities and found that the ones from the north of England were told to modify and tone down their accents in the classroom by their teacher training mentors. He goes to conclude from the data analysed that intolerance towards accents constitutes 'the last form of acceptable prejudice' and that a culture of linguistic prejudice is part of the teaching profession in the UK. The study has received much attention from the press and it was reported on in *The Telegraph* (Espinoza, 2016), *The Guardian* (Weale, 2016), and *The Sun* (Cain, 2016). BBC Radio Cumbria featured a segment on the topic in which the host Kevin Fernihough (a dialect speaker himself) talked to William Hanson, an etiquette expert, and Jane Setter, Professor of Phonetics at the University of Reading. Surprisingly per-

[17] Lukač, M. (2016, May 17). Can your local accent hold you back? [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/2016/05/17/can-your-local-accent-hold-you-back/.

haps, the two guests who respectively represented the prescriptive and the descriptive side of the debate agreed on their views regarding Baratta's study in stating that regional accents, as long as the speaker's words are pronounced clearly, should not be banned from the classroom or as Setter puts it 'What on Earth does it matter as long as the speaker is clearly spoken, it shouldn't matter that they have a regional accent.'

Appendix C

Flat adverbs survey

With this survey, we hope to collect data on the acceptability of flat adverbs, adverbs without the ending *-ly* as in *Go slow!,* for an article I am writing on the subject together with Morana Lukač. So we would like to ask you to fill in this brief survey for us, in which we will be asking you about the acceptability of a few sentences. We would also like to know a few things about you: just some general information to find out, for instance, if men and women respond differently to these sentences, and whether age makes a difference as well.

Filling in the survey won't take more than a few minutes. The survey is anonymous, and all information will be treated carefully. Thank you for taking the time to contribute to our research!

Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade (University of Leiden)

1. In what contexts is the following sentence acceptable in your opinion? Multiple answers are possible.

   That's a dangerous curve; you'd better **go slow.**

   - ok in informal speech
   - ok in informal writing
   - ok in formal speech
   - ok in formal writing
   - ok in netspeak (internet usage or chat language, texting)
   - unacceptable under any circumstances

2. In what contexts is the following sentence acceptable in your opinion? Multiple answers are possible.

   He did it **quicker** than he had ever done it before.

- ok in informal speech
- ok in informal writing
- ok in formal speech
- ok in formal writing
- ok in netspeak (internet usage or chat language, texting)
- unacceptable under any circumstances

3. In what contexts is the following sentence acceptable in your opinion? Multiple answers are possible.

   I don't want to commit myself to a long-term relationship, and **thusly**, I don't want to be financially responsible.

- ok in informal speech
- ok in informal writing
- ok in formal speech
- ok in formal writing
- ok in netspeak (internet usage or chat language, texting)
- unacceptable under any circumstances

4. In what contexts is the following sentence acceptable in your opinion? Multiple answers are possible.

   He described his daily routine **thusly**: 'I open my mail and I turn it over to the secretary to answer. I can go into my office now for an hour and that's a day's work.'

- ok in informal speech
- ok in informal writing
- ok in formal speech
- ok in formal writing
- ok in netspeak (internet usage or chat language, texting)
- unacceptable under any circumstances

5. If you disapprove of thusly as an adverb, why is that?

6. Flat adverbs are so-called 'old chestnuts' as far as usage questions are concerned, but we are also interested in new language features

that people are concerned about. So: what are your pet linguistic peeves?

7. Another question we are interested in is linguistic complaints such as those found in Letters to the Editor published in newspapers. Have you ever engaged in public discussions about language and grammar? Multiple answers are possible.

- No
- Yes: I sent a letter of complaint about language to a newspaper
- Yes: I phoned a radio or a television programme to discuss language
- Yes: I participated in a linguistic discussion in an online forum
- Yes: I commented on language use on Facebook, Twitter or other forms of social media
- Other

8. If you replied 'yes' to the previous question, do you remember what your complaint was about?

9. And if you replied 'Other', please specify where you did so, and how.

10. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- I'd prefer to leave this unspecified
-

11. What is your age?

- below 25
- 25 to 40
- 40 to 50
- 50 to 65
- 65 to 75
- over 75

12. Are you a native speaker of English?

- Yes
- No

13. If you are a native speaker of English, please specify of which variety. (In our research project, we currently only look at British and American English, so please don't be offended if we are asking you to tick 'Other'.)

- British English
- American English
- Other

14. If you are not a native speaker of English, please specify linguistic model.

- British English
- American English
- Other

15. What is your level of education?

- primary education
- secondary education
- university level

16. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

Appendix D

List of newspaper sources for the Letters corpus

Australia
Cairns Post
Hobart Mercury
Maroochy Weekly
Sunday Tasmanian
The Age
The Australian
The Bulletin
The Citizen
Daily Telegraph
The Sunday Mail
The Sidney Morning Herald

Canada
Calgary Herald
Montreal Gazette
The Globe and Mail
The Ottawa Citizen
The Toronto Star
The Winnipeg Sun

Ireland

The Irish Times

New Zealand
AdMedia Magazine

UK
Bath Chronicle
Birmingham Post
Brentwood Gazette
Bristol Evening Post
Camarthen Journal
Daily Mail
Derby Evening Telegraph
Evening Express
Express and Echo
Financial Times
Gloucestershire Echo
Hull Daily Mail
Islington Gazette
Leicester Mercury
Lichfield Mercury
Lincolnshire Echo
Newquest Media Group Newspapers
North Devon Journal
Nottingham Evening Post
South Wales Evening Post
Sunday Herald
Sunday Telegraph
Telegraph

US
America
Charleston Gazette
Christian Science Monitor
Edmonton Journal
Los Angeles Daily News
Naples Daily News
Raonoke Times
South Bend Tribune
Star Tribune
Star News
The New York Times
The Providence Journal
The Virginian-Pilot and Ledger Star
The Washington Post
Topeka Capital
Tulsa World
Weekend Post

Dominion Post
Northern Advocate
Sunday Star Times
The Nelson Mail
The New Zealand Herald
Waikato Times
The Daily Telegraph
The Guardian
The Independent
The Spectator
The Sunday Times
The Times
The Western Mail
Wells Journal
Western Daily Press
Western Morning News
Journal
York Press

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