

The corpus-based study of ongoing grammatical change in English: New data, new concepts

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Based mostly on the one-million-word corpora of written English of the “Brown family,” a substantial body of research on ongoing grammatical changes in present-day English was produced in the first decade of this century (e.g. Mair 2006, Mair and Leech 2006, Leech et al. 2009). The present paper argues that it is time to re-visit and possibly also revise these findings. This is not because the past decade has seen major changes which have escaped notice in previous research. What has dramatically improved, however, is the corpus-linguistic working environment and the theoretical framework in which research on ongoing change in English grammar can be carried out.

With many ongoing grammatical changes affecting constructions in the mid and low frequency bands, several very large corpora which have come online over the past decade (e.g. COHA, GloWbE and the generically more specialized Hansard and NoW corpora) can consolidate often provisional trends noted in the Brown family, expand the range of variables to be investigated, and increase the granularity of the analysis. The biggest improvement, though, is the coverage of spontaneous spoken language, where – for British English – the *Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English* (DCPSE) and the new *BNC Spoken 2014* afford opportunities which go far beyond what was possible ten or fifteen years ago. In view of the fact that – by and large – convergent diachronic trends tend to be more common in formal and written genres, whereas divergence is more likely to emerge in speech, this more balanced coverage of the two modalities in the available corpora represents a genuine advance.

One noteworthy theoretical advancement is the better understanding of the interaction between prescriptive language ideologies of various types and actually ongoing changes which has been achieved in work such as Curzan (2014) and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2018).

Revisiting two well studied changes – the decline of some core modals and the rise of the progressive, I will demonstrate that the use of new corpus data, while not fundamentally changing the picture, nevertheless requires considerable adjustments to the analysis. For example, data from the new BNC show that *have got to* is on the decline even in spoken British English and that phraseological chunks play a considerable role in the continuing spread of the progressive. A third variable, singular *themself*, was studied because (i) it is still rare and (ii) its documented spread over the past few decades is taking place in a highly charged language-ideological context which pits traditional prescriptivism against more recent language planning efforts designed to make the language more inclusive. On the basis of the available evidence, *themself* (a form of considerable historical standing in dialectal and nonstandard usage) is likely to become a rare instance of a new item being added to the “closed class” of pronominal forms in Standard English.

References

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