

Variation and Change in Our Living Language

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he Our Living Language notes in this dictionary were written to help demonstrate that American English, like all living languages, is not uniform and static but diverse and dynamic. Geography, social class, ethnicity, gender, and age, as well as factors internal to the language, influence the way particular speakers use and shape American English. The notes discuss exemplary linguistic variations resulting from these factors and provide a broader snapshot of our language than is allowed by traditional dictionary practice.

We are often led to believe that a particular language comes in only one standard, invariant mold, and that deviation or change from that standard spells the impending doom of civilization. But experience repeatedly belies such beliefs. We master textbook Spanish and land in Mexico to encounter a welter of words, pronunciations, and grammatical twists we never even dreamed existed. Or, reading Chaucer, we are struck by the metamorphosis that English has undergone since the 14th century.

Change in Progress

One area in which linguists have made considerable progress over the past 50 years is our ability to study language change as it is taking place, usually through careful attention to quantitative variations in regional and social usage that are both the harbingers and manifestations of change. Much of this progress was made through the study of American English, so it is especially appropriate to share some of our findings with readers of *The American Heritage Dictionary*. Although our advances have frequently involved pronunciation and grammar rather than vocabulary, words themselves are markers of diversity and carriers of history, and they can sometimes provide crucial evidence about developments in other parts of the language system.

The words *go*, *like*, and *all*, for instance, represent continuing change in the ways in which Americans introduce quotations in speech. In addition to the conventional *say*, some speakers began using *go* to report dialogue in the historic or narrative present, as in *Then he goes, "You think you're real smart, don't you?"* This usage now overlaps with and has to some extent been replaced by *be like*, as in *I'm like, "No, I don't!"* In the previous edition of this dictionary, I noted that *be all* (as in *"She's all, "You do, too!"*) had emerged as a competing variant of *be like*, and that, in California at least, it had even become more frequent among teenagers. But, as a striking demonstration of how quickly change can take place in a living language, a decade later the competition is virtually over, with quotative *be all* having ceded its dominance to *be like*, after spawning an intermediate *be all like* variant for a while.

One of the ways we can tell that American speech is undergoing change in this area is that younger people use the newer forms more often than older people do. When we have evidence that a linguistic feature is used at different rates by different age groups, we call it evidence of change in *apparent time*, using the terminology coined by William Labov, the leading figure in the study of language change in progress. Evidence of change in apparent time can be corroborated, however, by evidence of change in *real time*, by comparisons of speech and writing samples from earlier periods with those of today.

The note for *as far as* summarizes the corroborative evidence of change in apparent and real time quite clearly, change that involves syntax as much as vocabulary. The change taking place in constructions

involving *as far as* has been demonstrated not only in the United States, where it seems to be most advanced, but also in England and other parts of the English-speaking world. The change is not in the *as far as* phrase itself but in the traditional requirement that the noun subject that follows it be followed in turn by a form of *be concerned* or *go*. This requirement is upheld for standard usage by the Usage Panel of *The American Heritage Dictionary* and exemplified by two public figures whose speech is represented here (the number immediately following the name gives the speaker's age):

"*As far as the organized resistance is concerned, that's pretty much taken care of*" (Lt. Gen. Thomas Kelly, 60s, 1989).

"*Results of this summit were positive as far as the Soviet desires went*" (President George H. W. Bush, 60s, 1990).

But we also have hundreds of examples in our files, most from speech but many from e-mail and expository and fiction writing, in which the final verb is absent. For instance:

"*As far as the white servants, it isn't clear*" (Stanford student, 22, 1987).

"*The whole situation upset me, as far as the outcome of the verdict*" (unidentified young woman, 22, 1992).

How do we know that this is really a syntactic change in progress, that the *as far as* constructions are gradually becoming verbless? First of all, we have the evidence of change in apparent time, the fact that this usage is most frequent in examples from speakers and writers 19 years old or younger, somewhat less in speakers 20–39 years old, less again in speakers 40–59 years old, and least of all in speakers 60 years old or older. The association between this linguistic variation and age is not absolute, for teenagers and young adults do produce some *as far as* sentences with *be concerned* and *go*, and over-60 speakers do produce some *as far as* sentences without these verbal finishers. But the statistical correlations with age are significant, indicating ongoing change.

Moreover, we have some evidence from real time. The *as far as X goes/is concerned* construction (or a variation using *so far as*) is an 18th-century innovation that eventually replaced earlier ways of restricting the topic of one's discourse, such as *(As) concerning X* and *As far as concerns X*. In the 18th-century examples of the innovating construction, the verbal *is concerned* or *goes* part is always present. In the 19th century, the verbal part is almost always present, but in two examples from Jane Austen's *Emma* ("*so far as our living with Mr. Churchill at Enscombe, it is settled*" and "*he only means so far as your having some thoughts of marrying*") and one from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* ("*So far as what there may be of a narrative in this book*"), we find our first evidence of the verbless construction.

In the 20th century, not only do attestations of verbless *as/so far as* become increasingly frequent, but usage books start commenting openly and disapprovingly on this usage, a good indication that it has become more common. H.W. Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926), for instance, gives this example: *As far as getting the money he asked for, Mr. Churchill had little difficulty*. Fowler follows it with a stern rebuke against omitting the verb. In a 1961 article in *American Speech*, linguist Paul Faris notes that *as far as* occurs frequently in cultivated usage without any form of *be concerned* following it, and he provides

60 verbless examples. From 1960 on, the construction appears to have proliferated, attracting rebukes from almost every usage handbook. Of the more than 1,200 occurrences of the *as far as* construction that my colleagues, students, and I collected in the late 1980s and early 1990s, more than half were verbless. Even in the written examples, verbless constructions appeared in 32 percent of our sample, a significant increase from the 6 percent we found in texts written before 1959.

Thus, a profound and apparently inexorable change in our living language has been taking place—a grammatical change, really—making *as far as* more like a preposition (compare *as for*) than a clausal conjunction. Like many other instances of change in progress, this one began below the level of consciousness and overt comment. In fact, the general public appears to have remained oblivious to this change even at what is now a fairly advanced level.

Rule Governance in Variation and Change

Another respect in which the patterns of variation and change illustrated by *as far as* resemble those of other variables we have studied in the past half century is that they are regular rather than random, governed by unconscious, language-internal rules and restrictions that can often be appreciated only when we assemble large numbers of examples and study these quantitatively. People tend to think of rules and grammar as covering only the small set of items about which we receive overt instruction: to avoid split infinitives, to say *It is I* rather than *It is me*, and so on. But in fact we are unconscious of most of the language regularities and restrictions that we follow every day. For instance, we can say *He took out the trash* or *He took the trash out*, but if the object is a pronoun, we can only say *He took it out*, not *He took out it*. No one sits us down to teach us this rule, but like most of the rules we follow, we acquire and use it unconsciously as we grow up. Language learning and use would be virtually impossible without systematic rules and restrictions; this generalization applies to all varieties of language, including vernaculars.

Many of the entries for which we have provided Our Living Language notes in this volume are similarly subject to systematic rules that their speakers follow regularly, if unconsciously, even though these words and constructions come from vernaculars that are commonly regarded as lacking rules. For example, the *a-* prefix that is used with verb + *-ing* forms in Appalachian and other highland areas of the American South and Southwest is not used randomly but only with *-ing* forms that are part of a verb phrase, as in *She was a-running*. The benefactive *me* that is used instead of *myself* in Southern and other vernaculars, as in *I bought me some new clothes*, can only be deployed if it is followed by an indefinite modifier or pronoun, such as *a* or *some*. In other words, sentences like *I bought me new clothes* are not permitted in English. The *be like* and *be all* forms that young people use to introduce quotations are usually restricted to pronoun subjects rather than full noun subjects (i.e., one can say *She's all*, “*Yes, you are!*” but sentences like *The woman's all*, “*Yes, you are!*” are virtually unheard of). Restrictions also apply to the zero copula, the absence of the verb *be* in certain situations, as in *He working* and *They nice*, that is characteristic of African American Vernacular English and some Southern varieties. The copula cannot be deleted (be zero) if it comes at the end of a sentence (*That's what he is*), if it is the first person form (*I'm working*), or if it is in the past tense (*He was working*).

In the case of *as far as*, the verbless construction is more likely to appear at the beginning of a sentence, as in *As far as ball techniques and tactics, he's quite good* (perhaps by analogy with the preposition *as for*, which can only occur initially in sentences) than at the end, as in *He's quite good, as far as ball techniques and tactics*. An even more important constraint is that the verbless construction is most likely to be used when its following noun phrase is long and grammatically complex. When that noun phrase is a gerund, as in “*People think I'm constantly in motion, as*

far as making films” (Clint Eastwood, 1988), or contains a full sentence, as in *As far as the techniques that he has been using, the coaches were impressed*, the chances that *is concerned* or *goes* will be dropped are very high, over 80 percent. When the noun phrase is a conjoined noun phrase, like *ball techniques and tactics*, or when it includes a prepositional phrase, like *ball techniques in soccer*, the chances of verblessness are about fifty-fifty. And when the noun phrase is a single noun phrase, like *the men*, the chances of the verb being dropped are much lower.

Moreover, this constraint appears to have operated for a long time. The earliest attested verbless *as far as/so far as* constructions (from the 19th century) all involve gerundial or sentential noun phrases, and the first verbless nonsentential example we find in the 20th century is a conjoined noun phrase (“*so far as frame and covering*,” Henry Seidel Canby, *Thoreau*, 1939). We do not find verbless examples involving a single noun phrase until much later.

These historical facts support some general principles of variation and change proposed by the linguist C.J. Bailey in 1973. Among these is that language change does not begin equally in all environments, but begins in one linguistic environment before spreading in waves to other environments while moving to completion where it began. The corollary of this is the more = earlier/less = later principle, which holds that environments that show higher frequencies of the innovating variant at any point in time are likely to be the environments that were affected by the change earlier.

Bailey also suggested that changes begin in a limited geographical, social, and/or stylistic space and radiate from there to other parts of the speech community. The innovating verbless variant of *as far as* is currently most frequent in speech and least frequent in writing, as we might expect. Interestingly, the frequency for e-mail, where the element of planning is intermediate between speech and writing, falls in between those of printed writing and speech. It is likely that the *as far as* variation began in spoken usage of the 19th century.

Finally, women have a slight but significant lead over men in the use of the innovating *as far as* variant (60 versus 50 percent in our sample). Some have suggested that the fact that women frequently lead linguistic change is related to their closer association with the very young, who are often linguistic innovators; others hold that women are more expressive, using language more often as symbolic capital and as markers of personal style. No single explanation has yet been thoroughly validated, nor has any proven applicable to all features and speech communities.

Synchronic Variation

Synchronic variation—variation viewed at one point in time—is not always symptomatic of ongoing change, although it may encapsulate the effects of previous change or resistance to change. Most of the Our Living Language notes in this dictionary attest to the vibrancy of synchronic variation and variety in current American English without any indications of or implications for ongoing change. Many of our examples come from “vernacular” dialects of American English—everyday informal regional and social varieties with features like *ax* (for *ask*), *hissself* (for *himself*), and *zero copula* (as in *He working*) that are frequently stigmatized as nonmainstream, nonstandard, or worse (considered as evidence of ignorance, lack of education, or laziness). But usages of this type also survive, even thrive, by symbolizing opposition to mainstream culture. That is, they may vividly express the identities of their users as members of a particular region, social class, ethnicity, or age group.

Regional Variation

Certain Our Living Language notes bear witness to regional variation as well. *Hoosegow*, “jail,” is one of a small but intriguing set of words that

first appeared in the 19th century and early 20th century in the American West, perhaps in deliberate, jesting opposition to East Coast words and mores. As the notes at *foot* and *mine* reveal, vernacular forms like *three foot* and *That book is hern*, each having its own systematic restrictions, are characteristic of parts of New England and the South. And the South—by far the most salient dialect area in the United States—is the province of several other distinctive Our Living Language notes, including *like to*, “nearly” (*He like to died*), double modals (*He might could go*), and *right* in the sense of “very” (*He’s right nice*).

Variation by Ethnicity and Social Class

Several Our Living Language entries testify to the influence of some of the ethnic groups that compose the tapestry of American peoples. The word *schlock*, for example, comes from Yiddish, along with a number of other words like *schlep* and *schmooze*. But the most common ethnic words in the Our Living Language notes come from African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Many of the words from this source, including *bad* (“excellent”), *cool* (“first-rate”), *dig* (“to enjoy”), *igg* (“to ignore”), and *rap* (the musical form), have crossed over into general usage among Americans, partly through the immense influence of Black music on American popular culture.

The more grammatical features of AAVE, however, including invariant habitual *be* (*We be steady studying*) and zero copula (*She workin’ now*), are not found as readily among Americans of other ethnicities, with two exceptions. They are found quite frequently in the South (where they seem to have originated and where they are used by white Americans, but usually at lower frequencies than among Blacks) and among Latino, Asian, and Pacific Islander youth who are in close contact with African Americans in cities. The zero copula, in particular, may represent the influence of creole-speaking Blacks who were brought into America from the Caribbean in relatively large numbers in the 17th and 18th centuries. Salient grammatical features like habitual *be* and zero copula, which are socially stigmatized by the mainstream but vigorously endorsed by some of their users as markers of oppositional identity, also represent the intersection of ethnicity and social class. For they are most commonly employed by working-class African Americans and much more rarely used by middle-class African Americans. It is certainly not the case that all African Americans use them, and even those who do are most likely to use them in excited or informal interaction with their peers.

Other Kinds of Synchronic Variation

Not all aspects of synchronic variation can be fully represented by lexical entries; consequently, the Our Living Language notes do not cover all types of linguistic diversity in the United States equally well. Gender variation and the social construction of male and female identity have been the focus of intense research in recent years on such topics as male/female differences in interruptions, tag questions (e.g., *you know?*), and the amount of talk and silence; but such aspects of conversational interaction or discourse do not lend themselves readily to dictionary coverage. The extent of one’s social network has also been shown to be a salient factor in variation, both in the United States and Europe, but the features studied are elements of pronunciation and grammar rather than vocabulary. Variation by age has already been implicated in our earlier discussion of ongoing change in apparent time in features such as *as far as* and *be all/like*, and the fact that *a-* prefixing and the use of *hern*, *ourn*, and similar forms are more common among older speakers betrays their status as retentions from an earlier period. Recently, linguists have demonstrated that adolescence is a life stage in which the linguistic marking of social identity is at a peak. The extensive use of slang by teenagers is a part of this phenomenon.

Slang

Slang occurs chiefly in casual, playful speech and is typically made up of short-lived coinages and figures of speech that are deliberately used in place of standard terms for the sake of added raciness, humor, irreverence, or other effect. To this we might add that the creation and use of slang are commonest among adolescents and teenagers, and that some words that enter the vocabulary as slang pass into more general usage and endure for decades, if not centuries, as has occurred with *bad*, *cool*, *dig*, and *dude*. If it is surprising to learn that some of these words go back to the early 20th century and even to the 19th century (as do *bad* and *dude*), it is equally surprising to learn that a seemingly modern, computer-age slang word like *geek* originated in the 19th- and early-20th-century world of the circus, where it originally referred to a performer who engaged in bizarre acts such as biting the head off a live chicken.

Some slang words illustrate very general principles of linguistic variation and change. For instance, *igg*, from *ignore*, illustrates the tendency to reduce or shorten words in informal speech. Although the incidence is higher as one goes down the social ladder, virtually all Americans reduce *past* and *hand* to *pas* and *han* in casual or excited speech, at least some of the time, and they can similarly drop the initial unstressed syllable in (*a*)*bout*. Unlike more broadly accepted slang reductions (such as *mic* or *mike* for *microphone*), which typically retain their most strongly stressed syllable, *igg* involves the retention of an initial unstressed syllable and the loss of a stressed syllable. Some of the newer slang reductions, like *za* (from *pizza*), have an even more startling, in-your-face quality. Their effect derives from the fact that they involve the loss of an initial stressed syllable (*PIZZa*) and the replacement of the original reduced vowel (ə) in the remaining syllable by full vowels (ā, ē). In this respect they defy convention, much as the popular greeting among African Americans *What up?* defied the rule by which the copula in collocations using *what is*, *that is*, and *it is* is usually contracted (as in *wha’s up*, *tha’s ok*, *i’s me*) but not deleted in African American Vernacular English. As the note at *za* reminds us, however, today’s startling slang neologism can become tomorrow’s conventional standard usage, for *phone*, *bus*, and *wig* were originally derived (from *telephone*, *omnibus*, and *periwig*) by clipping stressed syllables.

One source of new words in American English is the Internet, which connects people around the world through e-mail, instant messages, blogs, and other forums. It has introduced a slew of new vocabulary words and added definitions to old ones. We “surf the net,” “post” entries on our “blogs,” and try to avoid “spam” to our “e-mail” accounts. There are also a number of Internet terms that describe elements of online culture: To “troll” is to deliberately post a provocative or unfounded message to a web forum; an Internet “meme” is an online cultural movement that spreads viruslike from one person to the next.

The Internet has also perpetuated the use of a distinctive informal written style that is replete with acronyms and community-specific jargon. The most common of these have even entered spoken English among young people—for example, the acronym *OMG*, originally used in emails and instant messages for “Oh my God,” sometimes takes the place of saying “Oh my God” in spoken conversation, where it is pronounced “oh em gee.” Similarly, *LOL* for “laugh out loud” has entered spoken English in some communities as the interjection “lol.” The rules of usage for these acronyms are often different from those of the words for which they stand. For example, “lol” has evolved a plural form, “lulz,” which means “laughs,” with a nuance of “joy obtained at the expense of others.” “I did it for the lulz” has become a common excuse for online misbehavior.

A century from now, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* will undoubtedly bear witness to completed changes and new kinds of regional and social variation that we cannot now envision. But to the extent that intervening editions continue to document and discuss the ways in which this vibrant American language is varying and changing, future developments should not come as a complete surprise.