

# ***The Changing English in Phrase*** Investigating recent language change with corpora

## **Introduction**

**Bas Aarts, Joanne Close, Geoffrey Leech and Sean Wallis**

### ***The background to this book***

There is an exciting emerging research area in English Linguistics which concerns itself with *short-term*, i.e. changes in the language that have taken place over relatively short spans of time, over decades rather than centuries, as is traditionally the case in diachronic linguistics. Changes across shorter periods of time have been studied in the past by a number of scholars, e.g. by Barber (1964), and more recently by Denison (1993, 1998, 2001, 2004), Krug (2000), Leech (2003, 2004), Leech and Smith (2006, 2009), Mair (1995, 1997), Mair and Hundt (1995, 1997), Mair and Leech (2006), and Smith (2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2005). A number of these publications culminated in Leech, Hundt,



studies focus on changes in the use of the progressive in English, as well as the choice between SHALL and WILL. One of the most important methodological tasks, the authors argue, is that it is necessary to focus on linguistic variation *e e e e e*. This ‘onomasiological’ requirement is simply stated, but can be difficult to achieve, and they show that a thorough investigation into whether WILL is replacing SHALL requires a focus on first person alternation and a careful analysis of the modal semantics involved. The reward, the authors argue, is clearer evidence of what precisely is changing than is otherwise possible.

### 3. Mark Davies (Brigham Young)





critical explanatory factor (Tagliamonte 2006). Geographic and economic mobility, shifting social norms as well as the current revolution in communication technology all contribute to the acceleration of certain types of linguistic change at the turn of the twenty-first century. Coming from a sociolinguistic research tradition, Tagliamonte's

Leech and Svartengren (LSAC) corpora which indicate that the progressive is most frequent in informal speech, and rare in formal writing.

9. **Meike Pfaff, Alexander Bergs and Thomas Hoffmann** (Osnabrück)  
 ‘*ed* on the expression of recentness and the English past progressive’

In their 1995 corpus study, Mair and Hundt show that within the 30 year time span between 1961 and 1991/92 the frequency of progressive forms increased measurably – a fact they attribute to shifting distributions of progressive and simple forms, i.e. to the spread of the progressive into the functional territory of the simple verb forms. They thereby appear to rule out, as a major contributing factor to the continuing rise of the progressive, its extension to new functions apart from

(11) I *e d*



with function words that are semantically redundant and grammatically omissible”, and that this “trend towards grammatical economy ties together an array of otherwise unrelated phenomena in the complementation system and awaits further study” (Rohdenburg & Schlüter 2009: 6).

11. **José Ramón Varela Pérez** (Santiago de Compostela)

‘Changes in the use of negative and operator contraction with      in spoken British English’

related constructions, viz. the Sentence adverbial schema and the Transitive schema. This view can account not only for the increasing degree of grammaticalization of comment clauses, but also for the retention of the *wh*-complementizer and thus contributes to a better understanding of the overall diachronic development of comment clauses.

13. **Jill Bowie, Sean Wallis and Bas Aarts** (University College London)  
‘The perfect infinitive in spoken British English’

Most studies of recent developments in the English perfect construction have focused on the present perfect (as in *I have seen her*), comparing its distribution to that of the preterite (*I saw her*). This paper investigates the present perfect alongside the past perfect (*I had seen her*) and infinitival perfect (*I would have seen her*). It presents evidence of recent change in the use of these forms in spoken British English, based on data from the *London Family Corpus* (LFC) (DCPSE), spanning the 1960s to the 1990s. A sharp decline in frequency is found for the past perfect and infinitival perfect,

largely the result of having to find a substitute for SHALL, which has been banned by many legal establishments. (Prescriptive texts throughout the English-speaking world are impervious to the rise elsewhere in HAVE, BE, and the progressive.)

The analysis is based on data from a number of small corpora of legislative English, but the author shows that it is still possible to demonstrate rigorously a series of changes in legal language, not least because these changes have been so substantial over this time period.

#### 15. Stig Johansson (Oslo)

‘Modals and semi-modals of obligation in American English: some aspects of developments from 1990 until the present day’

In this final chapter, Stig Johansson examines the very recent history of MUST HAVE, HAVE, and NEED as (semi-)modals of obligation in American English, as revealed in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA). The general trends observed over the period 1990-2008 are:

- (a) The frequency of HAVE (by far the most frequent of the four modals in this period) has stopped rising, and indeed has begun to decrease;
- (b) MUST has continued to decrease appreciably;
- (c) HAVE is far less frequent than HAVE and MUST, and has decreased in frequency over the two decades under study;
- (d) NEED, in contrast to the above three modals, has increased in frequency strikingly during this period.

The chapter goes on to look at patterns of genre distribution and lexical-grammatical association, noting, for example, that a particularly prominent use of MUST is in hedging performatives (e.g. *we need to*), and that NEED is used strategically to avoid face-threat. Johansson also observes the emergence and function of a little-noted construction where NEED is interrupted by a noun phrase as in *we need a*. In conclusion he illustrates the value of bilingual corpora such as the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*, and pays tribute to the pioneering work in corpus development of Randolph Quirk and the Survey of English Usage.

#### References

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