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Ongoing grammatical change in English: translating corpus-based findings into reference grammars

Abstract

After almost two decades of corpus-based research on ongoing grammatical change in written English (and a somewhat shorter span of work on changes in spoken English), a vast amount of results has accumulated which in many instances still await coherent interpretation and assessment with regard to their importance for reference grammars and language teaching. The main problem is that the observed changes in the usage frequencies of forms and constructions result from different causes. They may reflect changes in the grammatical system itself, they may reflect shifting stylistic preferences in an essentially stable system of systemic choices, or they reflect a mix between these two constellations. This point will be illustrated by surveying recent work on ongoing change in English based on the "Brown family" of corpora (writing) and the *Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English* (speech) by the author and others.

Taking English cleft sentences, modal verbs and noun-phrase modification structures as examples, the paper will make the point that parallel analysis of spoken and written corpus data is required to determine the status of a change, and that great caution is required when translating corpus trends into generalisations for inclusion in reference grammars and language-teaching materials.