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Interpreting Standard Usage Empirically

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Interpreting Standard Usage Empirically

Jacob F. Frandsen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Interpreting Standard Usage Empirically

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Master of Arts

Writers, editors, and everyday language users look to dictionaries, style guides, usage guides, and other published works to help inform their language decisions. They want to know what is Standard English and what is not. Commentators have been prescribing and proscribing certain usages for centuries; however, their advice has traditionally been based on the subjective opinions of the authors. Recent works have analyzed usage by relying wholly or partly on statistical and descriptive data rather than traditional opinion alone; however, no work has presented statistical usage data in a user-friendly and consistent format.

This study presents a statistically based methodology for analyzing the standardness of disputed English usage points that can be presented in a dictionary-like format useful to writers and editors. Using data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English, this study determined the percent of use of several disputed usage items. Percents of use were then applied to a statistically based “standardness” scale with several levels. The scale presented in this study is adapted from scales that have been used previously to study language change. In addition, returns from the Corpus of Historical American English were used to present historical trends, if any, for each usage item.

It was found that traditional sentiments about certain prescribed and proscribed usage items differ markedly from actual observed usage. Corpus data make it clear that even usage guides that purport to rely at least partly on descriptive data are often wrong about the prevalence and acceptability of usage items. To produce truly objective and accurate analysis, usage advice must depend on corpus data and use a standard usage-trend scale that accounts for how language changes.

Keywords: copyediting, usage, grammar, English language, standardization, Standard English, usage guides, language change

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Many writers, editors, and everyday language users look to dictionaries, style guides, usage guides, and other published works to help inform their language decisions—particularly decisions about written language—because of the perception that Standard English is determined at least partially by such language authorities. These resources are often seen as being invaluable, since many English users are not confident in their knowledge of usage rules (Schuster 2003). Traditionally, usage guides have presented guidelines based on the opinions of traditional language “gurus,” including writers and philologists. But the proliferation of subjective, opinion-based guides has made it difficult to determine whether a given usage is acceptable or not.

The purpose of this thesis is to develop an objective, empirical method for determining the “standardness” of disputed usages and to demonstrate how the empirical data that are produced using this method could be used to create a usage guide that is much more useful to writers and editors than existing works. Such a usage guide would present corpus-based usage data in a compact, dictionary-like format, with disputed usages clearly placed on the standardness scale.

The earliest works to address issues of standard English usage began to appear in about the 18th century. Early usage and language experts attempted to “fix” English and to make it more similar to Latin. For the most part, these early works relied solely on the writers’ opinions. Later works began to incorporate more sophisticated methods for analyzing usage. For example, some, like *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* (1985) formed guidelines based on the opinions of their own panel of usage experts. Other works depended on their own “files”—large collections of quotations from various sources—to inform their guidelines. The *Oxford English Dictionary* pioneered this methodology in English.

Finally, starting in the 20th century, linguists and some usage authorities began to examine usage through empirical quantitative studies. Some of the earliest quantitative usage studies took the form of surveys that measured subjects' attitudes toward certain disputed usages. Leonard and Moffett (1927) surveyed subjects who were perceived as being experts on the English language, asking them to classify certain usage items in terms of their acceptability (i.e., whether they were "formally correct," "informally correct," or "illiterate"). Leonard (1932) and Marckwardt and Walcott (1938) expanded on this methodology.

Later, Cameron (1967), Mittins et al. (1970) and Watson (1978) similarly asked subjects to indicate their spontaneous reaction to points of usage. Leonard and Gilsdorf (1990) looked at subjects' opinions from a slightly different angle, measuring the "distraction potential" or "botheration level" of usage points. Gilsdorf and Leonard (2001) repeated the study ten years later with a few alterations.

In other attempts to quantitatively study the acceptability of usage items, some researchers systematically surveyed published language authorities to determine how much consensus could be found. An early example is Copperud (1980), which attempted to synthesize the judgments of contemporary American usage authorities and dictionaries. The work compared eleven usage guides and dictionaries along with several general dictionaries. Copperud implicitly acknowledged some of the weaknesses of traditional usage guides when he pointed out the virtues of dictionaries: "The editors of general dictionaries have access to voluminous files on current practice, far transcending anything available to authors of dictionaries of usage, and also take a more impersonal attitude toward disputed points" (1980: v).

Cresswell (1975) and Peters and Young (1997) compared dictionaries and usage books, categorizing their attitudes toward specific usage items.

Peters and Young were “concerned with the use of empirical evidence and descriptive grammar in the lexicography of usage” (1997: 315). Therefore, their study surveyed how forty usage books from Britain, America, and Australia treated eleven points of usage to see to what degree each relied on description versus prescription.

Another development that affected the analysis of English usage during the 20th century was a move toward descriptivism. One usage guide that broke ground in this field was *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* (1989), which attempted to take a much more descriptive approach. The editors of this work compiled the opinions of many usage experts and drew on examples of actual usage; in addition, they also occasionally referred to data from the Brown corpus.

Corpus analysis of English usage became more common in the late 20th century and allowed researchers to describe current usage by methodically examining actual instances of usage. Large-scale descriptive usage works are still relatively rare, however. Early example of such works that utilized corpus data at least in part include Fries 1952 and Evans and Evans’s *Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage* (1957). Works like Burchfield 1996 and Garner 2009 claim to use corpus data but are not totally descriptive. Other corpus-based usage guides include Peters’s *Cambridge Australian English Style Guide* (1995), the *Guide to Canadian English* (Fee and McAlpine 1997), the *Cambridge Guide to English Usage* (Peters 2004), *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Quirk et al. 1985), and Huddleston et al. 2002.

Biber's *Longman grammar of spoken and written English* (1999) is based solely on analysis of corpus data. It attempts to provide a "detailed description of all the syntactic phenomena of English" (Hirst 2001: 132) based on the 40-million-word Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus. Despite its substantial merits, however, this work, like previous ones, has its limitations.

Currently, several important pieces are in place that can allow for usage to be analyzed using an objective, standard, and statistically based methodology. In terms of opening the door for statistical analysis of usage, probably the most important development was the creation and availability of large and reliable language corpora. Taking a descriptive approach to usage analysis removes the need for subjectivity and allows researchers to move into the realm of facts and evidence rather than intuition and assumption; in turn, corpora allow for this reliable descriptive approach.

Notwithstanding the usefulness of corpus data, editors and writers need more than statistics and figures as they make usage decisions. People who use usage guides need to know exactly what the statistics mean for a certain usage. Here, then, is the missing piece of the puzzle: a statistically based scale that measures the level of "standardness" of a given usage item.

Scales measuring the commonness of certain features of language are in place in linguistic studies. Such scales, however, have not been consistently applied to measuring standardness. Heller and Macris 1967 proposed an earlier four-level scale that tracks the movement of a linguistic feature from the lower to higher levels of acceptability. Garner 2009 took a cue from Heller and Macris and developed a 5-level scale. Biber et al. 1999 used a scale but not specifically for measuring standardness. Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003 used

an objective language-change scale in their studies of language change in English; they built on the work of Labov, applying percentage ranges to his stages of speech changes (1994: 79–83).

This method builds on recent usage guides that attempt to take into account usage data from language corpora. For example, in *Garner's Modern American Usage* (2009), Bryan Garner claims to incorporate corpus data into the usage guidelines he analyzes and comments on. His guide takes a dictionary-like format, which maximizes its usefulness for his audience. In addition, it employs a five-point scale and assigns disputed usages to one of the five categories in his scale. This scale makes it easy for users to quickly pinpoint a usage's degree of acceptability. Unfortunately, Garner's approach falls far short of satisfactory in several respects. First, Garner does not make clear exactly how he uses corpus data or how much weight such data holds as compared to the other information he uses as he crafts his guidelines. Second, Garner does not explain his methodology for assigning disputed usages a ranking in his scale. Third, subjective measures play an important role in Garner's work, making it susceptible to the same weaknesses of nearly every other prescriptive grammar and usage guide produced in the past.

Biber et al.'s *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (1999) improves on some of Garner's weaknesses. First, the work is based solely on usage data gleaned from English corpora. Second, entries clearly show the corpus data for applicable entries. The drawback to *Longman Grammar* is that specific usage items are not addressed in a dictionary-like format: instead, the book is divided into several sections corresponding to grammatical categories and subcategories (for example, the section on verbs contains subsections on single- and multiple word lexical verbs, primary verbs, copular verbs, and so forth). Ultimately, the work is not very helpful for interpreting questions on individual disputed usage items. It contains important data

that can be used to decide usage issues, but leaves to each reader the work of searching out the relevant data and analyzing and interpreting that data in terms of the usage question.

This thesis explores a specific method for analyzing standard usage empirically. Disputed usages with two and only two possible variants (binary forms) will be analyzed using data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The key figure in these analyses is the *percent of use* of each variant. For example, *towards* is a disputed (proscribed) usage in AmE, with *toward* being its complementary accepted (prescribed) form. These two forms make up a binary usage. A search in COCA for the total number of tokens of each form allows for a percent of use calculation.

The next step is to apply this percent of use figure to a statistical scale. The scale used in this study and the descriptors of each level will be discussed in detail later. For now, it can be said that *toward* is a “standard” or “completed” form, whereas *towards* is “nonstandard” or “incipient.”

This information—the percent of use of each form and the corresponding statistical descriptor—is the primary information that editors and writers are seeking after in a usage guide. However, more data can help tell a fuller story about each form. COCA contains data across several genres: spoken, fiction, magazine, newspaper, and academic. In some instances there are significant differences in usage among the genres, and when there are such differences this information could potentially be helpful to writers and editors.

Additionally, in this study each binary form will also be subjected to a search in the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA). A search of COHA will help demonstrate historical trends for each usage and the direction of language change. In the *toward/towards* example, COHA shows that *towards* was the preferred form in the 1910s, when it was used

about 93 percent of total versus *toward*, but then fell out of favor gradually until the present, when in the 2000s it was used only about 9 percent of total. It can therefore be said that *towards* is nonstandard, and it is becoming even less standard. Consequently this is probably a form to be avoided by writers and editors in the United States.

The objective, statistically based usage guide proposed by this study would take a dictionary-like form, organized alphabetically by each usage item. The entry for each item would include all the foregoing information, probably along with a discussion of traditional views and attitudes about each. This format would make the guide the most helpful for its users.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

People have been analyzing English usage for centuries, and myriad books have been published on the topic; however, no work has yet been published that (1) analyzes disputed usages using empirical methods and (2) presents relevant data in a way that is easily accessible to writers and editors. Until recently, such a work was not possible.

In the 18th century, self-proclaimed usage authorities like Jonathan Swift (1712), Bishop Robert Lowth (1762) and Lindley Murray (1795) helped propagate many rules of correctness that are still quoted today, including proscription of split infinitives, double negatives, and sentence-final prepositions. The goals of these and similar writers included upgrading and fixing English and shaping it into a form closer to Latin, a highly regarded language. The title of Swift's book—*Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue*—reflects the attitude held by many language experts of the time. Swift's approach was a “rigorous, logical recasting of the language, chiefly on classical analogies. But with minor exceptions, very little attention was paid to the actual facts of cultivated usage.” (Leonard 1927).

Other authorities used dictionaries to disseminate their ideas. Samuel Johnson (1755) began a tradition of standardizing spellings and word definitions, with Noah Webster (1828) continuing the tradition in America. Countless usage manuals, grammars, dictionaries, and other reference works have appeared since, all relying on different sources to support their rules, suggestions, and conclusions. Differences among authorities' opinions and priorities meant that no two references agreed completely in what items they treated and how they treated them. Competition to become *the* language authority continues to this day because there is no single agreed-upon authority for Standard English. This fact, however, is often unappreciated by those who assume that there are hard-and-fast right ways and wrong ways to use English. Many usage

experts appealed to judgments of moral rightness or wrongness. For example, in light of Fowler 1906 and Fowler 1926, highly regarded commentator Henry Fowler has been described as “an instinctive grammatical moralizer” (Jespersen, quoted in Gowers 1965: viii). The major problem with these early studies and nearly every study since is their *subjective basis*.

Later works have sometimes moved away from the opinions of individuals by forming rules and guidelines based on the opinions of their own panels of so-called usage experts. Such works include *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* (1985), *American Heritage Book of English Usage* (1996, 2000), and *American Heritage Guide to Contemporary Usage and Style* (2005).

Others have depended on their own “files”—large collections of quotations from various sources—to inform their guidelines. Sources taking this approach include *The Oxford Dictionary and Usage Guide to the English Language* (1995), *Penguin Dictionary of American English Usage and Style* (Lovinger 2000), and *New Fowler’s Modern English Usage* (Burchfield 1996). While these works were based on a wider range of opinions than their single-author predecessors, their basis was still totally subjective.

Finally, starting in the 20th century, some usage authorities began to examine usage through empirical and quantitative studies. This approach was totally different from that of 18th- and 19th-century authorities, who used real-life instances of usage only as they supported their own notions of right and wrong. Empirical approaches included acceptability and botheration surveys and source surveys.

Early quantitative usage studies took the form of large surveys that measured subjects’ attitudes toward certain disputed usages. The results of these studies can be systematically examined to draw conclusions about usage. Works that appeal to actual usage have increasingly

been able to examine usage in light of quantitative data, thanks particularly to the availability of large language corpora.

Early writers of grammars and other usage authorities had taken a bipolar view of usage issues: a certain usage was either correct and acceptable or it was not. Researchers later began to realize that a black-and-white approach failed to account for the many factors that might contribute to acceptability or correctness. These factors included regional variation, formality, register, genre, and others. Therefore, survey-based studies generally employed categorical scales as they examined acceptability or frequency. The benefit of categorical scales is that they present acceptability data in the most simple and easy-to-grasp manner. However, as will be seen, acceptability scales tend to be specific to each study, with each scale having unique strengths and weaknesses. No standard methodology or scale has emerged.

Among the earliest studies to measure attitudes toward usage issues was Leonard and Moffett's "Current definitions of levels in English usage" (1927). Contemporary researchers were beginning to challenge traditional English grammar and usage rules (e.g., Fries 1925, Fries 1927, Pooley 1932). Leonard 1927 was "an attempt find out what various judges have observed about the actual use or non-use by cultivated persons of a large number of expressions usually condemned in English textbooks and classes" (1927: 345) This study was an early attempt to analyze how people were actually using language, though the methodology was admittedly lacking, since it depended on 200 educated judges to report through the use of questionnaires on the usage they *had observed*: "Judges were asked to tell what they observed in the usage of those about them, not necessarily what they used themselves or believed should be used" (1927: 345). The judges polled in the study included writers, editors, businesspeople, linguists, and teachers in England, the United States, and Canada. The judges classified 202 proscribed usages as being

“formally correct or literary English,” “informally correct, cultivated English,” or “illiterate, popular English.” The tested usage items were described as being “usually condemned by grammarians and rhetoricians” (1927: 346), but no information is given to explain how the researchers selected which usages to study. The results of the study showed that more than 40 of the tested usages were accepted as being appropriate in informal cultivated speech or writing by over 75 percent of the subjects. The top four most accepted proscribed usages included: “It *behooves* them to take action at once” (misuse of *beehove*), “I *had rather* go at once” (misuse of *had rather*), “He toils *to the end that* he may amass wealth” (misuse of *that* with the phrase *to the end*), and “This is a man I used to know” (omitted relative pronoun). The least acceptable usages were: “He won’t leave me come in,” “My cold wa’n’t any better next day,” and “You was mistaken about that, John.” This study was the first to demonstrate through quantitative means that traditional opinion on certain usages is often very different from how people judge and use them.

In 1932, a fuller analysis of the Leonard 1927 findings was published by the National Council of Teachers of English, with a new scale being utilized: each of the hundreds of usage items were ranked as “established,” “disputable,” or “illiterate,” based on the judges’ questionnaire responses. The study included usage items like the following:

1. It is *liable* to snow tonight.
2. Both leaves of the drawbridge *raise* at once.
3. I felt I could walk no *further*.

As predicted, the study again revealed that traditional usage rules and common usage differed widely. The study argues that “since—as the following study should make evident—allowable usage is based on the actual practice of cultivated people rather than on rules of syntax

or logic, it seems desirable that some method be found whereby this practice can be ascertained and made available for reference” (Leonard 1932: 95). The publishers of the study, therefore, recommended that English teachers use the results to, among other things, prepare directions for schools’ written works, solve composition problems, and inform their own writing choices (vi). In addition, as a “substitution for arbitrary and outmoded textbooks and handbooks,” it could be used to “test the modernity of handbooks and composition texts” (vi). The Leonard studies were some of the first to suggest that qualitative analysis of actual usage and subjects’ attitudes toward usage should be used to help inform language choices and usage guidelines. At the same time, however, the studies revealed the difficulty of creating a useful and helpful scale for ranking and describing certain usages. For example, in Leonard 1927, the “technical English” category was discarded after it was found to be “of no value” (345). Further modifications were made to the scale for Leonard 1932, as mentioned above.

Marckwardt and Walcott 1938 attempted to improve on the methods of and Leonard 1932. They stated that “in contrast to the Leonard study, which is based wholly and frankly upon subjective impression, the present authors have attempted to make their analysis as objective as possible” (1938: 19). The study’s more objective analysis was accomplished by classifying each of the Leonard usages as being *literary English*, *American literary English*, *colloquial English*, *American colloquial English*, *dialect*, or *archaic*, based on citations of the usage in the Oxford English Dictionary and other sources. Of course this approach simply transfers subjectivity from the mass responses of survey participants (as in Leonard 1932) to the collective judgments or several dictionary editors, which in the main could be equally subjective. Even so, the Marckwardt-Walcott classifications shed additional light on certain usages, particularly differentiating between English and American usage.

Mittins et al. 1970 used a methodology that was slightly different from previous survey-based studies. It surveyed 457 judges from both academic and non-academic professions using a 55-item questionnaire. Subjects were asked to indicate their spontaneous reaction to each point of “debatable usage” when it was encountered in informal speech, informal writing, formal speech, and informal speech. They indicated whether they would “accept” or “reject” each usage item in each of the four situations. This study expanded on previous analyses because it was able to examine how attitudes toward usage varied between formal and informal English and between oral and written language.

The goal was to allow teachers to “be less negatively inhibiting and more positively encouraging than so many of the grammarians of the past and manual-writers of the present” (112). The authors suggest that no teacher should “allow the gap between his recommendations and the actual usage of others (not to mention his own actual usage) to become too wide to be spanned” (113).

The results of the Mittins et al. 1970 survey showed that overall the subjects had a tendency towards rejection rather than acceptance. The authors also noted that subjects’ judgments in experimental conditions may not be totally reliable: “Some respondents, perhaps those most familiar with modern linguistics and its advocacy of descriptive as against prescriptive attitudes to usage, may unconsciously have represented themselves as *more* tolerant than they really are. But such cases would probably be easily outnumbered by those who, consciously or unconsciously, were ‘put on their mettle’ by the situation and expressed *less* tolerant reactions than their ordinary language behavior warranted” (11–12).

The authors also observed that some subjects showed a “Canute-like insistence on linguistic practices not endorsed by contemporary society or even by colleagues” (5). This

behavior demonstrates the naturally skewed results that can result in a study that relies on reported opinions.

In his 1967 dissertation at the University of Alberta, Cameron 1967 surveyed the attitudes of businessmen, professors, and English teachers on 40 items of disputed usage, obtaining similar results.

Watson 1978 was based largely on Mittins et al. 1970. Watson surveyed 66 Australian high school teachers on 25 usage items, 19 of which were drawn from Mittins 1970. The other six usages were chosen by Watson. The question posed to subjects and the scale used in this study differed slightly from Mittins et al. 1970; it asked subjects:

Would you correct a pupil in Years 7–10 who used the following expressions:

- (a) in an informal speech situation (e.g., in informal class discussion);
- (b) in a formal speech situation (e.g., a prepared speech);
- (c) in writing? (1970: 33)

The study, therefore, did not make a distinction between formal and informal writing, as did Mittins. For each usage item in Watson, the total number of respondents who answered “yes” and “no” to each of the three questions above was presented, along with a total percent of subjects who said “yes.”

Watson was surprised by some of the results of the study, particularly the apparent “arbitrariness” of some of the subjects’ responses.

It is hard to understand why 12% of teachers would object to “We have got to finish the job” in an informal speech situation, or why 27% would object to “There were less road accidents this Christmas than last” in informal class talk.

There is an arbitrariness about the responses to the questionnaire that suggests that the linguistic prejudices of teachers are in many cases being foisted on pupils. It is hard to see why the use of a reflexive in a non-reflexive position (Item 8—“They invited my friends and myself”) should be considered so much worse than the omission of a case marker (Item 18—“Who was he looking for?”). Yet 20% object to the former in an informal speech situation while only 6% object to the latter. Again, it is hard to understand the grounds on which “off” in Item 15 is to be considered so much worse than “like” in Item 16. (1978: 38)

The “arbitrariness” that Watson points out is another undesirable result of relying on subjective opinion to analyze acceptability.

Hairston 1981 introduced a new approach for measuring subjects’ acceptance of disputed usages. This approach may be seen as a subset of acceptability studies and may be termed a “botheration” study. Hairston measured 84 subjects’ responses to 65 usage items, and subjects were asked to categorize each usage as “does not bother me,” “bothers me a little,” or “bothers me a lot.” Another distinctive feature of Hairston’s study is that its subjects were all “laymen” (795). This is in contrast to previous studies that surveyed only linguists, language experts, and/or other professionals. The purpose of targeting a lay audience was to discover “what kinds of grammatical errors mattered most in the world of real working writing” (795).

The Hairston study counted the total responses to each usage item and then classified each item as being “outrageous,” “very serious,” “serious,” “moderately serious,” “minor,” or “unimportant” based of the number of responses in each of the three botheration categories. The least-accepted usage item was “When Mitchell moved, he brung his secretary with him,” and other nonstandard verb uses provoked a similar level of botheration. Two other categories

exhibited a high level of botheration: (1) double negatives and (2) what Hairston inadequately describes as “beginning a sentence with an objective pronoun” (“Him and Richards were the last ones hired”) (797). The foregoing usages comprised the “outrageous” category. In the “unimportant” category were (1) using a qualifier before “unique,” (2) using “different than” instead of “different from,” (3) using singular verbs with “data,” (4) using a colon after a linking verb (“Three causes of inflation are:”), and (5) omitting the apostrophe in the contraction *it’s*.

Hairston 1981 had a few interesting results, including a much lower botheration rate among men than among women. Previous studies had not examined different levels of acceptance between genders. Beyond categorizing the survey items into the six categories mentioned, Hairston did not perform any further analyses on the study results. This fact illustrates a further weakness in many studies that examine the standardness of usage items: they do not present statistical data in a format that is easy for writers and editors to interpret.

Leonard and Gilsdorf 1990 built on Hairston 1981, measuring the “distraction potential” or “botheration level” of 45 points of usage that are “traditionally considered errors” (141) for two subject groups: post-secondary business communication teachers and business executive vice presidents. Their results showed that subjects were least distracted by lexical issues (for example, using *disinterested* for *uninterested* and *data* used as a singular noun) and most distracted by sentence structure errors (for example, run-on sentences and fragments).

Like so many previous studies, Leonard and Gilsdorf 1990 found that traditional acceptance of disputed usages differs greatly from actual acceptance by subjects. Therefore, the authors suggest that the acceptability of certain usages has changed with time. They assert that the study thus “gives an instructor strong evidence for motivating students to avoid in their writing the errors most distracting to these groups of readers. The study also suggests that some

usage elements traditionally considered errors are not perceived as very serious by considerable numbers of these respondents” (1990: 155). Unfortunately, the study was not able to prove that there had been an increase in the acceptability level of certain usage. This inability to provide historical usage data and therefore examine historical trends is a weakness of the majority of usage studies.

Gilsdorf and Leonard 2001 repeated the Leonard and Gilsdorf 1990 study ten years later with a few alterations. The questionnaire was “streamlined,” and eight usage items were dropped because of their low botheration level in the 1990 study. In addition, the three-point scale from 1990 was expanded into a five-point scale. The resulting questionnaire was completed by 194 academics and executives. This study’s results closely followed those of the 1990 study. In addition, Gray and Heuser 2003 replicated the methods of Hairston 1981, finding that in general subjects were less sensitive to errors than they were in Hairston’s study of some twenty years earlier. See Table 2.1 for a summary of empirical usage acceptability and botheration studies.

Table 2.1—Summary of empirical usage acceptability studies, 1927–2001

These studies reveal important gaps between (perceived) acceptable usage and traditional usage-handbook advice.

Study	Type of subjects	No. subjects	Scale	Form	Types of items analyzed	Example
Leonard and Moffett (1927)	Seven “juries”: one composed of linguists and six of teachers, authors, editors, and others.	222	1. Formally correct or literary English 2. Informally correct, cultivated English 3. Illiterate, popular English	AmE	“A large number of expressions usually condemned in English textbooks and classes.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Under</i> the circumstances • <i>Can</i> I be excused?
Leonard (1932)	Authors, editors, businessmen, linguists, and teachers	229	1. Literary English 2. Standard, cultivated colloquial English 3. Naïf, popular, or uncultivated English	AmE		
Mittins et al. (1970)	English teachers and examiners, other teachers, lecturers, other professionals	457	Acceptable in: 1. Informal speech 2. Formal speech 3. Informal writing 4. Formal writing	BrE	55 “debatable usages”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You’d better go <i>slow</i>,” • “between four powers”
Watson (1978)	High school teachers and college English teachers	83	Acceptable in 1. Informal Speech 2. Formal Speech 3. Writing	AusE	25 items, 19 of which were taken directly from Mittens et al. (1970)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “There were <i>less</i> road accidents” • “They invited my friends and <i>myself</i>.”
Hairston (1981)	“Professional people”	84	1. Does not bother me 2. Bother me a little 3. Bother me a lot	AmE	65 errors in standard English usage	
Leonard and Gilsdorf (1990)	Post-secondary business communication teachers and executive vice presidents in very large firms.	333	1. Does not bother me 2. Bother me a little 3. Bother me a lot	AmE	45 usage elements, traditionally considered errors, seen frequently in their business students’ writing.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “different than” • affect/effect • criteria/criterion • disinterested/uninterested • “felt badly”
Gilsdorf and Leonard (2001)	High-level executives working in very large publicly held U.S. companies.	194	5-point Likert scale: 1 (“doesn’t bother me at all”) to 5 (Bothers me a lot”)	AmE	50 items “which tested for those usage errors seen most frequently in our students’ business writing”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Style issues (sentence fragments, run-on sentences) • Word choice (<i>badly</i> used with linking verb) • Usage items (<i>disinterested/uninterested, affect/effect</i>)

While some researchers worked to survey subjects who were educated but not language authorities, a second approach to empirical usage analysis took the form of source surveys. These studies systematically surveyed published language authorities to determine how much consensus could be found. An early example is Copperud (1964), which attempted to synthesize the judgments of contemporary American usage authorities and dictionaries. Cresswell (1975) compared 10 dictionaries and 10 usage books, examining their coincidence with one another and with the usage notes of the American Heritage Dictionary (1969/71). Cresswell categorized the style guide’s attitudes toward each usage as *restricted* or *acceptable*. The study found little

consensus among the works, both in the usage items they covered and their judgments and recommendation regarding the items.

Peters and Young (1997) examined the attitudes of usage guides on 11 points of usage, categorizing each usage as being “unacceptable,” “restricted,” or “acceptable” according to each source.

In a somewhat related attempt to move away from single opinions and incorporate statistical methods into usage analysis, some works have analyzed usage based on the opinions of panels of usage experts. Such works include *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* (1985), *American Heritage Book of English Usage* (1996, 2000), and *American Heritage Guide to Contemporary Usage and Style* (2005) (see Feris 1970).

Nunberg 1990 attempted to discover how polls of such a usage panel might differ from common usage. The study, therefore, in 1988 surveyed members of the *American Heritage Dictionary*'s usage panel, which was composed of “about 175 well-known writers, scholars, broadcasters, and public figures who are periodically polled for their opinions on sensitive questions of usage” (1990: 469) The study ultimately concluded that the opinion of a usage panel is a poor reflection of the true state of the language:

We were struck, for example, by the panel's turnabout on a set of traditional rules of diction that involve arguments from etymology: “*aggravate* should not be used to mean ‘irritate,’ since its etymological meaning is ‘make worse’”; “*anxious* should not be used to mean ‘eager’”; and so on.

Here are the relevant example sentences (in all of the following, the percentage indicates the proportion of panelists who found the highlighted usage “acceptable”):

Anxious for “eager”: *We are anxious to see the new sculpture show.*

1969: 23%

1988: 52%

Aggravating for “irritating”: *It’s aggravating to have to ask Michelle twice whenever you want something done.*

1969: 43%

1988: 71%

It is clear that these shifts in opinion don’t reflect any abrupt changes in general use. The unetymological uses of *anxious*, *aggravating*, and *transpire* all have respectable nineteenth-century literary precedents. . . . Certainly none of these usages were any less common twenty years ago than now.

On the other hand, the shifts don’t reflect any broad tendency for panelists to be more liberal or permissive than they were on previous ballots. . . . In the notorious case of *hopefully* as a sentence adverb, the panel has actually become progressively more conservative over the course of several surveys:

Hopefully, neither side will insist on a complete cease-fire as a precondition for opening negotiations.

1969: 44%

1975: 37%

1988: 27%

At this point, it is important to point out another development that changed the landscape of usage guides during the 20th century: an increasing move toward descriptivism rather than prescriptivism. One usage guide that broke ground in this field was *Merriam-Webster’s*

Dictionary of English Usage (1989). This work attempted to take a much more descriptive approach than previous usage guides, attempting to compile and survey the opinions of many usage experts and then draw upon its own files for examples of actual usage; in addition, it occasionally refers to data from the Brown corpus. The work “examines and evaluates common problems of confused or disputed English usage from two perspectives: that of historical background, especially as shown in the great historical dictionaries, and that of present-day usage, chiefly as shown by evidence in the Merriam-Webster files” (4a). On many usage items, Merriam-Webster’s presents evidence but draws no real conclusions, allowing the user to do so instead. For example, it suggests that “you can decide for yourself” regarding the fanciness of *behest* (p. 173). In other instances, it gives advice, typical of which are the following: “Professional writers seem to revise them and you should too” (171). “[The spelling *concensus*] is no longer acceptable” (283). “The thing to do is to modify. . .” (403).

An important innovation in qualitative usage research came about in the late 20th century with the use of language corpora. Corpora allowed researchers to describe current usage by methodically examining actual instances of usage. But such descriptive usage works are relatively rare. Algeo (1991) examined usage books from the second part of the twentieth century, finding that very few use an empirical approach. Instead, the majority sit towards the “subjective, moralizing” end of Algeo’s scale, rather than toward the “objectivity and reportage” end. According to Peters (2006), other recent works like Burchfield (1996) and Garner (2009) are also more toward the subjective end of the scale, even though they claim to at least consider corpus data. Peters also points out that style guides that use corpus data tend to use their data only “in support of a priori judgments about correct use—or to identify negative examples. . . .

They show only occasional, grudging acceptance of usage trends, and otherwise affirm the prescriptive approach” (766).

Evans and Evans’s *Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage* (1957) described American usage in part using a purpose-built corpus of journalistic and undergraduate writing. However, no methodology is described by the authors. Another early work that examined usage using a corpus is Fries 1952. *Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* (1989) sometimes refers to data from the Brown corpus, though its main source is its own files. Peters’s *Cambridge Australian English Style Guide* (1995) used the Australian Corpus of English (ACE). Other corpus-based usage guides include the *Guide to Canadian English* (Fee and McAlpine 1997), the *Cambridge Guide to English Usage* (Peters 2004), *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Quirk et al. 1985), and Huddleston et al. 2002.

Take, for example, *Garner’s Modern American Usage* (2009). Garner claims to make usage recommendations based on 10 points of judgment: purpose, realism, linguistic simplicity, readers’ reactions, tightness, word-judging, differentiation, needless variants, conservatism, and actual usage. Although he claims that “the actual usage of educated speakers and writers is the overarching criterion for correctness,” he complicates this statement by adding, “But while actual usage can trump the other factors, it isn’t the only consideration” (xviii). In fact, Garner explicitly decries idea that usage is the only valid consideration in usage recommendations.

Garner’s usage sources include his personal collection of errors, many of which were sent to him by colleagues, and two online databases, NEXIS and WESTLAW. Garner admit that his examples do come from across the country and that a majority come from *The New York Times*, a publication he personally favors. Despite these drawbacks, Garner attempts to be scientific and unbiased in his usage judgments, recognizing the value of relying on real-life examples. He even

claims of his book: “The guidance given here is based on a greater corpus of current published writings than any usage guide ever before published” (xx).

Garner 2009 is typical of many recent style guides that consider corpus data in their recommendations but do not wholly rely on corpus data. Another example is Huddleston et al. 2002, which uses evidence “from several sources: our own intuitions as native speakers of the language; the reaction of other native speakers we consult when we are in doubt; data from computer corpora . . . and data presented in dictionaries and other scholarly work on grammar” (11).

In contrast, Biber’s *Longman grammar of spoken and written English* (1999) is based solely on analysis of corpus data. It attempts to provide a “detailed description of all the syntactic phenomena of English” (Hirst 2001: 132), based on the 40-million-word Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus. The four main registers included in the corpus are transcribed conversations (6.4 million words), fiction (5.0 million words), news (10.7 million words), and academic prose (5.3 million words); two supplementary registers are 5.7 million words of nonconversational speech and 6.9 million words of general prose. The Longman grammar was created as a supplement to Quirk’s *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, which relies on, among other sources such as elicitation studies, the corpus of the survey of English Usage (SEU), the Brown University corpus, and the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen corpus (LOB) (Aarts 1988).

Snyder 2007 examined thirty disputed usage items taken from Connors and Lunsford 1988. Snyder chose the usage items that could easily be studied using data from her corpus; specifically, she chose disputed usages with binary options, meaning usages with two forms (a

proscribed and a prescribed form). Connors and Lunsford, in turn, created their list of disputed usages from their own observations of the most common errors in college writing.

Snyder analyzed the usages in question using data from three text archives that served as corpora—Academic Search Premier provided a corpus of formal English found in scholarly journals; ProQuest served as a corpus for magazines; and Newspaper Source Publications acted as a newspaper corpus. This study is one of only a few to analyze standard usage through corpus data; however, ideally such a study should be carried out using a large-scale corpus (see Davies 2009) to ensure accurate results. Using data from this ad-hoc corpus, Snyder determined a percent of total use for each of the disputed usages. This percent-of-use data determined whether a usage item was standard or nonstandard, based on an arbitrarily defined cutoff point: “For the purposes of this dissertation, the cutoff for standard English is 95% usage and above, and anything that occurs 90% to 95% should be examined carefully. Any item that occurs in more than 10% of the texts should be considered as a plausible variant of standard English” (2007: 83). Such definitions—like Snyder’s “standard” and “plausible”—are highly valuable to writers and editors; however, Snyder’s scale and categories are arbitrarily defined and therefore not extremely valuable from a statistical standpoint. The percent-of-use data produced by Snyder’s study would be much more useful if they could be applied to a proven quantitative scale.

Acceptability scales have been used since the early twentieth century, with Leonard and Moffett 1927 pioneering their use. Leonard 1932 used an early scale with three categories: *formally correct*, *fully acceptable*, and *popular or illiterate*. Marckwardt and Walcott 1938 expanded this scale to comprise *literary*, *colloquial*, *dialect*, and *archaic* (with British and American categories). Later acceptability studies followed a slightly different model, using a simple accept/reject scale that was applied to several formality levels. For example, Mittins 1970

used an accept/reject model within the categories of *informal speech*, *informal writing*, *formal speech*, and *formal writing*. These categories have become something of a standard in acceptability studies. Watson (1978) used the categories of *informal speech*, *formal speech*, and *writing*.

Leonard and Gilsdorf 1990 took a somewhat different approach in that the study did not measure acceptability but rather degree of botheration. Their scale included three levels: *does not bother me*, *bothers me a little*, and *bothers me a lot*. Gilsdorf and Leonard 2001 expanded on the scale, using a scale of 1–5, with 1 being *bothers me not at all* and 5 being *bothers me a lot*. However, they did not account for formality or mode. Therefore, while earlier studies had measured binary scale across several formality levels and modes, Leonard and Gilsdorf used a 5-level scale applied to all formality levels and modes.

Many usage guides make acceptability judgments, but these judgments are not methodological or objective but instead are based on a number of factors (Webster 1989). Some use scales, but again these are based on several factors and only the author can ultimately place items on the scale. An example of such an approach is Garner 2009, which utilizes a “Language-Change Index” to categorize disputed usages (p. xxxv):

Stage 1 (“rejected”): A new form emerges as an innovation (or a dialectal form persists) among a small minority of the language community, perhaps displacing a traditional usage (e.g., **“conundra”* for *“conundrums”*).

Stage 2 (“widely shunned”): The form spreads to a significant fraction of the language community but remains unacceptable in standard usage (e.g., *“phenomena”* as a singular).

Stage 3 (“widespread but . . .”): The form becomes commonplace even among many well-educated people but is still avoided in careful usage (e.g., **“chaise lounge”* for *“chaise longue”*).

Stage 4 (“ubiquitous but . . .”): The form becomes virtually universal but is opposed on cogent grounds by a few linguistic stalwarts (die-hard snoots) (e.g., *“quality”* as an adjective meaning *“of high quality”*).

Stage 5 (“fully accepted”): The form is universally accepted (not counting pseudo-snoot eccentrics) (e.g., *“viewpoint”* for *“point of view”*).

Garner’s index is unusual because it is somewhat based on the concept of language change. The framework reflects the idea that a certain usage may enter the language as an innovation, first being widely shunned, but then becomes widespread and eventually accepted. However, a major drawback is that Garner uses no clear methodology in assigning usage items to a category. Instead, he apparently uses his own instincts and opinion as he categorizes. And the pattern of language change apparently does not totally inform Garner’s guidelines, since he specifies that actual usage is examined alongside several subjective considerations, including *“realism,” “tightness,”* and value judgments (xviii, xx). This approach ultimately means that users of Garner’s book must necessarily trust Garner’s judgment as the authority for the work.

On the other hand, Garner’s book is valuable in its ease of use for the average writer or editor. The language-change scale presents a simple, at-a-glance summary of each usage; without reading the commentary on a given item, readers can quickly see where the item falls on the scale. The book is also laid out in a dictionary-like format, making it easy for users to look up specific disputed usages. Although this user-friendly format is common in usage dictionaries and other works, it is absent from *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, which is a

descriptive work based wholly on corpus data. Therefore, while the corpus-based approach gives a solid authority to *Longman*, the unintuitive layout and lack of clear-cut acceptability categorization limits its usefulness for writers, editors, and casual users—and indeed, these were not *Longman*'s primary audience.

Another type of scale that has not yet been consistently applied to usage analysis is the language-change scale. Linguists have used such scales to examine historical language developments. An early scale that measured language change was Heller and Macris 1967. Their scale is as follows:

Stage 1: The development of a new form.

Stage 2: The increasing frequency of the innovative form and the occurrence of the variants in free variation.

Stage 3: The start of (1) the subtraction of a form or (2) the addition of a function.

Stage 4: The completion of (1) the subtraction (i.e., the disappearance) of the form or (2) the addition of the function (i.e., the complete establishment of the new function).

Garner 2009 adopted these stages and added one more. But neither system statistically defined the boundaries of each stage or category.

Biber et al. 1999 used percentage ranges when discussing the usage of regular and irregular verbs; however, they do not label these ranges with any descriptions to suggest levels of acceptability or stage of change.

Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003 provide an objective language-change scale in their studies, applying percentage ranges to Labov's stages of speech changes (Labov 1994: 79–83). Language change normally follows an s-curve or ogive pattern. The distinctive curve results from the slow rate of initial change, followed by rapid progress in midcourse, and finally slowing

change in the final stages (Bailey 1973; Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog 1968; Kroch 1989a; Kroch 1989b). The s-shape is evidence of the unstable competition that occurs between two forms, with the rate of change governed by the probability of contact between two forms (Labov, 1994: 66).

At the beginning of a change, one form is dominant, and users of this older form rarely encounter a given innovation; therefore, only a small amount of adoption or transfer occurs. At midpoint, as the new form reaches equal status with the old, free variation is observed, with language users highly likely to encounter both forms. This results in a high rate of transfer. The last slow phase occurs because the pressure to change decreases and the existence of language events where the shift can occur decreases (Labov 1994: 65–66). Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg’s scale accounts for the S-curve by having the middle stage cover a large range, and the stages above and below center covering progressively smaller ranges.

Figure 2.1—S-curve

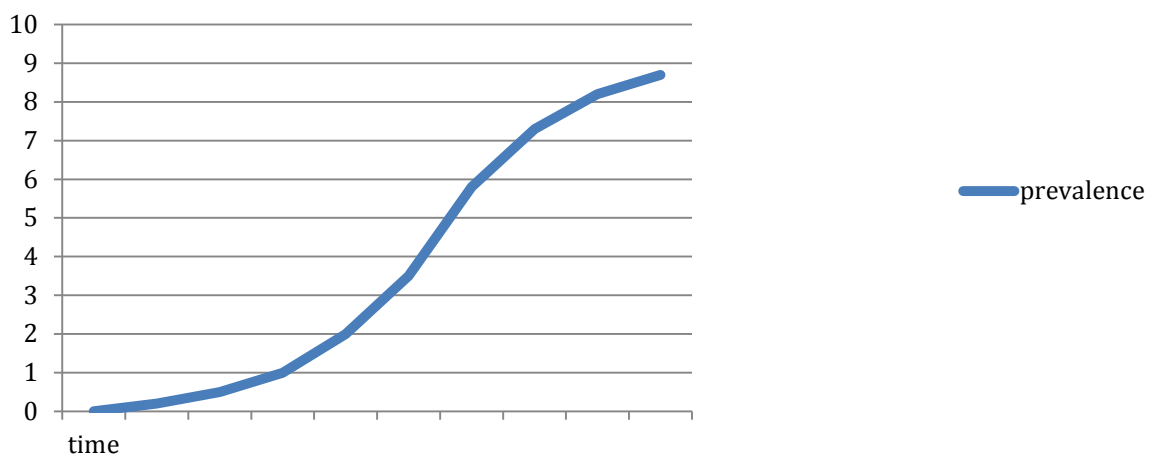



Table 2.2 compares Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg’s scale to those used by the other sources mentioned.

Table 2.2—Language-change scales

The studies below each utilized language-change scales containing four or five categories.

Scale	Source				
Nonstandard  Fully standard	Heller and Macris	Garner	Biber et al.	Labov	Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg
	Innovation	Innovation of a variant	less than 10%	Incipient	less than 15%
	Free variation	More common but still unacceptable	10%–25%	New and vigorous	15%–35%
	Subtraction or addition begins	Commonplace but avoided by the careful	25%–50%	Midrange	36%–65%
	Resolution	Virtually universal, opposed by a few	50%–75%	Nearing completion	66%–85%
	Universally adopted except by “eccentrics”	75% or 85%	Completed	>85%	

Dant 2012 used Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg’s scale as a basis for analyzing disputed usages, and the table above is adapted from her study. This scale is the most useful in informing writers and editors of the state of a disputed usage because it sits within a framework of language change that is easy to understand and clearly defines the state of the item. In addition, it helps dismiss the idea that a certain usage is either right or wrong, instead situating the item within a range or scale, with the understanding that the usage may become acceptable in the future.

However, perhaps the most valuable aspect of Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg’s scale is its objective, statistically based levels. These levels allow for any subjective considerations to be removed from usage guides and other authorities, provided that actual usage

can be analyzed confidently. This can be accomplished through the use of a large and well-designed language corpus.

One weakness of Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg’s scale is that the terms it uses imply that a given term (or in this case, usage) is increasing. Therefore, the term “incipient” implies that a certain usage is new, as does “new and vigorous.” However, for our purposes, these terms are not useful if a certain usage is used, for example, 14 percent of the time but is on its way *out* of common usage. For example, this study discovered that in COCA, the percent of use of *thru* is less than 15 percent. Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg’s scale would therefore classify *thru* as incipient. However, the Corpus of American Historical Usage (COHA) shows that the percent of use of *thru* has been steadily decreasing since the 1960s; therefore, “incipient” is not a satisfactory label. More accurate would be a term like “extinct” or “nearly extinct.” This study will propose a complementary term for each of Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg’s that will imply that a term is decreasing in usage.

Table 2.3—Proposed language-change scale of this study

If the usage is <i>increasing</i> in percent of use	Percent of use	If the usage is <i>decreasing</i> in percent of use
incipient	<15%	nearly extinct
new and vigorous	15%–35%	nearing extinction
midrange	36%–65%	Midrange
nearing completion	66%–85%	universal but decreasing
completed	>85%	Completed

This scale is based on research of how language changes historically. One problem that arises from such an approach is that language change does not always follow this pattern neatly. For example, issues related to “semantic space” mean that a proscribed form hangs on and exists comfortably in certain contexts, peacefully existing alongside the prescribed form and posing no

threat to it. For instance, as discussed later, the proscribed form *creeped* enjoys 100 percent of use in the phrase “creeped out.” And the proscribed form “thru” is common in the term “drive-thru” and a few others. Therefore, it should be pointed out that while the scale in this study reflects how language change *normally* happens, there are many other considerations besides total percent-of-use data that may apply to certain usages. Language change is not always a zero-sum game as the scale tends to imply. For this reason, this study includes other data, including percents of use broken down by genre and decade.

In this study, COHA will be used to determine whether a given usage is increasing or decreasing in its percent of use. This data is potentially very valuable in the context of a corpus-based usage guide because it will help users understand the trend that a given usage is following, and this will in turn help users make more informed usage decisions.

This study uses COCA to analyze the current state of English usage. One shortcoming of COCA is that—like the majority of corpora—it contains mostly written, published speech. Written language is more formal than spoken, and published language is the most “error-free” language there is. Further, published language generally passes through the hands of editors, who make changes in order to bring language in line with accepted norms.

Owen 2013a examined changes to usage and grammar that were made by student editorial interns and professional editors to twenty-two academic journal articles. The editors’ changes were counted and categorized to determine which usage rules were the most commonly applied. These changes highlight the differences between Standard English as produced in academic written works and the *edited* Standard English that makes it into publications. Owens’ data demonstrated that by codifying certain forms and reducing variations, editors play a role in defining and creating edited Standard English. Because the published version of a work does not

necessarily reflect the language produced by the writer, any analysis of usage based on returns from COCA must be qualified as applying mainly to published, written language (except in the case of the spoken segment of the corpus). This fact would be an issue for, for example, a work that sought to give guidelines on the standardness of spoken language, because such a work would need to draw data from spoken language. In the case of the current study specifically, however, this is not an important issue because writers and editors are aiming to produce language on par with *edited* Standard English—the language found in COCA.

Since the 18th century, many different methods emerged that attempted to analyze English usage in an objective way. Although these methods often vary widely, they have a common goal—to discover what is standard or acceptable without relying on intuition or opinion. These studies still have shortcomings, however, as has been discussed, particularly relating to their usefulness to editors and writers. No widely-accepted standardness categories have been defined, nor has the data (either categorical or otherwise) been presented in a format that can be trusted and easily used by writers and editors. This study will propose a methodology that meets these requirements.

Chapter 3: Methods

The goal of this thesis is to examine the benefits of a corpus-based empirical methodology for determining standard usage. This methodology can then be used to construct a dictionary-like usage guide that objectively describes the “standardness” of disputed usage items.

There are many benefits to using an empirical and methodological approach in crafting usage guidelines. A statistical scale in which disputed usages can be placed means that editors and writers can see at a glance the current situation of a usage item.

A corpus-based analysis allows for usage data to be compared across a range of genres. A disputed usage that is ubiquitous in fiction writing may be widely shunned in scholarly writing, for example.

According to the principles of language change, usage items tend to be rejected when they first enter the language, but often grow in acceptance until they are considered standard. A corpus-based analysis of disputed usages reveals the pattern of change over time, and whether a specific usage is waxing or waning in its usage and acceptability.

Within the framework of a statistical scale, a corpus-based approach allows for an objective analysis that is free from opinion and speculation.

Because traditional usage guides and grammars rely on authors’ intuition and personal preferences, there is a wide array of opinions on the acceptability of certain disputed usage items. Beyond this disagreement, usage authorities also differ in which usages they treat, although there is a large amount of overlap. Authorities must use their own knowledge and intuition to decide which usage items are deserving of being included in a work. A corpus study would help reveal which usages are highly disputed and which items are not. For example, a usage “rule” that is universally conformed to in actual usage is probably not worth including in a usage guide, since

users would appear not to have any trouble with it. In addition, a usage-based study allows for the analysis of frequency. Though a certain usage item may be hotly debated, if it is rarely encountered in actual usage, it may not be worth treating in a usage guide. On the other hand, if an item tends to appear frequently in the corpus, it is likely an item that an authority should treat (see Biber and Reppen 2002).

The disputed usages to be examined in the current study are drawn from the 30 studied by Snyder 2007. Snyder's usages were chosen for this study because they can be examined through corpus data. These items can be studied using string searches in corpora, and they were chosen by Snyder because string searches were the only search type possible in her purpose-built corpus. In addition, the use of Snyder's data allow for a comparison with her corpus results. This comparison will be discussed below. The results section will be presented in a dictionary-like format, with alphabetical entries that discuss disputed usage items. These entries will contain several types of information:

1. A discussion of the recommendations of certain usage guides and dictionaries. This discussion will help to establish traditional views of the disputed usage. An in-depth discussion of historical opinions on usage items is beyond the scope of this study (although such a discussion might be helpful to include in a usage guide). The usage guides and dictionaries I will examine are:
 - *Oxford English Dictionary*
 - *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*
 - *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*
 - *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*
 - *Chicago Manual of Style*

- *Associated Press Stylebook*
 - *Garner's Modern American Usage*
2. A discussion of usage data retrieved from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The percent of use of each option of a disputed usage will be determined.
 3. A graph of data from the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA). Any trends that can be discerned from the COHA data will be presented. For example, if either usage option is becoming more common, this fact will be pointed out.
 4. A statement about the standardness of each usage. Using percent of use data and historical trend data, each usage will be applied to the statistical scale discussed above. Each option will be assigned to a level on the scale.
 5. Any other data that is relevant to that particular usage. For the purpose of this study, only a small number of usage items will contain further data from other sources.

At the time of this study, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) contained 189,431 texts, comprising more than 450 million words. The corpus was created by Mark Davies of Brigham Young University. It was launched in 2007 and currently includes 20 million words each year from 1990 to 2012. COCA's texts, both overall and by each year, are evenly divided between five genres:

Spoken: About 95 million total words, from transcripts of unscripted language from about 150 different TV and radio programs.

Fiction: About 90 million words from short stories, plays, books, and movie scripts.

Magazines: About 95 million words from about one hundred popular magazines with topics including news, health, home and gardening, women's, financial, religion, and sports.

Newspapers: About 92 million words taken from ten newspapers across the United States. The text is drawn from local news, opinion, sports, and financial sections.

Academic journals: About 91 million words drawn from nearly one hundred peer-reviewed journals. The included journals cover the entire range of the Library of Congress classification system.

Overall COCA is the largest corpus of American English currently available.

The Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) was also created by Mark Davies; it is the largest structured corpus of historical English, containing 406 million words in more than 100,000 individual texts. It is composed of continuous text samples for every year from 1810 to 2009. The corpus contains texts in the genres of fiction (207 million words total), magazine (97 million), newspaper (40 million), and nonfiction (61 million), and the genres' proportions are balanced across all decades.

For the purposes of this study, I will compare my results with those of Snyder (2007). This comparative information would clearly not be useful in an actual usage guide; however, this information can yield some interesting insights into the benefits of this study's methodology. For example, Snyder used a corpus-based methodology, but with a corpus that is much smaller and therefore less useful and reliable than COCA. In addition, she used a simple standard/nonstandard scale in her analysis. Using a somewhat arbitrary cutoff of 90 percent, she said that any usage that fell above her cutoff was standard and that anything below was nonstandard. By contrast, I will examine these same usage items with a more complete, 5-stage scale.

By comparing COCA data with Snyder's, the benefits of this study's methodology will become apparent. There are several aspects of this study that are an improvement over Snyder's:

- The data for this study will be seven years newer and therefore more up-to-date.
- This study will employ a multilevel scale rather than a two-level “standard”/ “nonstandard” scale.
- This study will consider the direction of language change using COHA.
- This study will draw upon a much larger and better-balanced corpus (COCA).

Step 1: Search COCA for each disputed usage item and term. The “chart” option was chosen for the queries. This option produces bar graphs that indicate the *overall* frequency the queried words or phrases in each section of the corpus. This option allows for a comparison among different genres (spoken, fiction, magazine, newspaper, and academic) and among decades since 1990.

The examples below show samples of search queries and the resulting bar graphs for the various genres and decades.

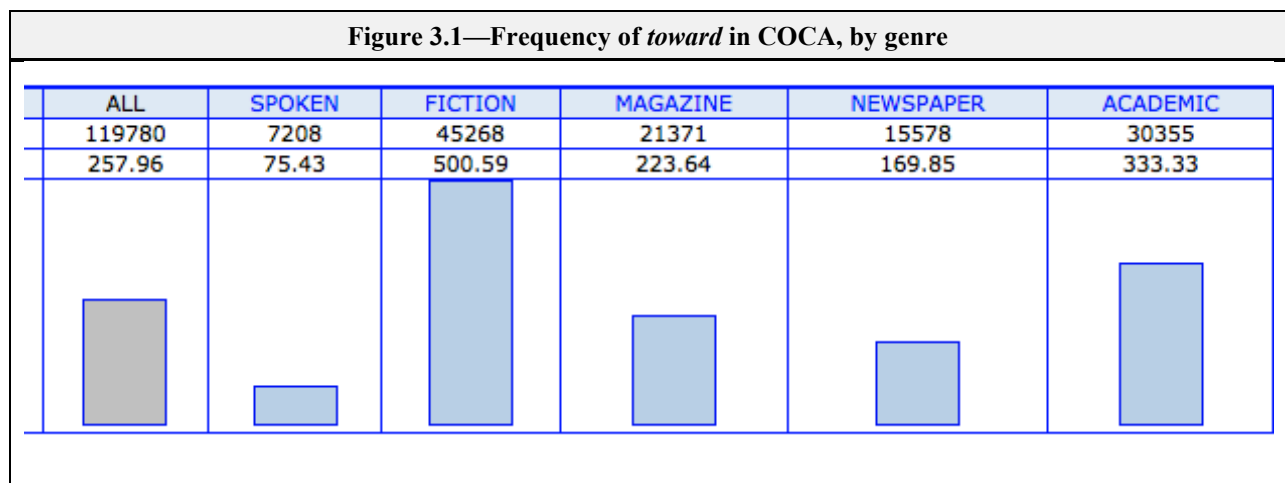


Figure 3.2—Frequency of *towards* in COCA, by decade

1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2009	2010-2012
28615	26550	26282	25658	12675
275.15	256.65	255.31	251.45	244.18

For some queries, the term’s part of speech was specified. For example, to examine the percent of use of *dived* versus *dove*, the search query for *dove* was **dove.[v*]**. Other usage items had to be studied using a series of corpus queries. For example, in the case of *data* (plural)/*data* (singular), Several queries were run using different verbs and *data*: “data are,” “data were,” “data show,” “data demonstrate,” and “data suggest” versus “data is,” “data was,” “data shows,” “data demonstrates,” and “data suggests.”

Step 2: Determine percent of use of each form. A search in COCA for the total number of tokens of each form yields the following figures: *toward* = 120,555; *towards* = 20,750. The total number of tokens of *both* forms is $(120,555 + 20,750) = 141,305$. This total can be used to calculate the percent of total use of each form (in this example, *toward*): $(120555 \div 141305) \times 100 = 85.32$ percent. Therefore, the percent of total for *towards* is 14.68 percent.

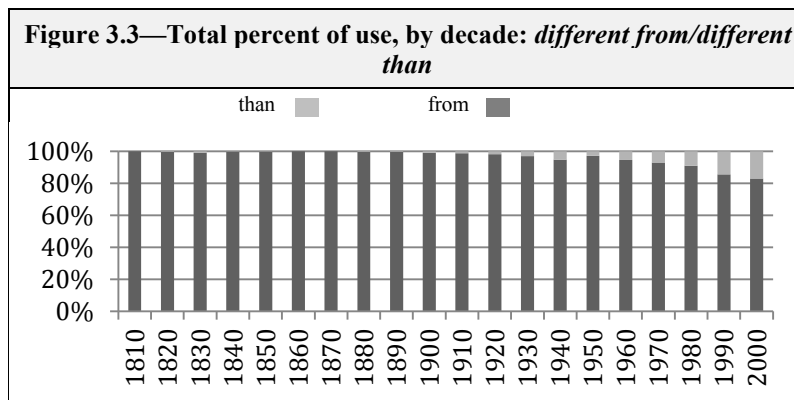
Step 3: Assign each usage to a level on the scale. The scale used in this study, based on the language-change scale sources discussed previously, is composed of five levels. Two descriptive terms are assigned to each level, one that is applied to usages that are increasing in

commonness (percent of use), and one that is applied to usages that are decreasing. COHA was used to determine the increasing/decreasing status of each item.

Table 3.1—Descriptive terms for scale levels, based on whether usage is increasing or decreasing

If the usage is <i>increasing</i> in percent of use	Percent of use	If the usage is <i>decreasing</i> in percent of use
incipient	<15%	nearly extinct
new and vigorous	15%–35%	nearing extinction
midrange	36%–65%	midrange
nearing completion	66%–85%	universal but decreasing
completed	>85%	completed

Step 4: Search COHA for each disputed usage item and term. Returns from the Corpus of Historical American English allow for an examination of historical trends for each usage item. If any general trends can be determined, they are discussed. Historical trends—whether each item is increasing or decreasing—will be considered as each usage is assigned a descriptive term on the scale. Some usage items do not show clear historical trends. Others, like *different from/different than*, do (see figure below).



Chapter 4: Results

This section is presented in a dictionary-like format, with each disputed usage presented alphabetically. Using this format, this section is essentially a small-scale prototype of a descriptive, empirically based usage guide that utilizes the methodology of this study to present results and data that are highly useful for the guide's audience.

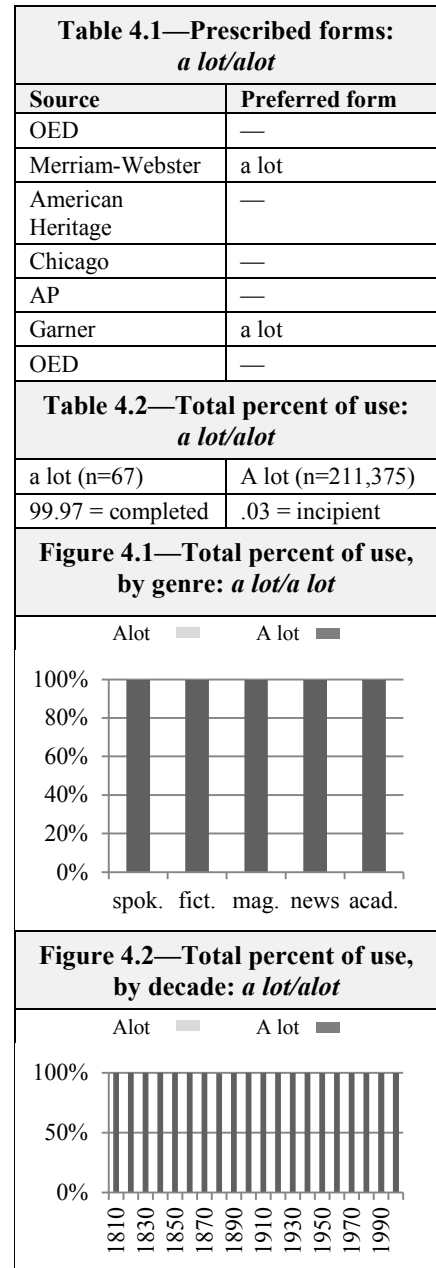
A lot/alot

Both Webster and Garner assert that the one-word form in published works is the result of carelessness, and they agree that the two-word version is standard. The Oxford English Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, American Heritage, Chicago, and AP do not mention the issue (see Table 4.1).

COCA records only 67 occurrences of *alot*, placing it at .03 percent of total versus *a lot* (see Table 4.2). No differences were observed across COCA’s five genres (see Figure 4.1).

This was found to be the most one-sided usage issue addressed in this thesis. Because *a lot* enjoys practically universal, a conscientious style guide for professional editors and writers might not need to address the question. Again, however, Garner chooses to include it in his work, perhaps because *alot* may be showing up frequently in the writing of novices who have not read enough professionally edited text to have acquired the standard form. This may also explain why Garner does not roundly reject *alot* by placing it in his lowest category. Instead, he places in his second category: “More common but still unacceptable.”

COHA’s data do not show a clear trend in the usage of *a lot* and *alot*. Aside from some outliers in the late nineteenth century, *alot* has existed only since the 1930s and its percent of use has remained basically stable since that time (see Figure 4.2).



All right/alright

Alright is a variant of *all right*, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, with *alright* being used since at least 1893. Webster contains a lengthy discussion on the two forms and says that both are acceptable. The debate over spelling has continued since the early 1900s, but today the two-word form is more common in published works. Webster also affirms that most usage handbook proscribe the one-word form, even though “no very cogent reasons are presented for its being considered wrong” (79).

Merriam-Webster includes *alright* as a variant of *all right* and points out that *alright* is commonly considered to be “wrong.” AP and Chicago proscribe *alright*. Garner speculates that *alright* is “gaining a shadowy acceptance” in British English, but claims that it has never been accepted in American English. American Heritage similarly claims that *alright* “has never been accepted as a standard variant.”

COCA shows that *alright* falls on the very low end of the incipient category with 2.92 percent of total. Across genres, fiction is the most accepting of *alright*, and is in fact the only genre in which *alright* is favored (albeit slightly) (see Figure 4.3).

Table 4.3—Prescribed forms: <i>alright/all right</i>	
Source	Preferred form
OED	
Merriam-Webster	all right, alright
American Heritage	all right
Chicago	all right
AP	all right
Garner	all right

Table 4.4—Total percent of use: <i>alright/all right</i>	
all right (n=65,920)	Alright (n=1,984)
97.08 (completed)	2.92 (incipient)

Figure 4.3—Total percent of use, by genre: *alright/all right*

Genre	alright (%)	all right (%)
spok.	~10	~90
fict.	~10	~90
mag.	~5	~95
news	~5	~95
acad.	~10	~90

Figure 4.4—Total percent of use, by decade: *alright/all right*

Decade	alright (%)	all right (%)
1810	~0	~100
1840	~0	~100
1870	~0	~100
1900	~0	~100
1930	~0	~100
1960	~0	~100
1990	~0	~100

Garner is much more generous, assigning it not to his lowest category but his second lowest. As with *alot*, Garner does not choose to outrightly reject *alright*, although English users have clearly done so.

COHA’s data suggest that usage of *alright* has been increasing since about the 1950s. Because its usage is increasing, *alright* can accurately be classified as incipient (see Figure 4.6).

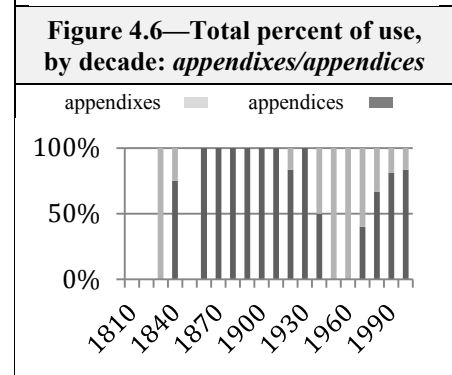
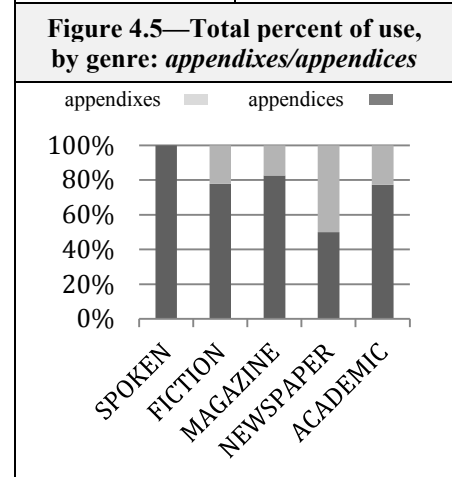
Appendixes/appendices

The Oxford English Dictionary prefers *appendices* but records instances of both spellings since the 16th century. On the other hand, Merriam-Webster and Chicago prefer the spelling *appendixes*. American Heritage lists *appendixes* first and *appendices* second. AP is silent on the issue. According to Webster, both spellings exist in the United Kingdom and the United States, with no clear preference.

Garner does not place either of the usages on his acceptability scale; however, he does say that *appendixes* is “preferable outside scientific contexts” (2009: 54). In COCA, however, *appendixes* does not enjoy higher usage in academic usage. In fact, across all categories, *appendices* represents 77 percent of total, placing it in the “nearing completion” category. In academic usage, *appendices* is actually used less than the average of all categories (70.5 percent).

Table 4.5—Prescribed forms: <i>appendixes/appendices</i>	
Source	Preferred form
OED	
Merriam-Webster	appendices
American Heritage	appendices, appendixes
Chicago	appendixes
AP	appendixes
Garner	appendices

Table 4.6—Total percent of use: <i>appendixes/appendices</i>	
appendices (n=140)	appendices (n=41)
77.35 nearing completion	22.65 new and vigorous



Between you and I/between you and me

Webster finds instances of “between you and I” spanning the past several centuries, concluding that the phrase is currently acceptable in spoken but not written form. Garner prescribes “between you and me.” The other sources do not address the issue.

In COCA, *between you and me* is overwhelmingly favored, enjoying a percent of use of 91.5 percent. This percent is almost identical to Snyder’s (91.55 percent). However, on Snyder’s scale, which cuts off standard at 90 percent, the usage is not considered fully standard. This study’s scale, on the other hand, places it well within the completed range. By contrast, Garner places the nonstandard *between you and me* in category 2 and not category 1. In this case actual use is more conservative than Garner.

It appears from COHA that the usage of *between you and I* has been holding somewhat steady since at least the 1850s.

**Table 4.7—Prescribed forms:
*between you and I/between you and me***

Source	Preferred form
OED	—
Merriam-Webster	—
American Heritage	—
Chicago	—
AP	—
Garner	between you and me

**Table 4.8—Total percent of use:
*between you and I/between you and me***

between you and me (n=183)	between you and I (n=17)
91.50 completed	8.50 incipient

Figure 4.7—Total percent of use, by genre: *between you and I/between you and me*

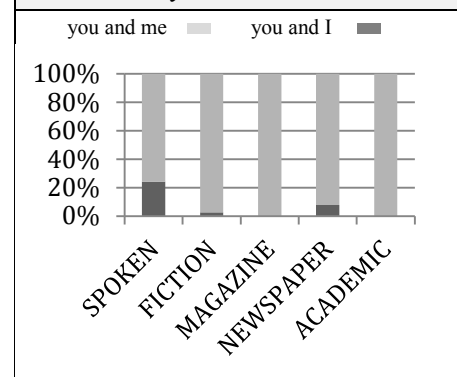
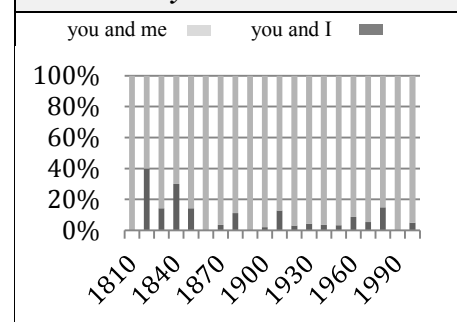


Figure 4.8—Total percent of use, by decade: *between you and I/between you and me*

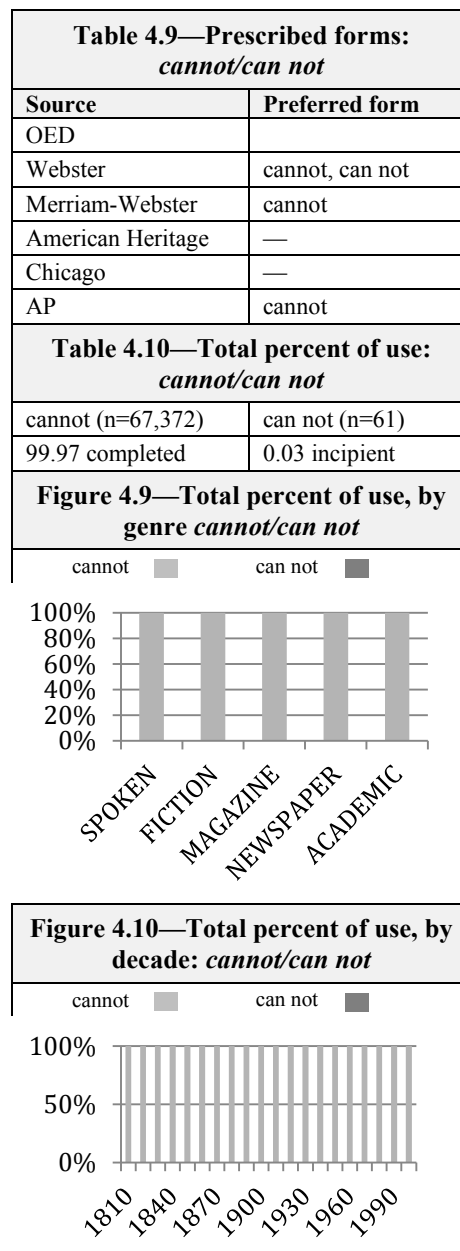


Cannot/can not

Both the one-word and the two-word form have existed since the 14th century, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Webster accepts both spellings but states that “*cannot* is more frequent in current use” (p. 219). Merriam-Webster, Garner, and AP prescribe *cannot*, and American Heritage and Chicago do not mention the issue.

Garner states simply that this term “should not appear as two words” and does not assign it to a category. COCA shows that *cannot* is universally used, with 99.97 percent of total.

This is another instance where a style guide may need not address this now-moot question. Data from all decades covered in COHA show that *cannot* has consistently enjoyed over 99 percent of total use. Since the 1980s, COHA contains no tokens of *can not*.

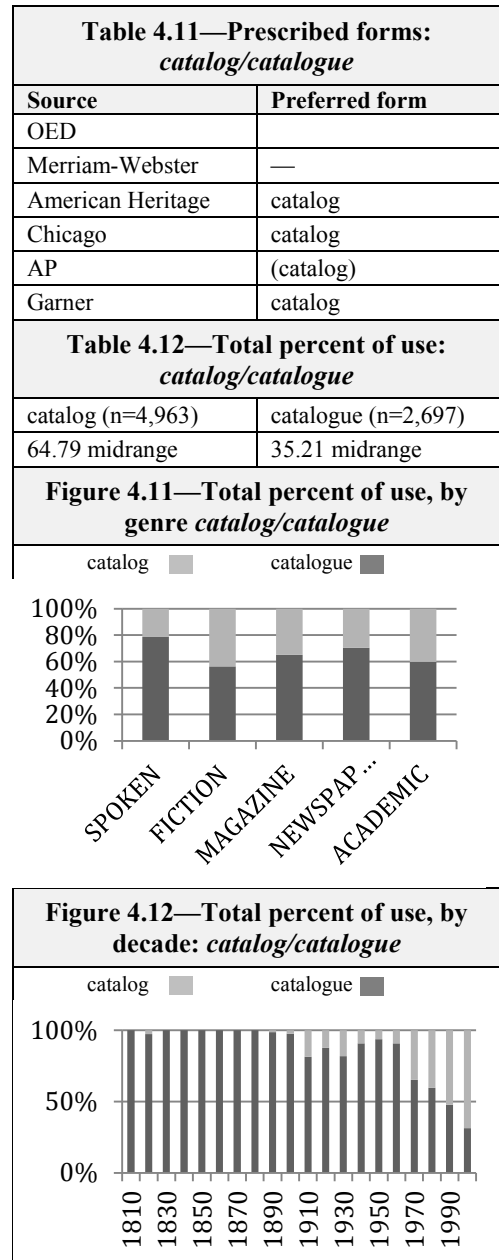


Catalog/catalogue

This word, which was borrowed from French *catalogue*, appeared in two forms—*catalogue* and *cataloge*—in the 15th century. *Catalog* appears in the 16th century, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. After the 16th century, *catalog* apparently dropped out of usage, leaving only *catalogue* until it reappeared in the 19th century. Merriam-Webster and American Heritage both prefer *catalog*. Chicago does not give any treatment to this word’s spelling; however, when the word appears in the book, it is spelled *catalog*. AP style prescribes *catalog*.

Garner asserts that “-ogue” is the better form; however, he does not place his recommended usage in one of his acceptability categories. In contrast to Garner’s opinion, COCA shows that the “-ogue” form is used just 35.21 percent of the time, which falls in Labov’s new and vigorous category, and the “-og” form is used 64.79 percent of the time, placing it in the “midrange.” COCA’s usage data suggests that the two spellings are in a state of free variation, with “-og” moderately favored over “-ogue.”

COHA shows that *catalogue* has been steadily decreasing in American usage since the 1950s.



Crept/creeped

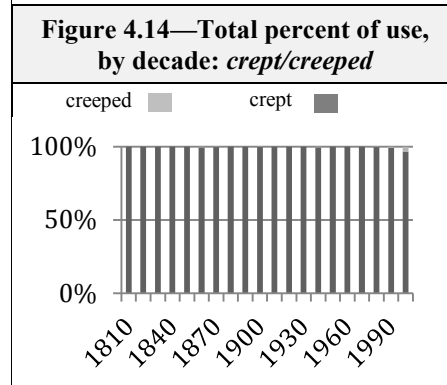
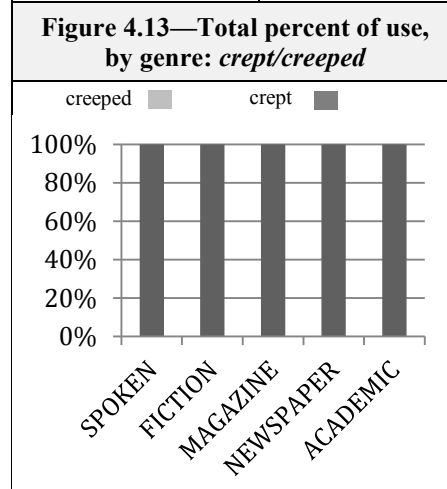
Since the 16th century, both forms have existed, with *crept* being more common than *creeped*, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. According to Webster, *creeped* is the newer form. Neither Chicago nor AP address this particular usage issue. American Heritage, Merriam Webster, and Garner favor *crept*.

In COCA, *crept* is clearly the standard form, with over 99 percent of total use. Only 98 *creeped* tokens appear in the corpus, and 56 of those are part of the phrase “creeped out.” With these tokens removed, *crept* receives 98.3 percent of total use. These data are very similar to Snyder’s, which showed *crept* at 96.33 percent of total. Garner assigns *creeped* to category 1, defined as an innovation of a variant.

A treatment of this usage in a usage guide would not be very valuable thanks to its high level of standardness and its low frequency. COHA data suggests that *creeped* may be infiltrating the language since the 1990s. It is worthwhile to note that the phrase *to creep out* (to make uncomfortable) appears to always take the form *creeped out* and never *crept out*.

Source	Preferred form
OED	
Merriam-Webster	crept
American Heritage	crept
Chicago	—
AP	—
Garner	crept

crept (n=2,431)	creeped (n=97)
98.30 completed	1.70 incipient

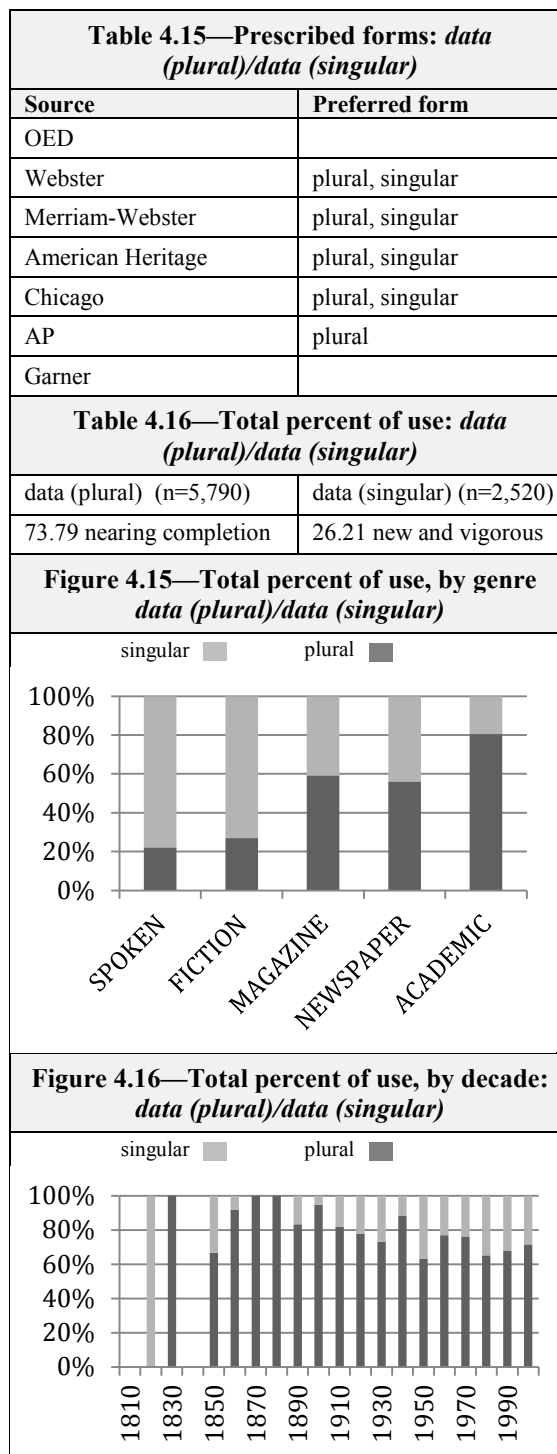


Data (plural)/data (singular)

The Oxford English Dictionary shows that singular *data* is basically an innovation from the 20th century. Webster’s lengthy discussion of the issue concludes by accepting both forms as standard. AP prescribes the use of *data* as a plural, though it concedes that *data* can in rare cases denote a mass noun. American Heritage’s usage survey accepts the singular form, revealing that 60 percent of their usage panel accepted *data* as a singular. Merriam-Webster lists both forms as standard. Chicago takes a vague stance on the issue, prescribing the plural form in formal and scientific writing. Garner calls *data* a “skunked term” because readers will raise their eyebrows no matter which option is used.

Several corpus searches were used to obtain data on plural and singular *data*: *these data*, *data are*, *data were*, *data show*, *data demonstrate*, and *data suggest* represented the plural form; and *this data*, *data is*, *data was*, *data shows*, *data demonstrates*, and *data suggests* represented the

singular form. COCA showed the plural form to be nearing completion, with a percent of total of 78.4. By contrast, Snyder showed the singular and



plural forms to be in free variation, with the plural form (54.6 percent) just edging out the singular. Garner claims that singular *data* is in stage 4, meaning it’s virtually universal.

COHA suggests that singular *data* can be described as “new and stable,” since no significant increases can be observed since the 1800s.

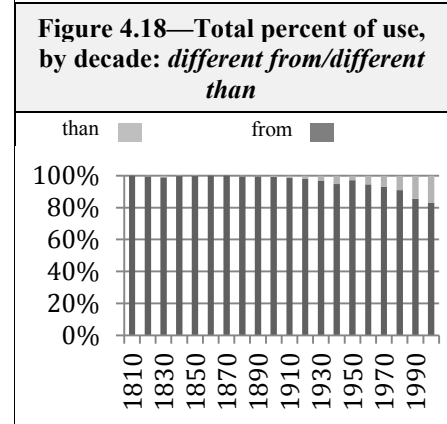
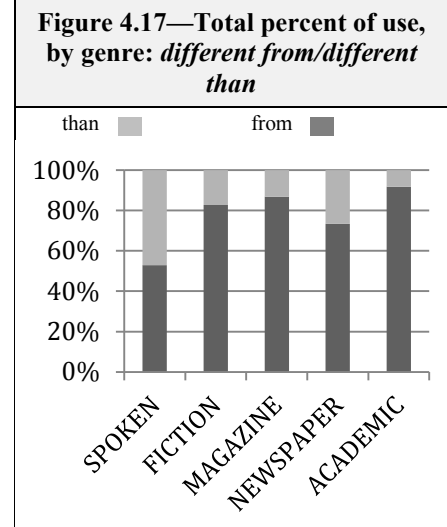
Different from/different than

AP prescribes using the preposition *from* with *different*, rather than the conjunction *than*. Chicago prefers *different from* as well. Merriam-Webster and American Heritage allow both forms. Webster says that *different than* is standard in both American and British usage. According to Garner’s claims, the phrase *different than* implies a comparison and therefore is illogical; however, he admits that *different than* is sometimes useful and even necessary. According to COCA, the preposition *from* is used significantly more than *than*. At 77.74 percent, *different from* can be considered to be nearing completion. Snyder’s results are nearly the same, at 79.57 percent. Garner, however is more generous in his estimate of the usage of *than*, placing it in stage 3.

Different than has apparently been increasing in its usage since the turn of the last century, according to COHA data.

Source	Preferred form
OED	
Webster	different from, different than
Merriam-Webster	different from, different than
American Heritage	different from, different than
Chicago	different from
AP	different from
Garner	different from

different from (n=13,439)	different than (n=3,846)
77.75 nearing completion	22.25 new and vigorous

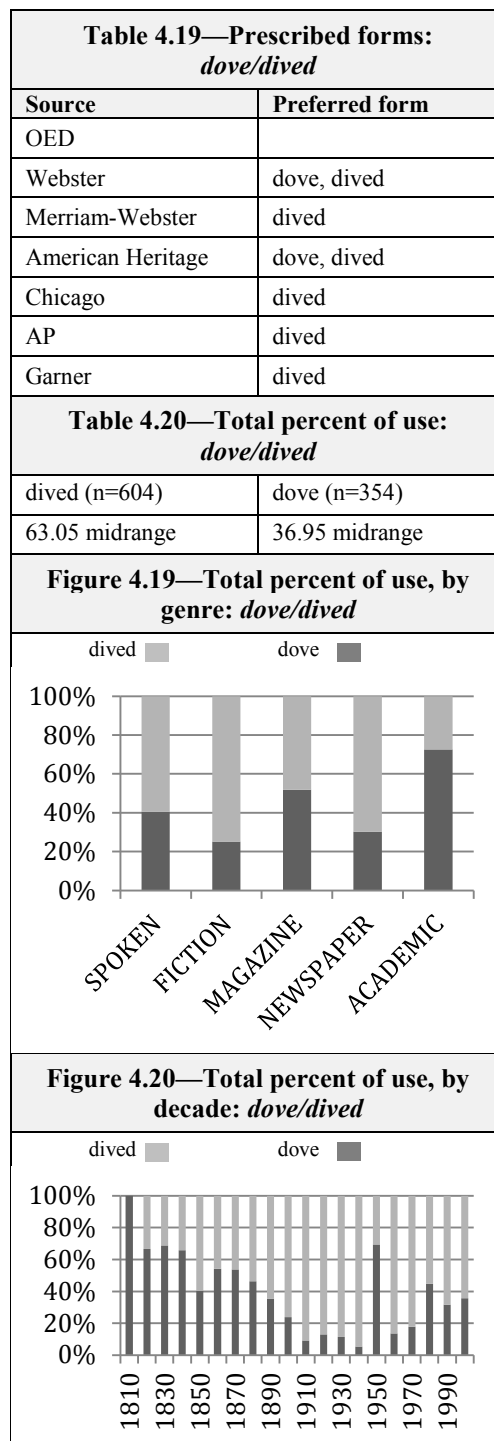


Dove/dived

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, Old English had a strong and weak form of *dive*, but the strong form (analogous to modern *dove*) ultimately disappeared. In modern times, probably thanks to analogy with *drive/drove* and *weave/wove*, *dove* reappeared. Webster dates the appearance of *dove* to the 19th century and accepts both *dove* and *dived*. American Heritage similarly accepts both forms, pointing out that there are regional differences in usage. By contrast, AP proscribes *dove* and allows only *dived*. Chicago recommends *dived* as well. Garner prefers *dived* and claims that it is the more common form.

Dived is used 63.04 percent of total in COCA, meaning it is in free variation with *dove*. Snyder's numbers also show the two words in free variation, but with *dove*, not *dived*, being slightly favored (57.35 percent).

The use of *dived* seems to have reached its highest point in the 1940s and has since seen a steady decrease. Therefore, *dived* might best be classified as “midrange and decreasing” and *dove* might best be classified as “midrange and increasing.”



E-mail/email

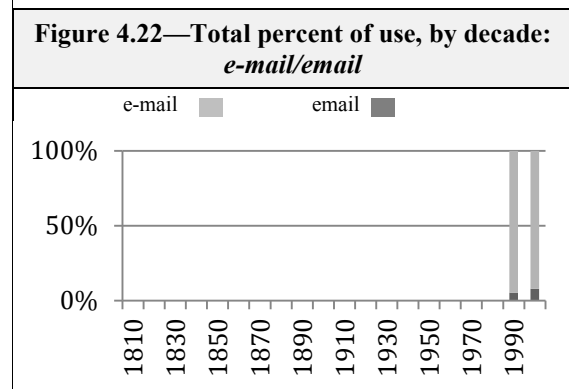
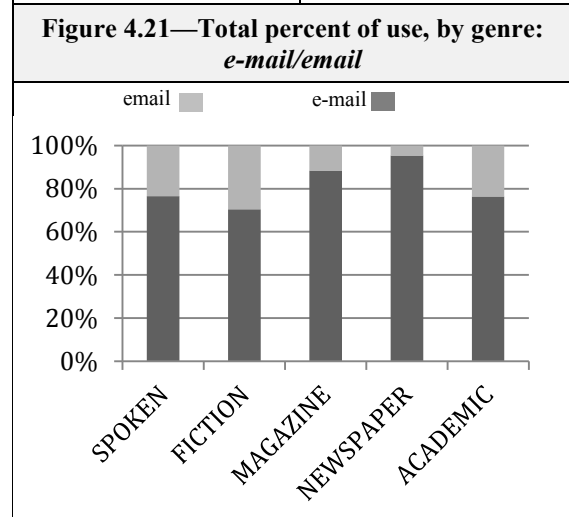
Both *email* and *e-mail* have existed since 1982, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Merriam-Webster, AP, and Chicago use *e-mail*. American Heritage lists the following, in order of preference: (a) *e-mail*, (b) *email*, (c) *E-mail*. Garner makes the claim that “*e-mail* is five times as common as *email*” (204), but he predicts that the hyphen will drop off eventually.

COCA results show that *e-mail* falls just short of the completed category with 84.3 percent of total, while *email* barely edges out of the incipient category. These results are in stark contrast to Garner, who places *email* in his second-highest category: “Virtually universal, opposed by a few.” Garner’s position is therefore completely opposite of actual current usage reflected in COCA.

Because *e-mail* is such a relatively new term, it is difficult to infer any trends in the COHA data, though it implies that *email* may be on the increase. Indeed, data from COCA (1990–present) demonstrate that *email* is on the rise.

Source	Preferred form
OED	
Webster	—
Merriam-Webster	e-mail
American Heritage	e-mail
Chicago	e-mail
AP	e-mail
Garner	e-mail

e-mail (n=23,968)	email (n=4,453)
84.33 nearing completion	15.67 new and vigorous



Formulas/formulae

The Oxford English Dictionary lists *formulae* first and *formulas* second. Webster cannot identify any pattern in the usage of the two spellings. Merriam-Webster lists *formulas* before *formulae*. AP accepts *formulas* only. Chicago has no entry for the word. Garner recommends *formulas* in all cases except in scientific writing.

COCA shows that *formulae* differs from the other Latin plurals examined in this paper because the Latin form is not favored in any register, including academic. Instead, *formulas* is strongly favored, being used 88.23 percent of the time.

No trend is apparent in COHA's data for *formulas* and *formulae*. Perhaps *formulae* could be more accurately classified as “new and stable” rather than “new and vigorous.”

Table 4.23—Prescribed forms: <i>formulas/formulae</i>	
Source	Preferred form
OED	formulae
Webster	formulae, formulas
Merriam-Webster	formulas
American Heritage	formulas
Chicago	—
AP	formulas
Garner	formulas

Table 4.24—Total percent of use: <i>formulas/formulae</i>	
formulas (n=1,799)	formulae (n=240)
88.23 completed	11.77 new and vigorous

**Figure 4.23—Total percent of use, by genre:
*formulas/formulae***

Genre	Formulas (%)	Formulae (%)
SPOKEN	88.23	11.77
FICTION	88.23	11.77
MAGAZINE	88.23	11.77
NEWSPAPER	88.23	11.77
ACADEMIC	88.23	11.77

**Figure 4.24—Total percent of use, by decade:
*formulas/formulae***

Decade	Formulas (%)	Formulae (%)
1810	88.23	11.77
1830	88.23	11.77
1850	88.23	11.77
1870	88.23	11.77
1890	88.23	11.77
1910	88.23	11.77
1930	88.23	11.77
1950	88.23	11.77
1970	88.23	11.77
1990	88.23	11.77

Indexes/indices

The Oxford English Dictionary prefers *indices* in mathematics or computer contexts and *indexes* in reference to the table of topics at the end of a document. Merriam-Webster and American Heritage prefer *indexes* but also list *indices*. AP allows *indexes* only. Although Chicago does not treat the issue specifically, only *indexes* appears in the book. No treatment appears in Webster. Garner strongly favors *indexes* and says *indices* is pretentious in contexts other than mathematics and the sciences.

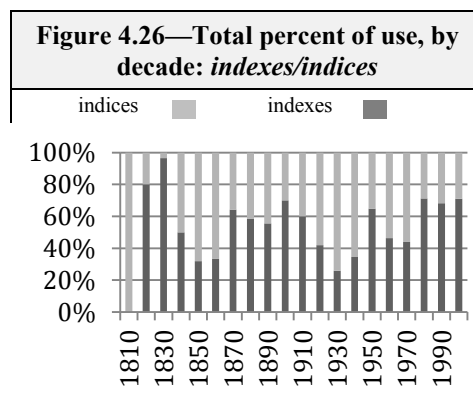
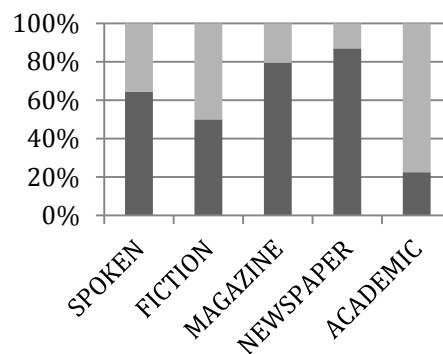
Although Garner calls *indices* “pretentious,” COCA shows a usage percentage of 61 percent of total for *indices*. However, this proportion is significantly skewed by academic texts, which use *indices* at a rate of 77 percent of total. With academic usage removed from the equation, the usage is flip-flopped, with *indexes* favored across all other categories at a rate of 77 percent of total. These numbers show a clear difference between academic usage and usage in all other registers. Interestingly, this pattern is not the same for *appendixes/appendices* (see above): in all registers, the Latin *appendices* was favored.

It is difficult to discern any trends from COHA’s data for these terms. It appears that both terms have, on average, been in the midrange category since the 1840s.

Table 4.25—Prescribed forms: <i>indexes/indices</i>	
Source	Preferred form
OED	indexes/indices
Webster	—
Merriam-Webster	indexes
American Heritage	indexes
Chicago	(indexes)
AP	indexes
Garner	indexes

Table 4.26—Total percent of use: <i>indexes/indices</i>	
indices (n=1,443)	indexes (n=920)
61.00 midrange	39.00 midrange

Figure 4.25—Total percent of use, by genre: <i>indexes/indices</i>	
indices	indexes



Kneeled/knelt

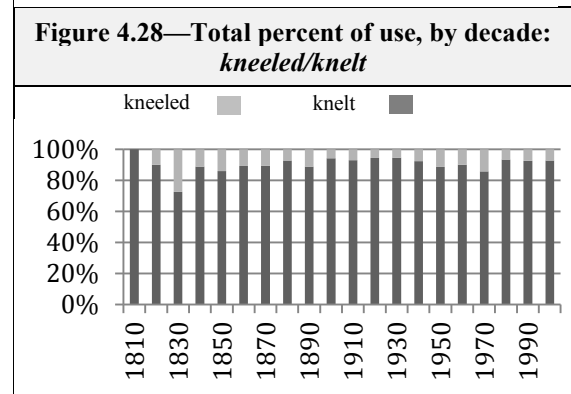
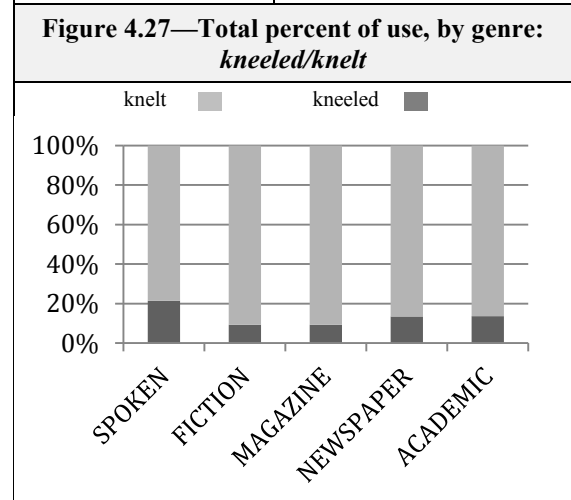
The Oxford English Dictionary says that *kneeled* is the older form and that *knelt* appeared in the 1800s. Webster accepts both forms, stating that *knelt* is more common than *kneeled* despite *knelt* being the newer form. Merriam-Webster and American Heritage both list *knelt* first, with *kneeled* second. AP and Chicago are silent on the issue. Garner prescribes *knelt* as both the simple past and past participle form; he claims that *knelt* is five times more common than *kneeled*.

In COCA, *knelt* was used 90.26 percent of total, placing it easily within the category of completed or standard. According to Snyder, *knelt* has a percent of use of 84.47 percent. Garner claims that *knelt* is at least five times as common as *kneeled*.

COHA reflects no clear trend in the usage of these terms; *kneeled* apparently has never made it out of the incipient range and probably won't in the foreseeable future.

Source	Preferred form
OED	
Webster	kneeled, knelt
Merriam-Webster	knelt
American Heritage	knelt
Chicago	—
AP	—
Garner	knelt

knelt (n=2,421)	kneeled (n=263)
90.26 completed	9.74 incipient



Lovelier/more lovely; loveliest/most lovely

The Oxford English Dictionary, American Heritage, and Merriam-Webster list only the one-word forms.

The forms of *lovely* show the most marked difference of any of the comparative/superlative pairs examined here. The comparative *lovelier* has a percent of use of 67.62 percent, while the superlative *loveliest* has a percent of use of 90.47 percent. This means that *loveliest* can be considered universally standard and *most lovely* a nonstandard, incipient form.

Table 4.29—Prescribed forms: <i>lovelier/more lovely; loveliest/most lovely</i>	
Source	Preferred form
OED	lovelier/loveliest
Webster	—
Merriam-Webster	lovelier/loveliest
American Heritage	lovelier/loveliest
Chicago	—
AP	—
Garner	—

Table 4.30—Total percent of use: <i>lovelier/more lovely</i>	
lovelier (n=94)	more lovely (n=45)
67.63 nearing completion	32.37 new and vigorous

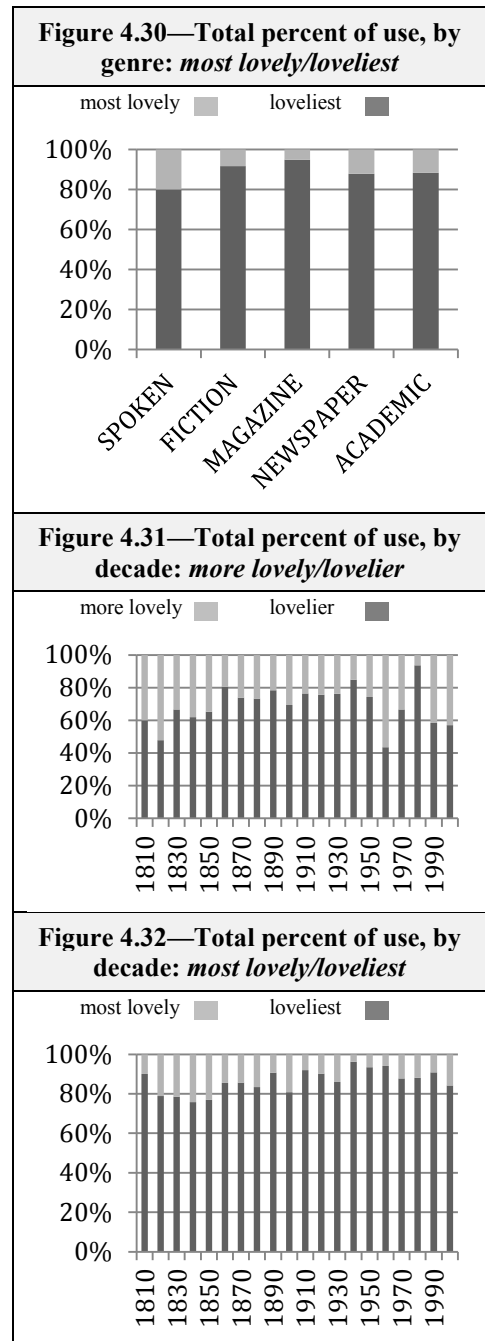
Table 4.31—Total percent of use: <i>most lovely/loveliest</i>	
loveliest (n=247)	most lovely (n=26)
90.48 completed	9.52 incipient

Figure 4.29—Total percent of use, by genre: *lovelier/more lovely*;

more lovely ■ lovelier ■

Genre	more lovely (%)	lovelier (%)
SPOKEN	60	40
FICTION	65	35
MAGAZINE	80	20
NEWSPAPER	70	30
ACADEMIC	30	70

COHA does not suggest any clear historical trend for the usage of either the comparative or superlative forms of *lovely*.



Prouder/more proud; proudest/most proud

The Oxford English Dictionary records the *prouder* and *proudest* inflections since Middle English. American Heritage lists -er and -est as the proper inflections, as opposed to the periphrastic *more proud* and *most proud*. Merriam-Webster lists *proudest* among its example sentences.

In COCA, *prouder* is used 57.08 percent of total. This places it in the midrange category, suggesting it is in free variation with *more proud*. COCA shows that *proudest* is favored over *most proud* at a rate of 67.79 percent of total. *Proudest* enjoys a higher percent of use

than does *prouder* (see above); this result is similar to Snyder’s results, which had *prouder* at 54.32 percent of total and *proudest* at 58.32 percent of total. The COCA figures suggest an even more dramatic difference between the comparative and the superlative, with *proudest*’s percent of total (67.8) being over 10 points higher than *prouder*’s (57.09). *Proudest* therefore falls just within the nearing completion category. All of the “most proud” instances were adjectival—none of them were noun phrases, as in “I think most proud people need to. . . .”

Table 4.32—Prescribed forms: <i>prouder, proudest/more proud, most proud</i>	
Source	Preferred form
OED	
Merriam-Webster	Prouder, proudest
American Heritage	Prouder, proudest
Chicago	
AP	
Garner	
OED	
Table 4.33—Total percent of use: <i>prouder/more proud</i>	
prouder (n=153)	more proud (n=115)
57.09 midrange	42.91 midrange
Table 4.34—Total percent of use: <i>proudest/most proud</i>	
proudest (n=419)	most proud (n=199)
67.80 nearing completion	32.20 new and vigorous

Figure 4.33—Total percent of use, by genre: *more proud/prouder*

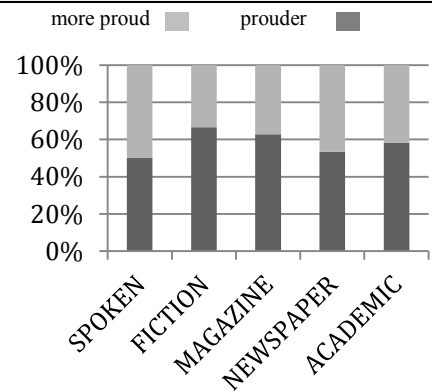


Figure 4.34—Total percent of use, by genre: *most proud/proudest*

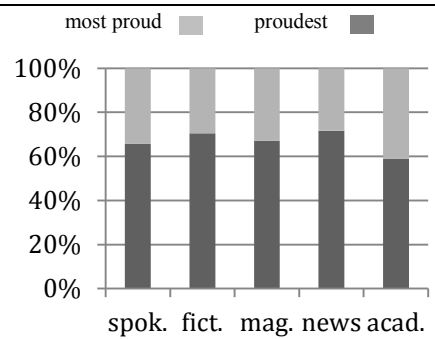
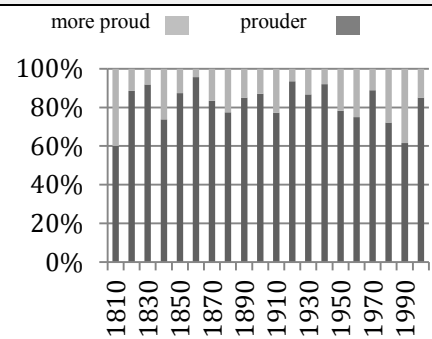
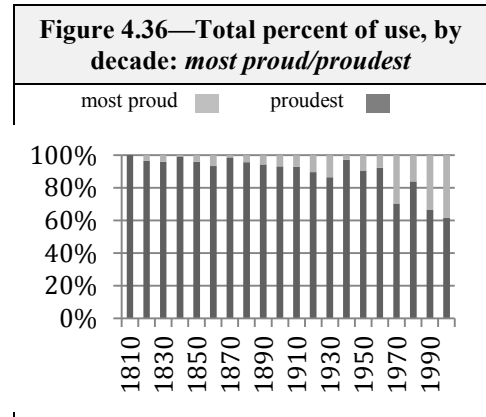


Figure 4.35—Total percent of use, by decade: *more proud/prouder*



In COHA, *most proud* appears to be following an upward trend. However, no trend is apparent between the usage of *more proud* and *proudest*. These terms seem to be holding steady at midrange.



Proven/proved

The Oxford English Dictionary records *proved* as being the past participle form of *to prove* since the era of Middle English, whereas *proven* didn't appear until the 15th century. AP style directs that *proven* should be used only as an adjective and that *proved* should always be used otherwise. Webster does not favor either form and considers both to be equally correct. Merriam-Webster and American Heritage both list *proved* before *proven* (although they allow *proven* as an adjective). Chicago and Garner follow this same reasoning.

For this corpus search, three auxiliaries were used in searches with *proved* and *proven* in order to restrict the results to participles and not adjectives: *has*, *have*, and *had*. In COCA, *proved* and *proven* both fell within the midrange or free variation category: *has, had, have proved*, 53.08 percent; *has, had, have proven*, 46.92 percent. These data are nearly identical to Snyder's, which show *proved* with a percent of use of 53.36 percent. By contrast, Garner places *has proven* in category 4, or virtually universal.

Interestingly, there is a significant difference among the auxiliaries used with *proved/proven*. While *have proven* is used 48.51 percent of the time, *had proven* is used only

Table 4.35—Usage guides' and dictionaries' preferred forms: *proven/proved*

Source	Preferred form
OED	-
Webster	proven, proved
Merriam-Webster	proved (proven only as adjective)
American Heritage	proved (proven only as adjective)
Chicago	proved (proven only as adjective)
AP	proved
Garner	proved (proven only as adjective)

Table 4.36—Total percent of use: *proven/proved*

proved (n=2,857)	proven (n=2,430)
53.08 midrange	46.92 midrange and increasing

Figure 4.37—Total percent of use, by genre: *proven/proved*

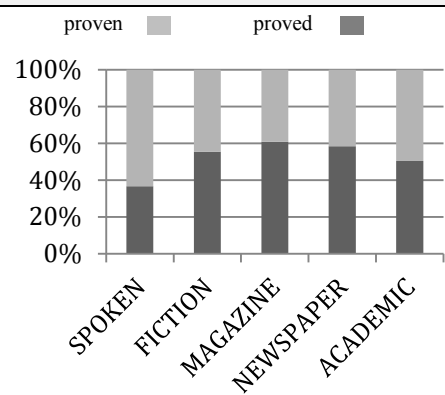
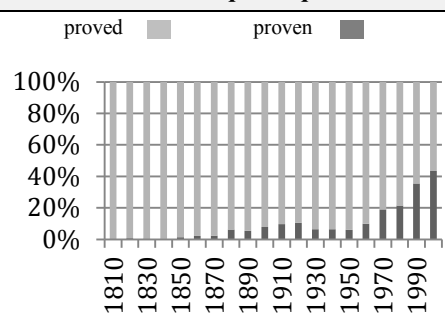


Figure 4.38—Total percent of use, by decade: *more proud/prouder*



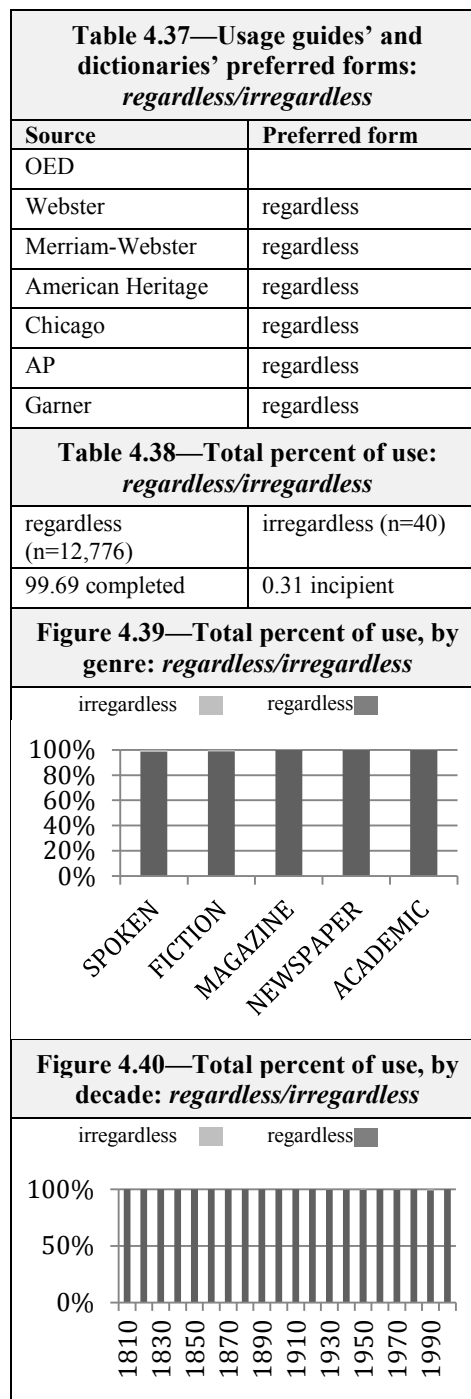
35.6 percent of the time. It appears that language users are more hesitant to use *proven* with *had*.

Use of *proven* has been steadily increasing since its appearance in COHA in about the 1850s.

Regardless/irregardless

Webster and Garner find limited use of *irregardless* in published form and more common use in speech. Both call *irregardless* nonstandard. Merriam-Webster also lists *irregardless* as “nonstandard,” while Chicago calls it “an error.” Garner dubs *irregardless* a “nonword” and strongly proscribes its use, though he assigns it to his category 2 and not 1. AP rejects *irregardless*. American Heritage points out that *irregardless* is sometimes assumed to be more formal than *regardless*.

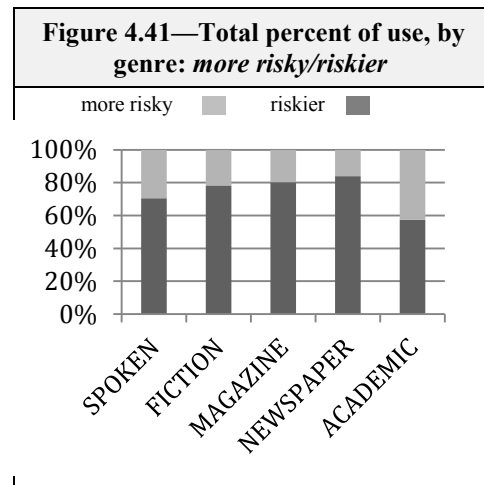
Only 40 *irregardless* tokens exist in COCA, and *regardless* is clearly favored over *irregardless*, at 99.68 percent of total. Snyder’s data are nearly identical, with *regardless* occurring at a rate of 99.86 percent.



Riskier/more risky; riskiest/most risky

Merriam-Webster and American Heritage each list *riskier* and *riskiest* as the comparative and superlative forms of *risky*, rather than the two-word forms. The comparative and superlative forms of *risky* follow a pattern that is similar to *proud*. But the one-word forms are even more common, with *riskier* at 76.48 percent and *riskiest* at 86.19 percent. As with the forms of *proud*, the superlative *proudest* has a higher percent of use than the comparative *prouder*. Snyder's results do not show so dramatic a difference: *riskier*, 75.6 percent; *riskiest*, 77.29 percent).

Table 4.39—Usage guides' and dictionaries' preferred forms: <i>riskier/more risky; riskiest/most risky</i>	
Source	Preferred form
OED	—
Webster	—
Merriam-Webster	riskier/riskiest
American Heritage	riskier/riskiest
Chicago	—
AP	—
Garner	—
Table 4.40—Total percent of use: <i>riskiest/most risky</i>	
riskiest (n=181)	most risky (n=29)
86.19 completed	13.81 incipient
Table 4.41—Total percent of use: <i>riskier/more risky</i>	
riskier (n=556)	more risky (n=171)
76.48 nearing completion	23.52 new and vigorous



The data in COHA suggest that *riskier* is on the increase while *more risky* is nearing extinction. No trends are apparent between the usage of *most risky* and *riskiest*.

Figure 4.42—Total percent of use, by genre: *most risky/riskiest*

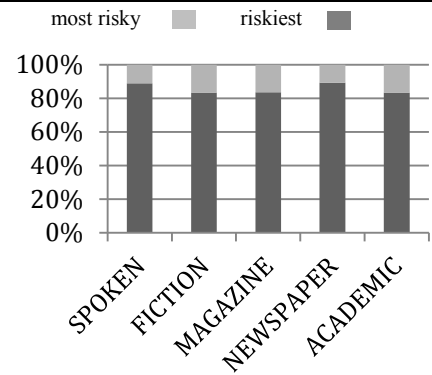


Figure 4.43—Total percent of use, by decade: *more risky/riskier*

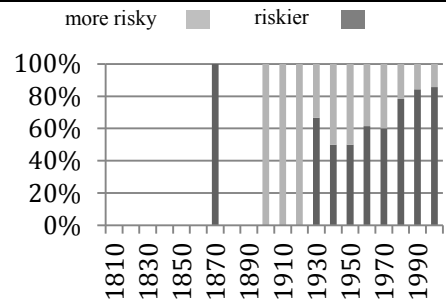
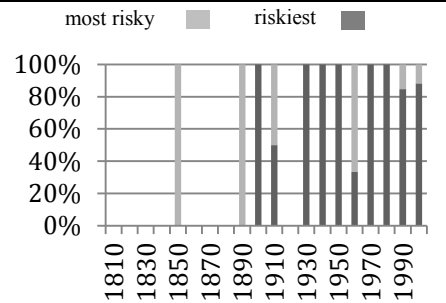


Figure 4.44—Total percent of use, by decade: *most risky/riskiest*



Snuck/sneaked

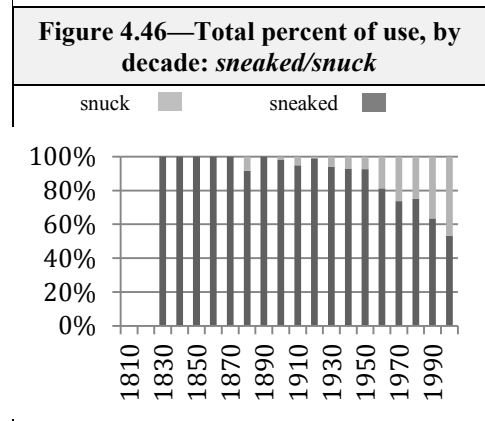
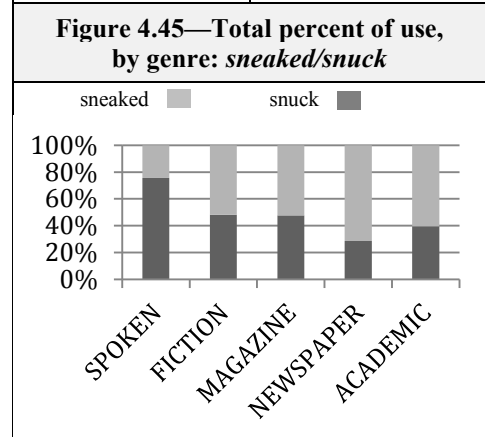
The Oxford English Dictionary asserts that *snuck* is an American invention from the 19th century. AP and Chicago proscribe *snuck*, and Garner describes the form as being nonstandard although it is used half as much as *sneaked*. Merriam-Webster lists *sneaked* before *snuck*. American Heritage claims that use of *snuck* increased about 20% between 1985 and 1995, but still considers *snuck* to be nonstandard, with two-thirds of its expert panel disapproving of *snuck* as of 1988.

The forms *snuck* and *sneaked* enjoy practically an identical percent of use: *snuck*, 49.30 percent; *sneaked*, 50.70 percent. Snyder’s data show *sneaked* enjoying a majority percentage of use, at 61.07 percent, although it is still within the midrange or free variation category. The COCA data agree with Garner, who places *snuck* in stage 3.

COHA shows a clear trend, with *snuck* increasing in percent of use since the 1920s. Therefore *snuck* could be classified as “midrange and increasing.”

Source	Preferred form
OED	
Merriam-Webster	sneaked
American Heritage	sneaked
Chicago	sneaked
AP	sneaked
Garner	sneaked
OED	

sneaked (n=869)	snuck (n=845)
50.70 midrange	49.30 midrange



Sped/speeded

The Oxford English Dictionary shows that *speeded* entered the language in the 18th century, a newcomer among other forms of *sped* that had existed since the 13th century. This issue is not treated in Webster, Chicago, or AP. Both Merriam-Webster and American Heritage list *sped* as the first variant. Garner prefers *sped*.

Sped falls within the standard or completed range according to COCA; however, at 85.56 percent, it does not enjoy as high a percent of use as *crept*. Snyder's data are significantly different, showing a percent of use for *sped* of 50.81 percent. This places *sped* in free variation with *speeded*. Garner places *sped* in category 2, between completed and free variation.

COHA suggests that the use of *speeded* has been increasing since the 1950s.

Table 4.44—Usage guides' and dictionaries' preferred forms: *sped/speeded*

Source	Preferred form
OED	
Webster	—
Merriam-Webster	sped
American Heritage	sped
Chicago	—
AP	—
Garner	sped

Table 4.45—Total percent of use: *sped/speeded*

sped (n=1,607)	speeded (n=271)
85.57 completed	14.43 incipient

Figure 4.47—Total percent of use, by genre: *sped/speeded*

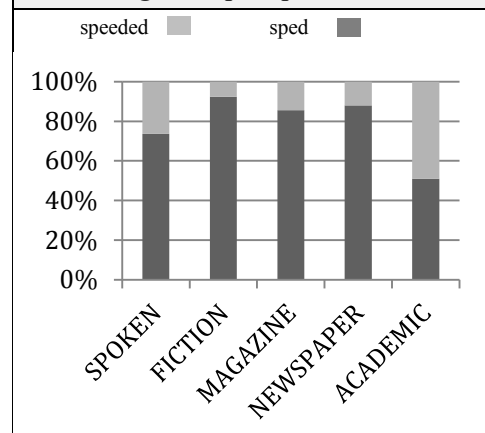
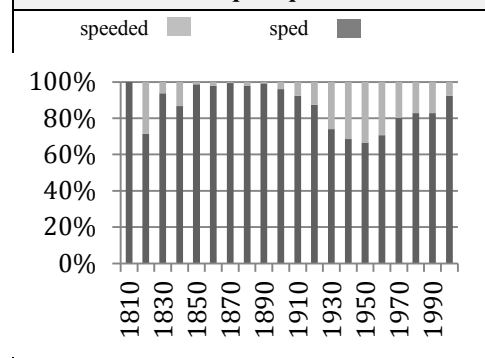


Figure 4.48—Total percent of use, by decade: *sped/speeded*



Syllabuses/syllabi

The Oxford English Dictionary lists only *syllabi* since 1881. Merriam-Webster lists *syllabi* first as the plural form. American Heritage does the opposite, listing *syllabuses* first, and AP accepts only *syllabuses*. Webster does not treat this particular issue. Garner makes the claim that *syllabuses* is preferred in American English at a rate of two to one over *syllabi*, except in legal writing. However, he does not prescribe either over the other.

The usage of *syllabus* and *syllabi* is similar to *appendixes/appendices* in that the Latin form is favored across all genres. In fact, *syllabi* is the most favored Latin plural of the four examined in this study; it is used over 93 percent of the time.

No clear trend on these terms' usage can be seen in COHA's data. In fact, as recently as the 1960s, *syllabuses* enjoyed 100 percent of usage in COHA. This suggests that the terms may be in greater flux than COCA implies.

Table 4.46—Usage guides' and dictionaries' preferred forms: *syllabuses/syllabi*

Source	Preferred form
OED	
Webster	—
Merriam-Webster	syllabi
American Heritage	syllabuses
Chicago	—
AP	syllabuses
Garner	syllabuses, syllabi

Table 4.47—Total percent of use: *syllabuses/syllabi*

syllabi (n=303)	syllabuses (n=22)
93.23 completed	6.77 incipient

Figure 4.49—Total percent of use, by genre: *syllabuses/syllabi*

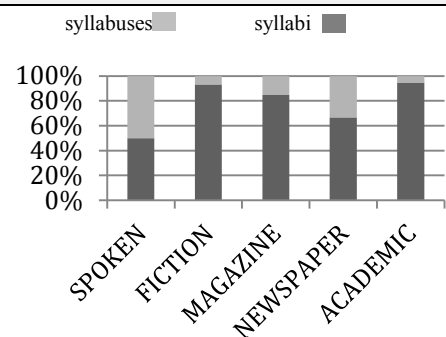
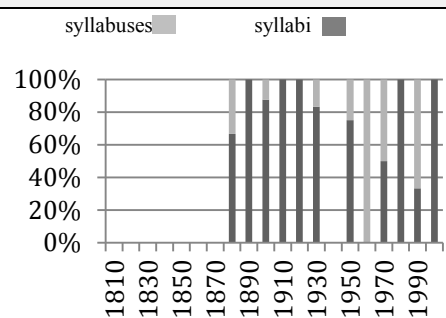


Figure 4.50—Total percent of use, by decade: *syllabuses/syllabi*



Technique/technic

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the *-ic* ending comes from Latin and Greek, while the *-ique* ending comes from French. In the nineteenth century both spellings were used for as nouns. The adjectival use of *technic* appears in 1612 but has mostly dropped out of usage. *Technic* is now almost exclusively used as a noun. The spelling of this word is not treated in Webster, Chicago, or AP.

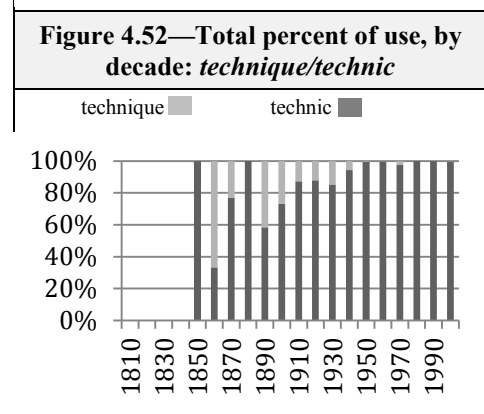
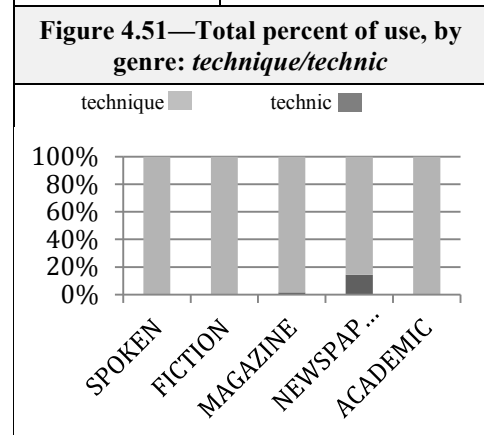
According to Garner, *technique* is standard and *technic* is a “variant spelling to be avoided” (p. 774). Merriam-Webster defines *technic* as *technique*, but not the other way around. American Heritage gives *technique* as the main spelling but also lists *technic* in the same entry.

Even though *technic* is practically absent in current usage, at 2.81 percent of total in COCA, Garner still devotes a paragraph to the question of *technic* versus *technique*. Clearly *technique* falls within the completed category and is universally used; therefore, a conscientious style guide may need not address the question.

COHA shows that the usage of *technique* is on the rise; in fact, no tokens of *technic* exist in COHA since the 1970s.

Source	Preferred form
OED	
Webster	—
Merriam-Webster	(technique)
American Heritage	technique
Chicago	—
AP	—
Garner	technique

technique (n=173)	technic (n=5)
97.19 completed	2.81 incipient



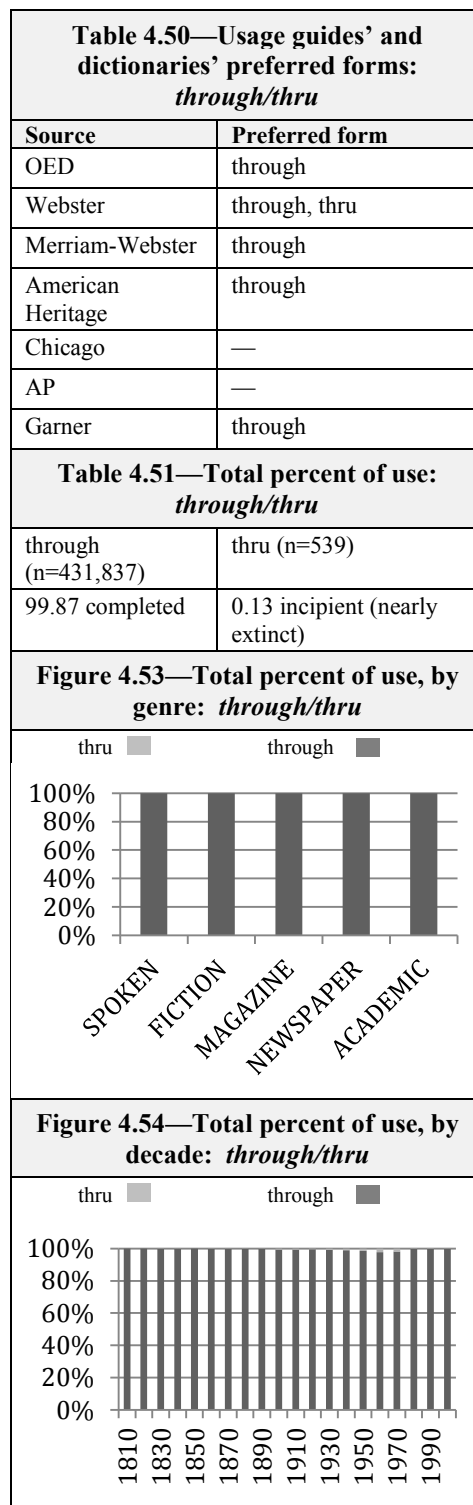
Through/thru

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, through has generally had a *-gh* or *-ch* ending in recorded history, and the word originally ended with a fricative sound. The fricative has disappeared from the pronunciation but not from the orthography. Today, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, *thru* is a variant spelling chiefly in North America. This American innovation *thru* was promoted by several organizations during the 19th and 20th centuries. Indeed, several editorial publications used *thru* at some point. Garner says that *thru* “should be shunned” (p. 814). Because *through* is in the completed or standard range, it is unlikely to be a difficult issue for language users, and style guides should consider not dealing with this issue.

Indeed, neither Chicago or AP address the issue, apparently considering it a moot point.

Across all genres and time periods in COCA, the spelling *through* is used over 99 percent of the time, which establishes it firmly as the standard over *thru*. And in terms

of language change, *through* is becoming even more common, with an increase from 99.74 percent in 1990–95 to 99.97 percent in the 2010s. This may be a statistically significant increase;



even so, however, this would have no real implications for style guides since *through* is so prevalent. Garner roundly rejects *thru* without placing it on his acceptability scale. A modern style guide may need not address this usage because *through* is used universally.

In terms of historical usage, COHA shows that since its peak of use in the 1960s, usage of *thru* has been steadily decreasing.

Toward/towards

Webster and Garner seem to agree that there are no semantic differences between *toward* and *towards*, but they acknowledge that *toward* is prevalent in American usage and *towards* in British. Merriam Webster and American Heritage have entries for *toward* but not *towards*, although *towards* is listed as an alternate form under the *toward* entry. AP proscribes *towards*.

According to COCA, *toward* is complete or standard, being used 85.31 percent of total. Snyder's data place *toward* in the nearing completion category, at 79.04 percent. However, in MICUSP, *towards* is used slightly more than *toward*: *towards*, 53.03 percent; *toward*, 46.97. Therefore MICUSP suggests that the two forms are in free variation.

This discrepancy in MICUSP may suggest that editors are routinely removing *towards* from published texts.

There's a clear trend in COHA that shows that *toward* is increasing in its percent of use.

Table 4.52—Usage guides' and dictionaries' preferred forms: *toward/towards*

Source	Preferred form
OED	
Webster	toward, towards
Merriam-Webster	toward
American Heritage	toward
Chicago	toward
AP	toward
Garner	toward

Table 4.53—Total percent of use: *toward/towards*

toward (n=120,555)	towards (n=20,750)
85.32 completed	14.68 incipient (nearly extinct)

Figure 4.55—Total percent of use, by genre: *toward/towards*

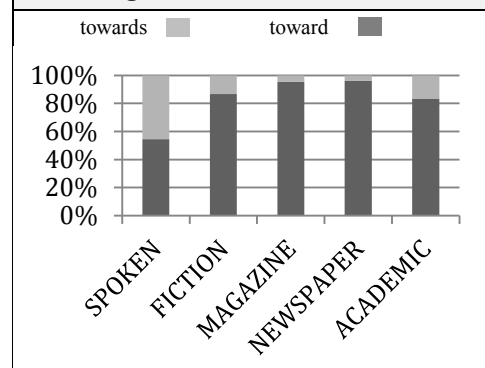


Figure 4.56—Total percent of use, by decade: *toward/towards*

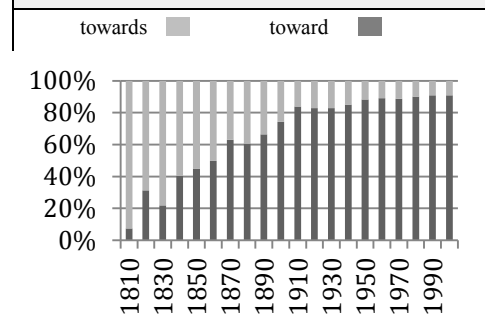


Table 4.54 lists each of the proscribed usages examined in this study, organized and categorized by percent of use.

Table 4.54—Proscribed forms, by percent of use

Incipient	
.03%	alot
.09	can not
.12	thru
.31	irregardless
1.70	creeped
2.81	technic
2.92	alright
6.77	syllabuses
8.50	between you and I
9.52	most lovely
9.74	kneeled
11.77	formulae
13.81	most risky
14.43	speeded
14.68	towards
New and vigorous	
15.67	email
22.25	different than
22.65	appendixes
23.52	more risky
26.21	data (singular)
32.20	most proud
32.37	more lovely
Midrange	
35.21	catalogue
36.95	dove
38.93	indexes
42.91	more proud
46.92	had proven
49.29	snuck

Chapter 5: Discussion

Comparison to Snyder

In general, the results of the COCA searches in this study were similar to the results obtained by Snyder in her 2007 study. However, there were some important differences. For instance, the proscribed usages (e.g., *irregardless*, *thru*, *catalogue*) had higher percents of use overall in Snyder's study. On average, the percent of use of proscribed usages in Snyder's study was 9.87 percentage points higher than in the current study. A full 19 out of 28 proscribed usages were more common in Snyder's data. These numbers suggest that the data in COCA tends to contain more traditional, proscribed usages than the corpus used by Snyder. Several factors might contribute to this difference. Snyder's corpus was much smaller than COCA, and it did not contain a wide variety of genres like COCA does.

The most significant discrepancies between the results of this study and those of Snyder were *syllabi/syllabuses*, *indexes/indices*, *data* (singular or plural), *dove/dived*, and *speeded/sped*. In each of these instances, the percent of use of the proscribed usages in Snyder's data was at least 19 percentage points higher than in COCA.

In COCA, singular *data* was used at a rate of 26.21 percent of total. In Snyder's study, it was used at a rate of 45.40 percent of total (a difference of 19.19 percentage points). Snyder's percent of total would place singular *data* in the midrange or free variation category instead of new and vigorous.

According to Snyder's data, *dove* is used 57.35 percent of total versus *dived*. In COCA, *dove* is used 36.95 percent of total. Incidentally, Snyder's percent and COCA's percent, despite being separated by 20.4 percentage points, both fall within the midrange category. The discrepancy might be explained in part by the fact that Snyder's corpus searches could not be

tagged for part of speech. Therefore, Snyder searched for “he dove” and “he dived,” potentially eliminating a significant number of tokens for *dove* and *dived*. In the COCA search for this study, searches were run for “dove” and “dive,” with each being tagged as a verb. This allowed for all tokens to be counted.

In COCA, *syllabuses* was used 6.77 percent of total versus *syllabi*. In Snyder’s study however, *syllabuses* was used 31.69 percent of total. The difference of 24.91 percentage points is significant.

COCA and Snyder disagree significantly on the percent of use of *indexes* and *indices*. COCA shows *indices* being favored at a rate of 61.07 percent of total, while Snyder has *indexes* favored at a rate of 60.15 percent of total.

The most significant difference between COCA and Snyder is *speeded/sped*. Both have *sped* favored over *speeded*; however, COCA records *speeded* at a rate of 14.43 percent of total (incipient) while Snyder has *speeded* at a rate of 49.19 (midrange).

Comparison to Garner

Of the 25 usage items examined in this paper, Garner placed 13 in one of his categories (though he addressed most of the other items, he did not place them in a category). Of those 13 items, Garner’s categories matched the categories of this study just two times—Garner’s assignment of *snuck* to a level 3 and *creeped* to a level 1. Interestingly, on the remaining 11 items, Garner’s categories were always too liberal and never too conservative. In other words, Garner always overestimated the commonness of the lesser-used or proscribed option. He was off by one category when he placed *alot*, *alright*, *speeded*, *between you and I*, and *irregardless* in category 2 instead of category 1. He was also off by one when he placed *different than* in category 3 instead of 2 and when he placed *dove* and *have proven* in category 4 instead of 3. On

other items he was much further off from COCA's data. He was off by two categories with *email* and singular *data* (he placed both in category 4 instead of 2). There was an even larger discrepancy with *towards*, with Garner assigning *towards* to level 4 (ubiquitous) while COCA data shows *towards* being used just 14.68 percent of total. Finally, Garner's largest discrepancy with COCA was with *syllabuses*. Garner places *syllabuses* in category 5 (fully accepted) but COCA shows *syllabuses* is used only 6.76 percent of total, placing it in the incipient category.

The fact that Garner agreed with COCA only 15.38 percent of the time illustrates the deficiency of non-quantitative analysis of usage. Since Garner claims to take usage into consideration in his book—and almost no other traditional usage guide claims to do even that much—Garner's inaccuracy suggests that traditional usage guides and guidelines are probably woefully inaccurate when compared to COCA.

Other Observations

The corpus searches of this study yielded several interesting results. There were a few instances where COCA's data differed significantly from the advice of traditional usage commentaries. Much more common were usages that are clearly shifting—either increasing or decreasing—and therefore becoming less clear-cut than traditionalists might prefer.

Shifting usages. Usages that are in fluctuating away from the standards of traditional usage include *alright*, *had proven*, *snuck*, and *dove*. For example, *alright* is used a fraction of the percent of total; however, it appears to be on the rise despite it being proscribed almost universally.

Similarly, *proven* as a participle is on the rise. As recently as the 1960s *had proven* was in the incipient range, but it has since that time reached the status of midrange, and it is still increasing. If the trend reflected in COHA continues, *had proven* may be standard within about

40 years. This is a usage that commentators should watch closely, and they might soon need to change their advice concerning it.

Snuck is a universally proscribed form, even though it is in free variation with *sneaked*. In fact, according to COCA, the two forms are used almost exactly equally. In addition, *snuck* is clearly on the increase, and COCA data suggests that if it continues its rate of increase, *snuck* may be standard within about 50 years. Interestingly, Garner acknowledges the prevalence of *snuck* in American writing (although his statement that it constitutes about one-third of total use is far too low), yet he still proscribes its use.

Dived was preferred by four out of the six sources cited in this study. However, COCA's data shows that *dove* is in free variation with *dived*. And *dove* appears to be increasing, mirroring on a smaller scale the increasing usage of the proscribed *snuck*.

Data (plural or singular). According to COCA, *data* as a singular noun is used 26.2 percent of total. These results show that singular *data* is at a level 2 (new and vigorous) and that the plural form is nearing completion. In addition, the plural form shows no sign of decreasing in COCA's data.

Other sources differ widely in their analysis of singular *data*. For example, according to Mittins (1970), singular *data* was accepted by a majority subjects at a rate of 69 percent. And according to Gilsdorf and Leonard (1990), singular *data* was of no bother to subjects. Finally, Garner assigns it a level 4 (virtually universal, opposed by a few). Therefore, COCA suggests that actual usage is more conservative than what the other authorities suggest.

However, when split across genres, it is clear that the distribution of plural *data* form varies greatly.

Table 5.1—Percent of total, by genre: data (plural)

Spoken	Fiction	Magazine	News	Academic
19.89% (new and vigorous)	22.23% (new and vigorous)	49.67% (midrange)	38.25% (midrange)	70.17% (universal but decreasing)

Another trend can be seen across time, which may be statistically significant enough to show that singular *data* is definitely increasing.

Table 5.2—Percent of use, by decade: data (singular)

1990–1994	1994–1999	2000–2004	2005–2009	2010–2012
32.86%	36.98%	41.48%	41.05%	45.13%

The discrepancy in the usage and acceptance of singular *data* between COCA and the other sources may come from the fact that the vast majority of COCA’s sources tend to be edited, published text. Singular *data* is something of a shibboleth in educated writing, and therefore editors may be very sensitive to its use. If copy editors are removing singular *data* from published texts on a significant scale, then COCA may not be a truly accurate reflection of actual usage. Owen 2013a has shown that editors do have an effect on COCA’s texts.

To test the possibility that editors have significantly decreased the occurrence of singular *data* in COCA, a search was run in the Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers (MICUSP), which is an online corpus of student academic writing samples. The corpus comprises approximately 2.6 million words in about 830 papers, including essays, reports, response papers, and so forth. The texts included in MICUSP were written by final-year undergraduate students and graduate students who obtained an A or A- grade on the paper. MICUSP’s texts apparently have not been published or professionally edited. A comparison of

results from COCA and MICUSP, therefore, may suggest a difference between edited and unedited texts and highlight the possible effects of editors on COCA.

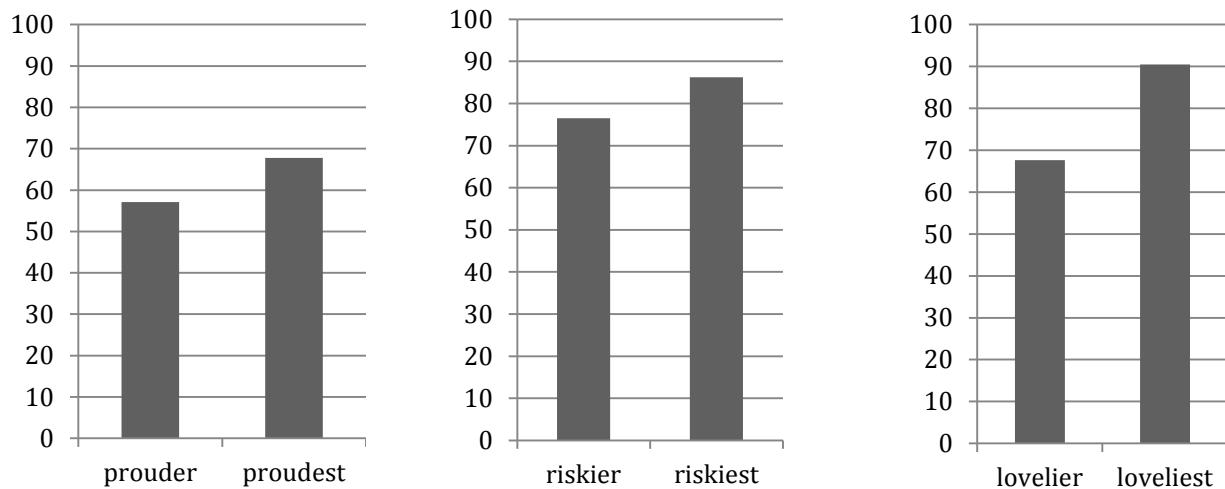
Results in MICUSP showed that singular *data* was favored at a rate of 79.04 percent of total. This places the singular form in the nearing completion range, with plural *data* (20.96 percent) in the new and vigorous range. Therefore, it is possible that editors have indeed reduced the number of occurrences of singular *data* in COCA, if the MICUSP results more actually reflect current usage. However, MICUSP's limited size precludes any confident comparisons to the massive COCA.

Foreign plurals. An interesting trend in COCA relates to the usage of foreign plurals. This study examined seven such plurals: *catalogue*, *technic*, *appendices*, *indices*, *syllabi*, *formulae*, and *criterion*. Interestingly, *syllabi* was the only foreign plural to be used at a high enough rate to be considered standard (93.23 percent). This is despite the fact that most of the sources examined for this study prescribe *syllabuses*. In addition, many sources claim that *syllabi* is much more common or exclusively common in technical or academic genres. For example, Garner states that “in AmE, *syllabuses* outstrips *-bi* by a 2-to-1 ratio. [In legal writing, oddly, the ratio is 10 to 1 the other way: *syllabi* over *-buses*.]” Garner is wrong on two counts. First, *syllabuses* does not outstrip *syllabi* at all in any genre, let alone by a 2-to-1 ratio. COCA shows that *syllabi* is used at a rate of 93.23 percent of total across all genres. The written genre in which *syllabuses* is most common is newspaper, but even in this genre *syllabuses* reaches only 50 percent. The numbers suggest that Garner is also wrong in his implication that technical or academic writing is alone in having a high percent of use of *syllabi*.

Comparatives and superlatives. Another interesting pattern evident in COCA data relates to the use of comparatives and superlatives of monosyllabic and bisyllabic words. The words

included in this study were *proud*, *risky*, and *lovely*. For all of these words, COCA showed that the one-word superlative and comparative forms were both significantly favored over the periphrastic forms. However, COCA also showed that the one-word comparative form was *less* favored than the one-word superlative form.

Figure 5.1—Comparison of comparative and superlative forms: *proud*, *risky*, *lovely*



Moot usage points. Several of the usage items examined in this study are so skewed one direction that it is probably neither necessary nor useful to include them in a usage guide. For example, *irregardless* (.31 percent of total), *thru* (.12 percent of total), and *alot* (.03 percent of total) are all used less than .5 percent of the time. There seems to be hardly any confusion concerning the standard usage of these terms. Other terms used less than 3 percent of total include *technic* (2.8 percent), *alright* (2.9 percent), and *creeped* (1.7 percent).

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The traditional grammar or usage guide is becoming obsolete, thanks to several modern developments that allow for the objective study of disputed usages. Subjective analyses and the opinions of grammar and usage “gurus” need no longer form the basis of usage guides.

With the emergence of large-scale corpora like COCA and COHA, it is possible to empirically and objectively study disputed usages and determine the standardness of such usages. Corpus data has been used in the past to determine percent of use of disputed usages (for example, Snyder 2007); however, no satisfactory statistical scale has been proposed that would allow systematic classification of percents of use.

This study has shown on a small scale that it is possible to create a user-friendly usage guide that takes a dictionary-like format and that objectively analyses the standardness of disputed usages. This objective approach is accomplished thanks to a number of factors. First, objective and reliable data can be retrieved from COCA and COHA. Second, an objective statistical scale is used to analyze percents of use and assign usages to categories or levels of standardness. This scale is based on historical linguistics studies that analyze the appearance of language innovations and how they infiltrate the language.

Owen 2013b pointed out 12 common mistakes that usage commentators make when discussing usage issues. Some of those errors include ignoring register, saying that a disliked word isn't a word, turning proposals into ironclad laws, failing to discuss exceptions to rules, overestimating the frequency of errors, believing that etymology is destiny, and forgetting that correct usage ultimately comes from users. Because it relies on descriptive statistical data, the methodology in this study is immune to these errors.

For example, an analyst who makes the mistake of seeing etymology as destiny might object to the form *formulas* and other non-Latin plurals. However, this study shows that *formula* is eight times as common as *formulae*—clearly, in many cases etymology is not destiny. Another common error cited by Owen is ignoring register. COCA makes it simple to compare usage across several genres, and by taking these genres into consideration this study shows that there are sometimes important differences across genres.

The methodology presented in this study could easily be the starting point for the production of a complete, large-scale usage guide. However, this study does have some shortcomings that will need further research before a full-scale work could be produced.

The first shortcoming is that this study examined only binary usage items—that is, items that have only two possible forms or options. For example, *regardless/irregardless* or *data* (plural)/*data* (singular). Some disputed usage items have three or more options; for example, *chairman/chairperson/chair*. Although such items are relatively rare, this study's statistical scale would need to be adapted to accommodate ternary analysis.

In addition, future studies could focus on producing analyses on broad usage issues rather than narrow, specific ones. For example, this study examined the usage of several Latin plurals (*appendices*, *indices*, *syllabi*, and *formulae*). It would be interesting to analyze a large number of such plurals and determine any trends. It might be helpful for a usage guide to contain a section that outlines data on the use of Latin plurals as a whole, if any can be determined from corpus analysis. Such a broad usage section would allow readers to not have to look up every specific Latin plural they come across.

A shortcoming of this study that has already been mentioned is that it does not go into detail on the historical background of each usage. Other usage guides, notably *Merriam-*

Webster's Dictionary of English Usage, do a thorough job of presenting both sides of the historical argument for each usage. This type of data may not, however, be as useful in the descriptive, corpus-based guide described in this study. This is because (in theory) the historical arguments of language pundits are trumped by the modern descriptive data produced by the methodology described here.

Another arguable shortcoming is that COCA is composed mostly of edited texts (the exception is the 95 million words in the spoken genre). This means that data gleaned from COCA applies mostly to published and edited English and not to spoken language or informal, unedited written language. This is of minor concern, however, because most users of usage guides are in fact writers and editors. For analyzing unedited English, the 1.9-billion-word Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE; <http://corpus2.byu.edu/glowbe>) would be very useful for future studies, since it comprises texts that are more likely to be unedited, including blogs.

For historical trends, Mark Davies' 155-billion-word Google Books corpus (<http://googlebooks.byu.edu>) would have been much better than COHA for many searches in this study. For example, while COHA includes 40 *irregardless* tokens and 12,776 *regardless* tokens, the English Google Books corpus contains 3,422 *irregardless* and 2,684,871 *regardless* tokens. With such a large number of tokens, the Google Books corpus is more reliable for usages where data in COHA is sparse. The drawback is that the Google Books corpus does not contain American English only. Incidentally, in the case of *regardless/irregardless*, the percent of total of the two forms was basically identical in both corpora. *Regardless* was at 99.87 percent of total in Google Books and 99.68 percent of total in COHA.

With further refinements as discussed, this study could easily form the basis of a user-friendly usage guide that objectively analyzes the standardness of disputed usages.

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