

GEOFFREY LEECH

Plenary Talk

Growth and Decline: How English grammar has been changing

In this presentation I will discuss the results of some recent corpus research on American and British English, showing how English grammar has been changing. Some linguistic features have grown dramatically in frequency: for example, the 's genitive (as in the government's decision) and the habit of placing nouns in sequences (as in San Francisco Redevelopment Agency Executive Director Edward Helfeld), also 'semi-modal verbs' such as have to, need to and want to). Other features have been declining - such as modal auxiliaries (particularly must, may, shall, needn't and ought to). Many of these changes show certain continuing tendencies - such as the tendency for written language to become more like speech ('colloquialization') and the tendency for American English to take the lead in changes ('Americanization'). I will end my talk by asking: how do these changes impact on the teaching of English as a foreign language?

Workshop

Workshop on English grammar and the contemporary language

In the workshop I will take up some of the points raised in my lecture, on the changing of English grammar. This is a slow process, but it is interesting to see how forms which were frequent in the 1930s, like the preposition upon and the conjunction for (meaning because) have declined dramatically. What about growth? There has been a big growth in the use of contractions (like don't, and it's) even in written texts. What about the future? I will hazard some speculations about this, on the basis of what we have observed about the recent past. At this point I will open the workshop to general discussion, and will invite participants to ask any questions they may have about English grammar or the contemporary English language in general.

Bio

Geoffrey Leech is Emeritus Professor of English Linguistics at Lancaster University, UK. He has written, edited or co-edited 28 books and over 100 articles. He is best known for his work on English grammar, corpus linguistics, stylistics and pragmatics (especially politeness). Among his books are English in Advertising (published in 1966), A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry (published in 1969), Meaning and the English Verb (published in 1971, with a 3rd edition

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appearing in 2004); Principles of Pragmatics (published in 1983); Language in Literature (published in 2008).

He has co-authored many books on English grammar, including the Communicative Grammar of English (with Jan Svartvik), An A-Z of English Grammar and Usage, and two enormous reference grammars, A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language (written with Randolph Quirk and others, 1985) and the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written Language (with Douglas Biber and others, 1999). All these books have been published by Longman, now Pearson/Longman.

Geoffrey's interest in creating and working on computer corpuses (or corpora) began early, in 1970, and he took a leading part in compiling the first available computer corpus of British English, known as the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus (or LOB Corpus for short). Later he took a leading role in compiling the 100-million-word corpus of spoken and written English, the British National Corpus, known familiarly as the BNC. It should be mentioned also here that his main publisher Longman, together with Oxford University Press, played a leading part in supporting the development of these corpora.

His work on English language corpora has continued up to the present time, and a book most relevant to the present lecture, called Change in Contemporary English, is to be published later this year by Cambridge University Press. This is another collaborative publication, being co-authored by Geoffrey with Marianne Hundt, Christian Mair and Nick Smith.

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