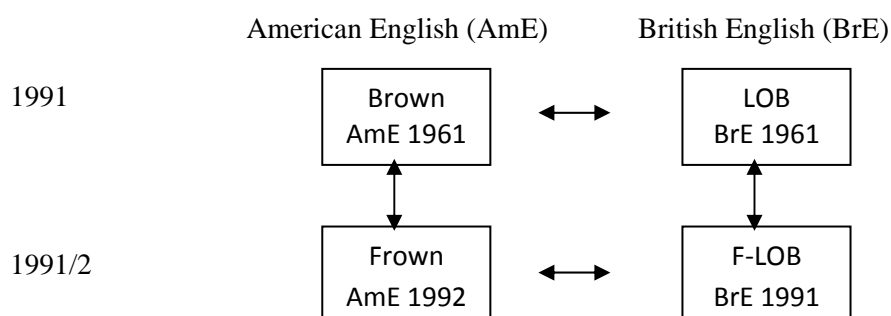# BOOK REVIEW

**Leech, Geoffrey, Marianne Hundt, Christian Mair and Nicholas Smith. 2009.** *Change in Contemporary English: A Grammatical Study.* **Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.**

This book provides knowledge of change in the grammar of English. It is based on empirical research and is different from many other linguistic text-books. In the introduction, the authors tell about what motivated them to do this work. They say, "…there is very little we know about grammatical change in written standard English in the twentieth century….What, then, are the causes of this apparent 'grammatical blindness?'" (Leech et al 2009: 1).

In the presentation of the content, "a starting point is provided by the many current hypotheses and assumptions about changes going on in English grammar, which are rarely completely unfounded, but documentation is usually very patchy, impressionistic, and colored by prescriptive linguistics." (Leech et al 2009: 14)

Therefore, the authors conducted research so as to be able to state how certain features in English grammar have changed. Based on English corpora, the study focuses on a consensus list of grammatical topics, e.g. decline of the inflected form *whom*; increase in the use of *get*-passive; a tendency towards analytical comparison (e.g. *politer, politest* → *more polite, most polite*); elimination of *shall* as a future marker in the first person; use of *BE going to* instead of modal auxiliaries, etc.

Chapter 2 describes the methodology used in research, which is labeled "comparable corpus linguistics." Four corpora are used as data: 1) the Brown corpus (created by Nelson Francis and Henry Kucera) representing 1961 American English; 2) the Langcaster-Oslo/Bergen or LOB corpus representing 1961 British English; 3) the Freiburg-Brown or Frown corpus representing 1992 American English; 4) the Freiburg-Langcaster-Oslo/Bergen or F-LOB corpus representing 1991 British English. These four corpora are matched for the comparison as shown in the following diagram.

|  | American English (AmE) | British English (BrE) |
|---|---|---|
| 1991 | Brown AmE 1961 ←→ | LOB BrE 1961 |
| 1991/2 | Frown AmE 1992 ←→ | F-LOB BrE 1991 |

Frequencies of the occurrences of each grammatical feature were presented in the form of graphic representations with the authors' explanation and interpretation.

Chapters 3 to 10 provide the results of the analyses covering the following grammatical features:

| | |
|---|---|
| Chapter 3 | The subjunctive mood |
| Chapter 4 | The modal auxiliaries |
| Chapter 5 | The so-called semi-modals |
| Chapter 6 | The progressive |
| Chapter 7 | The passive voice |
| Chapter 8 | *Take* or *have a look at a corpus*? Expanded predicates in British and American English |
| Chapter 9 | Non-finite clauses |
| Chapter 10 | The noun phrases |

In each of the chapters, clear statistical tables and figures are given, which enable the reader to follow the content and the authors' interpretation. The results of the comparative analyses can be summarized briefly chapter by chapter. Concerning the subjunctive mood (Ch.3), it is found that the mandative subjunctive (e.g. *He insisted that they go. I ask that they not leave*.) is in the process of replacing periphrastic constructions with *should*, more so in AmE than in BrE. In contrast, the use of *were* subjunctive in counterfactual if-clause (e.g. *I wonder if it were possible*.) is a recessive feature of standard written English. It is being replaced by *was*.

The chapter on modal auxiliaries (Ch.4) shows the declining use of the modal auxiliaries (especially *would, may, must*) in written standard English, the changing use of the modals in different genres (decrease in the use of *may* and increase in the use of *can*), and the decline in the use

of auxiliaries that express the meaning of strong obligation (e.g. *must*).

The next chapter (Ch.5) concerns the so-called "semi-modals" (e.g. *have to, BE going to*, *BE to, have got to*). The ones that have increased strikingly over time are *Be going to, have to, want to* (=*need to*). The authors explain that the increase is due to the decline of the meaning of strong obligation and necessity; i.e., *Be going to, have to* and *want to* are semantically softer than *will, must,* and *need to*, respectively.

Regarding the progressive (e.g. *I know that you are studying Chinese, Have you been waiting long?*), Chapter 6 shows a significant expansion of the progressive in BrE and AmE in the late twentieth century. The pattern of development is, however, highly variable across genres. Also, the use of progressive *BE*-passive and *will+be +ing* have expanded significantly in BrE, but not AmE.

The chapter on the passive voice (Ch. 7) focuses on passive and passive-like constructions; namely, 1) the central *be*-passive(e.g. *The book was sold.*), 2) the *get*-passive (e.g. *The bood got sold.*), and 3) "middles" or "mediopassive constructions" (e.g. *The book sold well.*). The authors hypothesize that the *be*-passive is decreasing whereas the *get*-passive and the mediopassive are being used more frequently. The findings support the hypothesis.

Concerning expanded predicates in British and American English (e.g. *Take or have a look at…*), Chapter 8 reveals that they are stylistically marked; i.e., their frequency of use depends on text type. Indeed, the data show that expanded predicates with *have, take* and *give* are used more frequently in fictional than in non-fictional texts, and more in spoken than in written

language. They are also found more in BrE than in AmE. With reference to change, the corpus does not provide conclusive evidence that the use of expanded predicates has increased over time.

Chapter 9 on non-finite clauses (e.g. *Lewis told him what clothes to bring along*.) shows that they have increased dramatically in the press in the period under study. The authors explain that non-finite clauses serve as a convention device to compress information into fewer words and that it may be this functional advantage which makes them particularly suitable for use in journalistic writing.

Chapter 10 concerns the noun phrase including noun modifiers, such as the genitive and relative clauses. The findings show that *wh*-relatives (e.g.*the people with whom they live*) on the whole have been declining and that zero relatives (e.g. *the people they live with*) and *that*- relatives (e.g. *the people that they live with*) have been increasing. The authors interpret that this change is caused by the impulse towards a more speech-like style of writing or colloquialization. It is also found that N+N and N's+N constructions (e.g. *the room atmosphere* and *the room's atmosphere*) have increased whereas N+PP including the *of*-genitive (e.g. *the atmosphere of the room*) has declined. The authors explain that this trend is caused by the impulse towards greater information density or densification.

In the last chapter (Chapter 11) entitled "Linguistic and other determinants of change," the authors attempt to give functional explanations of the syntactic changes found in the earlier chapters. The topics they discuss are the functional and social process of change, grammaticalization, colloquialization, densification of content,

Americanization, and other trends, such as democratization or ironing out differences, language prescriptions, and analyticization (the movement from synthetic to analytic structures). A summary table is provided so as to match postulated explanatory trends with the increases and decreases of frequency they help to explain.

In the conclusion, the authors say that they have made use of the resources that are available to present a synthesis of what can be known about the evolution of English grammar in the very recent past. However, they admit that the synthesis is incomplete because many topics that might have been included in this volume have been omitted. As many mysteries and challenges still remain, they encourage further studies to be conducted in the same line.

At the end of the book, three appendixes are provided: Appendix I on the composition of the Brown corpus, Appendix II on the C8 target used for part-of-speech tagging of the four corpora, and Appendix III on additional statistic tables and charts.

To evaluate, this book is very well-written. The details of the content are carefully arranged and presented. Even though the information is heavy and dense, the book is easy to read and follow. The authors provide clear hypotheses, vivid statistical tables and figures, elaborate explanation and interpretation, and plenty of examples for each topic or feature under focus.

Based on empirical approach and reliable corpora, the findings are striking and convincing as to how fast the English language has changed beyond the speakers' consciousness. The authors have adopted a non-prescriptive view of language change and present the change as a natural phenomenon that we should be aware of

and keep up with. Unlike some research reports that present statistical charts, and tables mechanically, this book always provide a satisfactory explanation and discussion of each quantitative evidence so as to help the reader understand what is found and how significant it is.

Another strength of this book is its attempt to show three dimensions of linguistic variation: diachronic variation (change in real time), regional variation (BrE vs. AmE), and stylistic variation (across different genres). The reader would learn from this book not only about how English has changed over time, but also about how the two major standard varieties of English (BrE and AmE) have drawn apart from each other, and how English varies according to text types. However, the findings about the three dimensions of variation are not systematically shown; i.e, they are differently presented in different chapters, which may cause difficulty or confusion to the reader. This seems to be the only drawback of the book. However, considering the main focus on change through time, the findings on regional and stylistic variation, even though sporadic, could be regarded as a bonus for the reader.

To end this review, it is easy to say that this is a very informative and unbiased book, which is worth reading, and especially suitable for syntacticians, grammarians, historical linguists, linguistic typologists, and teachers of English.

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