

CURRENT CHANGES IN THE ENGLISH VERB

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“Language moves down time in a current of its own making. It has a drift.” Edward Sapir (1921)

Abstract. *The present article is an overview of essential grammatical changes that have recently occurred in the Modern English verb. The article draws on works by Geoffrey Leech, Christian Mair, Marianne Hundt and Randolph Quirk. Although these changes are referred to as current, some of them started in the first half of the twentieth century. The emphasis in the paper was on the major changes related to the increase in use of continuous forms, decline of be-passive, decrease in the use of some modal verbs and increase in the use of semi-modals, and the revival of the mandative subjunctive. These changes are of particular interest for teachers of English.*

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Language is constantly developing but people usually do not notice how this is happening. New phenomena substitute outmoded ones that fall out of use. The produced changes are very different and take different periods of time to unfold. Lexical changes are more easily produced as people do not find it difficult to pick out some recently introduced words and they are, as a rule, noticeable. In grammar, however, a lot of time is required to make certain changes visible. As language facts prove, we are constantly in the process of some language change that may become noticeable only after hundreds of years. In the present article, which is a review of the most important changes that have been recently produced in English grammar, we are going to focus on changes in the verb only. This, we think, is an important topic for teachers of English as a foreign language who being non-native speakers of English find it even more complicated to notice that certain grammatical changes have already been completed and others are in the process of development. This may lead sometimes to mistakes. Thus teachers would sometimes correct the continuous verb form in *He is living in Italy at present* and the auxiliary verb do in *I don't have time*, the synthetic possessive in examples of the *type the car's roof*, less when used with countable nouns, like in *less people*, etc., considering them students' errors. This may become particularly irritant when such “corrections” are made in students' final (Bacalaureate) tests in English. Therefore it is essential that each teacher of English be aware of these changes.

We will deal in the present article only with “current” grammar changes in English which, according to linguists, are those developments that have occurred in the language since the beginning of the 20th century. (Mair and Leech, 2006:318-342). Hopefully the article will be of some help to teachers of English too. The topic was discussed in the works of such linguists as Laurie Bauer, David Denison, Geoffrey Leech, Christian Mair, Marianne Hundt, Nicholas Smith, Davies Mark, Swan Michael, Biber Douglas and others who have focused on different aspects of the problem. Given that the works of G. Leech, Ch. Mair and M. Hundt, N. are based on a detailed comparative analysis of four well known corpora, the valuable conclusions they came to are very important and helpful. This explains why the present article draws on these works. Another reason why the article is devoted to the study of recent and ongoing grammatical changes in English is the fact that “. . . grammar constitutes a central level of linguistic structuring” (Leech, 2009:1) and what is happening in grammar is of paramount importance. The grammatical changes have affected both the morphology and syntax of English though most of them are found at the morphological level. Morphological changes have occurred in most parts of speech but the verb, probably, has undergone

a greater amount of changes than other parts of speech.

Irregular verbs

One of the changes that have drawn English speakers' attention is **regularization of irregular verbs**. This means that some irregular verbs have acquired regular forms either for both simple past and past participle or only for one of them. Out of several hundreds of irregular verbs that existed in Old English only a few dozens are found in Modern English today. Little by little, more irregular verbs get regularized. There are already some irregular verbs that have both regular and irregular forms. This is probably how everything starts. The two forms will co-exist for some time after which the irregular forms might fall out of use. In his book *Oxford Practice Grammar*, John Eastwood (1999:383-384) mentions fifteen verbs of this kind:

bet-bet-betted	sew-sewed-sewn/sewed
burn-burnt/burned-burnt/burned	show-showed-shown/showed
dive-dived/dove (US)-dived	smell-smelt/smelled- smelt/smelled
dream-dreamt/dreamed-dreamt/dreamed	speed-spel/speeded-sped/speeeded
lean-leant/leaned-leant/leaned	spell-spelt/spelled-spelt/spelled
leap-leapt/leaped-leapt/leaped	spill-spilt/spilled-spilt/spilled
learn-learnt/learned- learnt/learned	spoil-spoilt/spoiled-spoilt/spoiled
light-lit/lighted- lit/lighted	

Out of these verbs *bet* has a regular form only for the past participle; *dive* is regular in BrE and irregular in AmE although, as J. Eastwood points out, the British prefer the **t** ending for the verbs **burn**, **learn**, **smell**, **spell**, **spill** and **spoil**, but **ed** is also possible. Americans, on the contrary, normally use the **ed** ending. However they say *a slice of burnt toast* in both British and American English (1999:382). The verb *get* is also special because it has two irregular forms for the past participle (*got and gotten*) and they are used differently in BrE and AmE as the British prefer *got* whereas Americans use *gotten* most often. As for the verbs **dream**, **lean** and **leap**, they can be regular or irregular in BrE but are usually regular in AmE. This shows that regular forms of irregular verbs are more frequently used in American English.

Continuous forms

The impressive growth of continuous forms in Modern English has made them really noticeable (We prefer the term “continuous” to “progressive” as it is more frequently used in textbooks). Christian Mair and Geoffrey Leech distinguish two different phenomena here: general increase in the frequency of occurrence of continuous forms, and the use of these forms in other “niches of the verbal paradigm in which it was not current until the twentieth century (2006:9). The system of continuous forms has visibly enriched after they started to be used with modal verbs and also in the passive voice: *You should be going* instead of *You should go*. The increase in the use of continuous forms was earlier mentioned by Otto Jespersen (1909:177). It is mentioned in *Change in Contemporary English* by G.Leech *et al* that there are some occurrences of complexes with three or more auxiliaries, like *will be being taken, must have been being considered* (2009:154). Evidently such examples are not very frequent today but they appear in language and should not be ignored. The same authors also point out that continuous forms are oftener found in speech-based registers, such as telephone calls, social letters, face-to-face conversations and broadcast discussions. We also may talk about some special uses of the continuous forms.

Thus the present continuous is often used with future time reference, e.g. *He is coming tomorrow*. In spoken English, we frequently come across examples, in which the continuous form performs an

attitudinal function and is usually accompanied by the adverb *always*:

You are always joking.

Such examples usually express irritation or amusement and, according to G. Leech, “accompany the hyperbolic representation of a situation” (2009:173). Another special use of the continuous forms is the so-called *interpretative* one. This happens when the verb in the continuous aspect provides an explanation of a situation. G. Leech offers the following example to illustrate this use: *When Paul Gascoigne says he will not be happy until he stops playing football, he is talking rot.* (2009:164). This use of the continuous, compared to other uses, according to Huddleston and Pullum, is “a genuinely new development” (2002: 165).

It is worthwhile to mention here the growth in use of the verb to be in the continuous aspect when followed by an adjective:

You are being silly.

I wonder why he is being so polite today.

J. Eastwood points out that such examples contain the description of temporary behaviour (2009:14). The continuous form in the first sentence prompts the idea that the person usually is not silly and in the second sentence, he/she is usually impolite.

The examples given above demonstrate that the traditional rule about the use of only dynamic verbs in the continuous aspect does not play a very important role today.

Passives

Some really dramatic changes have occurred in the use of passive constructions in Modern English. Passives were always a typical feature of academic writing; however, recently there have been various recommendations not to use them in this genre. The use of the traditional *be*-passive has considerably decreased in BrE as well as in AmE, whereas other forms of the passive started to be used more frequently. One of these forms is the *get*-passive, in which the auxiliary *be* is substituted by *get*. It is worth mentioning that the increase in use of this kind of passive was mentioned by Otto Jespersen at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since then the growth of its use has continued. Now it is not a surprise to come across examples like *to get punished, to get fired, to get frightened, to get hurt, to get burnt, to get drunk, etc* that are mostly used in spoken English.

When the children heard the noise, they got frightened.

The negative and interrogative forms are made with the auxiliary verb *do*, for example,

Did they get hurt? No, they didn't.

Most often *get*-passive constructions are associated with some unpleasant situations that happen unexpectedly.

Children often get bitten in our village.

There are other expressions with *get*-passives that are more frequently used in the language today: *get washed, get lost, get dressed, get started, get married, etc*. According to Ch. Mair, *get*-passive “has been on a rapid rise during the past 50 years”. Weiner and Labov claim that “a shift to the *get*-passive appears to be one of the most active grammatical changes taking place in English” (2009:144). It is, however, believed that the increase in frequency of *get* passives cannot compensate for the drop in *be*-passives (Mair, 2006).

Linguists talk about another kind of passive which is often called *passival*. It refers to cases when the verb form is used in the active progressive but its meaning is passive. Though not very frequently used, such constructions exist in the language and should be taken into account. To illustrate it we have borrowed an example provided by G. Leech in *Change in Contemporary English: Thelonus Monk's ruminative “Alone in San Francisco” is playing softly in the background* (Leech,

2009:144). The list of verbs used in this form is very short; it includes *play, do, like, ship and show* which are more common in AmE than in BrE.

There is one more construction that is related to passives. It consists of a verb in the non-continuous aspect, active voice which possesses a passive meaning, e.g. *the butter spreads easily, the cloth wears well, these shoes don't sell, the drum beats well, etc.* Linguists refer to such passive forms as *middle, neuter or mediopassive*. Sometimes they are considered independent voices different from the passive. In spite of the fact that constructions with the verb in the mediopassive form are not very frequently used, they are believed to have increased in the twentieth century and to be now a productive syntactic pattern more commonly used in advertizing texts (Hundt, 2006).

The appearance of new passive forms in English will probably not be able to compensate for the decrease in use of be-passive. Sometimes this decrease is explained by the fact that British and American people prefer to use a verb in the active voice not in the passive which is less direct.

The "mandative" subjunctive

For a long time it was believed that the mandative subjunctive was lying on its death bed, particularly in BrE though it continued to be used sometimes in AmE. Very surprisingly its use started to grow by the end of the twentieth century. This kind of subjunctive is used in subordinate clauses introduced by *that* after verbs denoting advice and urging, like *demand, insist, order, propose, recommend, request, stipulate, suggest, urge* and a few more.

Father demands that I be home by 9:00.

They suggest that she start preparing for her exams.

It is also used after nouns that derive from verbs of advice and urging (*suggestion, advice, request, recommendation, etc*), after adjectives derived from the same verbs and after some fixed expressions.

It has been noticed that mandatory subjunctive in BrE is more frequent in writing than in spoken language but in AmE it is more frequent in speech than in writing. G. Leech noted that in BrE, the mandative subjunctive is being used more frequently in different types of texts which does not happen in AmE (2009:88). He also notes that the mandative subjunctive is replacing the periphrastic constructions with the auxiliary *should*. This occurs oftener in AmE than in BrE.

It is curious to note that while some linguists enthusiastically talk about the revival of the mandatory subjunctive, Barber (1964:133) is not so optimistic about it, considering the present development of the mandatory subjunctive "a passing fashion". He thinks that this development will cause the loss of the inflection *-s* in the third person, singular, present tense which will make the English language more analytical.

Modals and semi modals

Out of all changes produced in Modern English, the most dramatic are probably those that occurred in the modals. It is common knowledge that modals appeared in the early years of Modern English; the so called semi-modals appeared later. The modals include *would, will, can, could, may, should, must and might* that are also called *core* modals. They all express the most common modal meanings, such as obligation, necessity, permission, possibility, volition and prediction. Ought (to) and *need* are included in the list as 'peripheral members' (Mair and Leech, 2009:13). R. Quirk (1985:137-140) treats *used to* and *dare* also as belonging to the periphery of core modal verbs, but G. Leech excludes them due to the fact that they do not express modality.

The most important representatives of semi-modals are *be going to* and *have to*. The others are *had better, would rather/sooner*. Since the very beginning, modal verbs have been more frequently used in spoken language, compared to written language. Examining the tables on the decrease and

increase in the use of modals provided by G. Leech *et al*, we can easily notice that the frequency in use of these verbs has changed and this change is not the same in all the verbs.

The modal verbs *can* and *would, will* and *could* are most widely used. According to the presented data, they have increased in use both in written and in spoken language in BrE and AmE. On the other hand, the use of the verbs *must, need, may, ought to* and *shall* have drastically dropped both in the written and in spoken language of British and American English. More linguists think that the decline in use of core modal verbs is caused by the increase in use of semi-modals.

Thus *have to* has become a rival of *i* They both express necessity and obligation but the ways they express these meanings are different. It is often suggested that *must* loses its popularity because of its authoritative character. J. Myhill thinks that *must*, like other “old” modals, “has usages associated with hierarchical social relationships, with people controlling the actions of other people. . .” while the semi-modals are different in character as they are “more personal, being used to give advice to an equal, make an emotional request, offer help or criticize one’s interlocutor” (Leech et al, 2009). This leads us to believe that socio-cultural factors may also be responsible for the increase or decrease in use of different modals.

The same factors may be considered responsible for the increasing use of *should* that is more popular than *must* when it is necessary to express obligation. As far as the other very frequently used semi-modal, the *be-going* to form, is concerned, it rivals *will* when used to express futurity. Consequently the increase in use of semi-modals determines the decline of core modals.

The information prompted by the above mentioned tables clearly shows that there are verbs that have decreased equally in the two variants of English, but others, like the verb *may*, have decreased more substantially in AmE. Below are two tables that constitute simplified versions of the ones provided by Ch. Mair and G. Leech (2006:17) which were based on the analysis of the 1991 corpora compared to the 1961 corpora.

Decline in the use of modal verbs

In the tables below, the modals and semi-modals are listed in order of frequency.

The + and the – point to the increase and decrease in frequency compared to the frequency in the 1961 corpora.

British English		American English	
<i>would</i>	-11.0%	<i>would</i>	-6.1%
<i>will</i>	-2.7%	<i>will</i>	-11.1%
<i>can</i>	+2.2%	<i>can</i>	-1.5%
<i>could</i>	+2.4%	<i>could</i>	-6.8%
<i>may</i>	-17.4%	<i>may</i>	-32.4%
<i>should</i>	-11.8%	<i>should</i>	-13.5%
<i>must</i>	-29.0%	<i>must</i>	-34.4%
<i>might</i>	-15.1%	<i>might</i>	-4.5%
<i>shall</i>	-43.7 %	<i>shall</i>	-43.8%
<i>ought (to)</i>	-44.2%	<i>ought (to)</i>	-30.0%
<i>need + V</i>	-40.2%	<i>need</i>	-12.5%
TOTAL	-9.5%	TOTAL	-12.2%

Increase in the use of semi - modals

Despite the fact that semi-modals are getting more and more frequently used in English, especially in AmE, while the core modals are dropping in use, the latter, according to G. Leech, are five times

British English		American English	
<i>be going to</i>	-1.2	<i>be going to</i>	+51.6
<i>be to</i>	-17.2	<i>be to</i>	-40.1
<i>had better</i>	-26.0	<i>had better</i>	-17.1
<i>(have) got to</i>	-34.1	<i>(have) got to</i>	+15.6
<i>have to</i>	+9.0	<i>have to</i>	+1.1
<i>need to</i>	+249.1	<i>need to</i>	+123.2
<i>be supposed to</i>	+113.6	<i>be supposed to</i>	+6.3
<i>used to</i>	+12.8	<i>used to</i>	+45.1
<i>want to</i>	+18.5	<i>want to</i>	+70.9
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TOTAL	+10.0	TOTAL	+18.6

as frequent as semi-modals.

Conclusions

In the twentieth century, the English verb has undergone a greater number of changes than any other part of speech. This is probably due to the fact that the verb being the most capacious part of speech has a richer morphological system. Trying to present an overview of the changes that occurred in the verb we focused on the most important ones. These changes, like other grammatical changes, are a real challenge for both native and non-native speakers of English, particularly for teachers of English for whom it is really important to be aware of these changes and of what has happened in grammar throughout the history.

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