Value Systems and Language Change: Grammatical Hypertrophy in Present-Day American English[1]

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Abstract: Members of a speech community use linguistic innovations to signal a variety of messages, such as ‘stronger meaning’, ‘group solidarity’, ‘greater intimacy’, or their opposites. Innovations can be motivated not only by strictly linguistic reasons but by systems of values that also apply to aspects of human behavior beyond speech. Particularly frequent in present-day American English are spontaneous grammatical innovations that redundantly repeat, duplicate, or extend elements of their traditional normative counterparts without any apparent gain in communicative content. Pleonasm is the most familiar category of such hypertrophic forms, some of which have in fact become part of the norm. A rational explication of such changes rests on the key assumption that any novel expression, apart from the content invested in it by grammar and pragmatics, has a specific value—or connotative content—by virtue of being different from a traditional expression with the same grammatical and pragmatic content. But in a more abstract sense such changes are ultimately to be explained as instantiations of broader cultural and ideological values. Data are drawn largely from media and colloquial language.

The research question posed here is informed by the idea of linguistic change as a form of communication—the title of a study by Labov, who concluded that members of a speech community use innovations to signal a variety of messages, such as “stronger meaning,” “group solidarity,” “greater intimacy,” or their opposites (1974: 253 ff.). Labov’s study clarifies some of the reasons why innovations are adopted and is significant for its key assumption alone that any novel expression, apart from the content invested in it by grammar and pragmatics, has a specific value by virtue of being different from a traditional expression with the same grammatical and pragmatic content. It is this “connotative content” (Hjelmslev 1960: 114 ff.) of novel linguistic expressions that is the object here. But whereas, for instance, Labov’s study refers the specific values carried by the innovations to such established categories of connotative content as those mentioned above, my investigation concentrates on uncovering the purport of innovations before their definite, collectively understood connotative content has been widely adopted; and before the stage of consolidation of their values has been reached.

The supposed dichotomy between language and society is non-existent in two respects. For one thing, language is an entirely social phenomenon and cannot be separated from its social functions. For another, when linguistic rules make reference to social categories such as age, gender, or class, these categories are also themselves linguistic categories. They can and should be strictly distinguished from such parameters as chronological age, biological sex, or socioeconomic status, which can be defined prior to—and without regard to—the investigation of any language. What linguistic expressions index are culture-specific categories such as ‘youthfulness’, ‘femininity’, or ‘upper class’, not

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as defined in universal, naturalistic terms, but as conventionally encoded and understood by speakers of the language in question at the given time. Far from being "sociological factors" or "social factors bear[ing] upon linguistic features" (Weinreich et al. 1968: 186), these are in fact linguistic features. They are language-particular categories of content, indexed by linguistic elements of expression, that are selected for expression in discourse by speakers in accordance with their communicative intentions and with the same degree of freedom (and responsibility) as other categories of linguistic content. While it is a commonplace that language is totally embedded in society (linguistic facts are social facts), what is important to understand is that through the sociolinguistic categories of content indexed by linguistic expressions, the categories of a society are embedded in its language "unevenly" (Weinreich et al. 1968: 185)––that is, selectively.

Any theory of language that wishes to explain language use must come to grips with the phenomenon of change and its causes. All linguistic variety, including social and dialectal differentiation within a given language, is necessarily the product of historical changes, some of which are still in progress at a given point in that language's development. Representative of much modern theorizing about the causes of language change is Coseriu's position (1958), according to which change in a language, as well as the absence of change, is produced by its speakers as part of that exercise of their free will which speaking constitutes. In speaking, they may be motivated by the diverse circumstances under which to speak is to deviate from the usage that is traditional in their community. But such a motivation is not a cause in the sense in which linguists (like Bloomfield 1933) understand the word, for individual speakers are free to let themselves be moved—or not moved—by the given circumstance(s). In Coseriu's view, the only true 'cause' of change are the speakers, who use their language, and in doing so observe or neglect their linguistic traditions as they see fit.

This way of looking at language is fairly realistic, not only because it assumes that any change may be conditioned by a number of coexisting circumstances, but also because it acknowledges the intentional character of speaking, whether it follows or breaks with tradition, and hence, by implication, an element of intention in both stability and change. In accordance with this latter aspect of Coseriu's theory, the language historian's task is not one of causal explanation but of rational explication.

What gives my approach its special stamp is a method whose main assumption is that linguistic change has a directionality defined by a parallelism between form and meaning. A simple example: "knowledge<u>s</u>"—'knowledge' used in what would be considered a deviant, if not outright ungrammatical, plural form. Why? Because it bears a contemporary ideological message that cannot easily be sustained in straightforward argument, the message, namely, that there are incompatible modes of thought that are equally valid. Thus "Western" science is only one (type of) knowledge to which such alternatives as Pawnee creation myths, "Wicca" witchcraft, etc., etc. are just as valid—so many distinct "knowledges."

American English, like all national languages, abounds in variety. Differences in age, sex, education, and psychosocial habits are typically correlated with differences in language use, so that there are always some discontinuities between the grammars of individual speakers. At the same time, similarities in speech and writing also tend to be mirrored by similarities in personalia. One way to understand what these correlations mean is to adopt a historical perspective on both the differences and the similarities of speech/writing.

When analyzed with respect to their positions on a continuum, in terms of both the immediately preceding system from which they are departures and the new system of which they are manifestations, linguistic innovations can provide clues to the meaning of social and cultural changes in contemporary American society.

General usage in America is understandably far from monolithic. Beside the variety in language use associated with geographical and social dialects, there are numerous linguistic variants that are part of American English in the round, so to speak. Differences in pronunciation such as that of broad and flat /a/ in words like *rather* or *aunt* can cross dialectal lines and constitute indicators of speakers' attitudes, i.e., as linguistic clues to their value systems. This kind of evidence can differ from the features that are traditionally labeled as stylistic or social. When applied to individuals that cannot otherwise easily be grouped socioeconomically, a microanalysis of linguistic habits shifts the focus productively from describing sociolects along traditional lines to identifying nascent groups of speakers by the value systems that account for their departures from received patterns.

There is a set of dialectally and socially unlocalized innovations in contemporary American English that are correlated with cultural changes. Failure to apply the traditional laxing rule in forming the plural of *house* can be seen not merely as the imposition of regularity on the paradigm but as a sign of the speaker's evidently unconscious rejection of the received pattern and adherence to the spreading new one. When phonological and morphological variants such as this occur in clusters in the language of a growing group of speakers, they can provide evidence of new attitudes not only toward what constitutes acceptable general usage but toward aspects of the "ideological" make-up of such groups.

Syntax and semantics represent relatively higher nodes of ascent along the linguistic hierarchy from constraint to freedom but are still areas of language structure that provide evidence of variation that can be correlated with "ideological" differences.

In the last thirty years, for instance, there has been a change in the government of the verb *commit* whereby the reflexive complement tends to be omitted. This syntactic innovation can be analyzed as an indicator of a change in the core meaning of the verb from that of 'bind/pledge oneself' to something more equivocal ('non-binding/-commital'; cf. Shapiro 1999). Speakers who habitually use the verb without the reflexive may be said to have a different attitude—and therefore, a different value system—from those speakers of American English who follow the older norm.

Semantics is the most fluid of linguistic subsystems and furnishes the richest evidence of the correlation between language use and value systems. An example (explored at greater length below) is that of pleonasm or redundancy. Locutions like *equally as* (for *equally*) or *also … as well* abound in contemporary American speech (and even in writing). In some cases pleonasms become part of general usage (*past experience, advance warning*, etc.), but there are many others that arise spontaneously. An "ideological" analysis of pleonastic constructions—and of redundancy in general—will seek to explore how such usage coheres with a particular attitudinal set toward the relation between form and content that crosses strictly linguistic boundaries to embrace modes of cognition correlated with beliefs and the predispositions toward action they account for.

When one speaks of values as a determinant of linguistic changes, many small examples come to mind, for instance

(1) inform**ant** vs. inform**er**,

where the older and traditional second variant is being replaced by the first. Note that the two suffixes differ in length, and that the newer variant displays the longer of the two. This means that the older variant, *informer*, has taken on a pejorative value and hence is to be avoided.

Or take the common practice of dropping the article *the* before specifying persons by their class membership, as in

(2) **[Ø]**commentator Dan Goldman vs. **the** commentator Dan Goldman.

Here the values-oriented interpretation suggests that Americans who habitually drop the article have incorporated the attitude summarized by the formula "you **ARE** what you **DO.**"

Another common switch in values accounts for the replacement of the traditional treatment of class designations as inanimate, when referring to them with the relative pronouns *who* and *what*, with a focus on their human membership, resulting in the occurrence of *who* rather than *which*, as in

(3) companies **who** vs. companies **which;** cf. "The computer **who** tracks the standings …" (John Feinstein, sports commentator, N[ational] P[ublic] R[adio], "M[orning] E[dition]," 11/30/07).

This is paralleled by the difference in grammatical number between British and American English when referring to mass nouns, as in

(4) the family/cabinet **are** vs. the family/cabinet **is**.

When one hears examples like

(5) "**marquee** issues" (unidentified male commentator, NPR, "A[ll] T[hings] C[onsidered]," 1/10/06––discussing the Alito confirmation hearings)

(6) "The internal conflict between Fatah and Hamas may **get equal billing** with the struggle against Israel." (Eric Westervelt, reporter, NPR, "ME," 5/22/06)

(7) "… before helping other **customers** [instead of 'passengers'] with their oxygen mask." (Continental Airlines in-flight safety announcement, 7/7/06),

the attitude of the speaker toward the content of each utterance dictates the choice of words. The very serious matter of confirmation hearings for a nominee to the Supreme Court of the United States is being treated as if it were merely an entertainment or show business ("marquee issues"), as is the terrible strife resulting in numerous deaths in the Middle East ("get equal billing"). In the last of this triplet of examples, there has been a subtle shift in the way the airline personnel (have been instructed to?) regard their human cargo: instead of focusing on their status as "passengers," they are now addressed as producers of revenue ("customers").

A shift in value is not the only matter at stake in discussing pleonasm and other hypertrophies. The latter term is apposite just because of its medical connotations, since a linguistic hypertrophy is not merely an unwarranted enlargement or bloating but an error, a failure of thought, hence akin to something somatically abnormal. While linguists rarely acknowledge the importance of outright error in language change, the histories of all languages are littered with cases. Here are some recent ones:

(8) "I'm **picking you and I**." (John Feinstein [?], NPR, "ME," 5/24/93); cf. "And those two deaths **bound you and she** together indissolubly for life." (James 1971: 278)

(9) "Their effort is **geared at** getting out the vote …" (Cokie Roberts, commentator, NPR, "ME," 6/5/06)

(10) "The **cup** is half-empty, the **cup** is half-full …" [twice in the same interview] (Kevin Starr, State Librarian of California Emeritus, NPR, "Talk of the nation," 11/29/07)

The last example is particularly revealing because the speaker evidently does not realize that the locution depends on a transparent container—glass—but for which no liquid could be observed so as to be measured by sight.

Below is a broad range of hypertrophic examples by category, with commentary where appropriate:

I. CONTEXTUAL HYPERTROPHY

(11) "There was a moment **back in 2002** when … [opening sentence]" (Caryn James, "Aniston agonistes: Good girl, bad choices," , 6/5/06, *N[ew] Y[ork] T[imes]*, p. B1)

(12) "The author of seven other books, she was a fellow at the library when she first got the idea **back in 2001**, on 9/11" (Patricia Cohen, *NYT*, 2/14/08, B9)

(13) "But none has gone quite so spectacularly to the bad as John Amery, the elder son of Churchill's old friend and wartime Secretary of State for India, who ended up being hanged for treason in 1945. **Back in 1949** Amery was one of the subjects …" (John Campbell, "Nasty and short," *Times literary supplement*, 11/18/ 2005)

(14) "**back in** January"–– said in February (unidentified man, viva voce; cf. [**way**] back [when])

The almost de rigueur contemporary insertion of *back* before temporal expressions headed by such words as *in* and *when* is an innovation in American English (and perhaps in British as well), and an instance of hypertrophy when the time referred to is relatively proximate, not distal.

Over the last decade or more, what used to be the standard manner of referring to events in the past by designating their dates in a prepositional phrase is being replaced by a longer form whereby the word *back* is inserted before the preposition regardless of the proximity of the past event to the speech event. Here are some additional recent examples:

(15) "**back in** January"––said in February (unidentified man, viva voce; cf. [**way**] back [when]).

(16) "**Back in** the seventeenth century, the original text had been registered for publication as…" (Bate 2009: 341).

The last is a particularly telling example. Its context is entirely localized temporally in the seventeenth century, i. e., all the events are dated to that time, making use of the word *back* utterly otiose. Moreover, it is from a contemporary British author (a university professor at that), showing that this linguistic feature has taken hold cisatlantically.

One hears such examples constantly on the radio and from ordinary speakers; moreover, the preposition in question can be *on* or *during* as well as *in* (*back on Thursday*, *back during the war*). And whereas the appearance of *back* was formerly conditioned strictly by the remoteness of the past event relative to the speech event—a form of EMPHASIS—now the emphatic meaning is apparently being neutralized: the appearance of *back* is becoming obligatory REGARDLESS OF THE DEGREE OF PROXIMITY OF THE PAST EVENT.

How to explain this development? One more or less speculative explanation comes to mind.

This new—habitual but redundant—use of the locative adverb *back* with designators of time could be motivated by what might be labeled THE AVOIDANCE OF PLACELESS EXISTENCE. A past event is by definition no longer existent in the same sense as a present event. This fundamental "non-*is*-ness" of a past event makes its designation unstable, and thereby in need of extra temporal determination. The most routine way in which all languages fix or anchor time expressions, with their quintessential instability, is by

localizing them through the use of words denoting space. Accordingly, the near-obligatory extension to non-emphatic contexts of the emphatic word *back* before prepositional phrases as a designator of remoteness in time in contemporary American speech may be yet another example of what is clearly a general grammatical tendency.

II. ANAPHORIC HYPERTROPHY

(17) "**The days** when blue-collar work could be passed down the family line, **those days** are over." (Gay N. Chaison, Prof. of Labor Relations, Clark Univ., quoted in *NYT*, 11/19/05, p. B7]

(18) my **sister-in-law, she** … [possible interference from Romance langs.]

III. MORPHEMIC HYPERTROPHY, INCLUDING HYPERURBANISMS

(19) **ir**regardless (20) **be**grudgingly (21) hark**en** back

(22) inform**ant** [vs. inform**er**] (23) **prior to** [instead of **before**]

(24) "'He is entirely **correct** [instead of "right"],' Mr. Cheney said on Tuesday at Fort Drum, N.Y., referring to Mr. Lieberman." (*NYT*, 12/10/05, p. A1)

(25) "**up**spike" - on the model of **uptick** (unidentified woman interviewee, NPR, "ME," 5/31/06)

(26) **purchase** [instead of **buy]** (27) **incorrect** [instead of **wrong]**

(28) **academia [** instead of **academe]** (29) **usage** [instead of **use]**

(30) "For the past 88 years … when public sentiment against Germany was at a fever**ish** pitch." (Jim Robbins, "Silence broken, pardons granted 88 years after crimes of sedition," *NYT,* 5/3/06, p. 1)

(31) "Clinton will be **adjudicated** by …" [instead of "**judged** by"] (William Bennett, "CNN today," 12/26/97)

(32) "Can I **importune on** you for an extra ticket?" (male theater critic, viva voce, Los Angeles, 6/4/06)

IV. EXCESSIVE REPETITION [**three** instead of **two**––said without emphasis]

(33) day after day after day (34) side by side by side (35) step by step by step

(36) "**ran down and ran down and ran down** … **ran up and ran up and ran up** …" (Allan Sloan, commentator, NPR, "Marketplace," 6/5/06)

V. PLEONASM (NB: cf. standard and semi-standard pleonasms, e.g., **friend of mine**, **advance planning**, **prior experience**, **component parts**, **close scrutiny**, etc.)

(37) "share … **in common**" (Donald Rumsfeld, Secy. of Defense, "Press conference," CNN, 4/15/03)

(38) share … **similar** … (39) **exactly** right (40) continue **on** (41) equally **as**

(42) "The **ability** of the Congress to be **able** to …" (James Sensenbrenner, NBC, "Meet the press," as heard on NPR, "ME," 5/28/06)

(43) "… **add** some **additional** policemen to patrol …" [twice in the same utterance] (Mark A. R. Kleiman, Prof. of Public Policy, UCLA, KPCC.FM, "Zócalo," 5/28/06); also heard on KPCC.FM: "**receive** a **receipt**;" "**receive** a warm **reception**"

(44) "With graduation ceremonies **coming right up around the corner** …" (Joel Rubin, *Los Angeles Times*, interviewed on KPCC.FM, 5/24/06)

(45) "**previous** precedent" (unidentified male law professor, Northwestern Univ., NPR, "ME," 1/10/06)

(46) "two **minutes** twenty-five **seconds** left on the **clock**" (Frank Deford, commentator, NPR, "ME," 12/7/05)

(47) "Moussaui … **intentionally lied** …" (Anne Hawke, reporter, NPR News, 4/3/06)

(48) "But far too many seemed to be innocents or **lowly foot soldiers** … " (Editorial, *NYT*, 3/8/06, p. A26)
(49) "It is **simply** that **simple**." (Sen. Diane Feinstein, quoted in *NYT*, 1/25/06, p. A16 – also heard on NPR)
(50) "I for one would have very strong opposition to any kind of **star chamber** proceeding that's held **in private**." (eadem, quoted in *NYT magazine*, by William Safire, "On language," 1/17/99, p. 18)
(51) "The one statistic that **keeps** China's leaders **up awake** at night is … " (Andy Rothman, stock broker, NPR, "Marketplace," 1/16/06)
(52) "As we **advance ahead** timewise …" (Bob Stokes, weather forecaster, The Weather Channel, 10/25/99)
(53) "**Each video** contains two 1-hour episodes on **each video**." (attributed to Columbia House [home-video mail-order company], by William Safire, "On language," *NYT magazine*, 7/18/99, [p. ?])
(54) "**Currently as of now** we have spent …" (Rep. Jerry Lewis, "Newshour," PBS, 7/27/99)
(55) "My **other fellow** senators …" (Sen. Robert Bennett, "CNN Saturday," 1/23/99)
(56) "… four **straight** days **in a row**" (stock broker, viva voce, Manchester, Vt., 1999)
(57) "… **also** received cash payments **as well**." (unidentified news reader, "World today," CNN, 1/24/99)
(58) "… **increasingly more** violent." (John W. Slattery, letter to the editor, *NYT magazine,* [?/?/]99, p. 14)
(59) "**Obviously** I'm stating the **obvious**." (lawyer, viva voce, Manchester, Vt., 6/6/06)
(60) "Kissinger and Putin met at Putin's **country** *dacha*." (Daniel Schorr, commentator, NPR, "ATC," 6/7/06); cf. "**shrimp** *scampi*," "PIN **number**," etc.
(61) "… to **move progress** [in the Serbia – Kosovo negotiations] **forward** …" (Emily Harris, reporter, NPR, "ATC," 7/24/06)
(62) "'It was like, "Oh, my God, we're on the cusp of something big **about to happen**",' Mr. Washington said." (Diane Cardwell, "Daring to believe, blacks savor Obama victory," *NYT*, 1/5/08, p. A1)
(63) "The widow of the Polish air force commander killed with President Lech Kaczynski and 94 others in a plane crash last year is accusing Russian investigators of **unfairly vilifying** her husband." (*Washington Post* [The Associated Press], "Polish widow defends general in presidential crash," 1/13/11).
VI. HYPERBOLE
(64) absolutely (65) great, tremendous, terrific, awesome, etc.
VII. DEICTIC ADVERB ([out] **there, here**)
(66) "There's a real world **out here** where people are offered …" (Ruth Lewin Sime, letter to the editor, *NYT*, 6/5/06, p. A22).
(67) "**There's** a lot of sadness **here**." ([in a context where the place has already been stipulated] attributed to Jamie Dettmer, director of media relations, Cato Institute, in "Columnist resigns his post, admitting lobbyist paid him," *NYT*, 12/17/05, p. A15)
(68) "**Where's** your heart rate **at**?" (female fitness trainer [with a B.A.], viva voce [speaking to a client wearing a monitor], Equinox Fitness Club, Westwood, Calif., 6/5/06); cf. "**What's** your heart rate **at**?"

The use of the adverbial phrase *out there* is particularly interesting because it also betokens some sort of "avoidance of placeless existence."

VIII. DEICTIC INTRODUCTION

(67) “The reality is **is** [that] …”

(68) “The fact of the matter is **is** [that] …”[2]

One could easily surmise that some of these hypertrophies arise from a need to be explicit, to repeat for emphasis, but a close analysis reveals that this is not so. They are all examples of redundancy and tautology. Pleonasms always exhibit a broadening of boundaries, and it is undoubtedly true that boundaries are among the most unstable of linguistic entities, more liable to shift (metanalysis) over time than other such units (cf. Shapiro 1993). But a stereoscopic view of the entire variety of cases where an enlargement has occurred reveals what is at bottom a FAILURE OF THOUGHT, in a “culture of excess.” Linguistic hypertrophy may, in the final analysis, be particularly true of the grammars of historically marginalized groups in society, for whom literacy and education have only recently become as common as among the traditional elites. It would be tempting to speculate that pleonasm and other hypertrophies in speech and writing are—in their aspect of characteristically displaced boundaries—a linguistic manifestation of an unstable social identity.

“Wherever the human mind has worked collectively and unconsciously, it has striven for and attained unique form. The important point is that the evolution of form has a drift in one direction, that it seeks poise, and that it rests, relatively speaking, when it has found this poise.” This is how Sapir (1949: 382) famously characterizes the principle of final causation in language. Present possibilities with greater or lesser powers of actualization exist at any given historical stage of a language. Innovations that become full-fledged [NOT **fully**-fledged!] social facts, i. e., changes, must have something about their form that enables them to perdure. The aggregate of such innovations-become-changes is what constitutes the drift of a language.[3]

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[2] For an analysis of the phenomenon involved in the last two examples, see Shapiro and Haley 2002.

[3] That ordinary users of language also have some sense of the inappropriateness of the drift at issue here can be seen from the following letter to the editor of *The New York Times* (National Edition, 12/5/07, p. A26): “To the Editor: As Harry Mount suggests in his Op-Ed article, 'A Vote for Latin,' the benefits of Latin are many. If people knew a little Latin, they would not use the 'wordy verbiage' I encounter every day as an editor. They would recognize such phrases as 'skilled expertise,' 'diverse variety,' 'basic fundamentals,' 'oral speech,' 'lived experience,' 'past history,' and 'in my opinion, I think' as combinations of Latin and Old English words (or of two Latin words) that mean the exact same thing. At the end of many a day, I am ready for what I heard a man order in a bar last week––I really need a liquid drink! ELAYNE ARCHER, Brooklyn, Dec. 3, 2007.”

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