

VARIATION ACROSS THREE GENERATIONS IN AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH: SELECTED FEATURES FROM AN ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE

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1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to show how present-day Australian English (henceforth AusE) usages vary with regard to certain linguistic features that have been reported to differ in their usage in British English (BrE) and American English (AmE). The data for the study were gathered by using an online questionnaire. The linguistic features to be discussed in this paper include verb morphology (*sneak* and *dive*), marginal modals (*need* and *dare*) and the variable *-(e)s* spelling in words such as *mango(e)s*. Due to limitations of space, I am not able to present exhaustive results of the questionnaire. The features chosen to be discussed here showed some of the most interesting cross-generational differences in the study. I will, therefore, concentrate on the differences in usage between three generations. By examining the generational variation, it is possible to see some indication as to what direction AusE development is taking. Furthermore, the features in question rarely come up often enough in either spoken or written corpus material (except maybe the marginal modal *need*), so the questionnaire method used here is a good way of tackling the question of variation regarding these features.

2. MATERIAL

2.1. The questionnaire

In order to create the online questionnaire I used an electronic form provided by the Educational Centre for ICT at the University of Helsinki. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. In the first part the informants were asked to give some personal information, such as sex, age and education. The second part included 25 questions on a variety of linguistic features: phonological, orthographic, lexical and

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syntactic. All features in this study have been reported to have differences in their usage in BrE and AmE. In this second part of the questionnaire, the informants were asked to choose which of the alternative test sentences they would be *most likely* to use in *everyday conversation*. Therefore, the aim was to study the more colloquial aspect of Australian English usage. Earlier studies used as models for my pilot study include: the *Dialect Topography* project led by Jack Chambers, the *Langscape Survey* (see Peters 1998b) and the *BBC Voices*. The third part of my questionnaire concentrated on speaker attitudes towards Australian English. However, the results of this part of the questionnaire will not be discussed in this paper.

2.2. The informants

The questionnaire was distributed to Australians through mailing lists and discussion forums on the Internet. However, the most effective way to distribute the questionnaire turned out to be by word-of-mouth. Therefore, I would here like to thank all my Australian friends and acquaintances for helping me to distribute the questionnaire.

I received 115 responses to my questionnaire of which 98 were relevant to the study. Some responses had to be excluded because the respondents were not Australian-born or they had not completed the questionnaire. Of the respondents 37 were male and 61 female; their ages ranged from 17 to 72 years, and the majority had a university education. Responses came from all around Australia. The results presented in this paper are categorized into three age groups: there are 34 informants in the youngest age group (ages 17–29), 36 in the middle age group (30–49) and 28 in the oldest age group (50–72).

3. RESULTS OF SELECTED FEATURES

3.1. Verb morphology: *dive* and *sneak*

There is a historical trend for verbs to move towards the regularized past tense forms. However, some verbs, such as *dive* and *sneak*, seem to be going the other way, at least in American English. The results of the present study show a similar tendency for Australian English. The difference in past tense forms for *dive* and *sneak* in BrE and AmE has been noted in various grammars, including Quirk et al. (1985) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002). For example, Huddleston and Pullum (2002:1604) state that “*dive* and *sneak* are regular in BrE, though *snuck* is used jocularly”. *The Macquarie Dictionary* also terms the use of *snuck* as colloquial. As for present-day AusE, Burridge (2004:132) states that “*sneak-snuck* is winning out over *sneak-sneaked*”. This, therefore, implies that there is a change in progress in AusE.

The test sentences given in (1) were the same that were also used in the *Dialect Topography* questionnaire:

- (1) a. Yesterday he dived/dove into the quarry.
- b. The little devil sneaked/snuck into the kitchen.

The overall results of the Australian data showed a preference for the use of *dived* as the past tense of *dive*, whereas *snuck* was used more often than *sneaked*. The differences in usage among the three age groups reveal an ongoing change in the use of the past tense forms of the verbs under investigation. The distribution of the past tense forms according to age is illustrated in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Distribution of past tense forms of *dive* and *sneak* according to age

	17-29		30-49		50-72	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>dived</i>	16	47.1	24	66.7	24	85.7
<i>dove</i>	16	47.1	12	33.3	3	10.7
both	2	5.9	0	0.0	1	3.6
<i>sneaked</i>	4	11.8	4	11.1	17	60.7
<i>snuck</i>	29	85.3	29	80.6	10	35.7
both	1	2.9	3	8.3	1	3.6

As shown in Table 1, the younger group is more likely than the older age group to use the irregular past tense form with both verbs. When compared to the Canadian data from the *Dialect Topography* survey, the results of the present study show a very similar development pattern in the use of *snuck* as the past tense form for *sneak*. Younger informants are especially in the favour of *snuck* in AusE. An increase in the use of the irregular past tense form with *dive* is also evident from the results. However, this development seems to be more advanced in the Canadian data. In conclusion, there is a clear trend towards the irregular past tense forms with both *dive* and *sneak* in Australian English.¹

3.2. Marginal modals: *need* and *dare*

Marginal modals *need* and *dare* can be used either as main (i.e. lexical) verbs or as auxiliaries. In addition, blend constructions with *do* and a bare infinitive are possible, but these occur mainly with *dare*. The leading role of AmE to use the marginal modals *need* and *dare* as main verbs rather than as auxiliaries in non-assertive contexts (negative and interrogative sentences, and related constructions) has been noted in many reference works, such as Trudgill and Hannah (1985) and Quirk et al. (1985). Previous research based on elicitation tests with university students has shown this to be the case for AusE as well (see Collins 1989). In order to test people's preferences with regard to this feature, the test sentences in (2) were used in the questionnaire; the results are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

- (2) a. You don't need to / need not / needn't be there.
b. They don't dare to / dare not / don't dare / daren't ask for more.

¹The difference between the age groups is statistically significant with both verbs.

TABLE 2
Distribution of *need* in the data

	17–29		30–49		50–72	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Main verb	28	82.4	30	83.3	15	53.6
Auxiliary verb	5	14.7	5	13.9	12	42.9
More than one variant/ none of the variants chosen	1	2.9	1	2.8	1	3.6

With *need* (Table 2) all age groups prefer the main verb variant in the negative context. If the auxiliary form is chosen, preference is given to the contracted form. There is, however, a visible trend from the acceptance of the auxiliary form in the older age group towards a clear preference for the main verb in the younger age group. It can, therefore, be concluded that with regard to this feature AusE seems to be moving closer to AmE in its usages.

TABLE 3
Distribution of *dare* in the data

	17–29		30–49		50–72	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Main verb	8	23.5	6	16.7	6	21.4
Auxiliary verb	8	23.5	13	36.1	12	42.9
Blend	18	52.9	15	41.7	3	10.7
More than one variant/ none of the variants chosen	0	0.0	2	5.6	7	25.0

In the case of *dare* (Table 3), blend seems to be gaining a lot of ground in the usage of the younger respondents while the older generation still clearly prefers to use *dare* as an auxiliary. The preference for blends in AusE was also found by Collins (1989:143).

With both marginal modals under investigation here, the differences in usage between the age groups are clear, especially among the young and the old.² Although all age groups show a tendency to use *need* as a main verb, the younger age group is more advanced. The difference to *dare* is that the oldest age group still seems to prefer to use it as an auxiliary verb. The most noticeable trend in the use of *dare* is the clear increase in its use as a blend.

²The difference between the age groups is statistically significant with both *need* and *dare*.

3.3. Spelling: *cargo(e)s*, *mango(e)s* and *volcano(e)s*

Variation in Australian English spelling is well illustrated by the following words: *cargoes*, *mangoes* and *volcanoes*. Dictionaries differ in respect to what they give as the plural of these words. For example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the *-es* plural to all, but the *-s* plural only to *mangoes*. The *Macquarie Dictionary*, on the other hand, gives *-es* as the only plural for *cargoes*, but both *-es* and *-s* to the other two lexemes under investigation here. Furthermore, different plural forms for these lexemes are also mentioned in different grammars. Therefore, there clearly is variance as to what is the dominant spelling of the plural, usually the shorter form being associated with AmE. As for AusE, Peters (1998a:531) states that *cargo* is one of the words that Australians are still more likely to give the *-es* ending to. In contrast, *mangoes* and *volcanoes* can be spelled either with *-es* or *-s*.

The overall results of the questionnaire data showed that *cargos* was almost equally often used with *-s* and *-es* whereas for *mangoes* and *volcanoes* *-es* was clearly the preferred variant. The results of the *Langscape* survey were quite the opposite for *cargoes* and *mangoes* in AusE (see Peters 1998b). The distribution of the spelling variants *-s* and *-es* according to age are shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4
Distribution of the spelling variants *-es* and *-s* according to age

	17-29		30-49		50-72*	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>cargoes</i>	10	29.4	17	47.2	20	71.4
<i>cargos</i>	24	70.6	19	52.8	8	28.6
<i>mangoes</i>	23	67.6	31	86.1	24	88.9
<i>mangos</i>	11	32.4	5	13.9	3	11.1
<i>volcanoes</i>	25	73.5	25	69.4	17	60.7
<i>volcanos</i>	9	26.5	11	30.6	11	39.3

*One informant had not chosen any of the variants with *mango(e)s*.

The results of the present study show a clear preference for the *-s* spelling with *cargo* in the younger age group whereas both *mangoes* and *volcanoes* are spelled more often with *-es* in all age groups. Even though the tendency to lose the *-e* in the spelling of these plurals is most evident in the case of *cargo*, the decline is also visible with *mango*. *Volcanoes*, on the other hand, seems to be holding onto the *-es* plural as the preference for that spelling increases with age. As the results presented here have shown, on the whole, AusE seems to be holding onto the *-es* plural, but with certain lexemes it seems to be on the decline.

4. SUMMARY

The results of the present study clearly show the kind of variation that can be found in present-day Australian English. By including three different age groups in the study, some predictions of possible development lines can be made. The results show significant differences among the age groups in preference for certain uses of the features examined. In some cases, as in the use of the irregular past tense forms of certain verbs, the younger age group seems to be closer to the American usage than the older age group. On the other hand, in features such as spelling, the more conservative variants still often prevail in the usage of Australians. The results presented in this paper, of course, come from a limited selection of language features, but they do give an indication of the kind of variation and development trends that are going on in present-day Australian English.

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