

Traditional descriptions of the English habitual past (e.g., Quirk & Greenbaum 1973) describe used to + verb (1) as the default form, with would + verb (2) less common, and the simple preterite (3) and past progressive (4) permitted in specific contexts.

- (1) As a kid I used to work in Ogilvy's. (Montréal 006)
- (2) We would go over and like, steal their underwear and stuff. (Montréal 023)
- (3) They had a sand pile, and played out in the back. (Quebec 034)
- (4) We were always getting into fights. (Montreal 123)

Quantitative analysis of the frequency and distribution of habitual forms, however, has been limited almost entirely to non-mainstream varieties, including Newfoundland English, Caribbean creoles, and African American English (Bickerton 1975, Blake 1997, Clarke 1997, Jones & Tagliamonte 2004, Poplack & Tagliamonte 2001, Winford 1992). This paper addresses and extends that work by examining the distribution of past habitual and durative forms in two regional varieties and two age cohorts that can be expected, on sociohistorical grounds, to vary in their degree of participation in mainstream changes.

From 48 sociolinguistic interviews conducted in Montreal and Quebec City (Poplack & Walker 2002), a total of 7785 verbal tokens with past temporal reference were coded for proposed conditioning factors (temporal relation, temporal distance, adverbial, and subject type) and subjected to multivariate analysis.

A first surprising finding is that used to is an infrequent exponent of past habituality, accounting for only 195 of the over 3000 habitual tokens. Would is more than twice as frequent, but the great majority of habitual contexts are expressed by the simple preterite. Across communities and age cohorts, the preterite is slightly favoured by unclear temporal relations, while used to generally occurs in anterior contexts and would in posterior contexts. This may reflect a discourse effect, whereby the salient and monovalent used to establishes habituality, thus permitting the subsequent use of the less phonologically salient (and usually reduced) would. Temporal distance exerts no influence; neither, contrary to claims in the traditional literature, do disambiguating adverbials.

The more conservative Quebec City informants favour would in 3rd-person contexts, likely an assignment of agency retained from the form's association with volition in earlier English. Among young Montrealers, the group most participating in mainstream change, this function is being usurped by the progressive, increasingly associated both with habituality and with 3rd person contexts.

Beyond revealing possible change in progress and challenging received wisdom with respect to Standard English, these findings may help explain variation in habitual expression in some non-standard varieties. In particular, the suggestion that bare verbs in habitual contexts sometimes result from deletion of preverbal would (Poplack & Tagliamonte 2001, Singler 1991) is supported by the relative frequency of would here. In fact, Quebec informants occasionally use such bare forms, but only in phonological contexts that strongly encourage would deletion.

References

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