

Studies in Colloquial English

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Chapter III

Usage

The aim of this chapter is to examine the scope and complexity of the usage of the English language by making good use of definitions and explanations quoted from dictionaries and grammars concerned.

1. Usage is the Ruler

The term "usage" is explained as follows in dictionaries, whose titles are abbreviated in parentheses.

"The word *usage* refers to the customary manner in which a language or a form of a language is spoken or written." (Random House)

"Before we permit silent speech to emerge as spoken language we must make choices and arrange words in patterns of sense and form, accessible to other people. These choices and patterns are usage." (Heritage)

A person's manner of speaking and writing varies quite remarkably according to the situation in which the language is used, in other words, according to his or her attitude to the hearer or the reader, to the topic, and to the purpose of the communication.

No one expects a newly elected American president to deliver his inaugural address in informal or colloquial English. He is naturally expected to make a dignified formal speech free from grammatical errors and stigmatized slang words.

Today, usage, not grammatical logic, is accepted as the authority of correctness, that is, authoritative contemporary English dictionaries are based upon actual usage. And such dictionaries take pride in being the authority of language use as can be glimpsed in the preface of Webster's Third New International Dictionary: "... accuracy is put first and foremost, for without accuracy there could be no appeal to WEBSTER'S THIRD NEW INTERNATIONAL as an authority."

The following quotations show how usage is regarded by lexicographers.

"The usage of native speakers is right." (Random House)

"The makers of The Heritage Illustrated Dictionary of the English Language accept usage as the authority for correctness. Usage is the ruler, the governor, the judge of language." (Heritage)

2. Usage Levels

Different attitudes toward different situations call for different language uses, resulting in the appearance of various usage levels.

The following is a list of usage-level distinctions arranged in order of simplicity, with over-simplified two-way contrasts first, followed by more detailed other distinctions. They have been taken from the preparatory or preface sections of the dictionaries and grammars indicated in parentheses.

- good usage.....bad usage (Heritage)
- educated.....uneducated (Contemporary)
- literary.....colloquial (American College)
- standard.....nonstandard (Advanced Learner's)
- standard.....substandard (Harper)
- formal.....informal (Comprehensive)
- cultured.....common.....folk (Random House)
- standard.....formal/colloquial.....nonstandard (Random House)
- formal literate.....colloquial.....illiterate (American College)
- formal.....informal.....slang (Heritage, Random House)
- formal.....neutral (and normal).....informal (Comprehensive)
- formal.....informal.....slang.....vulgar (Harper)
- (rigid).....formal.....informal.....familiar (Contemporary)
- very formal.....formal.....neutral.....informal.....very informal (Comprehensive)

The terms often used in the list above are *standard*, *nonstandard*, *formal*, *informal*, and *colloquial*. Before proceeding, these terms need to be defined or explained.

(1) Standard and Nonstandard Distinction

a. Whose English is standard?

"Standard English.....the practice of the socially accepted, those who are carrying on the important affairs of English speaking people." (American College)

"Standard English is revealed by observing the spoken and written English of mature, socially responsible, literate adults." (Random House)

"Standard.....word usage occurring in the speech and writing of literate, educated users of the language." (Harper)

b. Where or how is standard English used?

"... one dialect has become the standard used for formal speeches, radio and T. V., national relations, business letters, newspapers, college writing, and many other modes of communication." (Key to American English)

"Educated English (used synonymously with standard English) is codified in dictionaries, grammars, and guides to usage, and it is taught in the school system." (Comprehensive)

"Educated English is most exclusively the language of printed matter." (ibid.)

c. What are some of the characteristics of standard English?

"We believe that the standard English dialect is linguistically no better nor worse than any other dialect of English." (Keys to American English)

"This standard dialect differs from other dialects mostly in grammar (that is sentence structure, and word endings.)" (ibid.)

"Throughout the English-speaking world and particularly in the United States and Canada, the grammar of the educated is much more uniform than their pronunciation. In fact, grammar is the surest linguistic index of a speaker's education and general culture." (Random House)

"A standard language and a common language are different in that the latter is generated spontaneously, but the former is not. Standard language comes into existence as a result of some artificial linguistic manipulation (improvement or alteration) to one particular dialect, often with some educational purposes." (Encyclopedic Lexicon)

By way of getting a better understanding of the true nature of the standard……nonstandard distinction in American English, let's look into *Keys to American English*, written by Constance Gefvert et al. for its presentation of abundant examples.

In the book you will find the contrast "Standard Dialect……Community Dialect." Here the term "Standard Dialect" is to be interpreted as "Standard American English" and "Community Dialect" as "Nonstandard American English." The variety of nonstandard English listed in the book is so great that it is difficult for non-native speakers of English to believe the existence of so many ungrammatical expressions in the actual daily lives of American people. Some of them are shown below, with corresponding standard forms in parentheses.

(a) Verbs

The dog *play* (plays). You *bakes* (bake) good cake. The kittens *amuses* (amuse) the children. I *bake* (baked) a cake yesterday. I *be* (am) happy. I *is* (am) happy. I *happy* (am happy). I *were* (was) happy. They *is* (are) happy. You *was* (were) happy. He *have* (has) a mustache. They *has* (have) mustaches. Last year I *have* (*had*) a Siamese cat. I *does* (do) the shopping. I *done* (did) my homework. I *hitted* (hit) the ball. The bird *flied* (flew). The bird *flown* (flew). The man *have call* (has called) his wife. He *done finish* (has finished) his breakfast. Joe *had demolish* (had demolished) his new Honda. I *have swam* (have swum). I *has swum* (have swum). I *done swum* (have swum). He *done went* (has gone). She *had chose* (had chosen) him for her partner. I *be* (am) going. I *is* (am) running. I *going* (am going). I *is walk* (am walking) to school. You *was* (were) working. They were *worked* (working). I *has* (have) to go. I *got* (have got) to go. I *be* (am) able to play. We asked him to *paid* (pay) the bill. Mary always allows her baby to *sucks* (suck) his thumb. The cake *been* (is/was) eaten. The cake *got* (was) eaten.

(b) Nouns

two *cent* (cents), two *wolfs* (wolves), *childs* (children) *childrens* (children), *fishes* (fish), *gooses* (geese), *geeses* (geese), my *father* (father's) hat, *childs* (children's) snowsuits, I like *swim* (to swim). He was asked *drive* (to drive) a cab.

(c) Pronouns

Bill and *him* (he) gave the books to you and *I* (me).

Is going (Is it going) to rain? That is *they* (their) book. Just take *you* (your) time. *Me father* (My father) has a birthday today. That book is *you'n* (yours).

This book is *her'n* (hers). It is *they'n* (theirs)

Many other interesting examples have reluctantly been given up for lack of space.

Standard English is also called by such other names as *educated English*, *school English*, *textbook English*, etc., denoting its close relationship to school education. Users of nonstandard language are educated at school to be users of standard language by means of language teachers, textbooks, and dictionaries. Therefore, it is not too much to say that standard language is the kind of language whose correctness is approved by the language teacher, by the textbook writer, and by the dictionary maker.

(2) Formal……Informal Distinction

There is another way of distinguishing usage varieties or usage levels, the formal……informal distinction. The standard……nonstandard distinction treated in the preceding section is mainly based upon the “correct……incorrect” judgment of grammatical features, especially word inflections. On the other hand, the difference between formal language and informal language is not so conspicuous in grammatical inflections as in the choice of vocabulary items. The words selected for informal, familiar situations are usually considerably different from those chosen for formal or ceremonious occasions even though the same or similar meanings are intended to be expressed.

a. Informal vs. Colloquial

This present study was initially titled “Studies in Colloquial English.” But later it was found that the term “colloquial” was accompanied by some undesirable connotations. In *The American College Dictionary* “colloquial” is explained: “It (the term “colloquial”) is used to mark those words and constructions whose range of use is primarily that of the polite conversation of cultured people, of their familiar letters and informal speeches, as is distinct from those words and constructions which are common also in formal writing.” In the explanation above, “colloquial” is defined as the language used in “the polite conversation of cultured people,” but this attitude seems a little too optimistic when compared with the views of other dictionary makers today. Compare:

“*Colloquial* was commonly confused with *local* and was thought to refer to what are called *regionalisms* or *localisms*.” (Heritage)

“Some people take the term colloquial as a sign warning that terms so labeled should be avoided.” (Random House)

“The label ‘colloquial’ did not mean that the forms were in any way inferior to those in formal use.” (ibid.)

In order to avoid this discrepancy in connotations the term “colloquial” has begun to be replaced by “informal,” as is stated in Random House: “More accurately descriptive and less

easily misunderstood is the currently used stylistic label "informal."

The replacement of "colloquial" by "informal," however, does not seem to make much difference, because its scope is still as ambiguous as that of "colloquial." Here are some quotations explaining the terms "formal" and "informal":

"We recognize a gradient in attitude between FORMAL (relatively stiff, cold, polite, impersonal) on the one hand and INFORMAL (relatively relaxed, warm, rude, friendly) on the other." (Comprehensive)

"Both educated and uneducated speakers, whenever encountered, have formal and informal style." (Random House)

"Informal.....casual colloquial speech and writing, appropriate in all contexts save those indicated in the category *formal*." (Harper)

The ambiguous situations witnessed in over-simplified distinctions of usage levels are made more orderly and logical by recognizing the new usage level "neutral," as is seen in the "very formal.....formal..... neutral.....informal.....very informal" contrast introduced in *Comprehensive*. It says, "We chiefly employ the labels 'formal' and 'informal' leaving unmarked the 'neutral' normal style; but we sometimes designate language as 'very formal' or 'very informal', occasionally replacing 'very informal' by 'casual' or 'familiar' as appropriate. The COLLOQUIAL is also used for the very informal usage, but particularly for the spoken language." In this distinction, "colloquial" is equated with "very informal."

3. Colloquial Use of Vocabulary Items

English colloquialism is prominent in vocabulary and grammar, especially in the choice of vocabulary items. There is a gradient from less colloquial to more colloquial, in other words, from less informal to more informal. In the following examples, the words in italics are used colloquially (informally), and their meanings are given in parentheses. In the dictionary these are unmarked, neutral, ordinary words, but in certain contexts as shown below, they assume specific meanings.

(1) Nouns

It's your *baby*, not mine. (troublesome responsibility)

She is a quiet sort of *body*. (person)

He's a *case*. (peculiar or unusual person)

It's a *crime* to overfeed a dog like that. (foolish act)

What are the *damages* for the lubrication job on my car? (cost, expense, charge)

He is a lucky *dog*. (fellow)

He gained the *edge* on his opponent. (advantage)

I have spent a *small fortune* on records. (considerable money)

What do you want to put on such a *front* for? (outward impression)

He emptied the glass at one *go*. (one draft, one gulp)

I wonder what his *game* is. (trick, strategy)

That hat is a *horror*. (badly shaped thing)

She is quite a little *love*. (cheerful person)

Her good looks gave her a great *pull* over other girls. (advantage)

He never makes *passes* at girls who wear glasses.

(action to gain the attention of the other sex)

He gave her a big *rush*. (a series of lavish attention)

He's not such a *stick* as I thought. (stupid fellow)

What he said turned out to be a *story*. (lie)

He had no *show* of winning. (chance ; possibility)

(2) Adjectives

He is a *black* villain. (extreme, utter ; confirmed)

He is the *best* liar. (extreme, terrible)

He felt *cheap* about his mistake. (embarrassed, sheepish)

She is a *contrary* girl. (perverse, obstinate)

What a *darling* baby ! (charming ; cute, lovable)

He was *down* on her like hell. (hostile, averse to)

It did not seem to be making any *famous* progress. (excellent, first-rate)

I'd lend you the dollar, but I'm absolutely *flat* myself. (lacking money)

She is a woman *great* for raking up a person's past. (enthusiastic, much interested)

He is a *live* person. (energetic, alert ; up to date)

You should feel *mean* for being so stingy. (ashamed)

What is he so *mad* about ? (angry, enraged, irritated)

Come at any *old* time. (uncommon)

This accident will cost him a *pretty* sum. (considerable)

He is a *regular* fellow. (real, genuine)

This is a *rare* fine camera. (extremely)

He is the *squarest* man I ever knew. (honest, just, fair)

I'm *sick* of your lies. (disgusted)

He knocked me *silly*. (dazed, stunned)

That's a *tall* tale. (improbable, difficult to believe)

(3) Verbs

He kept *blowing* about his medals. (boast, brag)

He was *burned* by that phony stock deal. (cheat badly)

She *called* him on his vulgar language. (criticize adversely)

Don't go near him while he's *creating*. (conspicuously angry or upset)

I'm *dying* for a cup of coffee. (want keenly)

I must have my watch *fixed*. (repair, mend)

Did you *get* me ? (understand, comprehend)

I can't *go* his preaching. (endure, tolerate)

Let's *hit* the road. (begin to travel on)

The waiter was told to *jump* when the captain signaled. (obey quickly)

- He *kicked* at the requirement. (resist, object, complain)
 He's always *knocking* everything. (criticize)
 It *licks* me. (defeat)
 If you don't like what I am doing, you can *lump* it. (put up with, accept and endure)
 If you hurry, you can *make* the next flight. (be in time for, catch)
 The police *nailed* the suspect. (catch, seize)
 I *reckon* he was right about that. (think, suppose)
 Something I ate for breakfast didn't *sit* too well. (accept food in the stomach)
 She always *tails* after her sister. (follow close behind)
 She *wired* him to come at once. (send a telegram)

These examples are just the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, when compared with the huge number of instances listed in ordinary dictionaries. These are mostly examples of onesyllable words. If they are combined with particles into colloquial phrases, the number multiplies many times.

- pick..... pick at (nag), pick on (criticize), pick up (seduce), pick up (accept)
 sit sit in (participate), sit in (act as a babysitter", sit on (rebuke), sit on (squelch), sit out (sit outdoors), sit pretty (be in a comfortable situation), sit up (become interested), sit up (become astonished)

Furthermore, the criteria for classifying usage levels are slightly different from dictionary to dictionary. A word, or word use marked "colloquial" in one dictionary might be left unmarked in another, or a word with the label "colloquial" might be marked "slang" in some other dictionaries, revealing the gradient nature of the usage levels.

The most prominent characteristic of colloquial use of words and phrases is that ordinary one-syllable words are very often employed to express more formal and abstract meanings that are usually conveyed by polysyllabic, sophisticated words. Examples: pull = advantage; show = possibility; call = criticize; front = outward impression; cheap = embarrassed; great = enthusiastic; lump = accept and endure

4. Slang and Vulgar Words

In order to get a better understanding of "colloquial," an inquiry into "slang" and "vulgar" will be of some significance. Some explanations of "slang" below:

"Slang is often used to add colors and topicality to speech and writing but one should exercise caution in its use because it can have an awkward or even embarrassing impact on the listener or reader." (Harper)

"A further term SLANG is needed to denote the frequently vivid or playful lexical usage typical of casual discourse, usually indicating membership in a particular social group." (Comprehensive)

"The difference between slang and not-slang does not rest in the meanings of the words themselves." (American College)

"Slang is a special subdivision, or perhaps a special relative, of informal language." (Random

House)

"The fate of slang terms is unpredictable. Some disappear rapidly, some win their way into standard use, and still others remain what they were originally." (ibid.)

Finally, some explanations of "vulgar" :

"Some words and expressions occur primarily in the language of those without much conventional education. These expressions are often called 'illiterate' or 'vulgar English,' and are considered 'incorrect.' ... they are considered 'incorrect' only in the sense that they do not occur in the usage of standard English." (American College)

"Vulgar.....words and phrases generally considered taboo in speech and writing of careful, literate users of language. Many vulgar terms, notably the so-called four-letter words, are not truly *slang* but are definitely regarded as substandard by the vast majority of speakers, and, perhaps most significantly, publishers." (Harper)

There are a large number of, sometimes more than one hundred, words and phrases used for expressing the same, or synonymous, or similar ideas. In dictionaries, many of them are not marked because of their general use, and others are given such labels as "archaic", "literary," "colloquial," "slang," "vulgar," etc., because of their specific use, and still others are not listed in ordinary dictionaries because of their limited use, though their number is great.

The following is a list of words meaning "girl" or "young woman" taken from the *Shogakukan Progressive English-Japanese dictionary* and classified according to their usage levels given by the dictionary. Many of them are also accompanied by such nuances as "charming, attractive, unmarried, playful, carefree, romping, or boisterous."

《archaic》	damsel, wench
《literary》	maid, maiden
《unmarked》	girl, kitten, kitty, lass, lassy, pigeon, tomboy, virgin
《slang》	baby, babe, bird, chick, chicken, chicklet, spring chicken, heifer, jane, jill, missy, mouse, rib, skirt, tomato

Here are many more words that are entered in *The Thesaurus of Slang* under the headword "girl" but are not mentioned as such or ignored completely in *Shogakukan Progressive*, perhaps because of their vulgar or obscene connotations or of their use in limited circles.

《others》	baby doll, bag, biddie, broad, boytoy, bunny, jail bait, whistle bait, butterfly, canary, cheese, cover, cupcake, frill, gumdrop, slip, squab, twist, and many other sex-oriented words.
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5. Disputed Usage

Language usage is divided in various ways. Such a usage division as is seen between *on* and *upon* in "Depend *on/upon* it, he will succeed," has little or no linguistic significance whatsoever, because *on* and *upon* here are regarded synonymous and interchangeable.

But the choice between one or the other form of the following pairs has distinctly regional, social, cultural, or stylistic implication.

I have *ate/eaten* breakfast.

Look at *them/those* horses.

I went there *for to tell/to tell* the neighbors about it.

Finally, there is still another usage difference that is termed "disputed usage." Examples :

Who/Whom did the committee select ?

Nobody acknowledged *they were/he was* at fault.

I'm afraid I'm late, *aren't I/am I not* ?

Concerning such differences, *Random House* says: "There is disagreement about the significance of the difference because the practice of educated speakers and writers differs."

In order to settle such disputes, *Heritage* organized a "Usage Panel" believing that "The best authorities, at least for cultivated usage, are those professional speakers and writers who have demonstrated their sensitiveness to the language and their power to wield it effectively and beautifully." *Harper* also formed a "Usage Panel" of 165 members, consisting of writers, editors, and public speakers chosen for their demonstrated ability to use the language carefully and effectively. Interestingly, scholarly theoreticians were not asked to join the panel. The panelists' opinions on questions of disputed usage were reported in the form of percentages of approval and disapproval. A few examples from *Harper* :

(1) Q: Would you accept, in casual speech, "I'm afraid I'm late, *aren't I* ?

Yes: 54% No: 46%

(2) Q: Do you approve of *like* as a conjunction ?

In writing.....Yes: 12% No: 88%

(3) Q: When referring to your mental or physical state, do you say: " I feel *bad*" ?

Yes: 77% No: 23%

"I feel *badly*" ?

Yes: 26% No: 74%

Some more from *Heritage* :

(4) "... *ain't I*?" in writing

Disapproved by 99%

(5) "Drive *slow*."

Approved by 96%

(6) "Nobody thinks the criticism applies to *their* own work."

Disapproved by 95%

6. Mixed Usage

Colloquial and even slang terms are, occasionally, used in more formal situations for special effect. The impact achieved by incongruity makes those terms conspicuous. In the following examples, the words in italics are usually labeled "colloquial" in ordinary English-Japanese dictionaries. Their corresponding neutral or less colloquial expressions are given in parentheses.

Despite the danger, 50° desert heat and threat of poison gas, many *gung-ho* (loyal and enthusiastic) journalists would jump at the chance. (p. 1, Aug. 27, 1990 TIME)

Iraq's ambassador to Britain was summoned to the Foreign Office and given a 20-minute *dressing-down* (severe reprimand, scolding) (p. 14, *ibid.*)

Tony Watson found the Iraqi tank emplacements *scary* (causing fright or alarm). (p. 15, *ibid.*)

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