

“Between a Rock and A Hard Place” Supplemental Studies

Supplement I

A New Resource for Grammatical Study *Bryan Garner’s Modern English Usage*

One of the practical problems in communication is, on the one hand, avoiding constructions that will sound old-fashioned and stuffy to some readers, and, on the other hand, avoiding constructions that will sound like bad grammar to some readers. In a sea of grammatical change, how does one objectively determine what the current standards are or should be for editing standard contemporary prose?

The Wartburg Project is now making use of a valuable new resource to address this issue. *Garner’s Modern English Usage* has proved to be useful for understanding which constructions, phrases, and words (including spellings) are most common and acceptable today. Our interest started with an article about this new resource on modern English usage. Here’s a link to the article for aficionados of good English usage: <http://www.businessinsider.com/bryan-garner-interview-english-usage-google-ngrams-big-data-2016-4>

Below are a few edited excerpts from that article about the author, Bryan A. Garner:

The 57-year-old Texan has written 25 books, many of them award-winning, and he’s the editor-in-chief of *Black’s Law Dictionary*, said to be the most widely cited law book on the planet. In his new book, *Garner’s Modern English Usage* (Oxford), Garner has made extensive use of so-called *big data* to write more precisely and more objectively about English usage than anyone ever has done before. Google gave him license to delve into its [Google Books Ngram Viewer](#), which displays graphs showing how words have occurred in books over centuries.

In many ways, books about word usage have always been based on a good deal of guesswork. That’s why Garner calls the use of ngrams “absolutely revolutionary” in the field of usage lexicography.

Here’s a little bit of what Garner had to say in the interview:

The biggest change is the level of empiricism (objectivity) underlying all the judgments. I made extensive use of corpus linguistics, and especially of [Google Books and the ngrams](#), to assess the judgments that I’ve made in previous editions, and it was a most enlightening process. I’ve added almost 2,500 ratios of the most current available information about how many times one form—the standard form, let’s say—would appear in relation to a variant form. That’s enormously useful information for the connoisseur. But even for a less serious aficionado, those ratios can be extremely interesting....

If you want to know how often, for example, *between you and I* occurs in comparison with *between you and me* in print sources or current books, that information is now available to us, whereas previous lexicographers and usage writers simply had to guess. There’s a lot of this kind of empirical evidence spread throughout the book, and in some cases my judgments about terms changed. I’ve added about a thousand new entries, a lot

of them for connoisseurs — plural forms, some arcane plurals that weren't in the book before. I've tried to make the book the most comprehensive treatment of English usage ever published. That was the goal anyway....

Once the ngrams became available, it took me a little time to start playing with ngrams and realize this is absolutely revolutionary in the field of lexicography. The moment I played with a couple of ngrams, I realized this fundamentally changes the nature of usage lexicography. For a long time, some descriptive linguists have complained that usage books with a prescriptive bent are written by people who just sit back and say, "I like this better than I like that." I don't think that's ever been so, because the best usage books, even prescriptive ones, have been based on lifetimes of study — when you consider people like H.W. Fowler and Wilson Follet and Theodore Bernstein and others.

But still, they had to guess. Even the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* had to guess based on the few citation slips in front of them. But now we can apply *big data* to English usage and find out what usage was predominant until what year.

The editors of the Wartburg Project are finding Garner's book to be useful in our translation work. For example, the EHV will be spelling "worshipped" with the double "p." This is actually the standard American and British usage by a ratio of 3:1. Garner comments that some American dictionaries state a preference for "worshipped" with one "p," but this spelling has never attained a predominance in print. Double "pp" has steadily outranked single "p" in America, but in Britain there has been no competition at all. It's double "p" consistently.

Discuss: How have computer programs like ngrams revolutionized the study of grammar?