

Grammar as she is spoke

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How do you write your emails? Do you write blackberry? In other words, do you write like you speak? Jamie Oliver and Jeremy Clarkson do it. And with great success.

Dictionaries and grammars have always taken the written language as a benchmark for what is proper and standard. The spoken language has been downgraded and what is written and what is literate has higher cultural status. But our language is changing. People are beginning to write more like they speak.

Recent advances in audio- and recording technologies mean that there are now collections of people speaking in both formal and informal situations. The Cambridge International Corpus, developed by Cambridge University Press, contains over 1 billion words of English with several million words of spoken English.

These examples are collected in everyday places such as shops, pubs, the workplace and family home. The people recorded in the Corpus come from different regions of the country and incorporate a range of ages, social classes and gender. These recordings are then transcribed and made computer-readable so that computer programmes can identify frequent patterns and changes in the language.

The Corpus also has lots of examples of emails, magazines, newspapers, texting and advertisements and show how the spoken and written varieties of English are more closely connected than we have thought.

For example, we are all becoming very vague in the way we speak (and write). We all use a lot of vague language. It includes words and phrases such as *thing, stuff, or so, or something, and sort of*. Vague language avoids information overload and involves the reader. For example:

He was talking about sport, Wimbledon, the World Cup, US Open Golf and that sort of stuff. (Observer Magazine, 15/5/1997).

But it looks as if we are rapidly becoming a country of vague speakers and writers. Here are some more common examples of spoken grammar from Cambridge Grammar of English:

There are forms that are termed heads, found at the beginning of clauses. They help listeners orient to the topic: *The white house on the corner, is that where she lives?*

There are forms that are termed tails, found at the end of clauses. They help to reinforce what we are saying: *I'm going to have steak and fries, I am.*

Ellipsis occurs when we omit subjects and verbs because we can assume our listeners know what we mean: *Sounds good to me* (instead of: *That sounds good to me*).

Ellipsis, in particular, is especially common in certain kinds of writing such as email and Internet communications. Email communication is often direct and immediate. We prefer to sound informal:

Could you email Jim and get a quote for a wireless PC with Intel 4 processor? Said we'd do a deal with Hammond. Sony or Toshiba preferably. At least 80Gb hard disk. Good deal, tell Peter. More on the way.
(Inter company email)

Recipes written by Jamie Oliver have a similar feel. It's written like an email, as if he is there talking to you. *Simple you may think... So, you've got your bacon and bread. Lovely.* [Jamie Oliver, *The Naked Chef* (2000)]

In fact, one of the most significant changes affecting the English language at the end of the twentieth century is the growing presence of spoken forms in writing. For example, heads and tails occur increasingly in writing. Here is Jeremy Clarkson: *It doesn't feel like a car, this.* (Jeremy Clarkson, *The Sunday Times* 1/1/2006)

The tail (*this*) adds emphasis to the statement and makes it all sound more like a chat with the reader. Sometimes specific spoken 'conjunctions' do this job (e.g. *mind you, well, right, what's more, so*). For example:

So there I was sitting in Mick Jagger's kitchen while he went about making us both afternoon tea. Well, you can imagine how long it took to get him to talk about the band's latest album. Exactly. You've got it. Over two minutes. (The Daily Telegraph Magazine 19/9/1999)

Both advertisers and journalists make use of ellipsis. It sounds as if they are on the same level as you and keeping an open dialogue going. They then give an answer to your supposed question. It's highly interactive. It's clever. Soft sell rather than hard sell to get your points across.

Lexicographers and grammarians have to decide whether such features are to be ignored because they form a deviation from 'standard' usage. Or whether they are to be included because they are used by speakers of Standard English.

As collections of recorded spoken language and contemporary written forms expand, more evidence of this kind will come to light and grammars such as *The Cambridge English Grammar* will include such examples.

Right, well, so, it's all change with grammar then. Ok, right. Got you!