

A Study of Present-day English Usage

— Leonard Survey Re-examined
through Questionnaires —

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1. *Current English Usage* by Leonard

Current English Usage, the study of gathered opinions about usage of the words and expressions usually questioned or condemned in grammars and textbooks, is a result of a survey initiated by Sterling A. Leonard. It was completed after his death and published by the Publication Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English in 1932. The purpose of his study was set forth in the following statement at the outset of the article, "Current Definitions of Levels in English Usage" by Leonard and Moffett, published in the *English Journal* for May, 1927 (pages 345—359). This study was attempted to find out what various judges have observed about the actual use or non-use by cultivated persons of a large number of expressions usually condemned in English textbooks and classes. ①

Current English Usage, which appeared five years later, in 1932, was an enlargement of the earlier project, employing the same method and having the same purpose in view. ② The Leonard Survey is not a survey of the facts of the English usage but of opinions about the standing of various debatable items. The guiding principle of the survey is indicated succinctly in the statement that "allowable usage is based on the actual practice of cultivated people rather than on rules of survey or logic." ③ He examined the actually written and spoken English. His survey provides the evidence to demonstrate the discrepancy between the actual usage and rules of the grammar.

The method which Leonard and his associates pursued in order to get a consensus of expert opinions is followed. They submitted a list of 230 expressions whose standing might be questionable to the judges. They were 229 Englishmen and Americans, who were linguistics, editors, authors, business men and teachers of English and speech. The judges were asked to place the items into one of four categories according to the observation of what actual usage is rather than their opinions of what usage might be. The following is the part of the instructions to the judges.

The following list of expressions represents an attempt to present one or more

examples from each of the levels or regions of usage suggested by Dr. Murray in the preface to the *New English Dictionary*. We hope, by getting a consensus of expert opinion on the classification of these expressions, to clarify and define more precisely the categories themselves. . . .

Score, please, according to your observation of what is actual usage rather than your opinion of what usage should be. For example, if you detest *like* as a conjunction, but observe it as a standard literary use, you should mark 1. . . .

Finally, please do not mark according to your own definitions of categories or term below. . . for the purpose of this study use the definitions offered here. . . .

Key Number	Definition of Terms
1.	Formally correct English, appropriate chiefly for serious and important occasions, whether in speech or writing; usually called "Literary English."
2.	Fully acceptable English for informal conversation, correspondence, and all other writing of well-bred ease; not wholly appropriate for occasions of literary dignity: "standard, cultivated, colloquial English."
3.	Commercial, foreign, scientific, or other technical uses, limited in area of comprehensibility; not used outside their particular area by cultivated speakers: "trade or technical English."
4.	Popular or illiterate speech, not used by persons who wish to pass as cultivated, saved to represent uneducated speech, or to be jocose; here taken include slang or argot, and dialect forms not admissible to the standard or cultivated area; usually called "vulgar English" but with no implication necessarily of the current meaning of vulgar: "naïf, popular, or uncultivated English."

The various ratings are tabulated and results are presented in *Current English Usage* in three lists. Items are arranged in the order of their acceptability. The rank indicating most complete approval is No. 1 and that indicating most complete disapproval is No. 230. The items are divided into three groups, indicated as *Established*, *Disputable*, and *Illiterate*. The *Established* items, which the judges agreed upon as being either literary or cultivated colloquial English, are those approved by at least 75 per cent of the judges and disapproved by not more than 25 per cent. The *Disputable* items, which are placed in a middle group, are those approved by fewer than 75 per cent, and disapproved by more than 25 per cent. The *Illiterate* items, as uncultivated or popular English, are those approved by fewer than 25 per cent of the judges and disapproved by more than 75 per cent. ④

2. *Fact About Current English Usage* by Marckwardt and Walcott and our survey re-examined by authoritative materials in 1969

In 1938, six years after the publication of *Current English Usage*, *Fact About*

Current English Usage was published by Albert H. Marckwardt and Fred G. Walcott. They pointed out that Leonard and his associates had made a survey of the opinions about usage rather than the facts of usage and that this appeal to opinions might be said to have decisive results in less than one-half of the cases submitted to the judges.^⑤ Their purpose was to supplement the survey of opinions, which formed the basis of the Leonard monograph, with a survey of the recorded usage. They attempted to make the Leonard Survey as objective as possible by using the *Oxford English Dictionary* mainly. They placed the various expressions into one of the following categories, *Literary English*, *American Literary English*, *Colloquial English*, *American Colloquial English*, *Dialect* and *Archaic*. We must offer a few explanatory comments about their use of the terms. If an expression was recorded without a limiting label in the authoritative materials, and if there were at least one citation from the nineteenth century, the expression was considered *Literary English*. The term *Colloquial English* means that a word or expression is to be found in spoken or informal written English. If an expression was recorded without comment, but the citations appeared to have been drawn from informally written material or from dialogue, it was recorded as *Colloquial English*. But if an expression was labeled *colloquial* in the dictionary but the citations were chiefly drawn from works of a serious literary nature, they felt justified in classifying such an item as *Literary English*. The words and expressions for which no citations after 1800 were found in the *Oxford Dictionary* were listed as *Archaic* unless one of the other sources indicated that they were still in present use. If a word was labeled both *dialect* and *archaic* by the dictionaries, it was placed in the *Dialect* category on the ground that it was still in use somewhere at the present time.^⑥

In 1969, we made an investigation to supplement the survey of the judges' opinions with that of recorded usage and to find out the changes of usage level of debatable words and expressions in forty years by using the authoritative dictionaries and grammars published after 1955. The result is recorded on *The Journal of Otemae Women's University* published in 1971. The expression was placed in one of the following six categories, *Literary English*, *General English*, *Colloquial English*, *Slang*, *Dialect* and *Archaic*, when it was found recorded in one or more authorities.

3. This investigation

This investigation was intended to find out the change of usage level of the words and expressions in forty years and to demonstrate the discrepancy between the actual usage and rules of grammars. In other words our purpose is to know if the expression which was labeled as Standard English forty years ago has changed its label and is considered as Nonstandard English and vice versa. In the result of this survey we can understand the change of usage level of the expressions in forty years and find out that some expressions that were used are no longer understood by many informants.^⑦

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Our informants are twelve Americans who, except one, teach English in colleges and universities in Japan. The instructions to the judges are the same as those of the Leonard Survey. But the definition of usage level is different, because the Leonard's definition was not precise. The following is a part of the letter to the judges.

In the separate papers, from page 1 to 11, there are 230 sentences each of which includes the problem of usage level. The word or phrase about which there is question of placement is underlined; no other part of the sentences which may perhaps belong to a different level should influence a judgment as to the critical expression. The problem of pronunciation does not enter.

Score, please, according to your observation of what is actual usage rather than your opinion of what usage should be. For example, if you dislike *like* as a conjunction, but observe it as *Literary English*, you should mark it 1.

Comments on any or all the expressions or on reasons for your placement will of course be most welcome.

Please, do not mark according to your own definitions of the categories; for the purposes of this study use the definitions offered here.

Key Number	Definitions of Terms
1.	<i>Literary English</i> : typically used in serious writings, such as textbooks, reference works, scientific and scholarly treaties, philosophical and critical essays, literature (exclusive of dialogue), and magazines edited for a rather limited, highly educated audience, and in addresses on solemn or formal occasions and lectures to special audience.
2.	<i>General English</i> : used both in written and spoken forms. Used in writings, such as business letters and advertising, newspaper columns, magazine articles, and literature for general circulation, and other writings intended for the general public and in conversation such as talks to generic audiences.
3.	<i>Colloquial English</i> : used in familiar conversation of educated people, and in writings that are conversational in nature, such as personal letters, diaries and the like. Used within the family circle and among close friends and sometimes used by public speakers when the occasion is not formal and they feel sure of the sympathy of audience.
4.	<i>Slang</i> : not appropriate for public affairs but heard in conversation at home, with friends or on job.
5.	<i>Dialect</i> : used in limited regions but not in the entire area.
6.	<i>Archaic</i> : old-fashioned and no longer used in standard English.

As a matter of course the differences between British usage and American usage might be found. If a certain *General* expression is found only in Britain or in America, then it should be labeled as 3B (means *General English* in Britain) or 3US

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(means *General English* in America) respectively. It is so with *Literary English* and *Colloquial English*.

We asked twenty people to fill out the questionnaire according to the instruction but twelve answers have been received till now. The main reason why we have received less than we expected is that the number of items on which we addressed the questionnaire was great. The number of 230 items was much trouble to the informants when they were asked to place the words and expressions into one of the categories, *Literary English*, *General English*, *Colloquial English*, *Slang*, *Dialect* and *Archaic*. We had only twelve informants, but if all the informants placed an expression in one of the categories, *Literary English*, *General English*, and *Colloquial English*, we decided it as Standard English. If twelve informants put an expression in *Slang*, *Dialect* or *Archaic*, it was definitely Nonstandard English. Thus when all the informants agreed about usage level of each item, we decided the level, even though the number of the informants was small.

In the next section we have the Standard English, that is, the words and expressions which all the informants placed in one of the categories, *Literary*, *General* and *Colloquial English*. We have also the Nonstandard English, that is, the words and expressions which all the informants put in one of the categories, *Slang*, *Dialect* and *Archaic*. These items are arranged in the order of their acceptability, which was decided by adding the score that the informants placed to the items. For example, if twelve informants agreed to place *an* in *A Tale of Two Cities* is *an* historical novel in the class of *Literary English* and mark 1 according to the instruction, the added score of the use of *an* was 12, which indicated most complete approval. If the twelve informants agreed an expression as *Archaic* and marked 6, the item achieved 72 scores, which meant the most complete disapproval. The items the meaning of which the informants did not understand and which they did not mark was the score 7.

To show the change of usage level of the words and expressions, we add the survey of Leonard, that of Markwardt and Walcott, and our survey made by grammars and dictionaries in 1969. The abbreviations which are used in the present investigation are as follows:

- L. indicates the judgment of the Leonard Survey, followed by these abbreviations.
Est.—Established Usage Dis.—Disputable Usage
Ill.—Illiterate Usage

The number after the abbreviation shows the ranking of acceptability of the judges.

MW. indicates the judgment of the Marckwardt-Walcott Survey, followed by these abbreviations.

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|
| LE—Literary English | ALE—American Literary English |
| CE—Colloquial English | ACE—American Colloquial English |
| Dial—Dialect | Arch—Archaic |
| //—Not recorded | |

- O. indicates the judgment of our previous survey, followed by these abbreviations.
- | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------|
| LE—Literary English | GE—General English |
| CE—Colloquial English | Dial—Dialect |
| Arch—Archaic | //—Not recorded |

In each case the expression is quoted in full with the questionable point italicized.

4. Standard usages and Nonstandard usages

Standard usages

The items which all the judges agreed upon as being *Literary English*, *General English*, or *Colloquial English*.

1. Why *pursur* a vain hope?
L Est 3: MW Established without grammatical problems: O GE
2. The honest person is to be applauded.
L Est 23: MW Established without grammatical problems; O GE
3. I *drove* the car around the block.
L Est 33: MW Established as colloquially technical: O GE
4. *One* rarely likes to do as *he* is told.
L Dis 110: MW LE: O GE in U. S.
5. My position in the company was satisfactory from every *point of view*.
L Est 14: MW Established without grammatical problems: O GE
6. The defendant's case was *hurt* by this admission.
L Est 17: MW Established without grammatical problems: O GE
7. He stood *in front of* the class to speak.
L Est 24: MW Established without grammatical problems: O GE
8. *This much* is certain.
L Est 25: MW Established without grammatical problems: O GE
9. Take two *cups* of flour.
L Est 32: MW Established as colloquially technical: O GE
10. Is your insurance sufficient *coverage* for your house?
L Est 71: MW Established as technical: O GE
11. Galileo discovered that the earth *moved*.
L Est 12: MW LE: O GE
12. *In the case* of students who elect an extra subject, an additional fee is charged.
L Est 16: MW Established without grammatical problems: O GE
13. My *viewpoint* on this is that we ought to make concession.
L Dis 82: MW LE: O GE
14. There is *a big woods* behind the house.
L Dis 126: MW CE: O GE in U. S.
15. The man was *very amused*.
L Dis 146: MW LE: O GE

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16. This is a man... I used to know. (Omitted relative)
L Est 9: ME LE: O GE
17. *Under these circumstances*, I will concede the point.
L Est 20: MW Established without grammatical problems; O GE
18. He has no fear; nothing can *confuse* him.
L Est 27: MW Established without grammatical problems: O GE
19. *Will* you be at the Browns' this evening?
L Est 51: MW LE: O GE
20. That clock must be *fixed*.
L Dis 108: MW ACE: O GE in U. S.

Nonstandard usages

1. You *was* mistaken about that, John.
L Ill 220: MW Dial: O Dial
2. It *don't* make any difference what you think.
L Dis 158: MW ACE: O Dial
3. He won't *leave* me come in.
L Ill 217: MW ACE: O Slang
4. Martha *don't* sew as well as she used to.
L Dis 168: MW ACE: O Dial
5. He looked at me and *says*.
L Ill 205: MW CE: O Slang
6. It was dark when he *come* in.
L Ill 219: MW Dial: O Dial
7. Somebody *run* past just as I opened the door.
L Iii 227: MW Dial: O Dial
8. My cold *wa'nt* any better next day.
L Ill 223: MW Dial: O //
9. He *begun* to make excuse.
L Ill 201: MW CE: O Dial
10. I *have drank* all my milk.
LIII 210: MW Arch: O Arch
11. The old poodle was *to no sense* agreeable.
L Ill 212: MW //: O //

5. The items on which 90 per cent of informants agree

We had twelve informants, but we thought if eleven out of twelve informants agreed about usage level of the words and expressions, we decided their levels. The following items are those which eleven, that is 90 per cent of informants placed in one of the categories, *Literary English*, *General English*, and *Colloquial English*. They are also Standard English.

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Standard English

21. *In this connection*, I should add. . . .
L Est 8: MW Established without grammatical problems: O GE
22. He doesn't do it *the way* I do.
L Est 34: Mw LE: O GE
23. We have made some progress *along these lines*.
L Est 39: MW Established without grammatical problems: O GE
24. The catcher stands *back of* the home plate.
L Est 40: MW Established without grammatical problems: O GE in U. S.
25. Jane was *home* all last week.
L Est 45: MW CE: O CE
26. I'd *like* to make a correction.
L Est 46: MW LE: O CE
27. The banker *loaned* me \$200 at 6%.
L Est 68: MW Established as technical: O GE in U. S.
28. He never works *evenings* or *Sundays*.
L Dis III: MW ALE in U. S.
29. I have no prejudice, and *that* is the cause of my unpopularity.
L Est 21: MW Established without grammatical problems: O GE
30. He did *not* do *as* we expected.
L Est 26: MW LE: O GE
31. I was attacked by one of *those* huge police dogs.
L Est 29: MW Established without grammatical problems: O GE
32. *Pikes Peak* is in Colorado.
L Est 69: MW Established as technical: O GE
33. It says in the book that. . . .
L Dis 80: MW CE: O CE
34. He made a *date* for next week.
L Dis 94: MW ACE: O CE
35. *The data* is often inaccurate.
L Dis 192: MW ALE: O GE in U. S.
36. Each person should of course bear *his or her* share of the expense.
L Est 11: MW Established as hyper-urbanisms: O LE
37. I *for one* hope he will be there.
L Est 18: MW Established without grammatical problems: O GE
38. We can expect the commission *to at least protect* our interest.
L Est 48: MW LE: O GE
39. The real *reason* he failed *was because* he tried to do too much.
L Est 62: MW LE: O GE
40. Harry was a little shaver about *this* tall.
L Est 63: MW LE: O GE

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41. *They* had numerous strikes in England in 1860.
L Est 65: MW CE: O GE
42. I *will probably* come alittle late.
L Dis 135: MW LE: O GE
43. Yes our plan worked just *fine*.
L Dis 161: MW Dial: O CE
44. The New York climate is *healthiest* in fall.
L Est 35: MW LE: O GE
45. There are some *nice* people here.
L Est 50: MW LE O CE
46. I don't know *if* I can.
L Est 53: M W LE: O GE
47. *You* had to have property to vote in the eighteenth century.
L Est 60: MW LE: O GE
48. We *got home* at three o'clock.
L Dis 72: MW CE: O GE
49. The invalid was able *partially to raise* his body.
L Est 5: MW Established as hyper-urbanisms: O LE
50. This was the *reason why* he went home.
L Est 31: MW LE: O GE
51. He *loaned* me his skates.
L Est 66: MW ALE: O GE in U. S.
52. *Who* are you looking for?
L Dis 86: MW CE: O CE
53. What was the reason for *Bennet making* that disturbance?
L Dis 101: MW LE: O GE
54. The child was weak, *due to* improper feeding.
L Dis 177: MW ALE: O GE in U. S.
55. "You just had a telephone call." "Did *they* leave any message?"
L Est 28: MW LE: O CE
56. This room is *awfully* cold.
L Est 59: MW CE: O CE
57. We will *try and get* it.
L Dis 77: MW LE: O CE
58. In hopes of seeing you, I asked...
L Dis 79: MW LE: O LE
59. He came *around* four o'clock.
L Dis 106: MW ALE: O CE in U. S.
60. I *can't seem to* get this problem right.
L Dis 121: MW LE: O CE in U. S.
61. We don't often see sunset *like* they have in the tropics.

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- L Dis 173 : MW LE : O CE
62. It looked *like* they meant business.
L Dis 176 : MW ACE : O CE
63. You *had better* stop that foolishness.
L Est 10 : MW LE : O GE
64. Have you *fixed* the fire for the night?
L Est 52 : MW ACE : O CE in U. S.
65. If it *wasn't* for football, school life would be dull.
L Est 54 : MW LE : O CE
66. I *guess* I'll go to lunch.
L Dis 118 : MW ACE : O CE in U. S.
67. He could write *as well* or *better than* I.
L Dis 119 : MW // : O CE

The following items are those which 90 per cent of informants placed in one of the categories, *Slang*, *Dialect* and *Archaic*. We may regard them as Nonstandard English.

Nonstandard English

12. The stock market collapse left me *busted*.
L Dis 180 : MW ACE : O Slang
13. I haven't *hardly* any money.
L Ill 194 : MW Arch : O Slang
14. I suppose I'm wrong, *ain't* I?
L Dis 183 : MW CE : O CE
15. I wish he *hadn't of* come.
L Ill 221 : MW ACE : O Slang
16. If John *had of* come, I needn't have.
L Ill 224 : MV ACE : O Slang
17. She *sung* very well.
L Dis 186 : MW LE : O Arch
18. Just *set* down and rest awhile.
L Ill 228 : MV Dial : O Dial
19. The neighbors took turns *setting* up with him.
L Ill 229 : MW Dial : O Dial
20. *That there* rooster is a fighter.
L Ill 211 : MW Dial : O Slang
21. He *drunk* too much ice water.
L Ill 197 : MW Arch : O Dial
22. Such naif actions seem to me absurd.
L Dis 147 : MW LE : O Arch
23. One of my brothers *were* helping me.

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L III 213 : MW // : O Slang

24. His presence was valueless *not only*, but a hindrance as well.

L Dis 172 : MW // : O //

25. I enjoy wandering *among* a library.

L III 214 : MW LE : O //

6. Conclusion

The words and expressions which were *Established* in the Leonard Survey and are placed in the class of Standard usage in this survey are forty-four. But the items which were once *Established* but have become *Disputable* are twenty-seven. The following is the comparison between the Leonard Survey and this investigation.

Table I
Leonard Survey and this investigation

Leonard \ This inv.	Standard	Disputable	Nonstandard	Total
Established	44	27	0	71
Disputable	23	91	7	121
Illiterate	0	20	18	38
Total	67	138	25	230

The items which have not changed the levels are forty-four, ninety-one, and eighteen. These numbers are 66.5 per cent of 230 items. But the items which have changed their levels are seventy-seven, that is, 33.5 per cent of 230 items. One third of 230 items have changed their levels during forty years.

We compare our survey made by authorities in 1967 with this investigation.

Table II
Our survey in 1967 and this investigation

Our survey \ This inv.	Standard	Disputable	Nonstandard	Total
Standard	67	108	1	176
Nonstandard	0	27	20	47
Not Recorded	0	3	4	7
Total	67	138	25	230

We ignore Not Recorded items. 108 and 1 out of 176 Standard items in our previous survey have changed their levels. 27 out of 47 Nonstandard items also have changed their levels. We can say that 60.9 per cent of the items have changed their status, when we compare our survey by authorities with this survey of opinions.

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To make sure of this figure, we present the comparison between the Leonard Survey and the Marckwardt and Walcott Survey.

Table III
Leonard Survey and Marckwardt and Walcott Survey

Marckwardt	Leonard	Established	Disputable	Illiterate	Total
Standard		71	107	13	191
Nonstandard		0	5	20	25
Not Recorded		0	9	5	14
Total		71	121	38	230

Comparing the Leonard Survey with the Marckwardt and Walcott Survey, 121 out of 191 Standard usage in the Marckwardt and Walcott Survey are *Disputable* and *Illiterate* in the Leonard Survey. Five out of twenty-five Nonstandard usage in the dictionaries survey are *Disputable* in the survey of opinions. In other words 57.8 per cent of 230 items have different levels. Roughly to say from two comparisons, about 60 per cent of words and expressions have discrepancy about usage level of the expressions, when we compare the survey of opinions with that of grammars and dictionaries. Opinions of people on usage level are rather conservative.

Notes

1. Albert H. Marckwardt and Fred Walcott, *Fact About Current English Usage* (New York : Appleton-Century-Crofts, Ins., 1938), p. 2.
2. *Ibid.* p. 2.
3. Sterling A. Leonard, *Current English Usage* (Chicago : Inland Press, 1932), p. 95.
4. *Current English Usage*, p. 167.
5. *Fact About Current English Usage*, p. 13.
6. *Ibid.* pp. 17-21.
7. The next items are those which half of the informants did not mark. The number indicates the ranking of acceptability in the Leonard Survey.
 75. This book is valueless, that one has more to recommend it. (Comma Splice)
 147. Such *naif* actions seem to me absurd. (Debated Spelling)
 156. Cities and villages are being stripped of all they contain *not only, but* often their very inhabitants. (Position of Adverb)
 172. His presence was valueless *not only*, but a hindrance as well.