



Linguistic Society of America

NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: Alyson Reed, LSA Executive Director
areed@lsadc.org; 202-835-1714

Which-Hunting and the Hegemony of Style Guides

(Washington, DC) – A new study reveals just how strong the influence of mass-market books promoting a certain style of writing have had on authors since they were first published in the late 1950s. The study “Which-hunting and the Standard English Relative Clause,” by a team of linguists at the University of Texas at Austin and KU Leuven, was published in the December, 2015 issue of the scholarly journal *Language*. A pre-print version of the article may be found at: http://www.linguisticsociety.org/sites/default/files/archived-documents/Lg_03_91.4_Hinrichs_article.pdf.

The article examines the significant impact of mass-market manuals to systematically change the way that writers use the English language. Advice books such as Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style*, or Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* have been able to systematically influence generation after generation of students in much of the English-speaking world. The new study demonstrates the importance of prescriptive grammar as a social force and its steady increase over the course of the twentieth century.

The authors of the study, Lars Hinrichs and Axel Bohmann, of the University of Texas at Austin, and Benedikt Szmrecsanyi, of KU Leuven, show that these changes can sometimes be rather drastic. To introduce relative clauses, English writers (especially American ones) now clearly prefer the relative pronoun *that* (as in the sentence: *This is the book that impressed me*), whereas in the middle of the twentieth century, the use of *which* (as in *This is the book which impressed me*) was still much more common. This shift dovetails with recommendations in style guides to go *which*-hunting, and to instead use *that* in defining relative clauses.

For this research, the linguists studied 16,868 relative clauses that appeared in written publications in English from either Britain or the US, and which were published either in 1961 or in 1991/1992. In each of these cases, writers would have been able, in principle, to use either *that* or *which* as relative pronoun. The study found that there is a very significant shift from the early 60’s to the 90’s, in writers’ preferences for *that* at the expense of *which*. Regression analysis also reveals an interesting pattern when linguists look at who the writers are that prefer to use *that* over *which*. The same writers are the ones who on the one hand follow another rule from prescriptive style guides, “avoid the passive voice”. On the other hand, writers preferring to use *that* tend to disproportionately often end sentences in a preposition (*the house which I looked at*), which is proscribed.

As a result, usage of relative *that*, avoidance of the passive, and ending sentences in a preposition all go hand in hand, and crucially, all of these options are rather informal. Relative *that*, for example, is the variant that people normally use when they talk. The study thus reveals an important fact about prescriptive grammar: it is most successful in changing usage if what it prescribes is more informal than alternative options.

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The Linguistic Society of America (LSA) publishes the peer-reviewed journal, Language, four times per year. The LSA is the largest national professional society representing the field of linguistics. Its mission is to advance the scientific study of language.