

FACTS ABOUT CURRENT ENGLISH USAGE

BY

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INCLUDING A DISCUSSION OF CURRENT USAGE
IN GRAMMAR FROM "CURRENT ENGLISH USAGE"

BY

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PREFACE

This study, which the Publications Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English has generously consented to make available in printed form, had its inception in two papers presented before the Current Language Problems section of the National Council of Teachers of English. In 1933, the year after the appearance of *Current English Usage*, Mr. Walcott read a paper entitled, "Some Practical Aspects of the Leonard Monograph" at the Council meeting held in Detroit. Mr. Marckwardt's paper was read at the Buffalo meeting in 1937. Both papers had the same end in view and employed the same technique. The authors collected evidence as to the usage of certain expressions for the purpose of comparing this evidence with the collected opinion in the Leonard report about the same expressions.

Thus it seemed feasible to combine the two papers into a single comprehensive study which would present the factual evidence concerning all, or nearly all, of the expressions surveyed in *Current English Usage*. It is this combination which is presented here. Mr. Walcott is responsible for the work on those items which both groups of judges voted "established." The items which were voted "established" by the linguists and "disputable" by the per-capita vote of all the judges were studied independently by both collaborators, the results being combined in this monograph. The work on the remaining "disputable" and the "illiterate" items was done by Mr. Marckwardt.

To help those readers who are not familiar with the original Leonard report, and to furnish a convenience for those who may wish to compare Leonard's findings with ours, the grammar portion of the Leonard study has been appended to this monograph.

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE	V
I. THE LEONARD STUDY ON USAGE	1
The Technique of the Leonard Study	2
Presentation of Results	4
Grammatical Usages as Ranked by Linguists	4
II. THE PURPOSE AND METHOD OF THIS STUDY	13
The Method in This Study	15
Results of the Investigation	17
III. THE "ESTABLISHED" USAGES	22
IV. THE "DISPUTABLE" USAGES	33
V. THE "ILLITERATE" USAGES	52
VI. CONCLUSION	61

CURRENT USAGE IN GRAMMAR

Reprinted from

Current English Usage by Sterling A. Leonard

I. INTRODUCTION	65
II. JUDGES' DISCUSSION OF SPECIFIC ITEMS OF USAGE	69
Nouns	70
Pronouns	71
Verbs	82
Adjectives	97
Articles	98
Adverbs	98

	PAGE
Comparison	105
Prepositions	107
Conjunctions and Conjunctive Adverbs	111
Sentence Structure	114
Barbarisms and Improprieties	116
Idioms and Colloquialisms	117
Changes in Definition and Use of Words	122
Debated Spellings	130
III. PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS AS TO GRAMMAR AND USAGE	132
INDEX	139



THE LEONARD STUDY ON USAGE

It was most appropriate that the first of the *English Monographs* sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English should have dealt with the very fundamental problem of language. This monograph, *Current English Usage*, is the result of a study initiated by the late Professor Sterling A. Leonard. It was completed after his untimely death by a committee of the National Council and published in 1932. Appearing at a time when the researches of Leonard, Fries, and Pooley, to mention only a few, had established the unreliable character of the linguistic judgments in many school textbooks, this study sought to provide the classroom teacher with accurate and reliable information concerning English usage. The constant interest of the teaching profession in research of such a practical and helpful character is evidenced by the fact that the second printing of *Current English Usage* is now exhausted.

Although the appreciation of the teachers for this work has been manifest, there are two other aspects of its reception that deserve comment here. It should be recalled, first of all, that *Current English Usage* was the subject of much adverse journalistic comment both upon its initial appearance and when the second printing was issued. In general, these criticisms were either flippant or indignant; they seized upon what seemed to be some of the most startling of the findings and used them as a point of departure to predict the disintegration of the English language or to question the sanity of the authors. Almost without

exception the criticisms were neither penetrating nor constructive.

On the other hand, language scholars and language historians, the individuals best qualified not only to make an intelligent appraisal of the results of the Leonard study but to pursue some of the stimulating problems that were raised in it, have given it little notice. During the five years in which *Current English Usage* has been available to them, there have been few studies based upon it, and these deal with the pedagogical rather than the linguistic implications of the study. It is, in part at least, the purpose of this monograph to demonstrate the possibilities of linguistic analysis of the *Current English Usage* results.

THE TECHNIQUE OF THE LEONARD STUDY

Before proceeding, it will be pertinent, however, to recall a few of the details concerning the development of this study, the method pursued by Leonard and his associates, and the results which they presented. The study appears in what may be called its initiatory stage in an article by Leonard and Moffett, entitled "Current Definitions of Levels in English Usage," and published in the *English Journal* for May, 1927 (pages 345-359). The purpose of the study is set forth in the following statement which appears at the outset of the article:

This study was an attempt 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.

The monograph *Current English Usage*, which appeared five years later, was an enlargement of this earlier project, employing the same method and having the same purpose in view. The first significant fact to remember, then, is that *Current English Usage* deals primarily not with usage itself but with opinion about the

usage of words and expressions usually questioned or condemned in grammars and handbooks.

The following technique was employed in securing this "consensus of expert opinion": a list of 230 expressions "of whose standing there might be some question"¹ was submitted to a group of 229 judges, composed of thirty linguistic specialists, an equal number of editors, twenty-two authors, nineteen business men, and about 130 teachers of English and of speech.² The judges were asked to place the various expressions into one of the following three categories, according to their observation of what usage is rather than their opinion of what usage ought to be:

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. Popular or illiterate speech, not used by persons who wish to pass as cultivated, save to represent uneducated speech, or to be jocose; here taken to 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"³

That the stipulation to "score according to your observation of what is actual usage rather than your opinion of what usage

¹ Quoted from the instructions to the judges.

² Of these, approximately fifty were college instructors belonging to the Modern Language Association; another fifty, including many teachers from the high schools and grammar grades, consisted of members of the National Council; the remaining thirty were teachers of speech. There were really two lists of questionable expressions; the first, of 102 items, was submitted to all of the judges. This was the original list compiled by Leonard and Moffett in 1927. A second ballot of 130 items was submitted only to the linguists and members of the National Council.

³ There was also a fourth category, "trade or technical English" which was employed so infrequently that it assumed no importance in the final tabulations and is omitted from consideration here.

4 FACTS ABOUT CURRENT ENGLISH USAGE

should be" was at times more honored in the breach than in the observance is indicated by such comments as, "I do not like *very amused*"; "I dislike this, but rather because it is stylistically bad than because it is grammatically incorrect"; and "*One* is the proper form."⁴

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

After these various ratings had been tabulated, the results were presented in *Current English Usage* in two lists, the first, pages 168-175, giving the ranking of all the items according to the vote of the linguists is reproduced below. The second, pages 179-186, gave the ranking of all the items according to a per capita vote of the whole group of judges. Each of these lists was divided into three parts. Those items which the judges generally agreed upon as being either literary or cultivated colloquial English were labeled *established*. Those items which were generally agreed upon as being uncultivated or popular English were labeled *illiterate*. Finally, the expressions about which there was marked disagreement were placed in a middle group and labeled *disputable*.⁵

GRAMMATICAL USAGES AS RANKED BY LINGUISTS

A. ESTABLISHED USAGES

1. *A Tale of Two Cities* is *an* historical novel.
2. It was *I* that broke the vase, father.
3. Why *pursue* a vain hope?
4. *One* rarely enjoys *one's* luncheon when *one* is tired.
5. The invalid was able *partially to raise* his body.

⁴ *Current English Usage*, pp. 107, 134, 153.

⁵ Approval as formal or cultivated colloquial English by at least 75 per cent of the judges was required to place an item in the "established" group; disapproval by at least 75 per cent of the judges was required to place an item in the "illiterate" category. Hence "disputable" usages are those approved by more than 25 per cent but less than 75 per cent of the judges.

6. It *behooves* them to take action at once.
7. I *had rather* go at once.
8. *In this connection*, I should add . . .
9. This is a man . . . I used to know. (Omitted relative.)
10. You *had better* stop that foolishness.
11. Each person should of course bear *his or her* share of the expense.
12. Galileo discovered that the earth *moved*.
13. This hat is *not so* large as mine.
14. My position in the company was satisfactory from every *point of view*.
15. He toils *to the end that* he may amass wealth.
16. *In the case of* students who elect an extra subject, an additional fee is charged.
17. The defendant's case was *hurt* by this admission.
18. *I for one* hope he will be there.
19. This is the chapter *whose* contents cause most discussion.
20. *Under these circumstances* I will concede the point.
21. I have no prejudices, and *that* is the cause of my unpopularity.
22. You may ask *whomsoever* you please.
23. The honest person is to be *applauded*.
24. He stood *in front of* the class to speak.
25. *This much* is certain.
26. He did not do *as well as* we expected.
27. We *got home* at three o'clock.
28. He has no fear; nothing can *confuse* him.
29. There is a large *works* near the bridge.
30. *As regards the League*, let me say . . .
31. "You just had a telephone call." "Did *they* leave any message?"
32. I was attacked by one of *those* huge police dogs.
33. The women were *all dressed up*.
34. This was the *reason why* he went home.
35. This book is valueless, that one has more to recommend it.
(Comma splice.)
36. Take two *cups* of flour.
37. *None of them are* here.
38. I *drove* the car around the block.
39. He doesn't do it *the way* I do.
40. The New York climate is *healthiest* in fall.

41. I felt I could walk no *further*.
42. One is not *fit* to vote at the age of eighteen.
43. Our catch was *pretty* good.
44. We have made some progress *along these lines*.
45. The catcher stands *back of* the home plate.
46. My colleagues and I *shall* be glad to help you.
47. I went immediately into the banquet room, *which was*, I found later, a technical error.
48. That will be *all right*, you may be sure.
49. We will *try and* get it.
50. We cannot discover *from whence* this rumor emanates.
51. I can hardly *stand* him.
52. Jane *was home* all last week.
53. I'd *like* to make a correction.
54. I've absolutely *got* to go.
55. We can expect the commission *to at least protect* our interests.
56. That's a dangerous curve; you'd better go *slow*.
57. There are some *nice* people here.
58. *Will* you be at the Browns' this evening?
59. Have you *fixed* the fire for the night?
60. I don't know *if* I can.
61. *In hopes of* seeing you, I asked . . .
62. *It* says in the book that . . .
63. If it *wasn't* for football, school life *would be* dull.
64. His attack on my motives made me *preish*.
65. We *taxied* to the station to catch the train.
66. We *only* had one left.
67. My *viewpoint* on this is that we ought to make concessions.
68. Factories were *mostly* closed on election day.
69. He moves mighty *quick* on a tennis court.
70. He stopped to *price* some flowers.
71. He worked with much *snap*.
72. This room is *awfully* cold.
73. It is *me*.
74. *Who* are you looking for?
75. A treaty was concluded *between the four powers*.
76. *You* had to have property to vote, in the eighteenth century.
77. The kind of apples you mean *are* large and sour.
78. I have a *heap* of work to do.

79. I *felt badly* about his death.
80. The real *reason* he failed *was because* he tried to do too much.
81. Invite *whoever* you like to the party.
82. Drive *slow* down that hill!
83. Harry was a little shaver about *this* tall.
84. I didn't speak to my uncle by long distance; I couldn't *get through*.
85. *They* had numerous strikes in England.
86. I will go, *providing* you keep away.
87. I have *got* my own opinion on that.
88. He made a *date* for next week.
89. My father walked very *slow* down the street.
90. There *was* a bed, a dresser, and two chairs in the room.
91. They invited my friends and *myself*.
92. It is now *plain and evident* why he left.
93. I wish I *was* wonderful.
94. I've no doubt *but what* he will come.
95. What was the reason for *Bennett making* that disturbance?
96. *Can* I be excused from this class?
97. Haven't you *got through* yet?
98. *Everyone* was here, but *they* all went home early.
99. He *loaned* me his skates.
100. My *folks* sent me a check.
101. He came *around* four o'clock.
102. If it had been *us*, we would admit it.
103. They went *way* around by the the orchard road.
104. The banker *loaned* me \$200 at 6%.
105. *Pikes* Peak is in Colorado.
106. The sailors *laid* out along the yards.
107. Is your insurance sufficient *coverage* for your house?

B. DISPUTABLE USAGES

108. That clock must be *fixed*.
109. My contention has been *proven* many times.
110. Sam, who was then in town, was with me *the three or four first* days.
111. *One* rarely likes to do as *he* is told.
112. He never works *evenings* or *Sundays*.

113. They have *gotten* a new car this year.
114. The Rock Island *depot* burned down last night.
115. Sitting *in back of* John, he said, "Now guess what I have."
116. I took it to be *they*.
117. *I guess* I'll go to lunch.
118. He went *right* home and told his father.
119. He could write *as well* or *better than* I.
120. I *expect* he knows his subject.
121. I *can't seem to* get this problem right.
122. I was pretty *mad* about it.
123. *Either* of these *three* roads is good.
124. You are older than *me*.
125. What are the chances of *them* being found out?
126. There is *a big woods* behind the house.
127. I know it to be *he*.
128. Do you *wish* for some ice cream?
129. Intoxication is *when* the brain is affected by certain stimulants.
130. *Neither* of your reasons *are* really valid.
131. He *dove* off the pier.
132. Trollope's novels have already begun to *date*.
133. Will you go? *Sure*.
134. He is *kind of silly*, I think.
135. I *will probably* come a little late.
136. That was the reason for *me leaving* school.
137. They *eat* (et) dinner at twelve o'clock.
138. I'll swear that was *him*.
139. Well, that's *going some*.
140. *Leave* me alone, or else get out.
141. Of two disputants, the *warmest* is generally in the wrong.
142. It was *good and cold* when I came in.
143. We haven't *but* a few left.
144. In the collision with a Packard, our car naturally got the *worse* of it.
145. I wouldn't have said that if I had thought it *would have* shocked her.
146. *Yourself* and your guests are invited.
147. The man was *very amused*.
148. Such *naïf* actions seem to me absurd.
149. It seems to be *them*.

150. Everybody bought *their* own ticket.
151. *Say*, do you know who that is?
152. I suppose that's *him*.
153. I *can't help but* eat it.
154. *Aren't* ('nt or rnt) I right?
155. There is a row of beds with a curtain *between each bed*.
156. If I asked him, he would *likely* refuse.
157. John didn't do so *bad* this time.
158. Cities and villages are being stripped of all they contain *not only, but* often of their very inhabitants.
159. *Everybody's else* affairs are his concern.
160. It *don't* make any difference what you think.
161. I read in the paper *where* a plane was lost.
162. That boy's mischievous behavior *aggravates* me.
163. That stock market collapse left me *busted*.
164. Neither author ~~nor~~ publisher *are* subject to censorship.
165. Yes, our plan worked just *fine*.
166. The fire captain with his loyal men *were* cheered.
167. Don't get *these* kind of gloves.
168. The British look at this differently *than* we do.
169. *Most* anybody can do that.
170. It is *liable* to snow tonight.
171. They went in *search for* the missing child.
172. I suppose I'm wrong, *ain't* I?
173. John was *raised* by his aunt.
174. Martha *don't* sew as well as she used to.
175. He *most* always does what his wife tells him.
176. It *sure* was good to see Uncle Charles.
177. My experience on the farm helped me *some*, of course.
178. It's *real* cold today.
179. His presence was valueless *not only*, but a hindrance as well.
180. We don't often see sunsets *like* they have in the tropics.
181. I am older than *him*.
182. She leaped off *of* the moving car.
183. She *sung* very well.
184. It is only a little *ways* farther.
185. It looked *like* they meant business.
186. Do it *like* he tells you.
187. The child was weak, *due to* improper feeding.

C. UNCULTIVATED OR ILLITERATE USAGES

188. John *had awoken* much earlier than usual.
189. I haven't *hardly* any money.
190. The engine was hitting *good* this morning.
191. The dessert was made with *whip* cream.
192. Now just *where* are we *at*?
193. The kitten mews whenever it *wants in*.
194. A woman *whom* I know was my friend *spoke next*.
195. He *drunk* too much ice water.
196. *Reverend Jones* will preach.
197. All came except *she*.
198. The *party* who wrote that was a scholar.
199. My Uncle John, *he* told me a story.
200. He *begun* to make excuses.
201. I *calculate* to go soon.
202. This is *all the further* I can read.
203. That *ain't* so.
204. The *data* is often inaccurate.
205. He looked at me and *says* . . .
206. I must go and *lay* down.
207. *Ain't* that just like a man?
208. Both leaves of the drawbridge *raise* at once.
209. The people *which* were here have all gone.
210. I *have drank* all my milk.
211. *That there* rooster is a fighter.
212. The old poodle was *to no sense* agreeable.
213. One of my brothers *were* helping me.
214. I enjoy wandering *among* a library.
215. A light *complected* girl passed.
216. I want *for you to come* at once.
217. He won't *leave* me come in.
218. There was *a* orange in the dish.
219. It was dark when he *come* in.
220. You *was* mistaken about that, John.
221. I wish he *hadn't of* come.
222. *Hadn't* you *ought* to ask your mother?
223. My cold *wa'nt* any better next day.
224. If John *had of* come, I needn't have.

225. I had hardly *laid* down again when the phone rang.
 226. He did *noble*.
 227. Somebody *run* past just as I opened the door.
 228. Just *set* down and rest awhile.
 229. The neighbors took turns *setting* up with him.
 230. They *swang* their partners in the reel.

Although it is not necessary here to consider the merits of the practice followed in the body of the Leonard monograph, that of giving special prominence to the rankings of the linguists, there is no doubt that the final results were somewhat complicated by the presentation of two rankings instead of one. However, the following chart attempts to combine in a single tabulation the two rankings given in *Current English Usage*, that of the group of linguistic experts, and the per capita vote of all the judges.

TABLE I

DISTRIBUTION OF RANKINGS IN THE CURRENT ENGLISH USAGE BALLOTS

I. Expressions rated "established" by both groups	71 items
IIa. Expressions rated "established" by the linguists and "disputable" by the vote of the whole group	36 items
IIb. Expressions rated "disputable" by the linguists and "established" by the vote of the whole group	6 items
IIc. Expressions rated "disputable" by both groups	64 items
IIId. Expressions rated "disputable" by the linguists and "illiterate" by the vote of the whole group	10 items
IIe. Expressions rated "illiterate" by the linguists and "disputable" by the vote of the whole group	5 items
III. Expressions rated "illiterate" by both groups	38 items
Total	<hr/> 230 items

To sum up the matter very briefly, seventy-one of the 230 test expressions were rated as acceptable or established both by the vote of the linguists considered separately and by the per capita vote of all the judges. Likewise these two groups also agreed in condemning as illiterate thirty-eight of the total number. This

12 FACTS ABOUT CURRENT ENGLISH USAGE

accounts for 109 of the 230 expressions. The status of the remaining 121 expressions is left somewhat in doubt since either one group of judges or both groups were unable to come to any agreement about them.