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Australian English Grammar: variation across speech and writing

This paper details a project to describe the distinctive grammatical features of Australian English. Such features as have been noted are differences of degree rather than kind, in comparison with standard British and American English. They thus they lend themselves to comparative analysis via corpus evidence, as in Hundt's (1998) analysis of New Zealand English, using data from ACE (the Australian Corpus of English), the Wellington Corpus, Brown and LOB. On variable points of grammar, Australian English often positions itself between British and American in its relative use of the alternatives, for example its preference for *will* over *shall*, and in the relative distributions of other modals and quasimodal alternatives (Collins and Peters, 2005).

Yet on some particular variables, Australian English patterns of selection seems to be more advanced than in other varieties, for example in its neutralization of case distinctions towards a common case for the pronouns. Wales meanwhile (1995) suggests there may be more than one kind of default pattern for subject/object pronouns, depending on the construction (coordinated structures, following a preposition etc.). Others e.g Biber et al (1999), have noted the variability between object and possessive pronouns in gerundial complements, which may be associated with register differences across spoken and written English, but also with diverging regional tendencies (Peters 2005). The Australian penchant for more informal modes of expression is a force in developing distinctive patterns of usage, ahead of those registered elsewhere.

This paper presents the findings on pronoun selections for gerundial complements and other constructions where pronoun selections tend to vary, using data extracted from ICE-AUS, and mapping their distribution in spoken genres, dialogic and monologic, as well as written material. Whether the pronoun selections tend to form a cline in terms of the relative formality and/or interactivity of the genre, remains to be seen. The Australian patterns will be compared with those from equivalent genres in ICE-GB and ICE-NZ, to see what similarities there are between the two antipodean varieties, and how far they mirror the British pattern on which both are historically based. These three-comparisons show the extent to which there are common Australian and New Zealand trends in this aspect of English grammar, and how far such trends are register-dependent.

References:

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