



Usage questions from 2009

09:1

1. Is it true that the simple past (e.g. *I saw it*) is preferred in American English, while the perfect (e.g. *I've seen it*) is more frequent in British English?
2. Is *there's* with plural noun phrases an accepted structure in English nowadays?
3. Should I wish my students *Good luck with your test!* or is this "Swenglish"? Is there a more appropriate alternative?
4. I have heard Americans say *how big of a threat is it*, rather than *how big a threat is it*. This sounds strange to my ears – where does the extra *of* come from?
5. Is it true that native speakers have started using the phrase *on the other side* to mean 'on the other hand'?

09:2

1. Which form is more commonly used to talk about the people representing a nation, *the British* or *Britain*?
2. Which preposition should I use after *smitten*, *by* or *with*?
3. How frequent is the use of singular *life* when referring to plural concepts, as in *They lost their life*?
4. Should I use a comma before *and* when I list things in English, that is should I write *John, Paul, and Ringo* with a comma or should I write *John, Paul and Ringo* without a comma?

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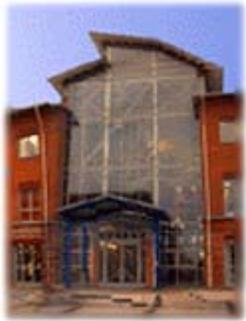
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@GramTime News 09:1 @

April 2009

Welcome to the fortysecond issue of GramTime News, the electronic newsletter on English usage from Växjö University!

Editor-in-chief: [Hans Lindquist](#), PhD

Managing editor: [Maria Estling Vannestål](#), PhD

Contributing editor: [Magnus Levin](#), PhD

Editorial

Dear readers,

In this issue we hit some of the hard stuff, central aspects of grammar like tense and grammatical constructions. Magnus takes up the claim that there is a difference in the use of the simple past (*he ate all the chocolate eggs*) and the perfect (*he has eaten all the chocolate eggs*) with current relevance in British and American English. It turns out that this is rather hard to show with corpus data. In another piece, Magnus introduces us to a fairly new use in spoken English: the insertion of the little word *of* in constructions like *How big of a chocolate egg is it?* “What is that *of* doing there?”, one wonders. Another spoken language feature that is now firmly established is *there’s* with plural nouns, as in *There’s lots of chocolate eggs left*. Maria reports on this.

As Swedish learners of English we try to avoid interference from our native language – we don’t want to produce

Swenglish. But sometimes “the same” expression exists in both languages, and it is hard to know when. For instance, do you know if you can say *on the other side* (for Swedish *å andra sidan*) or *Good luck with your test* (for Swedish *Lycka till med provet*)? Read the answers given by Magnus and Maria!

We end with a number of very useful links to on-line newspapers and magazines from every imaginable corner of the world – almost. I searched in vain for publications from Easter Island, which I thought would be appropriate at this time of the year. However, if you want to read about ongoing scientific activities on Thor Heyerdahl’s old roaming ground Easter Island, or Rapa Nui as it is now called, why not try out the *Rapa Nui Journal* at <http://www.islandheritage.org/rnj.html>.

Happy Easter from all the editors!

Hans Lindquist
Editor-in-chief

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The next issue

We plan to distribute the next newsletter in June 2009.

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1. Is it true that the simple past (e.g. "I saw it") is preferred in American English, while the perfect (e.g. "I've seen it") is more frequent in British English?

This is a rather complicated question to answer. In GTN [2007:4](#) we discussed the 'footballer's perfect' in British English where typically football players appear to be using the perfect when others would not. Thus, players have been heard to say *We've missed too many chances today* after their games, when one could expect the simple past (*We missed too many chances today*).

However, it has been suggested that this perceived difference between the two varieties relates to the language as a whole, and not only to the informal speech of British footballers. The following examples from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the British National Corpus (BNC) illustrate the potential for variation:

(1)

JIM WOOTEN: We have pursued our collection activity against him, just as we would have against any other taxpayer who owed money like this. (...)

3rd HUSBAND-CALLER (voice-over): All of this, of course, begs the question, "Why couldn't this man, who sold more than 50 million records and grossed well over \$100 million, pay off his debts? Where did the money go?"

JIM WOOTEN: My belief is that *he gave it all away*. (COCA; ABC_PrimeTime)

(2) (...) one of last year's recipients of the Templeton Prize, the most prestigious and valuable prize in the world for progress in religion. Characteristically *he has given it all away*. (BNC)

(3)

FRED CRUTCHFIELD, Senior Vice President, Trading, W.: Hillary Clinton's ad now *running* in Iowa. It's interesting that various candidates have been running commercials in that state for quite a while now, one of the best-funded candidates, Hillary Clinton has waited this long to get in.

Dr. STANLEY GOLDSMITH, NY State Waste Site Commission: True. But what's interesting about this ad to me

is that *she took* on the Republican administration, (...) (COCA; NPR_TalkNation)

(4) With no qualifications and precious little experience, *she has taken* on the job of Princess of Wales and is turning it into a significant career --; (BNC)

Both (1) and (2) refer to people who *gave/have given away* their possessions. In both cases it can be argued that the action has current relevance and that therefore the perfect could have been used. Similarly, in (3) and (4) there are people having taken on something (with current relevance). In (3) Hilary Clinton *took on* the Republican administration with an ad that is now running, while in (4) Diana *has taken on* a job that is still in progress. There thus seems to be scope for variation in this area.

Interestingly, Biber et al. (1999: 463) say in *The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* that the difference between AmE and BrE “does not seriously affect the frequencies in conversation. It remains a mystery why the marked difference of frequency shows up mainly in news. It might be relevant that American newspapers are renowned for a space-saving drive towards stylistic economy, and that the simple past usually requires one less word than the perfect .”

A quick-and-dirty search of COCA and BNC supports the idea that it is hard to establish a general difference between AmE and BrE in this respect. By searching for the personal pronouns *he* and *she* followed by either the simple past or the perfect of the three high-frequency verbs *give*, *look* and *take* in the whole corpora, we found, counter to expectation, a slightly greater preference for the perfect in AmE. The AmE material produced 3.9% past participles (in 63,000 tokens), and only 3.3% in BrE (in 19,000 tokens).

A few small samples from the category Newspapers in the two corpora nevertheless support the hypothesis that there in fact is a slightly greater preference for the perfect in BrE. For instance, for *he gave/has given* the perfect was more frequent in BrE (11.6%) than in AmE (9.3%). However, a recent study (Elsness 2009 in Rohdenburg & Schlüter (eds.), *One Language, Two Grammars?*) indicates that there is indeed a greater preference in written AmE overall for the simple past. By comparing the LOB/FLOB and Brown/Frown written corpora from 1961 and 1991, he found that AmE has a significantly greater predilection for using the past than BrE, and that interestingly, the use of the perfect is steadily decreasing in BrE. This is in line with other findings suggesting that AmE is leading the way in many grammatical changes.

To conclude, there is some support for the idea that AmE uses simple past verb forms to a greater extent than BrE. This regional difference is mainly observable in newspaper text, and comparisons based on other genres may well find no difference at all.

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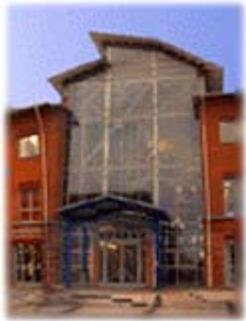
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2. Is "there's" with plural noun phrases accepted in English nowadays?

The grammatical structure with existential *there* and a singular form of the verb *be* (*there's*) used when the notional subject is a plural noun (as in *There's lots of museums*) seems to have become a frequently occurring language phenomenon lately. One of our subscribers has read about *there's* being considered a prefabricated phrase, in line with *il y a* (in French), *es gibt* (in German) and *hay* (in Spanish), and asks us if we can confirm this claim.

In their *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (from 1999), Biber et al claim that although *there are* is the typical structure with plural notional subjects in written language, the singular form of the verb *be* is common. Observe, however, that it is mainly the contracted verb form in the present tense (i.e. *there's*) that functions like this. The non-contracted verb form in the present tense (*there is*) and the past tense (*there was*) is much rarer, according to Biber et al. The explanation provided by Biber et al is that "*there's* tends to behave as a single invariable unit for the purposes of speech processing". The one-syllable contraction is easier and faster to produce and is thus a natural form of reduction. The same phenomenon also occurs in other phrases, such as ***Here's your shoes***, ***Where's your tapes*** and ***How's things*** (Biber et al 1999:186).

The variation between *there's* and *there are* has been further investigated in a corpus-based study by William Crawford (*Verb Agreement and Disagreement in Journal of English Linguistics*, 33/05) and his results indicate that this linguistic phenomenon is mainly related to a spoken-written dimension (in line with Biber et al's suggestion) rather than to an informal-formal dimension. Crawford found *there's* to be frequent in spoken academic lectures, which could be considered a formal register.

We searched our most recent corpus, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), for the following structures:

* *How is things* vs. *How's things* vs. *How are things*

* *There is many/several* vs. *There's many/several* vs. *There are many/several*

The same pattern emerged with both structures, i.e. that the uncontracted singular verb forms (*How is, There is*), as in (1) and (2), were very rare (1 and 15 occurrences respectively):

(1) *How is things* going? (CNN, Larry King talk show)

(2) The issue really is that in Washington *there is many issues* that come up about abortion rights. (spoken news forum)

The contracted singular verb forms, as in (3) and (4), occurred more frequently, *how's things* 15 times and *there's many/several* 208 times in all (instances of *there's many a/an* having been disregarded):

(3) *How 's things* there, Bill? (CNN, Larry King talk show)

(4) *There 's several things* that occur as we age. (NBC Today)

The instances of singular verb forms (both contracted and uncontracted occur in samples of spoken texts or in dialogues in fiction and interviews in magazines.

Comparing the frequencies of occurrences with singular and plural verb forms, we find that the plural form was many times more frequent overall in the corpus: 154 *how are things* and 8.628 *there are many/several*, as in (5) and (6), the majority from written texts but quite a few in spoken language as well:

(5) *How are things* going, Mike? (CBS 48 Hours)

(6) Well, I think *there are several* issues here. (PBS Newshour)

It seems that we can conclude that even though *there are* is the most frequent structure with notional plural subjects, the contraction *there's* (and *how's, where's* etc.) is accepted in spoken language, irrespective of whether we're speaking in a formal or an informal context. Thus it is also something that we have to accept in our students' spoken language, whereas we should go on advising them to use the non-contracted verb form in their written language.

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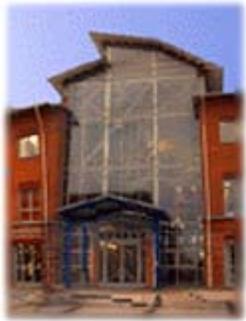
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3. Should I wish my students "Good luck with your test!" or is this "Swenglish"? Is there a more appropriate alternative?

It sometimes strikes me that phrases that I hear or read in students' essays, which feel somewhat unidiomatic and perhaps "Swenglish", quite often turn out to be examples of perfectly natural and correct English. They simply seem "too good to be true", considering all the effort we spend on avoiding mother tongue interference in our foreign language production.

This is also the case with the expression for wishing somebody good luck in our subscriber's usage question. Consulting our favourite corpora, *The British National Corpus* (BNC) and *The Corpus of American Contemporary English* (COCA), we find that there are alternatives, but that *good luck with* is the most frequent expression.

First of all, we had to delete some irrelevant examples, where *with* had another function than what we were looking for, as in (1) and (2):

(1) She made no mention of her disastrous trip to Brynteg, told him she'd met someone else, and wished him *good luck with deliberate finality* when she said goodbye. (written British English)

(2) I have *had good luck with tulips* "perennializing" in my garden, which has made the investment in a permanent label worthwhile. (written American English)

There were then 29 and 312 relevant instances respectively in the BNC and COCA of *good luck with*, some of which occur in indirect speech, as in (3), whereas the majority occur in direct speech, as in (4):

(3) She had then wished him *good luck with* the sale of his book and had quietly shut the door in his face. (written British English)

(4) Mario Van Peebles, *good luck with* the movies, and thanks for coming on with us in Cannes. (spoken American English)

Other prepositions occurring in combination with *good luck* (besides *to* and *for*, which are only used before a noun

phrase which identifies the referent who is the recipient of the good luck) are *in*, *on* and *at* (see Table 1).

Table 1. Occurrences of *good luck* with different prepositions in BNC and COCA

	BNC	COCA
<i>with</i>	29	309
<i>in</i>	12	103
<i>on</i>	2	66
<i>at</i>	1	12

In and *at* are mainly used when the following noun phrase has some kind of temporal or spacial meaning. Sometimes, as in (4), *with* could hardly have been used instead, and those examples were deleted:

(4) Well, *good luck in the States*.

Other cases, such as when the wish about good luck concerns "the future" (*in*), as in (5), or a test, trip, party or TV show (mainly *at*), as in (6), *with* could have been used as well, although it seems to be a less preferred alternative.

(5) We wish you a Merry Christmas, as merry as possible in the circumstances and *good luck in the future*. (spoken American English)

(6) *Good luck at the show* today. (spoken American English)

In those cases *i* and *på* would probably be more natural alternatives to *med* in Swedish. If we look at the examples of *good luck with* this hypothesis is more or less confirmed, since there are quite few examples of noun phrases with a spatial meaning coming after *with*. One could also speculate that there might be a meaning difference between, for instance, using *good luck with the party* and *good luck at the party*, the former suggesting a more active role (actually hosting a party), whereas the latter merely refers to passive participation.

On, however, seems to be a "more true" competitor for *with*. Having deleted irrelevant examples such as *good luck on Monday* (where *with* is not a plausible alternative), we end up with fairly many occurrences where the noun phrase coming after *on* has no spatial meaning, as in (7), whereas there are also such examples in the corpora, as in (8):

(7) Congratulations on your election, and *good luck on your plan to reinvent the government*. (spoken American English)

(8) *Good luck on* your driving test. (written British English)

We can further observe that when the preposition is followed by a dependent clause, as in (9) and (10), *in* seems to be the preferred alternative. Out of 17 such examples, *in* was used nine times, *on* four times, *with* three times and *at* once.

(9) *Good luck in what you're doing*, trying to do. (spoken American English)

(10) And *good luck on being on that television station*. (spoken American English)

We can safely recommend our students to use the most direct translation of Swedish *lycka till med*, that is *good luck with*. When there is a temporal or spatial meaning, however, *in* and *on* seem to be the most natural choices.

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4. I have heard Americans say "how big of a threat is it", rather than "how big a threat is it". This sounds strange to my ears – where does the extra of come from?

This is indeed an interesting construction. And it is difficult to know where the *of* comes from, since it is perfectly ok to use the phrase without *of*, as in (1):

(1) *How big a threat* is cyberterror? (COCA; Fox)

In recent years there has been a tendency to include an *of* in informal American speech in phrases like *how* ADJ (*of*) a NOUN and *too* ADJ (*of*) a NOUN. This is illustrated in (2) to (5) below, all from COCA (the Corpus of Contemporary American English). All four instances would be fine without *of*.

(2) *How big of a threat* is that from your experience there? (COCA; Fox)

(3) None of those mean shit as to *how good of a real skier* you are. (COCA; Skiing)

(4) Yet you remain optimistic that that won't be *too big of a problem*. (COCA; CNN)

(5) Serial killers are having *too good of a time* at our expense. (COCA; CBS)

Two facts about the distribution of this construction are striking: first of all, it is entirely(?) restricted to American English, since not a single instance was found in the British National Corpus (100 M words) (for supporting evidence, see Rohdenburg & Schlüter 2009:393–394 in Rohdenburg & Schlüter (eds.), *One Language, Two Grammars?*), and secondly, the construction is more frequent in speech than in writing.

Table 1 presents a comparison of the distributions of *how/too* ADJ *of a(n)* and their *of*-less counterparts in two selected subcorpora in COCA. It should be pointed out that the spoken part only contains transcribed radio and television programmes (mostly from news channels).

Table 1. The number of tokens / 1 M words in COCA in two selected subcorpora

	Speech	Newspapers
<i>how</i> ADJ <i>of a(n)</i>	1.3	0.2
<i>how</i> ADJ <i>a(n)</i>	9.1	4.3
<i>too</i> ADJ <i>of a(n)</i>	1.0	0.6
<i>too</i> ADJ <i>a(n)</i>	5.3	4.7

The table shows that the *of*-less variant predominates clearly in speech and newspapers, but the preference is less marked in speech. Thus, there is support for the hypothesis that *how/too* ADJ *of a(n)* is mainly found in informal AmE speech.

A further diachronic trend is visible as well. Both *how* ADJ *of a(n)* and *too* ADJ *of a(n)* increase consistently over the five-year intervals 1990–1994, 1995–1999, 2000–2004 and 2005– in COCA. Furthermore, while the competing more standard phrase *how* ADJ *a(n)* is stable over the years, *too* ADJ *a(n)* has decreased with a third between 1990–1994 and the most recent years.

As regards the type of phrases and the range of adjectives used, there are also restrictions. Of the 132 instances of *how* ADJ *of a(n)* in COCA, half of the tokens (67 instances) involved the adjective *big*, and a further 13 instances contained *good*. Similarly, in the 80 *too* ADJ *of a(n)*, there were 28 *big* and 6 *good*. The same pattern is often seen in phraseology, where empty slots in phrases often are highly restricted as to which words from a category can occur. It remains to be seen whether more variation will be possible in the future.

It will be interesting to follow the development of the extra *of*. Will this new use spread to more formal genres and to other varieties? For now at least it illustrates that not all changes stem from speakers' inherent 'laziness', since the language is moving towards the inclusion of more material. And for the time being, learners are advised to restrict their use of phrases like *how big of deal* to informal speech.

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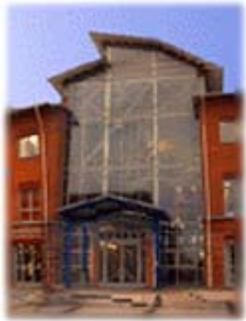
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5. Is it true that native speakers have started using the phrase "on the other side" to mean 'on the other hand'?

The simple answer here is 'no'. After a number of searches through recent British and American corpora we did not find any indication at all of this. Those instances which at a quick glance appeared to be evidence of this, such as (1) below, all turn out to indicate the meaning 'on the opposing side of the argument/political divide'.

(1) 'Moose's team is aggressive,' said Terri Yagoda, a supporter whose son played for Mr. Greenfield. 'People say Little League should be for fun, but it's also about learning skills. If you don't want your kid to play competitive things, he shouldn't play baseball.'

On the other side, Nick Canella, president of the local baseball association, declared that a key requirement [sic] for coaches was to show respect for umpires. 'What happened was sad, unfortunate and wrong,' he said. (NYT 1995)

Teachers can therefore rest assured that *on the other side* does not mean 'on the other hand'.

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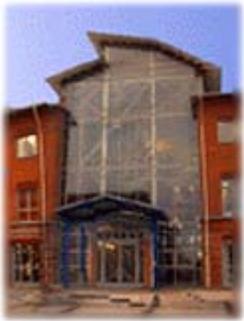
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1. Which form is more commonly used to talk about the people representing a nation, "the British" or "Britain"?

In grammar books, nationality words are sometimes presented in three different forms: (a) the adjective used for describing something from a particular country (e.g. *British*), (b) the noun referring to individuals coming from a particular country (e.g. *a Briton*) and (c) the noun or adjective referring to the people as a nation, or people representing it (e.g. *the British*). Particular attention tends to be paid to the last of these three forms, since there are differences between different groups of nationalities as to what type of word is used here. For instance, when we talk about the British Isles we refer to the inhabitants as *the British* (using the adjective as the head of the noun phrase), as in (1), whereas people from Sweden are referred to as *the Swedes* (using a noun instead), as in (2).

(1) [...] by May 1902 *the British* agreed that tenants could pay either the two rupees or labor for one month. (written American English)

(2) [...] *the Swedes* have won a medal in four of the last seven Olympics (written American English)

What is less often mentioned is that an alternative to using a nationality adjective or noun (of the kind described above) when referring to the people as a nation is to use the name of the country, i.e. talking about *Britain* rather than *the British* in contexts of war, sports etc, as illustrated in (3) and (4):

(3) During 1954, for example, *Britain* agreed to replace the 1936 treaty [...] (written American English)

(4) *Sweden* won its second straight world hockey championship with a 5-2 victory over Finland Sunday. (written American English)

Now, which of these forms is more frequent and are there any regional differences?

We used our two largest corpora, the *British National Corpus* (BNC) and the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA), searching for the two different variants involving pairs of eight nationality words. The query was narrowed to contexts involving verbs that could be expected to be used with both expressions with more or less the

same meaning, although it is of course possible that there is a slight difference in nuances between them, with *Britain* etc. focusing more on the nation and *the British* or more on its inhabitants. The nationality words and verbs involved in the queries are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Nationality words and verbs used in the study

Nationality words	Verbs
<i>the Americans – America /the US/the USA</i>	<i>agreed – has/have agreed</i>
<i>the British – Britain</i>	<i>beat – has/have beaten</i>
<i>the Chinese – China</i>	<i>defeated – has/have defeated</i>
<i>the French – France</i>	<i>lost – has/have lost</i>
<i>the Germans – Germany</i>	<i>promised – has/have promised</i>
<i>the Irish - Ireland</i>	<i>sent – has/have sent</i>
<i>the Japanese – Japan</i>	<i>was/were/has been/have been defeated</i>
<i>the Spanish/Spaniards – Spain</i>	<i>won – has/have won</i>

As illustrated in Table 2, the results of the corpus queries were very similar in the BNC and COCA, i.e. no regional differences could be observed. The form usually mentioned in grammar books (i.e. a noun or adjective referring generically to the inhabitants in a country) was used in less than a third of the cases, whereas the form where the name of the country is used predominated in both corpora.

Table 2. The distribution of *the British* etc. vs. *Britain* etc. in the BNC and COCA

	BNC (British)		COCA (American)	
	N	%	N	%
<i>the British</i> etc.	50	29%	179	30%
<i>Britain</i> etc.	122	71%	412	70%
Total	172	100%	591	100%

We can thus conclude that even though both variants can be used, the form where we use the name of a country is the more common one, and thus should be included in descriptions of nationality words, in grammar books and elsewhere. Like so many times before, corpora have provided us with another little piece in the huge and fascinating jigsaw puzzle called language.

MEV

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2. Which preposition should I use after "smitten", "by" or "with"?

Either *smitten by* or *smitten with* is fine to express the meaning 'to suddenly feel that you love someone or like something very much' (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*). In the British National Corpus (BNC) the alternatives are equally common, while in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) *with* is twice as frequent as *by*.

One example of each alternative is given below:

- (1) Neil was immediately *smitten with* Rachel. (COCA)
- (2) Simberg was immediately *smitten by* the petite young woman with frosty-green eyes and dyed-platinum bangs. (COCA)

The two examples above illustrate an interesting aspect of *smitten with/by* from a gender perspective: men are more likely to be *smitten with/by* women than the other way round. For example, in COCA there were 28 instances of *smitten with/by her* and only 7 instances of *smitten with/by him*. This is probably partly due to a majority of texts being written from a male perspective, since, for instance, in COCA *fell in love with her* occurs 137 times and *fell in love with him* only 99 times. However, the fact that men are as much as four times more likely to be smitten with/by women than the other way round would seem to suggest that being smitten is a typically male thing. (No instances of same-sex infatuations were found in spot-checks.)

A final point regards the connotations of the phrases. There do not appear to be any negative connotations connected with either preposition. However, in some rare instances *smitten with/by* refers to various illnesses, as in (3) below, where the context is clearly negative:

- (3) (...) various people had been *smitten with* untimely summer flu. (BNC)

To conclude, you can write either *smitten by* or *smitten with*. However, for equality's sake you may want to put in

a few smitten women in your texts.

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3. How frequent is the use of singular "life" when referring to plural concepts, as in "They lost their life"?

Many years ago, in [GTN 00:3](#), I wrote about what Ljung & Ohlander refer to as "logical plurals" in their *Gleerups engelska grammatik* (1992). Using corpora to see how frequently singular nouns were used in cases where grammar books tell us to use plurals, I concluded that we should continue advising our students to use plural forms in expressions such as *shake hands* and *change buses* and that constructions such as *change their mind*, *lose their life* etc. occurred, but mainly in spoken language, and (in the case of the noun occurring after the third person pronoun *their*) especially when a reference was made to a gender-neutral expression, such as *someone*, as in (1):

(1) The post-coital cigarette is not as popular as it once was and the idea of making love to *someone* who has a fag in *their mouth* must be one of life's great turn-offs. (written British English)

Today we will return to logical plurals, or rather to one particular noun: *life*. In recent years I have repeatedly observed the use of *life* in contexts where I would expect *lives*, and now one of our subscribers has made the same observation. Furthermore, we now have access to a huge up-to-date corpus of American English which was not available at the time of the previous study. So what does the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) say about *life* vs. *lives* combined with possessive pronouns in the plural? The result of the corpus search (all instances of *our/their life expectancy*, *our/their life story*, *our/their life savings* etc. excluded) is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Life* vs. *lives* after plural possessive pronouns

	<i>our</i>		<i>their</i>	
	N	%	N	%
<i>life</i>	1074	14	2300	13
<i>lives</i>	6481	86	14883	87
Total	7555	100	17183	100

It is quite clear that even though the plural form, as in (2) and (3), still predominates, singular use of the noun *life* frequently occurs after plural pronouns, as in (4) and (5).

(2) We just think about *our lives* and try to prioritize. (magazine)

(3) Keeping a scrapbook of *their lives* was part of her job as steward of their legacy. (fiction)

(4) By that he means that although the rest of *our life* has been revolutionized by science and technology, the way we cook has not. (news)

(5) We have cases with kids with big problems, and they change *their life* with music. (spoken)

Looking into the subcorpora of COCA, we can further observe that the use of the singular noun is still more frequent in spoken language than in written genres (Table 2).

Table 2. The use of singular *their life* across genre in COCA

	Tokens per million words
spoken	14.3
fiction	3.9
magazine	6.3
news	6.0
academic	6.2

However, although the number of tokens per million words is much higher in the spoken corpus, we cannot really dismiss this feature of English usage as informal, since many tokens occurred in the written subcorpora as well, even in academic writing, as in (6).

(6) The children were given brief instructions to write what they remembered about *their life* before their parent died [...]

We further investigated a few rather fixed phrases (*lose/lost their lives, live/lived our/their lives, the rest of our/their lives*), to see whether the singular noun form would be found there as well, and indeed it was:

(7) "Better to lose a year of school than *lose their life*," says the father of three school-aged children [...] (news)

(8) They start to *live their life* passionately every single day.[...] (spoken)

(9) That's where we were going to live for *the rest of our life*. (spoken)

Roughly the same proportions between *life* and *lives* could be observed here as generally (Table 1); on average *life* was used in 12% of the cases (193 tokens in all).

There are also cases where singular *life* in fact feels more appropriate than plural *lives* (for instance, in the expression *their life together*) but since the corpus material shows variation here, these were not excluded from the study:

(10) Consequently, a majority of their evaluation consisted of statements about *their life together*. (academic)

(11) So began the Honeymoon Period of *their lives together*. (fiction)

Finally, as mentioned above, an observation made in the previous GTN study of logical plurals was that quite a few of the tokens of singular nouns occurring after *their* were found to refer to non-specific gender-neutral expressions, such as *someone* or *a doctor*, as in example (1) above.

There were too many tokens in the corpus to carry out a full-scale study, but in a random sample of 100 tokens, we found 12 occurrences of reference to gender-neutral expressions, as in (12), whereas the vast majority referred to plural entities, as in (13):

(12) They have the power to put *someone* in jail for the rest of *their life* if they want to. (spoken)

(13) Migraines can be difficult to treat and *some people* have decided to give in and accept them as a fact of *their life*. (spoken)

To conclude, it seems that although the singular form *life* is more common in speech than in writing, it may be on its way of becoming accepted in cases where we would expect a plural noun, also in more formal contexts.

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4. Should I use a comma before "and" when I list things in English, that is should I write "John, Paul, and Ringo" with a comma or should I write "John, Paul and Ringo" without a comma?

The simple answer is that either is fine. The more complex answer is that there are interesting differences between varieties and genres. To begin with, a couple of examples, where (1) contains the comma and (2) is without it:

(1) *teachers, administrators, and parents*

(2) *salt, pepper and garlic*

We compared the usage in fiction, newspapers and academic texts from the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The searches were restricted to the three preposition *with*, *about* and *on* followed by [N, N (comma) and N]. The results are presented below in Table 1, where both the number of instances / 1 million words and the percentages are given:

Table 1. The distribution of structures without and with a comma

	COCA				BNC			
	0		comma		0		comma	
	N/M	%	N/M	%	N/M	%	N/M	%
Fiction								
<i>with</i>	1.7	36	3.0	64	4.9	87	0.7	13
<i>about</i>	0.2	33	0.4	67	0.2	100	0	0
<i>on</i>	0.2	25	0.6	75	1.1	100	0	0
News								
<i>with</i>	12.2	92	1.1	8	9.0	95	0.5	5
<i>about</i>	1.9	86	0.3	14	1.1	85	0.2	15
<i>on</i>	4.8	84	0.9	16	5.5	96	0.2	4
Academic								
<i>with</i>	1.6	15	9.0	85	4.8	73	1.8	27
<i>about</i>	0.6	18	2.8	82	1.2	80	0.3	20
<i>on</i>	2.3	26	6.7	74	3.9	74	1.4	26

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the table. The comma is more common in AmE than in BrE, while the use of the comma is rare overall in BrE. The comma is most common in academic writing in both varieties, but is only in AmE academic writing and fiction that the use reaches over 50%. The use in newspapers is quite similar in both varieties with the comma being dispreferred, while the differences between the varieties are considerable as regards fiction and academic writing.

To conclude, the comma before *and* in sequences such as *X, Y, and Z* is on the verge of disappearing from BrE, where it mainly lingers on in academic writing. In AmE, the comma is still the preferred alternative in some more conservative genres, such as academic texts and fiction, but in the “fastest” genre, that of newspapers, the comma may be disappearing as well. For learners, the best advice for the future is therefore to avoid the comma.

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