

Explaining American English Usages with Reference to the History of British English Usages: Variations of Past Participle *Got* and *Gotten* as a Test Case

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Archaic uses in British English (BrE) have survived in Present-day American English (AmE). Concerning the pronunciation of the noun *herb*, for example, the *OED* describes that the word was spelt in Middle English as “usually *erbe*, a. OF. *erbe* . . . In OF. and ME. occasionally spelt with *h* after Lat.; regularly so since c 1475, but the *h* was mute until the 19th c.” (*OED*², s.v. *n. herb*). This naturally explains the reason why the word *herb* is generally pronounced as [ˈɜːrb] in AmE.

Similarly, the form *afterward* stems from older BrE. Where corpora are concerned, BrE essentially had only the form of *afterward* from the fourteenth to the first half of the sixteenth centuries, and this form was transferred to the American colonies, whereas in BrE it changed into *afterwards* around the mid-seventeenth century (Nakamura 2024). Furthermore, the usage of *he don't know*, which had its long pedigree in BrE, survives in some parts of the US (Nakamura 2013, 2023). Mencken (1977⁴ [1919]: 542), for example, states that the negative contraction of *do* was usually *don't*, and that *doesn't* was seldom heard. Among Southerners, he continues, the third singular *don't* rose “to the level of cultured speech”. Trask (2004: 199) even writes that “*doesn't* scarcely exists in vernacular speech” in the west part of the state of New York.

Considering these connections, this presentation aims to explore variations between the past participle *gotten* and *got* statistically across time and varieties of English, referring to other studies such as Hundt (2009) and Anderwald (2020). An examination of electronic corpora includes (a) contemporary BrE: LOB, FLOB and BNC; (b) contemporary AmE: Time, Brown, Frown, COCA and SOAP; (c) other varieties of contemporary English: ACE, Kolhapur and Strathy; (d) historical BrE: EEBO ver. 3, BrE part of ARCHER ver. 3.2 and Hansard; and (e) historical AmE: AmE part of ARCHER, ver. 3.2, US Supreme Court decisions and COHA.

Based upon 740,145 examples, it is clear that, from 1470 onward, the prevalent past participle form of *get* was *gotten* in BrE, whether perfective or passive. Accordingly, the British colonists brought *gotten* along with them to their new homeland in North America. However, around the mid-17th century, when North Carolina became an American colony, *got* surpassed *gotten* in BrE and then underwent a rapid acceleration in both BrE and AmE. “Newcomer” as *got* was, it was preferred partly perhaps because of its simpler form and pronunciation.

Despite this, the categorisation of *got* in many dictionaries is a complete mystery. Webster (1787⁴ [1784]: 92) includes the verb *get* among the verbs which have the present, past and participle as being all different—unlike *MWCD*¹¹ (2020) in which *got* is lemmatised prior to *gotten*. Mencken (1977⁴ [1919]: 540), invoking Curme (1927: 495-496), regards the *gotten* as a hallmark of AmE. BrE dictionaries such as *OALD*¹⁰ (2020) also categorise *gotten* as typically AmE. So far as the corpora examined above are concerned, however, *gotten* was never prevalent in any phase of the history of AmE.

References

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