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English Today / Volume 30 / Issue 04 / December 2014, pp 51 - 58

DOI: 10.1017/S0266078414000418, Published online: 11 November 2014

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0266078414000418

How to cite this article:

Camilla Søballe Horslund (2014). How *snuck* sneaked into English and *drug* is still dragging behind: A corpus study on the usage of new past tense forms for *sneak* and *drag* in British and American English. English Today, 30, pp 51-58 doi:10.1017/S0266078414000418

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How *snuck* sneaked into English and *drug* is still dragging behind: A corpus study on the usage of new past tense forms for *sneak* and *drag* in British and American English

CAMILLA SØBALLE HORSLUND

Tracking diachronic changes in usage across different varieties of English

Introduction

Language observers may have noticed the existence of two past tense forms for the verb *to sneak* in American English, *sneaked* and *snuck*. Interestingly, both forms have not always coexisted; the original form is *sneaked*, and *snuck* has only recently become a real competitor for *sneaked* (Hogg, 1988: 31–32). The verb *to drag* seems to be somewhat in the same situation with the original past tense form *dragged* as well as the new form *drug* (Bybee & Moder, 1983: 252). However, *drug* is much less frequent than *snuck*. Murray's (1998) study on the attitudes towards *snuck* and *drug* suggests some difference in the usage of these forms across registers.

This study investigates the historical development of the neologisms *snuck* and *drug* in American English as well as their current distribution across registers in British and American English and relates the register distribution to Murray's (1998) attitude data.

Strong and weak verb patterns

Historically, *drag* and *sneak* were weak verbs with the past tense and past participle forms *dragged* and *sneaked* (Simpson & Weiner, 2010). The distinction between weak and strong verbs is

somewhat related to the distinction between regular and irregular verbs, yet this relation is not uncomplicated. While regular English verbs form their past tense and past participle by adding *-ed* to the stem, there are a number of ways in which English verbs can be irregular. Quirk *et al.* (1985: 104–105) distinguishes seven classes of irregular verbs (see Table 1), some of which are

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Table 1: Classes of irregular English verbs.
From Quirk *et al.* (1985: 104).

Class	-t/-d suffix	-n suffix	Past tense = past participle	Vowel identity	Example		
1	+	—	+	+	burn	burned/ burnt	burned/ burnt
2	+	+	+/-	+	saw	sawed	sawed/ sawn
3	+	—	+	—	bring	brought	brought
4	—	+	—	—	break	broke	broken
5	—	—	+	+	cut	cut	cut
6	—	—	+	—	strike	struck	struck
7	—	—	—	—	swim	swam	swum

strong verb classes (classes 4, 6 and 7). In the strong verb pattern, past tense and past participle forms are formed by changing the stem vowel (Strang, 1970: 196). Comparatively, in the weak verb pattern, the past tense and past participle are formed by adding a /t/ or /d/ suffix. The weak verb pattern thus consists of all the regular verbs and those irregulars that have /t/ or /d/ inflection (classes 1, 2 and 3). Note that the /t/ or /d/ inflection may substitute a final /d/ in the root as in *build/built* and *bleed/bled*, and that some irregular weak verbs have vowel change stemming from sound changes (Strang, 1970: 147, 196). While weak verbs use the same form for both past tense and past participle, strong verbs may use the same form or different forms for the past tense and the past participle (Quirk *et al.*, 1985: 103).

The strong verb pattern is inherited by all Germanic languages, including English, from Proto-Indo-European, whereas the weak verb pattern is a Germanic innovation (Taylor, 1994: 143). Thus, even though the strong verb pattern is historically older than the weak verb pattern, the weak verb pattern has proved very productive, now counting the vast majority of Germanic verbs. In Old English there were approximately 360 strong verbs, yet in Present Day English there are only around 60 strong verbs left (Strang, 1970: 147). Among the original strong verbs that have changed to weak verbs since the Old English period are *climb*, *help*, *melt*, *step*, *walk* and *wash* (Greenbaum, 1996: 133). This very strong productivity of the weak verb pattern fits in with the overall trend towards regularisation in linguistic change (Strang, 1970: 98–101; 146–148). Interestingly,

in spite of the general trend towards regularisation, there are some instances of change in the reverse direction, for example, the verbs *sneak* and *drag*, which were originally weak, have developed new strong forms, namely *snuck* and *drug*.

Snuck and *drug* are not the only examples of this unexpected change. Five other originally weak verbs developed a strong form in the 16th century. These are *hang/hung*, *string/strung*, *stick/stuck*, *strike/struck* and *dig/dug*. Even more interesting is that the strong past tense forms that developed for these five verbs have the same vowel as *snuck* and *drug*, namely /ʌ/ (Hogg, 1988: 34). While the sound pattern of the *drag/drug* alternation has an analogical form in the *hang/hung* alternation, no verb has the alternation /i/ in the present tense and /ʌ/ in the past tense similar to *sneak/snuck* (Hogg, 1988: 32–33). As can be seen from Table 2, the /i/ -/ʌ/ alternation is common, while *hang/hung* and *drag/drug* are the only examples of the /æ/ -/ʌ/ alternation, and *sneak/snuck* is likewise the only example of the /i/ -/ʌ/ alternation.

The existence of several weak-verbs-gone-strong with similar vowel patterns shows that productivity is not a prerogative of regular verbs. And, as will be seen below, this change seems to take place despite negative attitudes towards the newer forms.

Attitudes towards *drug* and *snuck*

The *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* (OALD) (Turnbull *et al.*, 2010) states that *snuck* is 'very common in informal speech in North American English and some people use it in British English too. However, many people think

Table 2: English strong verbs with past tense and past participle in /ʌ/.
Based on Bybee & Moder (1983: 122)

Vowel change	Original strong verbs		Weak-verbs-gone-strong			
	Standard forms		Alternative forms			
/ɪ/ - /ʌ/	spin	spun	fling	flung	bring	brung
	win	won	sting	stung		
	cling	clung	string	strung		
	swing	swung	stick	stuck		
	wring	wrung	dig	dug		
	slink	slunk				
/æ/ - /ʌ/			hang	hung	drag	drug
/i/ - /ʌ/					sneak	snuck
/aɪ/ - /ʌ/			strike	struck		
/eɪ/ - /ʌ/					shake	shuck

that it is not correct and it should not be used in formal writing.’ According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) (Simpson & Weiner, 2010), *snuck* is originally and still chiefly an American English phenomenon, and the earliest example of *snuck* in the OED is from 1932. *Drug*, on the other hand, is not mentioned in the OALD at all, and the OED describes it as ‘nonstandard and regional’. The OED further states that *drug* is primarily used in the Southern and Midland US.

In line with the OALD and OED descriptions of *snuck* and *drug* as incorrect and nonstandard, Murray (1998) found that many Midwestern American speakers had negative attitudes toward *snuck* and *drug*, but not toward their regular counterparts *sneaked* and *dragged*. Nevertheless, Murray’s data suggested no regional affiliation in terms of traditional dialect boundaries for either *drug* or *snuck*. Instead, there seems to be an effect of socio-economic class on the preference of *dragged* to *drug*, in that the irregular form is less likely to be accepted by speakers of the highest socio-economic class than by speakers of the middle or lower socio-economic classes. Furthermore, for a majority of speakers in all socio-economic classes, *drug* is perceived as ‘incorrect’, while *dragged* is perceived as ‘correct’. There is no such socio-economic effect on the acceptance of *snuck*, which is much less stigmatised and more broadly accepted than *drug*, though *snuck* is considered informal by some speakers and elicits some negative comments. Creswell (1994: 154) even suggests that *snuck* may be in the process of replacing *sneaked* as the

standard past tense form of the verb *to sneak*. This is in line with Murray’s (1998) apparent-time data, which suggests that *snuck* and *drug* may be on the rise, as their acceptance is significantly higher among younger speakers than among older speakers and drastically so for *snuck*.

Murray’s (1998) findings may reflect a difference across registers with respect to the choice between the regular and the irregular form, such that *sneaked* and *dragged* are perceived as more correct and associated with upper-class speech because they are the preferred forms in formal and written registers, while *snuck* and *drug* are perceived as colloquial and less correct because they are the preferred forms in informal and spoken registers, with this preference for the regular form being stronger for *drug* than for *sneak*.

The study

This article presents a study on the usage of *snuck* and *drug*, using corpus data, thus bringing the data on *snuck* and *drug* up to date by looking at real-time data for the historical development of *snuck* and *drug* as well as the current variation across geographic varieties (British and American English) and registers with respect to the usage of *snuck* and *drug*. Hence, the study investigates when *snuck* and *drug* were first attested, whether these new past tense forms are increasing or decreasing in usage in American English, whether the new forms are more common in British or American English, and in which registers the new forms primarily are used as

well as relates the register distribution to Murray's (1998) attitude data.

Data and methods

The present data stem from two corpora of American English and one corpus of British English. The contemporary data used for a comparison of British and American English and register distribution within the two varieties are from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) and the *British National Corpus* (BNC). COCA currently consists of 450 million words and covers the time period 1990–2012. New texts and transcriptions of speech are regularly added to COCA, allowing it to be continually up to date. The BNC covers the years 1980–1993 and consists of 100 million words. The corpus used for historical American data is the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA), which covers the period from 1810 to 2009 with 400 million words evenly distributed over the years covered. All three corpora are divided into the following registers: spoken, fiction, magazine, newspaper and academic.¹

The register distribution for the historical data was disregarded, as there are too few tokens for each decade to allow for an analysis of register variation over time. Past tense and past participle are analysed together as there are too few tokens to allow for separate analyses of the two forms. Thus, the term *past tense* is used to refer to the past tense and the past participle collectively. As seen below, there are very few *drug* tokens in the data, which unfortunately limits the number of statistical analyses that can be performed on the *dragged/drug* data.

In order to count only verbal occurrences, the corpus searches were restricted by means of PoS-tags (Part of Speech tags), which are easily applied in all three corpora. The specific PoS-tags used here were [*snuck*].[v*] and [*drug*].[v*], which search for all verbal occurrences of the words *snuck* and *drug* respectively. Since the form *snuck* unambiguously refers to the past tense form of the verb *to sneak*, a simple search gives the same result as the PoS-tagged one. The form *drug*, however, is ambiguous between the noun *drug* the verb *to drug* and the past tense form of the verb *to drag*. A search restricted by the PoS-tag [*drug*].[v*] returns a combined count of the two verbal uses. The search options in BNC, COCA and COCA offer no way of distinguishing between these two verbal uses of the form *drug*, so all occurrences returned by the [*drug*].[v*] tagged search were manually analysed and categorised as either a present tense or infinitival form of the verb *to drug* or a past tense form of the

verb *to drag*. The *drug* counts thus represent the result of this manual analysis.

The historical development of *snuck*

Neither of the past tense forms of *sneak* appear in COHA until the 1830s, when the first instance of *sneaked* is attested. The first instance of *snuck* is attested in 1889. Both forms increase in usage from their first occurrence to 2009, suggesting that the use of the verb *to sneak* is becoming more common in this period. The relative increase of *snuck* starts off slowly, and *snuck* is not a serious competitor until the 1960s, when its increase accelerates. Figure 1 shows the absolute usage of the two past tense forms of the verb *to sneak* over time, and Figure 2 shows the relative usage of the two past tense forms over time.

Statistical analyses show a significant increase in the use of *snuck* relative to *sneaked* and a strong correlation between decade and per cent *snuck* occurrences. These results suggest that the absolute increase in *snuck* occurrences (as shown in Figure 1) is not only due to a general increase in the use of the verb *to sneak*, but also due to an increased tendency to use *snuck* instead of *sneaked* as the past tense form of *sneak* (as shown in Figure 2).²

The historical development of *drug*

Interestingly, the first instance of *drug* in COHA is attested in the same decade as the first instance of *snuck*, namely the 1880s. However, *drug* never gains the same frequency as *snuck*. In contrast to *snuck*, which increases drastically, *drug* is rare or not attested at all for all periods in COHA (see Figure 3). *Dragged* increases in absolute terms, though not steadily. The verb *to drag* seems to be more frequent overall than the verb *to sneak*, which makes the small numbers of *drug* even smaller in relative terms.

Figure 3 shows the absolute usage of the two past tense forms of the verb *to drag* over time. No figure of the relative usage is presented due to the very low number of *drug* occurrences. Statistical analyses did not show a significant increase in per cent *drug* occurrences, thus providing no evidence that the relative occurrence of *drug* increases over time.³

Variety and register variation for *snuck*

The BNC and COCA data suggest that British English has an overall preference for *sneaked*,

Figure 1. Number of *sneaked/snuck* tokens (absolute numbers) in American English over time. Data from COHA.

while both past tense forms of the verb *to sneak* are almost equally common in American English, which shows a slight preference for *sneaked*. Statistical tests confirm this pattern.⁴

Three American English registers show a preference for one of the forms; *snuck* is favoured in speech and *sneaked* is favoured in academic and newspaper writing, but none of these preferences are close to categorical. In British English, there is a strong preference for *sneaked* in all registers, and *snuck* is generally rare. In both varieties, the register with the highest relative frequency of *snuck* is the spoken register. There is no evidence that the register distribution differs for British and American

English. For the combined counts from both varieties, the spoken register is the only register that differs significantly from all the other registers.⁵ These results thus suggest a main difference between speech and writing, which, in the light of Murray's (1998) findings, can be seen as evidence that there is a link between register distribution and attitudes. It thus seems plausible to suggest a relation between the reported attitude that *snuck* is less correct than *sneaked* and the observation that the neologism *snuck* primarily is used in speech, while the 'safer' form *sneaked* prevails in writing. Figure 4 shows the relative usage of *sneaked* and *snuck* across registers for both American and British English.

Figure 2. Per cent *sneaked/snuck* tokens in American English over time. Data from COHA.

Figure 3. Number of *dragged*/*drug* tokens (absolute numbers) in American English over time. Data from COHA.

Due to the smaller size of the BNC and the very low frequency of *snuck* in this corpus, all numbers and especially those for the registers that show a 100 per cent preference for *sneaked* should be treated with caution and cannot be taken to imply categorical usage of *sneaked*. It should, moreover, be noted that the BNC only covers the years 1980–1993, so it is not possible to say anything about the usage of *snuck* after 1993. Based on the historical American English data, there is reason to infer, as suggested by Creswell (1994: 152), that *snuck* may be increasing in British English too, but unfortunately the BNC

does not provide comparable data to investigate this hypothesis.

Variety and register variation for *drug*

It is noteworthy that there are no instances of *drug* as past tense or past participle forms of *drag* in the BNC. Also, *drug* is quite rare in COCA, where it is most common in the spoken register, but even here it only makes up 3 per cent of the past tense and past participle forms of *drag*. *Drug* is not that

Figure 4. Per cent *sneaked*/*snuck* tokens divided by register in British and American English. American English data from COCA. British English data from BNC.

Figure 5. Per cent *dragged/drug* tokens divided by register in British and American English. American English data from COCA. British English data from BNC.

rare in all areas of the US though, as shown by Bernstein's (1994: 140) finding that 39% of high-school students in Silsbee, Texas, prefer *drug* to *dragged*.

Despite the infrequency of *drug* in both BNC and COCA, there is a significant association between variety and relative use of *dragged* and *drug*,⁶ thus supporting the observation that *drug* is primarily an American English occurrence. Similar to the *snuck* data, the smaller size and the years of coverage of the BNC need to be taken into consideration, so that even though the BNC data suggests categorical usage of *dragged* in British English, there may be instances of *drug* in British English not reported in the BNC. Figure 5 shows the relative use of *dragged* and *drug* in British and American English.

Conclusion

Summing up, *snuck* and *drug* are neologisms first attested in the 1880s. The present real-time data supports Murray's (1998) suggestion, based on apparent-time data, that *snuck*, if not replacing *sneaked*, then at least is increasing in relative use. *Drug*, on the other hand, stays a minority form over time, and there is no evidence that the form is becoming common. *Snuck* is generally much more common than *drug*, in both British and American English. Furthermore, both strong past tense forms are more common in American English than in British English. With respect to register, the strong form is most common in the spoken register for both American and British English and least common in the academic and newspaper registers, which could be taken to

support an association between language use and language attitudes, (as reported by Murray, 1998); the idea that *snuck* is informal may be related to the fact that *snuck* is mainly used in informal registers and rarely in formal ones. This relation is even more distinct for *drug*, as *drug* is much less used, and if so chiefly in speech, and thus elicits heavier negative attitudes.

Further research may investigate whether *snuck* has become more common in British English since 1993, and whether *drug* has spread to British English since 1993. More recent and comparable corpus data on British English after the BNC cut-off point is much needed in order to answer these and other questions about current British English. ■

Notes

- 1 All three corpora were accessed through the webpage of Brigham Young University (<http://corpus.byu.edu/>) in April 2012. At that time, COCA consisted of 425 million words and covered the time period 1990–2011.
- 2 A logarithmic linear regression analysis showed a statistically significant increase in the use of *snuck* relative to the use of *sneaked* ($p = 0.002$). The correlation between decade and per cent *snuck* occurrences is quite strong (Pearson's $R = 0.798$). Information about decade improves the prediction of per cent *snuck* occurrences by 64% compared with using the mean as a predictor ($R^2 = 0.636$).
- 3 A linear regression revealed no significant effect of decade on the relative occurrence of *drug* ($p = 0.083$).
- 4 A chi square goodness of fit test revealed a significant difference in the number of occurrences of *snuck* and *sneaked* in both BNC ($p < 0.000$) and COCA ($p = 0.025$). A chi square test of independence showed a significant association between variety and

the relative use of the two past tense forms of *sneak* ($p < 0.000$).

5 An independent two-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect of variety ($p < 0.000$) and of register ($p = 0.002$) on the relative use of *snuck* and *sneaked*. The interaction between variety and register was not significant. Post hoc test revealed that the relative amount of *snuck* occurrences in the spoken register is significantly higher than the relative amount of *snuck* occurrences in any of the other registers. Within the written registers, the relative amount of *snuck* occurrences in the newspaper register differs significantly from the relative amount of *snuck* occurrences in the spoken, fiction and magazine registers.

6 A chi square test of independence showed a significant association between variety and the relative use of *dragged* and *drug* ($p < 0.000$).

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