Survivals of Older Forms in Modern Speechways

By

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(As Discussed in Syntax by G. O. Curme)

Nature of Colloquial English

Colloquial English differs in many ways from literary English. Of various features that characterize colloquial English the most conspicuous may be the abundance of contractions, omission of words, and the lack of logical completeness. These elements of the daily speechways, perhaps, are more responsible than anything else for the common notion that brands colloquial English as an incorrect peculiar speech practice of a particular group of people; hence of a lower level and therefore must be avoided.

The mere fact that people do not speak as they write does not in any way justify this prevailing notion; for literary and colloquial are not repellant of each other, but they are rather the component elements of the whole, each representing its own sphere of activity. Thus, while literary English is employed in formal writing, colloquial is used in conversational situations. One makes up what the other lacks to complete the larger whole, satisfying that strong human desire which constantly seeks after some means for self-expression.

Colloquial, in a proper sense, is the word "used to mark those words and constructions," expounds C. C. Fries in his American English Grammar, "whose range of use is primarily that of the polite conversation of cultivated people, of their familiar letters and informal speeches, as distinct from those words and constructions which are common also in formal writing." In short, when an expression is termed colloquial, it merely means that the expression in question can be heard in conversation of decent people but they are not usually found in formal writing, unless the writing is intended for the reproduction of some conversational situation.

Colloquial must also be distinguished from vulgar English. Vulgar is another type of spoken language and, as is frequently more properly designated by the term "popular speech," it is the language of the common people, never coming up to the level of the polite speech of educated people.
Though it is difficult to mark off one from the other along the borderlines—where the two show a strong tendency to blend, what differentiates vulgar from colloquial is the fact that the former may go as low as the speech level of the illiterate, barely discharging its duties as a means of oral communication.

**Relation Between the Present and Old Forms**

A careful observer, in his investigation of the growth of Modern English, will never overlook the fact that—in much the same manner that a large portion of the present day literary forms owes its origin to the daily language practices of our predecessors—some of our current colloquialisms are most intimately linked with the speech habits of the foregone generations. To illustrate this significance I can think of no better authority than the following passage from Henry Sweet’s *A New English Grammar* (Part 1, §577):

> “It is important to observe that the literary language is always colloquial in its origin: all literary forms which differ from the contemporary spoken language are really fossilized colloquialisms of an earlier period. Thus such forms as thou hast, he hath, which are now used only in the liturgical and poetical strata, were once in common colloquial use. Literary languages are therefore to some extent anachronisms, being the mixture of the contemporary spoken language with the spoken languages of earlier periods. For this reason the study of a language should always be based—as far as possible—on the spoken language of the period which is being dealt with.”

**Survivals of the Old Forms**

In the paragraphs to follow my discussion will be centered around only a few of those colloquial forms which, in my estimate, might strike Japanese students of English as somewhat strange and might puzzle them, or lead them to one or another kind of confusion in their endeavor to find a precise and convincing explanation of the forms. In view of the foregoing an attempt is made here to set forth some of the common forms—as treated by Dr. G.O. Curme in his *Syntax*—which have survived the test of time, more or less intact, in spite of the changes that have wrought destructive influences upon the less significant forms of expression. While pains have been taken to avoid, as much as possible, the direct quotation of the statements from the original text, an effort has been made so that the essential points and underlying principles might not be impaired in the process of interpreting them.
1. Simple Infinitive as Accusative of Goal

‘Go (come) get it!’
‘Come lie down.’
‘Come sit on the chair.’
‘I’ll go see if he has returned.’

Just as for to-infinitive (See 4 below) was once popularly employed in older English to express the idea of purpose, so this use of the simple infinitive after an intransitive verb of motion, such as go or come, especially in an imperative sentence, was a very prevailing form to indicate a concrete goal. The simple infinitive in this case is a verbal noun in the accusative case with adverbial force, indicating the goal, i.e., end or purpose of the verb of motion. The usage remains only in a few limited cases. Not only a simple infinitive as verbal noun but a noun in the accusative was also frequently used with adverbial force after an intransitive verb of motion. The only survival of this use of a noun in the accusative may be seen today in the case of home in ‘He went home.’ (11, 2; 33, 2)

2. Simple Infinitive as Subject

‘All you have to do is pay for the damage.’
‘The only thing I can do is keep quiet about it.’
‘What we must do is get out of here.’

In a sentence containing a copula it is often difficult to distinguish the subject from the complement; for the subject may not always come, in accordance with the regular word-order, at the head of the sentence. Such is exactly the case in the above examples. The very thing talked about in each sentence here is the action represented by the simple infinitive. An infinitive, when used as the subject of a sentence, is generally preceded by to in modern usage. But here the simple infinitive still persists in colloquial speech, partly because it is construed as an imperative [and partly because of its older character with substantive force] (4, 1, d; 21, e).

3. Simple Infinitive in ‘cannot help but + simple Infinitive’

‘He could not help but feel sorry.’
‘I could not choose but speak the truth.’
‘I can’t choose but go on.’
‘He could not but see them.’
‘He could not but fail.’ := [He could not (do anything) but fail.]
Here help (less frequently choose, but with the same meaning), with negative force, is construed as a verb of avoiding or preventing; i.e., it implies an idea that something cannot be avoided or prevented. However, it must be noted that in the last two examples, though the verb of prevention is lacking, the meaning is not impaired at all on that account. If the verb do and the object anything are supplied, as indicated in the last example, the meaning will be made clear. Though the form cannot help is very commonly used in combination with a gerund (I could not help seeing them.), the form with the simple infinitive is still employed not only in writing on both sides of the Atlantic, but also in colloquial, especially in America. The construction, being an abridged form, can be traced back to its original ‘but that’ clause after a verb of avoiding or preventing: “Who doubts [literary, avoids believing] but that he will win.” = You cannot help but believe that he will win. (24, III; 24, III, d; 49, III, 4, E)

4. For to Infinitive

‘She is an orphan, studying for to be a governess.’
‘He is always ready for to help me.’
‘There will a car be sent and two boys from the Union for to bear her out from the house.’

Originally the now redundant for with the same meaning as that of to, expressing purpose, was added to the infinitive in order to clarify the idea of purpose. But as early as the thirteenth century it began losing its concrete force and finally disappeared from literary use, leaving to alone to take care of the situation. However, this construction still lingers in colloquial speech, though it is almost completely replaced by so as, in order, and on purpose in literary style (21, e; 24, III, d: 33, 2).

5. Conservatism in Use of Adverbs

‘This is real good.’
‘A little louder, please!’
‘I want to see him bad.’
‘I can beat you easy.’
‘Sure I’ve met you before.’

Quite a strong trace of conservatism can be noticed to adhere to the use of the old type of adverbs in colloquial English. In the course of development of the English language a great number of adverbs lost their suffix -e, which had distinguished the words from their corresponding adjectives, causing the two parts of speech to share a common form. Later some adverbs began to
take a new suffix -ly and have come to be used along with those with the simple form. The foregoing examples are perhaps survivals of the old type of adverbs which once shared the common form with their counterpart adjectives. In some cases, however, the old and the new are carefully differentiated because of their different shades of meaning: 'He aims high,' but 'They praise him highly.' 'I sit up late,' but 'She died lately.' (16, 4)

6. Adverbial Genitive

*Anywheres, somewheres, nowheres* in colloquial for *anywhere, somewhere, nowhere* in literary English.

This form of -s ending is construed to be the survival of the old adverbial genitive suffix which may still be seen today in such adverbs as nowadays, once (i.e., ones), unawares, longways, lengthways, sideways, always, etc. Those belong to the *anywheres* group are frequently heard in popular speech although they have disappeared altogether from the literary language (16, 4, a).

7. Genitive nouns, or Accusative Plurals

*Mornings; nights; Sundays; o’nights (=on nights); on Sundays.*

'Sleep o’nights.'

'The museum is open (on) Sundays.'

As one can easily infer from the -s ending of these words, they are all survivals of the nouns in the genitive and were used adverbially, as they are still so used to express the idea of repeated occurrence or of continuance in colloquial speech today. Today, however, they are considered accusative plurals rather than nouns in the genitive. Instead of the old genitive, we employ here the modern prepositional genitive in literary English: of a morning; of an evening; of a Sunday; of late years, etc. (16, 4, a)

8. Definite Pronouns as Adverbs

'Did he come home *that* late?'

'Do you care to go *that* high?'

'You shouldn’t have allowed him to go *that* far.'

'I’ve never been *this* low.'

'I didn’t know you were *this* bad.'

The use of the definite pronouns *this* and *that* in adverbial function is closely related to the use of indefinite pronouns, such as *little, some, a bit,*
none, much, a lot, etc., in the same function. As a matter of fact, the adverbial use of the definite pronouns is said to have originated in the fifteenth century after the pattern of the same use of indefinite pronouns. Though 'this much' and 'that much' seem to be the only well established forms in the literary language, the usage has gone far beyond this boundary in colloquial speech, as shown in the examples, largely on account of the concrete force inherent in the nature of these pronouns (16, 4, 6).

9. 'Like' as Conjunction

'I cannot do it like you do.' (=as)
'Then I felt like my last hour had come.' (=as if)
'He acted like he was afraid.'
'They raven down scenery like children do sweetmeats.'

A clause of comparison in many cases is joined to its principal proposition by 'like' instead of a more common conjunction 'as' and this practice is often censured as bad grammar. Grammatically speaking, however, the criticism seems to be somewhat unfair. The usage here can be traced back to the older 'like as' construction: 'Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him' (Psalms); 'She holds him round the neck, like as if she was protecting him' (Dickens). In these passages 'like' is an adverb meaning 'in the same manner'; and 'as' in one and 'as if' in the other are conjunctions. When 'as' gradually dropped out because 'like' was felt strong enough to express both the adverbial meaning and the linking force, 'like' alone was left and became a subordinate conjunction of comparison. In spite of the objection raised to this construction by grammarians, 'like' has struck deep root in the field of colloquial and popular speech (28, 2; 28, 2, a).

10. 'What...for...'=What kind of...

'What is she for a woman?'=What kind of woman...? (Form still sometimes used in popular speech.)
'What is he for a fool that betroths himself to unquietness.' (Older form).

Just as the idea of likeness or similarity is expressed by employing 'like,' the idea of identity, or the notion that a thing is in oneness with something else, is usually expressed by employing 'as': 'He was born as a poor farmer's boy and died as President of the United States.' Here the subject is represented to be identical with its predicate complements, boy and President. But in 'He looks just like my brother,' the idea expressed is likeness or simi-
larity between the subject and the complement.

In some set expressions, however, the idea of identity is brought up by employing a for-phrase, in place of ‘as; as a predicate complement: ‘He passes for an American.’; ‘She chose him for her husband.’ This use of ‘for’ was more common in older English. Closely related to this use is the form with ‘what... for’ with the meaning ‘what kind of.’ The form, though not so widely used as it was in older English, is still encountered now and then in popular speech (7, A, 6, (3); 7, A, c).

11. ‘Only for’=but for; except for, etc.

‘We should have died only for him.’
‘Only for my tea, I should have had the headache.’

In the literary style of current English, full conditional clauses are often replaced by much terser phrases, such as ‘were it not for,’ or ‘had it not been for.’ These forms in turn not infrequently give place to still simpler ‘but for,’ ‘except for,’ and ‘save for,’ not only in literary English but in colloquial as well. Along with these simple forms, ‘only for’ was once very common and is still employed to some extent in colloquial speech. These phrases are now construed as compound prepositions, but historically they are elliptical expressions in which ‘but,’ ‘except,’ ‘save,’ and ‘only’ served as conjunctions (31, 2).

12. Genitive Indicating ‘Sphere’

‘I can’t get rid (myself) of this cold.’
‘They robbed him of his money.’
‘The new law has deprived them of their privileges.’

This is a very popular form of expression much used both in literary and colloquial English to indicate a specific relation between a verb and its object, i.e., a noun placed after an inflectional preposition ‘of.’ The noun in this case may be called a genitive object. Though the original meaning of the genitive is difficult to ascertain, the study of the older uses reveals the fact that the most fundamental idea in this case had to do with the ‘sphere’ of action. Thus in the sentence ‘I am thinking of the coming examination,’ the idea expressed is that ‘My act of thinking is in the sphere of the coming examination.’ In the expression ‘They robbed him of his money,’ the original conception was that ‘their act of robbing him was committed in the sphere of his money. i.e., with respect to, or in regard of his money.’ But later this use of the genitive in connection with such verbs as cited in the foregoing examples has come to have a little different shade of meaning, and now it is more commonly construed as expressing the idea of separation. However, the
original meaning is still retained in many cases: ‘They complained of heavy taxes,’; ‘I reminded him of his duty.’ (13, 3)

13. Synthetic Form with Polysyllabic Adjectives

‘Nothing certainer’
‘One of the beautifullest men in the world.’
‘..., we expect her to be perfecter than a watch.’
‘There was no crastier or crookeder director in the habitual world.’
‘He was the delightedest old boy I ever saw...’
‘She is the blessedest little soul.’
‘It is the stupidest nonsense!’

In modern usage of adjectives the general rule is to employ the synthetic form (-er and -est suffixes) with most of the monosyllabics and a large number of disyllabics to indicate the comparative and the superlative degrees, both in literary and colloquial English. With polysyllabic adjectives, however, the prevailing tendency today is to show the two degrees by means of the analytic form with more and most, and the preference for the analytic form is well established at least in literary style. In colloquial speech, however, the old synthetic form can be noted lingering in some polysyllabic adjectives, especially in emphatic and excited colloquial expressions as shown in the examples. The synthetic form is said to be much older than the analytic form; for the latter, appearing in the thirteenth century, was first used with participles, and then slowly found its way into popular use in the sixteenth century (54, 1; 54, 1, a, a).

14. ‘Have to’ or ‘have got to’ as Indicative and Subjunctive

‘You have to (or have got to) come to my birthday party.’ [Volition, will of a person]
‘The plan has to succeed.’ [Volition, wish]
‘I don’t want to do it, but I have to.’ [Volition, will of another person]
‘I have often had to do it.’ [Either idicative, meaning constraint of circumstances, or volition, will of another person.]
‘We have to (or must) sell our house.’ [Indicative, constraint of circumstances.]
‘In life we have to (or must) do many things we do not desire to do.’ [Indicative, objective necessity lying in circumstances.]
‘Just when I was dropping off, a door had to (or must) bang.’ [Volitio nal, probably the door in this case is represented as equipped with power of will.]
Both ‘have to’ and ‘have got to’ are used synonymously with ‘must’ in many situations, but, while the former is widely used both in literary and colloquial expressions, the latter, i.e., ‘have got to,’ is nearly always confined to the present tense and mostly to spoken language. Another thing to be noted is that the latter is more emphatic than the former. In spite of the similarity existing between ‘must’ and ‘have to’ in their usage, there is, however, historical difference which we cannot afford to overlook. ‘Must,’ though generally construed as a present tense, was originally a past subjunctive. ‘Have to,’ on the other hand, was originally an indicative suggesting the idea of some kind of compelling force of circumstances, though today it is frequently employed as a modal auxiliary, with subjunctive force, to show the will of a person. The prevailing idea in both cases is some kind of compelling force. Thus the form ‘have to’ is often used interchangeably with ‘must,’ to denote an objective necessity that lies in circumstances [i.e., indicative use], and also to indicate an objective necessity that lies in the will of a person [i.e., subjunctive use] (43, I, A; 45, 5, e).

15. Old Appositional Construction instead of Partitive Genitive

‘One the places’= one of the places
‘None the boys are good enough for the job.’= None of the boys...
‘She caressed them each.’= .... each of them.

The appositional construction was more popularly used in older English than now. Thus, before the partitive genitive, which employs the inflectional preposition ‘of’ to indicate the relation of a part to its whole, came into general use, it was a very common practice to express a partitive idea by means of the appositional construction. According to the older use, therefore, what corresponded to ‘the receipt of two of your letters,’ ‘either of the sisters,’ ‘three of the tallest,’ ‘some of your friends,’ ‘many more of our countrymen,’ etc., were respectively ‘the receipt of two your letters,’ ‘either the sisters,’ ‘three the tallest,’ ‘some your friends,’ ‘many more our countrymen,’ etc. In literary English this appositional construction has mostly given way to the partitive genitive except in a few cases, such as two dozen eggs; a great many children; a few boys, etc. But in colloquial speech, as shown in the foregoing examples, where the noun after the appositive is in plural, the appositional construction survives (10, II, 2, H; 10, II, 2, H, b).