The rise of rebel grammar

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Call the editors! There's been an ambush! Three little words have hijacked our language and threaten to have us all speaking like characters from *Friends*.

English grammar has always been in flux, since the time of Chaucer and through the era of Shakespeare, to the great novelists of the nineteenth century. But never before have we experienced as creative a phase in language as we are now in our age of modern media.

For Cambridge University Press's publication *Cambridge Grammar of English*, we used a 1 billion-word computer database of language to survey how words are being used in contemporary Britain and Ireland. The database, called the Cambridge International Corpus, includes recorded day-to-day conversations and examples from radio and TV across a wide range of different regions, age groups and social strata.

The biggest changes in the grammar take place in the way we speak. The results from the 5 million spoken British English section of the Corpus show the surprising frequency of *so* and *like* – and signs that both are likely to increase their ranking in the next few years. Another common word *how* is ranked in the top 100 words in spoken English, and is set to move up quickly to join its counterpart rebels. The use of *like* to introduce direct speech occurs in almost 50% of occurrences in the speech of speakers under the age of 35 and is on the march throughout the spoken language as a whole. (Incidentally two other small words *you* and *know* are very common too. *You know* is the 57th most frequent item in the whole language spoken and written and 60% of all examples of *know* occur in the phrase *you know*.)

These three small, common words *(so, like, how)* have undergone massive changes in the way they are used in the last decade or so, especially, but by no means exclusively, in the speech of younger people. We can trace the source of these changes mostly to imported TV programmes from America – what some people call the *'Friends'* phenomenon. The three words are not the only ones to have changed, but they are the ones that seem most often to irritate more conservative speakers, for which read 'grumpy old men and women'.

Let's take *so*. A BBC radio travel reporter recounting a tough mountaineering expedition on Radio 4's *Excess Baggage* programme, recently said: And I'm thinking 'I am **so not** fit for this expedition'. For some reason that's not immediately obvious to us, speakers now seem more and more to use *so* with *not*. The speaker was by anyone's standards educated middle-class, and sounded middle-aged.

Younger speakers have also taken to using *so* to emphasise almost anything, nouns, verbs, the lot, though this usage is frowned on by almost everyone else! For example, a *Hollyoaks* character warned her schoolmate that she would get into trouble for wearing large earrings to school: "You're **so** going to get it from Mrs Webster."

The media are using *so* in this new way and people are using it in their daily lives. Are the people using it because of the media, or are the media people using it because everyone's using it? We can't easily answer that question, but we certainly know that this usage is common in the US, so it's likely it came in via TV shows. What we do know is that this is *so* what we were not taught in school!

The next little word is *how*. Sure enough, we heard it first on *Friends*, a series which, like many imported sitcoms, has had a big influence on how we speak: (Monica to Chandler) *How great are you, you little saver!*

We use *how*, among other ways, in exclamations. For example, another example *How rubbish is that as a toy!* was used by a highly cultured, middle-aged and middle-class antiques expert on the BBC's *Antiques Road Show*. Not only did she use the question word order but she also used *how* with a noun (*rubbish*), whereas traditionally it was used with adjectives.

Then there's *like*. We've all heard it – and cringed: *He keeps coming and trying to kiss me and I'm like, 'Go away!'* I was like, 'Oh, my God!' you know. *Like* has found a new role for itself: it can now replace verbs like *say* and *tell* when we report our words or the words of others.

These three little words are just that: three small words, but they are very frequent. They are in the top 100 most frequent words of the tens of thousands of words we use everyday in spoken English. We use them all the time. And it is just these heavy-duty words that are most sensitive to change; they are flexible friends who will bend themselves to our needs. The trouble is, many people don't like such changes. But history shows us that today's horrors are tomorrow's standard usage, just as today's youth are tomorrow's grumpy old men and women. How inevitable is that!

TOP 40 FREQUENT SPOKEN WORDS

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