'*SHE MAY HAVE TOOK THE BOOK*': IRREGULAR VERBS IN STANDARD AND NONSTANDARD ENGLISH. A CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Regularization of irregular verbs is a quite widespread phenomenon in nonstandard English dialects. This paper looks at the nonstandard past tense and past participle forms in several British and American English dialects. Some verbs display two past tense and past participle forms in Standard English: an irregular and a regular one. Their frequency is measured using two large-scale corpora: the British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English. Briefly mentioned is the view shared by eighteenth century prescriptivist grammarians regarding the process of simplification involving irregular verbs. Reference is also made to two processes taking place in nonstandard English dialects: analogy and leveling. Regularization and irregularization of verb forms are discussed at length in the last part of this paper, using Ngrams as statistical evidence.

Keywords: *nonstandard English*; *leveling*; *past tense*; *past participle*; *regularization*; *irregularization*; *irregular verbs*; *analogy*, *Ngrams*.

1. Introduction

In English there are around two hundred verbs which display an irregular morphological form. Regular and irregular verbs share one thing: they are both identical in their morphology for -$e(s)$ and -*ing* forms. Irregular verbs, however, differ from regular verbs in the formation of past tense (or preterite) and past participle forms.

Biber et al. (2000: 394) identify seven main patterns to mark past tense and past participles in irregular verbs:

(i) Class 1 verbs have a voiceless -*t* suffix to mark past tense and past participles: this can replace a final *d* of the base or it can be added to the base:

      (1) a. build – *built*
          b. send – *sent*
          c. learn – *learnt*

(ii) Class 2 verbs take a *-t* or *-d* suffix to mark past tense and past participle. In this case there is a change in the base vowel:

(2) **base form**	**past tense**	**past participle**
feel /fiːl/	felt /fɛlt/	felt
keep /kiːp/	kept /kɛpt/	kept
leave /liːv/	left /lɛft/	left
mean /miːn/	meant /mɛnt/	meant
bring /brɪŋ/	brought /brɔːt/	brought
think /θɪŋk/	thought /θɔːt/	thought
sell /sɛl/	sold /səʊld/	sold
tell /tɛl/	told /təʊld/	told

(iii) Class 3 verbs mark the past tense by adding the suffix *-ed*, and use the suffix *-e*(*n*) to mark past participle:

(3) **base form**	**past tense**	**past participle**
show	showed	shown (or showed)

(iv) Class 4 verbs do not add any suffix for past tense but take the suffix -e(n) for past participle, with a change in the base vowel for one or both:

(4) **base form**	**past tense**	**past participle**
break /eɪ	broke /əʊ/	broken /əʊ/
choose /uː/	chose /əʊ/	chosen /əʊ/
eat /iː/	ate /ɛ/ or /eɪ/	eaten /iː/
fall /ɔː/	fell /ɛ/	fallen /ɔː/
forget /ɛ/	forgot /ɒ/ or /ɑː/	forgotten /ɒ/ or /ɑː/
give /ɪ/	gave /eɪ/	given /ɪ/
grow /əʊ/	grew /uː/	grown /əʊ/
know /əʊ/	knew /uː/	known /əʊ/
see /iː/	saw /ɔː/	seen /iː/
speak /iː/	spoke /əʊ/	spoken /əʊ/
take /eɪ/	took /ʊ/	taken /eɪ/
wear /ɛː/	wore /ɔː/	worn /ɔː/

(v) Class 5 verbs comprise past tense and past participle forms marked only by a change in the base vowel:

(5) **base form**	**past tense**	**past participle**
come /ʌ/	came /eɪ/	come /ʌ/
begin	began /æ/	begun /ʌ/

find /aɪ/	found /əʊ/	found /əʊ/
hold /əʊ/	held /ɛ/	held /ɛ/
hang /æ/	hung /ʌ/	hung /ʌ/
meet /iː/	met /ɛ/	met /ɛ/
sit /ɪ/	sat /æ/	sat /æ/
stand /æ/	stood /ʊ/	stood /ʊ/
win /ɪ/	won /ʌ/	won /ʌ/

(vi) Class 6 verbs include past tense and past participle forms identical to the base form:

(6) **base form**	**past tense**	**past participle**
cut	cut	cut
hit	hit	hit
let	let	let
shut	shut	shut

(vii) Class 7 verbs have one or more completely unmatched forms:

(7) **base form**	**past tense**	**past participle**
go /gəʊ/	went /wɛnt/	gone /gɒn/

Despite the fact that present-day Standard English has little inflectional morphology, a small amount of variation still exists in one area of Standard English verbal morphology: the past tense and past participle forms of certain irregular verbs:

(8) burnt – burned
    dove – dived
    dreamt – dreamed
    hung – hunged
    knit – knitted
    leant – leaned
    lit – lighted
    quit – quitted
    smelt – smelled
    snuck – sneaked
    spelt – spelled
    sped – speeded
    spoilt – spoiled
    wed – wedded

In order to have a better grasp of whether these verbal forms are in free variation, we have checked the frequency with which they appear in the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA):
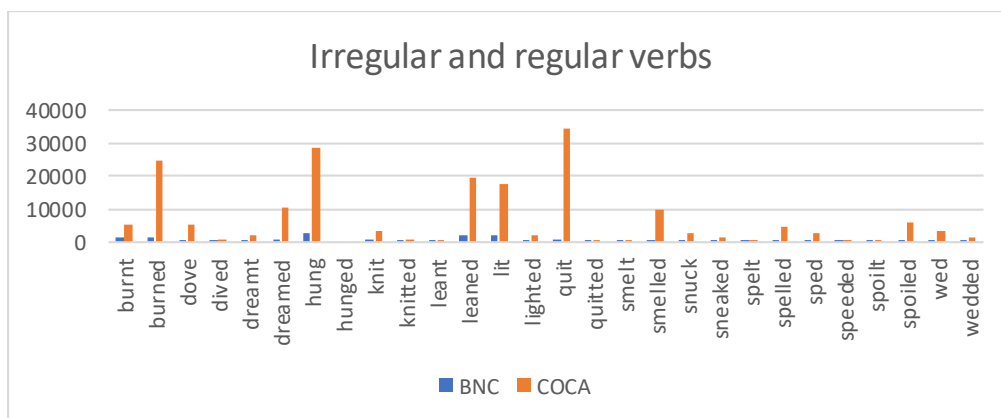

Fig. 1. *Frequency of irregular vs. regular forms where both variants can be used as either past tense or participle in the British National Corpus (BNC) and Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*

The data reveal that both regular and irregular forms are usually used quite frequently. In some cases, however, there is a considerable difference in the frequency with which one form is used. Such cases include: *burned*, *hung*, *quit*, *lit* and *smelled*.

This variation that occurs in Standard English verbal morphology is intriguing and, in some cases, unexpected. This paper compares the past tense and past participles that occur in present-day Standard English with those that are found in present-day nonstandard varieties of English, and looks more closely at the processes of *regularization* and *irregularization* of past tense forms. For instance, in the English dialect used in Orkney and Shetland, the irregular verb forms of "eat" include *aet*, *öt*, *ötten/eaten* (Melchers 2004: 37). Cheshire (1982) highlights that in Reading, Berkshire, there are at least five past tense forms for the verb "*see*": *saw* (as in standard English), *see*, *seen*, *seed* and *sawed*. Elsewhere, Cheshire (1994: 117) notes that, in some cases, weak forms co-occur with the strong forms. Some attested examples from the British Isles include: *catched*, *drawed*, *fighted*, *gived*, *holded*, *knowed*, *runned*, *seed*, *telled*, *waked*. Cheshire (1982) also distinguishes three classes of verbs:

(i) verbs that are weak in the nonstandard, but still strong in the standard, i.e., that have a nonstandard past tense with *-ed* (e.g., *gived*, *holded*, *drawed*, *swinged*, *runned*, *blowed*, *fighted*, *waked*);

(ii) verbs where the Standard English past tense form is used for both the past tense and the (nonstandard) past participle (e.g., *go*, *take*, *forget*, *run*, *break*, *throw*, *beat*, *see*);

(iii) in the third class, the reverse is possible, in which case the Standard English past participle is used for both nonstandard past tense and past participle (e.g., *come*, *become*, *run*, *do*).

Similar forms are also found in Australia. Eisikovits (1987: 11) mentions the following past tense and past participle forms which she identified in her corpus of inner-city Sidney English:

(9) breaked, catched, costed, fighted, hitted, goed, lied, seed, spreaded, teared, winded.

Such forms are attested in sixteenth century England (Lass, 1994) and several were still used in educated spoken English in the eighteenth century. Cheshire[1] (1994: 117) argues that the transfer of irregular verbs to regular verbs is thought to have ended by the end of the fifteenth century, however, it would be more precise to say that irregular and regular forms of the same verb have co-occurred for a further three centuries. Some of them even co-occur in present-day English, as mentioned above in (8).

2. Standard and nonstandard English

How should we account for the divergence between standard and nonstandard varieties of English as far as regular and irregular verbs are concerned? Cheshire (1994) claims that these differences exit due to the social changes that took place during the period 1600-1800. She further notes that a plausible explanation to account for the elimination of certain strong verb forms in cultivated speech is the fact that a distinction appeared between public and private styles of writing, and regionalisms were removed from the public styles. Regular verbs were quite productive in that period and the overgeneralization of the *-ed* marker for past tense to produce forms such as *gived*, *comed* was deemed a developmental feature of children's English. Taking into consideration the people's urge to appear and sound

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[1] Cheshire (1994) uses the labels *strong verbs* and *weak verbs*. In this paper, however, we adopt the labels *irregular* and *regular* verbs.

sophisticated, refined and cultivated, they would have wanted to distance themselves from the immature speech of children. Hence, the persistence and survival of irregular verb forms is due to their usage as markers of social class. This hypothesis is actually pertinent, as in fiction, for example, authors frequently make use of the regularization of irregular verbs in the speech of characters from lower classes.

There is a general consensus that eighteenth century grammarians "stood in the way of the normal process of simplification that was taking place with the strong verbs" (Cheshire, 1994: 121). This view is shared by Priestley (1761: 16-17): "As the paucity of inflections is the greatest defect in our language, we ought to take advantage of every variety that the practice of good authors will warrant, and therefore, if possible, make a participle different from the preterite of a verb as *a book is written*, not *wrote*; the *ships are taken*, not *took*." This idea was subsequently reinforced by Bishop Robert Lowth in his highly influential book, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*, published in 1762, who wrote that "our ears have grown familiar with *I have writ*, *I have drank*, *I have bore* which are altogether…barbarous" (Lowth, 1762: 90).

Another important distinction worth mentioning is that, with some verbs, the past tense and past participle forms are distinct in Standard English, but identical in nonstandard English. In colloquial American English, for instance, the simple past is used as past participle:

(10) a. Me and Bob have **swam** in that pond lotsa times.
     b. She'd **sang** that song her whole life, and then up and forgot the words.   (Murray and Simon, 2004: 223)

The same situation occurs in rural varieties spoken in the Southeastern part of the United States (11) and Newfoundland English (12):

(11) a. I had **went** down there.
     b. She may have **took** the car.   (Wolfram, 2004: 290)
(12) a. Have they **drove** home already?
     b. He haven't **went** there yet.
     c. Have she **tore** her jacket?
     d. They've **took** it back.   (Clarke, 2004: 307)

This phenomenon is not only confined to American English dialects. Ryfa (2013: 74) notes that, in London English, as well as the English dialects found in the southeast of England, strong verbs with identical past tense and past participle forms are quite common. For instance, *do – done – done*

(when the verb *do* functions as a full verb; when it is used as an auxiliary it can be *do – did – did*); *drive – drove – drove*; *forget – forgot – forgot*; *take – took – took*.

(13) a. She **done** it, didn't she?

b. I take speed, I'**ve took** coke, I'**ve took** pills, I'**ve took** speed today! I've been drinking, I'**ve took** speed oops! I, I have been drinking today! I **have took** speed today! I don't take speed all the time. But my auntie, she **done** heroine for two years and, err, she overdosed on crack, and then she was in hospital for 3 months.   (Ryfa, 2013: 74)

Ryfa also acknowledges that "this two-way pattern represents a feature of Cockney", and it is very salient in "the nonstandard dialects of the rest of the Southeast" (Ryfa 2013:47, Cheshire et al. 1993: 78, Edwards 1993: 221).

(14) He **swum** across the river. (*West Lancashire*)

(15) Father took over the business then and he **done** most things and repairs and all the rest of it, but he never **done** anything big. (*Norfolk*)

(16) They **sung** a song that goes back to Saxon days. (*Sussex*)

(Freeborn, 1995: 48)

In the examples provided in (14) – (16) the past participle form is used instead of the past tense form. These examples corroborate Ryfa's (2013) claim that the two-way pattern (past tense form for past participle or past participle form for past tense) is quite widespread in the dialects spoken in the Southeast of England.

Of particular interest is also the verb '*to get*'. In Standard British English, the paradigm is *get – got – got*. In Standard American English, however, the past participle form is not *got*, but *gotten*. This form has been retained, therefore, in Standard American English, but has disappeared from Standard British English. However, it still occurs in some British English dialects:

(17) They've **gotten** up to nearly eleven thousand pounds. (*Staffs*)

(Freeborn, 1995: 48)

A feature that is quite widespread in London English is the use of the past perfect of *got – I have got*, reduced to a single verb:

(18) They'll rush over at one o'clock and I **got** a queue there. (*London*)

(Freeborn, 1995: 48)

In an attempt to determine the range and distribution of paradigms across regional dialects, Anderwald (2009) has examined the FRED corpus and discovered that the use of a regular paradigm where Standard English has an irregular one is quite rare, except for the verbs with a *-t* suffix, such as *tellt* and *sellt*, which are attested in Scottish dialects and Scots. Such forms are also discussed in Miller (2004), who provides the following examples found in Scottish English:

(19) *Past tense forms of verbs*
      a. brung 'brought'
      b. come 'came'
      c. done 'did'
      d. driv 'drove'
      e. killt 'killed'
      f. run 'ran'
      g. seen 'saw'
      h. sellt 'sold'
      i. sunk 'sank'
      j. tellt 'told'
      k. writ 'wrote'   (Miller, 2004: 48)

(20) *Past participles*
      a. beat 'beaten'
      b. blew 'blown'
      c. broke 'broken'
      d. came 'come'
      e. feart 'frightened'
      f. fell 'fallen'
      g. forgot 'forgotten'
      h. froze 'frozen'
      i. gave 'given'
      j. gotten 'got'
      k. knew 'known'
      l. rose 'risen'
      m. saw 'seen'
      n. stole 'stolen'
      o. took 'taken'
      p. went 'gone'   (Miller, 2004: 48)

The forms *sellt* and *tellt* show that irregular verbs can be made regular, a process known as *regularization*. Miller (2004: 48) notes that, in Scottish English, the forms *gave* and *knew* are "incomers". The original verbs are *gie* with the past tense form *gied* and the past participle *gien*, and *ken* with the form *kent* functioning as both past tense and past participle. The form *sellt* has zero occurrences in both the BNC and COCA corpora. However, the form *tellt* occurs three times in the BNC corpus and once in the COCA corpus:

> (21) '…when he cam back fae the school and **tellt** us whit Miss Mackenzie had had tae pit [….] Ah gave him a clip roon the ear and **tellt** him and Sebastian no tae laugh…'
> (**BNC** – *True confessions and new cliches*. Lochhead, Liz. Edinburgh: Polygon Books, 1985, pp. 1-135)

> (22) 'I **tellt** ye that safe was silly. But you had tae go and dae things on the cheap.'
> (**COCA** – *Death of a dentist*. Beaton, M.C. New York: Warner Books, 1998)

Beal (2010: 31), following Anderwald (2009), reinforces the idea that there is a tendency in Northern British dialects to reduce irregular paradigms with three forms in Standard English (e.g., *drink-drank-drunk*) to two forms (*drink-drunk-drunk*) and those with two forms (e.g., *come-came-come*) to just one (*come-come-come*). An interesting find presented in Anderwald (2009) suggests that there is a strong tendency for ablaut forms to be levelled to orthographic <u>, and phonological /ʊ ~ʌ/, especially in the Southeast. For instance, *do-done-done*; *come-come-come*; *run-run-run*. In the Northeast, however, many are levelled to <a>, as in *drink-drank-drank*; *ring-rang-rang*; *sing-sang-sang* (Beal, 2008: 375).

3. Nonstandard tense forms: the (ir)regularization of (ir)regular verbs
The regularization of irregular past and participle verb forms that often occurs in vernacular varieties of language involve analogy. For instance, some speakers might use *knowed* for *knew* or *catched* for *caught*. In this case the ***analogical formula*** is:

> (23) walk: walked:: know: knowed
>
> (Wolfram and Schilling, 2016:44)

Another type of linguistic analogy is ***leveling***. This entails that the different forms of a verb are made more similar of identical (e.g., *do-done-done*), as previously mentioned. In some cases, "dominant pattern analogy and leveling are conveniently referred to simply as *regularization* since the processes

result in sets of forms, or paradigms, that eliminate exceptions or irregularities in patterns" (Wolfram and Schilling, 2016:46). In some vernacular dialects, forms like *brang* or *brung* as the past tense of *bring* might be used, by analogy to forms like *sing-sang-sung* or *ring-rang-rung*. Wolfram and Schilling (2016: 46) label this phenomenon **minority pattern analogy**, because it requires a reshaping of irregular forms following a model of a minor pattern instead of a predominant one, like the *-ed* past tense suffix. The two authors go further and convincingly argue that, in some cases, albeit scarce, minority pattern analogy might result in **irregularization**. They illustrate this process by giving the verb *to dive* as an example. As aforementioned, the past tense form of *dive* is historically the regular form *dived* in British English. In American English, however, the past tense form is *dove*, by analogy to verb forms like *drive-drove* or *ride-rode*. The occurrences of the past tense forms *dove* vs. *dived* in the BNC and COCA corpora are illustrated above in Figure 1.

Clarke (2004:307) found that, in Newfoundland English, irregular verbs are regularized by adding the -ed suffix to the non-past stem. Forms such as *blowed*, *comed*, *dealed*, *drinked*, *falled* (*down*), *freezed* (*up*), *goed*, *growed*, *heared*, *knowed*, *leaved*, *lied* (*down*), *maked*, *runned*, *seed*, *teached*, *throwed*, are frequent. Clarke also reports minor regularization processes among which the double marking of past forms. Consider the following examples:

(24) drownded, ownded, bursted, beated, frozed.

Another peculiarity discovered in Newfoundland English is the appearance of new irregular past forms, such as *scrope* for *scraped*, *sove* for *saved* and *wove* for *waved*.

Partial regularization has also been discovered in the East Anglian dialect. Trudgill (2004:143) discusses this phenomenon and provides the following examples from the dialect of East Anglia:

(25)	**Present**	**Past**	**Past Participle**
	bring	brung	brung
	catch	catched	catched
	give	gived	gived
	grow	growed	growed
	snow	snew	snown
	teach	teached	teached
	write	writ	writ

(Adapted from Trudgill, 2004:143)

Trudgill also identified the form *shew* used as the past tense of *show*, which occurs quite frequently in "the speech of people whose English is not very dialectal" (Trudgill, 2004:143).

Another case of regularization of irregular verbs is reported by Wagner (2004:170) in her analysis of English dialects in the Southwest of England. She argues that Standard English verbs are regularized in dialects. Forms such as *know-knowed*, *see-seed*, *give-gived*, *blow-blowed*, *hurt-hurted* are found to occur quite frequently.

(26) a. So, they went off one night, went up round and **catched** her 'bout six o'clock…'

b. …he were **gived** the push.

c. …you **knowed** this one.   (FRED Corpus, Wagner 2004: 178)

In Appalachian English (Montgomery, 2004) and African American Vernacular English (Wolfram, 2004) the form *cotch*, as the past tense of *catch* is in use. This form also appears in the short-story *The Gold-Bug* by Edgar Allan Poe, in the speech of Jupiter, a black slave (Oancea, forthcoming) and has also been attested in Schneider's (1989: 97) corpus.

(27) a. 'Massa Will **cotch** him fuss, but had to let him go…'

b. '…but I **cotch** him up in de paper and stuff a piece…'

(Oancea, forthcoming)

According to Bayley and Santa Ana (2004: 376), Chicano English "shares a number of features of the verb phrase with other vernacular phrases, including African American Vernacular English. Among them is the regularization of irregular verbs."

(28) When I was little and that teacher hit my hand on my- my upper side of the hand – that when she **striked** me with that, that just blew my mind…   (*SA, female, age 30*)   (Bayley and Santa Ana, 2004: 376)

The regularization of the past tense in Chicano English is also tackled in Fought (2002), who provides the following examples from her own fieldwork in the Los Angeles Chicano community:

(29)   a. It **spinned**. (*David*, *17*)

b. I haven't **wrote** in a long time. (*Amanda*, *17*)

c. Those were the um- most people that I **hanged** around with.

(*Marina*, *17*)

d. I had like, three weeks that I had **came** out the hospital

(*Avery*, *16*)

(Fought, 2002: 94)

Quite interestingly, regularization of irregular verbs occurs quite frequently in teenage speech in Chicano English.

In order to check the frequency with which some of these regularized past tense forms are used, we have used the Google Ngram[2] Online Viewer with the English 2019 corpus:
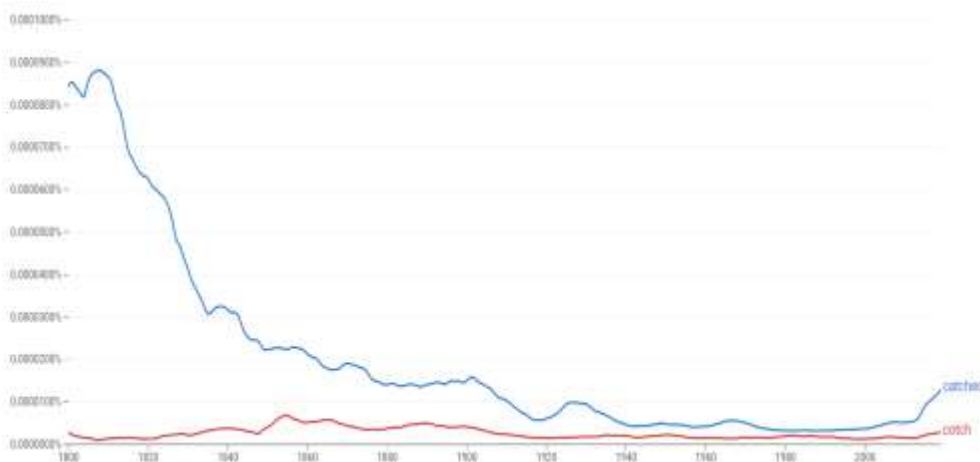

Fig. 2. *Relative word frequencies for the regularized past tense forms for 'catch' during the 19th and 20th centuries, using Google Ngram Online Viewer with the English 2019 corpus*

The nonstandard past tense form *catched* was quite consistently used in early 1800s, but has gradually seen a decline in use. The form *cotch* has been less frequent in use, compared to *catched*.

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[2] Ngrams are combinations of words and letters occurring next to each other. An Ngram line graph displays the frequency of words or combination of words used over time and also shows changes in the use of specific words or phrases over time, using language corpus data (through search algorithms). Gray et al. (2018) discuss English verb regularization in books and Tweets using Ngrams and Twitter.

Fig. 3. *Relative word frequencies for the regularized past tense form 'gived' during the 19ᵗʰ and 20ᵗʰ centuries, using Google Ngram Online Viewer with the English 2019 corpus*

The nonstandard past tense form *gived* has also been attested in several nonstandard dialects and, in recent years, it appears to be on an ascending curve, although its peak was in the early days of the 19ᵗʰ century.

One of the most striking forms encountered in our discussion of the regularization of irregular verb forms was *snew*, as the past tense form of *snow*. In this particular case, however, we are dealing with the irregularization of a regular verb form in the past tense. This occurs in the East Anglian dialect, probably by analogy to verb forms such as *blow – blew*, *grow – grew*, *know – knew*. The form *snew* was included by Dr Samuel Johnson in his 1783 *A Dictionary of the English Language*, where it is registered as the old preterite form of '*to snow*'. It is also mentioned in the *American Journal of Education* (1858) as the preterite of *snow*, with the remark that it is used in the north of England. *Blackwood's Magazine* (1869), includes the forms: *snow*, *snew*, *snown*, under the heading '*Lost Preterites*', followed by a brief note: "the preterite and past participle survive in America, but are considered vulgarisms" (*Blackwood Magazine*, July-December, 1869:275). The following example is provided to illustrate its use:

(30) 'First is blew, and then it **snew**, and then it frizz horrid" – *Major Downing's Letters*

The entry includes the following note: "In the book *English Grammar*, Ben Johnson cites the following verbs that mark their preterite forms in ew – blow, grow, throw, crow, know, draw, slay, and snow. The last is the only one of the number that now forms its preterite in *ed*, though uneducated people both in Great Britain and America sometimes form the preterites of *grow*, *blow* and *know* in *ed*…" (*Blackwood Magazine*, July-December, 1869:

275-6). A few years later, Ebenezer Cobham Brewer, in his book *Errors of Speech and of Spelling*, published in 1877, includes the following entry:

> (31) **Snow** (to rhyme with *grow*), congealed vapour precipitated from the clouds in flakes, to fall in snow; *snowed, snowd* (not *snew*). "It *snowed* yesterday," not "It *snew* yesterday."
>
> (Cobham Brewer, 1877: 1149)

The *Merriem-Webster* dictionary acknowledges the form *snew* as the dialectal past tense of *snow*. Etymologically, it comes from Middle English *sniwen, snewen*, from Old English *snīwan* and it is akin to Middle Dutch and Middle Low German *snīen, to snow*.
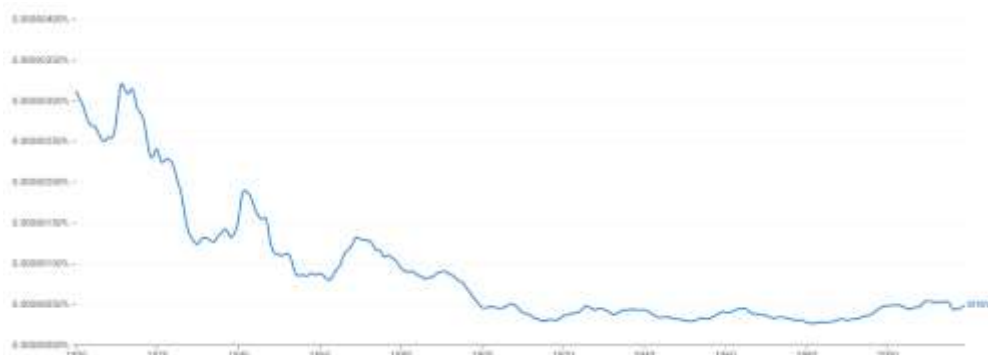

Fig. 4. *Relative word frequencies for the irregularized past tense form 'snew' during the 19th and 20th centuries, using Google Ngram Online Viewer with the English 2019 corpus*

We note that Fig. 4 shows that the irregularized past tense form *snew* appears quite frequently in the first part of the 19th century and afterwards has been slowly decreasing in usage. It is noteworthy that the form *snew* appears only once in both the BNC and COCA corpora.

Thus, we can safely state that, in contrast to the standard forms, the non-standard forms, though consistently reported to be in use in vernacular dialects, cannot be interpreted as a tendency toward regularization of verb irregularity in standard British or American English, at least for the time being.

4. Conclusion

This paper has examined the regularization of irregular verbs in several nonstandard British and American English dialects.

Variation in one part of Standard English morphology has been presented, namely the past tense and past participle forms of certain irregular verbs (e.g., *dive – dove/dived*; *burn – burnt/burned*; *learn – learnt/learned*,

etc.). Two large-scale corpora have been used (BNC and COCA) with the aim to identify and establish patterns of frequency and of preference between the regular and irregular past tense and past participle forms.

The last part has been devoted to the process or (ir)regularization of (ir)regular verbs in nonstandard English. The status of regularized past tense forms has been discussed within the larger context of vernacular dialects. Though scarce, minority pattern analogy, resulting in irregularization, has also been tackled, and the verb *to snow*, with the irregularized past tense form *snew* has been more thoroughly discussed.

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