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Among the young, they prefer amongst



I HAVE been asked to comment on the use of “amongst” in the Victoria University of Wellington campaign tagline “Get amongst the best”. Specifically, I was asked whether there is any difference between “amongst” and “among”, and why “amongst” was chosen, since it seems rather outdated and conservative.

The publicity folk at Victoria informed me that at least part of the reason is a resurgence of “amongst” among(st) today’s youth, particularly in the phrase “get amongst it”, meaning to party.

The phrase has been adopted by Air New Zealand for a social networking site it has established on the web, which clearly has a young audience in mind. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* suggests that when “amongst” is used it can imply “intermixture”. This seems to fit the partying idea, and so the slogan could suggest that students coming to Victoria are mixing with and becoming the best themselves, rather than simply being among the best without joining them.

Similarly, the *OED* tells us that “amongst” is used more with verbs showing movement, and “among” with other verbs. The slogan is certainly calling out to prospective students to make the move to Victoria. Other sources say the choice between “amongst” and “among” can be driven by euphony – what sounds best. It is awkward to say “amongst students” because of the juxtaposition of two “st” sequences, so “among students” sounds better. No such problem with

“amongst others”. “Amongst the best” does also have a certain ring to it, with the repetition of “-st”.

Where do these “st” forms come from? Are they in fact old-fashioned? It turns out that at one time these forms were innovative, and that “among” has been around for longer than “amongst”. This “st” ending, also found in “amidst” and “whilst”, started life as the genitive ending -es. Genitive endings have meanings like “of”; as with the possessive marker in “John’s”.

The idea of putting genitive endings on words like “among” seems odd to us now, but in earlier centuries it was more common. “Among” was formed from the phrase “on emang”, meaning something like “in the mingling”, which was shortened to a single word with various spellings such as “emong”. The genitive form “emonges” meant something like “in the mingling of”. It is likely that “emonges” became today’s “amongst” because there was some confusion between the genitive “es” and the superlative “est” ending that we find in “longest”. So Chaucer (14th century) has “amonges”, but Marlowe (16th century) has “mongst”. All the while, “among”, without the genitive marking, continued to be widespread.

“Amid” and “amidst” have a similar history. Originally, a phrase “in mid” was shortened to “amid” or “amidde”. The genitive form was “amiddes”, which became “amidst”. Fairly loose differences in meaning have also been given to these two. So “amidst” often seems to be used of

“things scattered about”, or with verbs of movement.

ANOTHER phrase, “on gegn”, meant “in a direct line with” or “opposite”, and the phrase merged to give us the word “again”. The “st” ending was added by the same process as for “amongst” and “amidst”. Note, though, that while “against” largely kept the locational meaning of “on gegn”, “again” gradually took on the temporal sense of repetition, giving a clearer meaning difference between these two than between “among” and “amongst”.

It has been suggested that “amongst” is a British form, and is not used in North America. It is interesting that style guides on both sides of the Atlantic (*The Times* as well as the Canadian *Hansard*) prefer “among”. “Amongst” certainly seems to be less popular in North America – a web search using Google and the .ca domain (Canada) produced more than 12 times as many hits for “among” as for “amongst”, and 40 times as many in the US (using .edu).

In Britain, on the other hand, the .uk domain resulted in only 1.13 times as many “among” hits as “amongst” hits.

So what are New Zealanders’ preferences? Well, we sit among(st) our Pacific neighbours, with a ratio of just over three to one, similar to Australia’s.

Paul Warren is at the school of linguistics and applied language studies at Victoria University.