

Some verb complements in New Zealand English

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Although Raymond Chandler wrote a novel called *Farewell, My Lovely*, he could not have written in it *We farewellled her*, because that construction is not possible with *farewell* in American English. The transitivity of this particular verb in New Zealand English has been a matter of comment for some time (Turner 1966: 92) and has a first citation in Orsman (1997) from 1908.

Complementation of this kind is a rather idiosyncratic aspect of any verb. There is no obvious reason why *I believed him guilty* should be perfectly acceptable English, but *I suspected him guilty* should not be: clearly the meaning is not crucial here (though it may be in other cases), it is simply a matter of how individual verbs behave. In what follows, (in)transitivity and the use of particular prepositions following verbs will be the focus of attention. Such features may change over time without any change in meaning, or there may also be a concomitant change in meaning (as will be illustrated below).

Farewell is not the only verb whose pattern of complementation in New Zealand English has received scholarly comment. Bauer (1987: 14) also draws attention to transitive usages of *appeal* and *protest* in New Zealand English, and intransitive uses of *meet* (followed by *with*). Hundt (1998) presents a corpus-based study of these and other verbs, adding *screen* to the list of verbs which behave differently in New Zealand English from the way they behave in other varieties.

This paper provides some comparative figures from a number of different corpora, including the Australian Corpus of English.¹ It updates the data provided in Hundt (1998), often by looking at completed corpora instead of just the portions which were available at the time Hundt carried out her study; it also adds some data for other verbs where variable prepositional usage may be of interest.

First consider the word *farewell*, which was our starting point above. Table 1 presents data on complementation patterns from the following corpora: the Freiburg update of the Brown Corpus, containing written American English materials from 1991 (FROWN), the Freiburg update of the Lancaster-Oslo-Bergen corpus, containing British written materials from 1991 (FLOB), the Wellington Corpus of Written New Zealand English, with materials from 1986 (WCWNZE), the Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English, also from 1986 (WCSNZE), and the Australian Corpus of English, with

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written material from Australia in 1986 (ACE). Each corpus consists of approximately 1 million words of running text. It can be seen from Table 1 that *farewell* is used transitively only in New Zealand and Australia.

Table 1: FAREWELL

CATEGORY	FROWN	FLOB	WCWNZE	WCSNZE	ACE
Transitive	0	0	4	1	1
Non-transitive uses	2	3	3	0	1
TOTAL	2	3	7	1	2

Non-transitive uses in Table I include the use of *Farewell!* as an interjection. *Farewell* is typical of the verbs we are dealing with here in that its frequency in corpora of 1 million words is extremely low. For that reason there is little point in noting different percentages or in attempting to give statistical measures of difference. Rather it is a matter of looking for patterns emerging from the sparse data. Each verb must, however, be treated individually, since there are no general patterns which apply across the lexicon.

The corresponding patterns for *appeal* are shown in Table 2. Here we can see that Australian and New Zealand English provide a compromise between American and British English. British English avoids constructions such as *They appealed the decision* or *The decision was appealed*; American English avoids constructions such as *They appealed against the decision*; Australian and New Zealand English allow both. The 'indirect speech' category, as in *They appealed to us to leave* is permitted everywhere, but not attested in the New Zealand corpora. The absolute use occurs in sentences like *When the decision is announced, they are expected to appeal*.

Table 2: APPEAL

CATEGORY	FROWN	FLOB	WCWNZE	WCSNZE	ACE	
Transitive	1	0	1	3	1	
Passive	1	0	0	0	1	
Intransitive	Against	0	3	1	0	6
	For	0	6	2	0	3
Absolute	2	3	2	1	0	
Indirect speech	1	1	0	0	1	
Unclear	0	0	0	0	1	
TOTAL	5	13	6	4	13	

The figures for *protest* are given in Table 3. Here we can see that all the varieties considered allow constructions like *They protested that they were*

innocent ('indirect speech'), and *They protested* ('absolute'). While American English prefers structures such as *They protested the decision*, other varieties of English tend to prefer *They protested against the decision*. The FROWN corpus also contains the construction *He protests himself to be X*, which is yet another transitive usage, not recorded in Table 3.

Table 3: PROTEST

CATEGORY		FROWN	FLOB	WCWNZE	WCSNZE	ACE
Intransitive with preposition	At	0	3	2	1	3
	Against	2	6	4	1	1
	About	0	4	2	1	0
Transitive		10	2	3	1	0
Absolute		1	1	3	3	2
Indirect Speech		11	12	10	1	10
TOTAL		24	28	24	8	16

The verb *progress* can be heard in the media being used transitively as in *We have decided to progress this matter*, but this has scarcely yet impacted on the corpora, as can be seen in Table 4. Perhaps more recent materials would show a higher proportion of this type of construction.

Table 4: PROGRESS

CATEGORY	FROWN	FLOB	WCWNZE	WCSNZE	ACE
Transitive	0	3	0	1	0
Intransitive	12	20	12	8	13
TOTAL	12	23	12	9	13

Table 5 shows the figures for the verb *screen*, identified by Hundt as being different in New Zealand English. Here it is the intransitive or medio-passive use (*This show screens at 7:00 pm*) which has the particular Australasian flavour.

Finally among this set of verbs, *battle*, the figures for which are seen in Table 6, appears to show a difference between British and American usage. The absolute usage referred to in Table 6 is illustrated by *They battled*.

As well as these verbs of variable transitivity, there are verbs which can be used either transitively or intransitively but with slightly different meanings. One such verb is *meet*. We can say *She met an old friend* and *She met with an old friend*, but the two are not quite synonymous. *Meet with* frequently means 'be in a meeting with' rather than 'bump into'; alternatively it can be used in the phrase *to meet with an accident*. Differences between such constructions in different corpora are difficult to interpret: they could show national

preferences for or against particular constructions, or they could just show that the different corpora happened to deal with different topics. Figures for people meeting people are given in Table 7.

Table 5: SCREEN

CATEGORY	FROWN	FLOB	WCWNZE	WCSNZE	ACE
Transitive	0	1	0	1	9
Passive	0	3	0	0	2
Intransitive	0	0	14	0	5
Unclear	0	0	0	0	1
TOTAL	0	4	14	1	17

Table 6: BATTLE

CATEGORY	FROWN	FLOB	WCWNZE	WCSNZE	ACE
Transitive	5	0	2	1	5
Transitive with <i>each other</i>	1	0	0	0	0
Intransitive with <i>against</i>	1	1	1	0	0
Intransitive with <i>with</i>	1	1	3	3	3
Absolute	2	2	2	0	2
TOTAL	10	4	8	4	10

Table 7: MEET

CATEGORY	FROWN	FLOB	WCWNZE	WCSNZE	ACE
Transitive	103	167	131	158	77
Transitive + <i>each other</i>	0	3	0	0	1
Passive	2	6	5	1	3
Intransitive + <i>with</i>	26	2	5	8	5
Absolute	47	55	42	32	43
Unclear	4	2	1	0	2
TOTALS	182	235	184	199	131

A similar case is *consult*, where we can talk about *consulting a doctor* or *consulting with a colleague*. Again the two are not quite synonymous, and again the implications are not clear. The figures are in Table 8. Here the differences do not appear to be anything but random.

Table 8: CONSULT

CATEGORY	FROWN	FLOB	WCWNZE	WCSNZE	ACE
Transitive	15	15	12	4	8
Passive	7	2	4	1	2
Intransitive + <i>with</i>	4	1	2	3	1
Absolute uses	2	2	1	1	1
Reflexive	1	0	1	0	2
TOTAL	29	20	20	9	14

The same remarks can be made in respect of *congratulate*, as can be seen in Table 9. The same is true for *speak to/with*, *talk to/with* (the figures for which are not given here since they are so consistent across varieties).

Table 9: CONGRATULATE

CATEGORY	FROWN	FLOB	WCWNZE	WCSNZE	ACE
On	1	11	3	3	1
For	1	1	2	0	1
TOTAL	2	12	5	3	2

One case which often receives comment is the difference between filling a form out and filling a form in. *Fill out*, in this sense, is supposed to be North American (Robinson 1996). The figures are in Table 10. They show that *fill out* and *fill in* are equally common in spoken New Zealand English and in written Australian English. The reason for the preference for *fill in* in written New Zealand English is unclear; we may hypothesise that it is perceived as the more formal option in New Zealand.

Table 10: FILL (for forms, questionnaires, etc.)

CATEGORY	FROWN	FLOB	WCWNZE	WCSNZE	ACE
In	0	4	7	15	3
Out	1	1	1	14	2
Neither	0	0	1	0	0
TOTAL	1	5	9	29	5

Finally, it is worth looking at the verb *write* when the person written to is mentioned. Only in American English do we find the construction *Write me today!* On the other hand, all varieties prefer *write me it to write it me* where two pronouns are involved, although both seem to be permitted everywhere. The figures are given in Table 11.

Table 11: WRITE (Marking recipient)

CATEGORY	FROWN	FLOB	WCWNZE	WCSNZE	ACE
Use of prep	25	53	24	64	20
No prep	27	0	0	0	0
IO DO	3	1	0	5	1
DO IO	6	2	4	8	3
Unclear	0	0	0	2	0
TOTAL	61	56	28	69	23

This paper has presented some patterns of complementation found with a few verbs, some of which show variation in usage from one national variety of English to another. Of the patterns discussed, only *write me* is restricted to one variety. Unsurprisingly, New Zealand English grammar in this area seems to resemble Australian English grammar more than it does the other varieties discussed. Both Australian and New Zealand English might be seen as moving towards a new standard which is influenced by both American and British Englishes, but which is identical with neither.

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