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‘They cost me less pains than tragedy does’: on the configuration of the quantifiers *less* and *fewer* in English

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Abstract: Although *less* and *fewer* are supposed to have their particular domains for the expression of quantification, this has not always been the case in the history of English. These two quantifiers coexisted in free variation – irrespective of the typology of the noun – down to the eighteenth century. While some scholars have believed that the advent of prescriptivism seemed to specialise their distribution – with *fewer* being used exclusively for count nouns – the issue has been controversial on two grounds. On the one hand, it is unclear whether the distinction between *fewer* and *less* resulted from the codification of English grammar or if it was a usage-derived development later confirmed by grammarians. On the other hand, the state of affairs in present-day usage is uncertain, as *less* is lately being used regardless of the typology of the noun. In light of this, the present paper provides an overview of the phenomenon over time, paying attention to the historical and contemporary distribution of the quantifiers *less* and *fewer* in combination with count and mass nouns. From a corpus-based perspective, the paper examines the phenomenon throughout Modern English as well as across World Englishes today and concludes that usage preceded codification and that, while *less* is indeed spreading into the domain of *fewer*, the process appears to be slow and localised so far.

Keywords: Early Modern English; Late Modern English; *quantifiers*; linguistic variation; World Englishes

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1 Introduction

Present-day English has two alternative forms for the expression of negatively-oriented quantification: *less* and *fewer*. These are found to have a long-standing history inasmuch as the two forms have managed to coexist in complementary distribution over the centuries. The quantifier use of *less*, on the one hand, dates back to the Old English period (*OED*, s.v. *less*, adj. and adv.), attested in adverbial use in combination with genitive plural nouns, as in examples (1–2). The eventual disappearance of the genitive in these cases gave way to expressions such as *less words* and *less men*, which were preserved until the Late Modern (1700–1900) period regardless of the countability of the noun. The comparative form of *few*, on the other hand, evolved from Old English *fea* by the latter part of the Middle Ages, as in examples (3–4), where both of them function as modifiers of a plural noun (*OED*, s.v. *fewer*, adj., P.2.a.).

(1) Swa mid læs worda swa mid ma, swæðer we hit gereccan magon
'Either with less words or with more, whichever of the two we may prove it'
(Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, xxii. 489).

(2) Swa man mare sprycþ swa him læs manna gelyfeþ
'The more a man speaks, the fewer men believe him'
(*Anglo-Saxon Dialogues of Salomon and Saturn*).

(3) Swa swa hit wæs gedon on Angelcynne nu for anum feawum gearum
'Just as it was done in England now for a few years'
(Ælfric, *Grammar*, 3).

(4) Pigges of þe secounde sowe ben fewere in nombre
'Pigs of the second sow are fewer in number'
(John Trevisa, translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De Proprietatibus Rerum*).

The English language thus paved the way for the existence of two synonymous variants within the same domain of quantification. While their Present-day selection can presumably be described in terms of complementary distribution, they seemed to coexist in free variation until the late 18th century. The interchangeability of *less* and *fewer*, especially in combination with count nouns as exemplified in (5–6) with the plural of *thing*, soon came to an end. The items could have been subjected to an underlying pressure as a change from above, in an attempt to restrict the distributional domain of the quantifiers according to the noun type. Baker (1770) seemed to play a particularly prominent role in establishing this complentary distribution, as he was the first grammarian to systematise the uses of *less* and *fewer* and

discriminate between them on the grounds of the features of the head noun that they would modify (Doetjes 2021: 96). Thus, *less* was to be used for mass or uncountable nouns and *fewer*, for count nouns. Interestingly enough, this norm seems to have been taken as a desideratum by other grammar writers at the time as well as the following generations of grammarians to such an extent that it appears to have become dogmatic for them since then (Sundby et al. 1991: 121).

(5) […] it is but a trade of less things to increase greater
(Jeremiah Burroughs, *Moses His Choice with His Eye Fixed upon Heaven*, 1650).

(6) […] because they have fewer things to hope for, and more things to fear
(James Howell, *The Vision, or a Dialog between the Soul and the Bodie*, 1651).

However, the configuration of *less* and *fewer* in Present-day English is not as straightforward as Late Modern grammarians would have it. The expression *less than five* – where *fewer* should be *a priori* expected in view of the countability of the number – epitomises one of its issues. Examples of this construction can be found across authors of renown such as Jonathan Swift, who was often preoccupied with linguistic correctness (*in less than three hours, I was raised and slung into the engine*), or Frederick Douglass (*we were often less than five minutes taking our meals*).[1] Ultimately, these constructions reflect another systemic pressure, a push towards the simplification of negatively-oriented quantification based on analogy with another member of the paradigm. The quantifier *more*, located at the other end of the scale for the expression of positive orientation, "had co-occurred with both types of noun since the end of the sixteenth century" and, consequently, this structural pressure may have played an important role in the replacement of *fewer* by *less* that seems to be unfolding nowadays (Denison and Hogg 2006: 38; also Denison 1998: 124).

The reorganisation of these quantifiers in the late 18th century thus seems to have had two side effects in the subsequent development of the system. On the one hand, it appears that the two forms survived because they were found in complementary distribution. If neither *less* nor *fewer* had specialised, one of them might have already disappeared on the assumption that synonymous linguistic structures cannot co-occur in the same distributional domains of a specific language indefinitely. In the end, one variant has to find a different ecological niche, or it would

1 A cursory glance at its distribution across American and British corpora suggests the use of *less* with numerals to be of American impulse typically collocating with nouns denoting time (*minutes*, *hours*, *days*, *years*), quantity (*hundred, thousand, pounds*) and distance (*feet, inches, miles*). According to Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1127), this may well be due to the very nature of the constructions, since examples like "less than 100 miles" are to be considered amounts rather than numbers (see Merriam-Webster 2024 *less*, adj.).

become extinct (Aronoff 1976: 6, 2019: 41). On the other hand, this (re)configuration kickstarted the competition – still unresolved – between the two aforementioned systems: one in favour of the mass/count noun distinction and the other in favour of a binary system with *more* and *less* as the only members of their paradigm.[2] Huddleston and Pullum, among others, state that, though count nouns collocate with both *less* and *fewer*, "*less* is subject to quite strong prescriptive disapproval, so that *fewer* is widely preferred in formal style, and by many speakers in informal style too" (2002: 1126; see also Peters 2004: 205). Quirk et al. also refer to the condemned use of *less* with count nouns, although the expression *no less than* is generally accepted in these environments as in the example *no less than fifty people* (1985: 263). Usage manuals are bound to take a stand on the issue, with the great bulk of them acknowledging that this use of *less* is "regrettable but prevalent among some standard as well as many non-standard speakers" (Burchfield 1998: 295). Today, the sole existence of the quantifier *more* for the expression of positive orientation seems to be regenerating the system towards a binary pattern with the quantifier *less* at the other end of the scale, and where *fewer* would progressively have little or no room for continuity (Denison and Hogg 2006: 38; Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1126).

References to the chronology and development of this competition are scarce in the relevant literature, the bulk of them consisting of general remarks on the influence of *more* in the simplification of the system that is supposedly unfolding today. It is essential, in our opinion, to account for the origin of the competition between *less* and *fewer* in the expression of negatively-oriented quantification in the history of English and to cast some light on the phenomenon in Present-day usage, elsewhere referred to as "not as strict at all [since] the rules of the mavens are made-up and idiosyncratic" (van Gelderen 2006: 229). More importantly, studies of these quantifiers using a corpus-based framework are still lacking, while these could potentially confirm the influence exerted by prescriptivists on their complementary configuration as well as offer insight into the period in which the mass/count noun rule started to decline along with the progressive weakening of *fewer* in these environments. In light of this, the present paper has been conceived as an investigation to provide an overview of the phenomenon over time, paying attention to its historical

2 It should be noted that there are usage guides which go one step further in the simplification path, proposing that the distinction between *fewer* and *less* is a matter of number. As such, *less* is recommended with singular nouns and *fewer*, with plural nouns. Among others, we could mention the Chicago Manual of Style (www.chicagomanualofstyle.org), the MLA Style Centre (https://style.mla.org) along with a number of grammar tips published online under the label of the singular/plural rule (https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/opinion/tn-dpt-me-1003-casagrande-20131001-story.html). In itself, the rationale behind the singular/plural and the mass/count noun rule is the same insofar as the speaker ends up using *less* with singular mass nouns and *fewer* with plural count nouns, thus leaving no room to the exceptional use of *less* with plural nouns.

and its contemporary distribution. The paper, therefore, investigates the distribution of these quantifiers in the period 1650–1900 to shed light on their historical development and to ascertain the role possibly played by prescriptive grammarians in the process. The study also addresses the distribution of these items in Present-day English to evaluate the use of *less* in combination with count nouns in some varieties of English worldwide and thus provide insight into actual usage.

2 Methodology

The present study pursues a diachronic and a diatopic analysis of the distribution of *less* and *fewer* in English. The most obvious choice of corpora would have been *A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers* (*ARCHER*), as the ideal input for the study of American and British English in the period 1600–1999. ARCHER is a structured but a comparatively-small corpus and it only featured 180 tokens of the phenomenon at hand. In view of the low frequency of these quantifiers, it was necessary to rely on large corpora that – despite not being structured – would enable the investigation of the phenomenon with some level of reliability. The historical study is based on four different corpora, chosen in light of their dimension and historical coverage: *Early English Books Online* or *EEBO* (Davies 2017) and *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* or *ECCO* (Text Creation Partnership 2020) for British English along with the *Evans Corpus* (Text Creation Partnership 2011) and the *Corpus of Historical American English* or *COHA* (Davies 2010) for American English.[3] Ranging from 70 million to 755 million words, they sample language use in England for the period 1470–1799 and in America for the period 1640–2019. Table 1 reproduces their chronology and total word-count.

Table 1: Word count of the historical corpora.

	Period	Words
EEBO	1470–1680	755,078,402
ECCO	1700–1799	69,515,608
Evans	1640–1800	139,126,666
COHA	1810–2019	475,031,831

3 The version of *ECCO* that we have used here was downloaded for offline use from the resources provided by the University of Michigan via the Text Creation Partnership. This procedure allowed us to search the raw version of the British component of the corpus by decades, thus leaving out the American English files that were not necessary at this point.

The choice to combine these corpora for the diachronic analysis of the phenomenon is not without problems. In the first place, the historical coverage of the two varieties does not line up, which is partly due to the unavailability of other source material useful for the present investigation and partly because of the very timeline of the varieties in question. We have not found other big data corpora that may shed light on the development of British English during the Modern period nor from the nineteenth century onwards. Additionally, it should be noted that the development of American English cannot be traced as far back as that of British English and, in fact, *Evans* is the earliest major source of evidence that we can find for language use in North America. Secondly, the historical corpora are not comparable to one another since they do not necessarily sample the same genres or text types to the same extent. The insight that these may offer on actual usage is, therefore, inherently skewed. One clear example is the case of *less* + plural noun, which was proscribed for part of the period investigated and was therefore far more likely to occur in informal texts. That we find a higher or lower occurrence of this quantifier may result from a question of genre variation that the present paper cannot address. Be that as it may, the four corpora include a great variety of texts that will ultimately shed light on usage in general and, more specifically, on the very standing of *less* and *fewer* in the language. Moreover, it is worth noting that three of the corpora are related, since *EEBO*, *ECCO* and *Evans* were all compiled by the Text Creation Partnership following the same general criteria. This increases their comparability, even if slightly so.

The diatopic analysis, for its part, is based on the *Corpus of Global Web-based English* or *GloWbE* (Davies 2013). With up to 1,900 million words of running text, the corpus provides a synchronic sample of up to 20 varieties of World Englishes, including inner- and outer-circle varieties.[4] Their representation ranges from the 35 million words of Tanzanian English to the 386 million of American English, thus making *GloWbE* a sizeable corpus for researching diatopic variation today. The texts composing the corpus, which were produced on the internet, represent ideal input for the analysis of the distribution of these quantifiers, providing insight into usage on the widespread and interconnected online medium, where most communication unfolds in English. In an attempt to offer an accurate picture of the distribution of these quantifiers in Present-day English worldwide, the study is based on a total of 19 varieties, six of them belonging to the inner and 13 to the outer circle, the latter comprising eight varieties of Asian Englishes and five varieties of African Englishes. Table 2 presents the word count of the different varieties surveyed in *GloWbE*.

4 It should be noted that one potential drawback of this corpus is that it is impossible to guarantee that writers contributing to one diatopic subcorpus actually come from that region. While this would lead to erroneous results in the analysis of random sets, the issue is by all accounts minimised when the entirety of the corpus is put to use.

Table 2: Word-count of the different varieties of English in *GloWbE*.

	Variety	Words
Inner circle	American English (AmE)	386,809,355
	Canadian English (CanE)	134,765,381
	British English (BrE)	387,615,074
	Irish English (IrE)	101,029,231
	Australian English (AusE)	148,208,169
	New Zealand English (NZE)	81,390,476
Outer circle	Indian English (IndE)	96,430,888
Asian Englishes	Sri Lankan English (SLE)	46,583,115
	Pakistani English (PkE)	51,367,152
	Bangladeshi English (BgE)	39,658,255
	Singapore English (SgE)	42,974,705
	Malaysian English (MalE)	42,420,168
	Philippines English (PhE)	43,250,093
	Hong Kong English (HKE)	40,450,291
Outer circle	South African English (SAE)	45,364,498
African English	Nigerian English (NgE)	42,646,098
	Ghanan English (GhE)	38,768,231
	Kenyan English (KE)	41,069,085
	Tanzanian English (TzE)	35,169,042

The retrieval of the data differs in view of the particularities of the corpus, whether distributed as plain text or in tagged version. *EEBO*, *COHA* and *GloWbE*, on the one hand, are offered for consultation in their raw version and with part-of-speech tagging, the latter taken as crucial for the automatic retrieval of the instances. Strings like <less *_NN1/*NN2> and <fewer *_NN1/NN2> were thus run through the corpora, retrieving a significant number of hits requiring little disambiguation. Both *ECCO* and *Evans*, on the other hand, are exclusively given in plain-text version, which complicates the data gathering process. Strings like <less *> and <fewer *> were prompted to generate the occurrences of these quantifiers followed by any given word. The results yielded by the corpus included much noise requiring manual disambiguation to select the appropriate input in view of context and it was then necessary to leave out the instances of *fewer* in pronominal use, *less* as an adjective modifier or both *fewer* and *less* in comparative constructions followed by *than*, among others. All in all, the present study analyses a total of 57,576 instances, of which 41,805 come from the historical corpora and 15,771 from the diatopic corpus. For the purpose of comparing their frequencies over time and across the varieties, these were normalised to a common base of 1,000,000 words as a result of the constrained dimension of the quantifiers in the corpora.

3 Analysis

The present section sheds light on the distribution of *less* and *fewer* in combination with mass and count nouns from two different perspectives, providing first the historical overview of the phenomenon and, secondly, the synchronic-diatopic analysis.

3.1 The quantifiers over time

Figures 1 and 2 present the selection of these quantifiers with mass nouns for the period 1470–1799 in British English and 1640–1899 in American English, respectively. The figures confirm what would become a tenet among subsequent grammarians: mass nouns only collocated with *less*, while *fewer* never seemed to interfere with that distributional domain. While the findings mostly attest to the non-occurrence of *fewer* in combination with mass nouns, a closer inspection of the data reveals that there are some exceptions, though they are not significant. For instance, there are 13 tokens for the phrase *fewer strength* as opposed to the 195 tokens for *less strength*, as well as 4 and 102 tokens for the phrases *fewer part* and *less part*, respectively. Perhaps more interesting – both quantitative and qualitatively – are the examples of the noun *number*, combining with *fewer* in 105 occasions and with *less*, in 450, as in *a fewer number of men* or *less number of persons*. These instances have, nevertheless, been disregarded from the data on the basis of the countability of the noun *number* in these examples, which Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 349) define as a non-count quantificational noun.[5]

Figures 3 and 4, in turn, illustrate the distribution of the quantifiers in combination with count nouns in British and American English, respectively. These data are markedly different from the patterns of usage discussed before. The first point that deserves attention in Figure 3 is that the occurrence of negatively-oriented quantification with count nouns is far less frequent than with mass nouns. There are, in fact, no tokens of the phenomenon for the first 30 years of the corpus, most likely due to its low frequency of appearance. Once there are results, however, it is notable that *less* preceded *fewer* in this domain, though the latter quantifier soon emerged.

5 The phrase *a number of* – which only combines with plural and therefore countable nouns – seemingly functions as a complex quantifier in these contexts, since "the grammatical number of the whole NP is plural" (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 351). In this regard, the use of the quantifiers in examples like those cited above may answer to two syntactic interpretations of the phrases, with *fewer* ultimately modifying the noun *men* or with *less* modifying the noun *number*, whose singular form may be confused for uncountability.

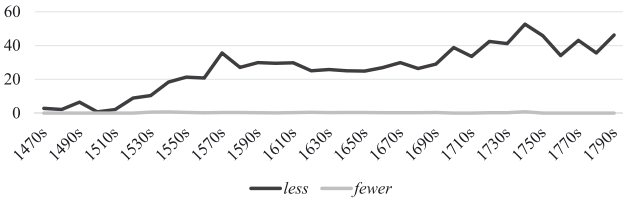

Figure 1: *Less* and *fewer* with mass nouns in British English (normalised per 1 million words).

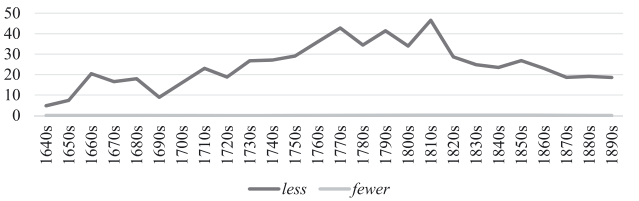

Figure 2: *Less* and *fewer* with mass nouns in American English (normalised per 1 million words).

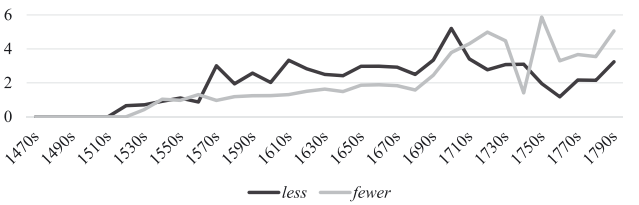

Figure 3: *Less* and *fewer* with count nouns in British English (normalised per 1 million words).

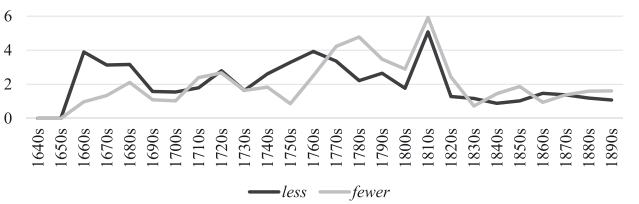

Figure 4: *Less* and *fewer* with count nouns in American English (normalised per 1 million words).

The slight competition that ensued between the two forms seemed to be interrupted by the late 16th century and, for most of the 17th, *less* was the preferred quantifier for count nouns, as in *lesse paines* or *lesse things*. At the turn of the 18th century,

however, the distributional pattern changed yet again. *Less* started decreasing in frequency while *fewer* seemed to be on the rise and the forms – which had presented parallel distributional patterns, though with the dominance of *less* – started competing more directly. By the 1750s, *less* gained ground once more, although *fewer* ultimately became dominant by the end of that century. Nonetheless, it should be noted that *less* appeared to be following closely behind.

The distributional pattern of *less* and *fewer* with count nouns in American English presents interesting similarities to usage in Britain. In the first place, this type of quantification was also rare, as exemplified by the highest value in the normalised frequencies – 5.93 as opposed to 46.57 in mass nouns – and by the lack of data in the first decade. The second half of the 17th century was seemingly characterised by the dominance of *less*, while *fewer* started gaining ground and outnumbered it by the early 1700s. In a mirror-like development, *less* overcame its counterpart for roughly 30 years in the mid-18th century, as it had happened in Britain. Nonetheless, *fewer* grew in usage once more and remained the preferred quantifier for most of the 19th century. Although there were some ups and downs in the selection of the two, *fewer* was dominant by the end of the 1800s. While the presence of *less* should not be disregarded in the late 19th century nor, therefore, throughout the 20th, this will be discussed in more detail in Section 3.2, as these periods fall outside of the scope of what is usually understood as Modern English.

These data provide intriguing insights into the configuration of *less* and *fewer* and the countability of the nouns that they combined with. One of the objectives of this paper was to ascertain whether prescriptivism and codification had an impact on restricting the domains of usage of these quantifiers. The results suggest that the rise to the standard of *fewer*, by all means limited to count nouns, preceded the arrival of the prescriptivists and of any other attempts at codification. As Doetjes (2021: 96) argued, the first reference to the *less* versus *fewer* issue in a grammar is found in Baker's *Reflections on the English Language*, published in the second half of the 18th century. By that time, however, *fewer* was already dominant in usage in Britain and, soon after, also in the United States. A close examination of lexicography – which had a longer history in codifying the language – does not resolve the anachrony between usage and precept.[6] On the one hand, *fewer* is never considered a word of its own nor a form of *few* deserving any special attention. In fact, the only trace of the comparative is found in quotations in Johnson's dictionary (1755: s.v. *few*,

6 For this purpose, both *A Dictionary of English Normative Grammar* (Sundby et al. 1991) and a database of 25 dictionaries compiled by Pacheco-Franco (2023) were consulted. The findings were, as reported above, mostly irrelevant and the only citations given are from Johnson (1755) due to the prestige and standing of his dictionary among his contemporaries.

adj.), though with no commentary regarding its use or distribution.[7] *Less*, for its part, was not even included in most dictionaries until the mid-18th century, when it was still defined as 'a smaller degree' – thus accounting for its meaning with mass nouns – and also as '[a] smaller quantity' – which could be seen to allude to its collocations with count nouns as well. All in all, the incongruity between usage and precept ultimately contradicts the claims that the distinction between *less* and *fewer* originated as change from above.[8] While their re-configuration was certainly a Late Modern development, it was not a result of prescription. If anything, prescriptivism may have contributed to the diffusion and maintenance of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, the jury is still out on the question of its survival into Present-day English, especially in light of Denison's (1998) and Denison and Hogg's (2006) claim that the binary rule with *more* and *less* is now on the rise. The following synchronic analysis will thus shed some much-needed light on this issue.

3.2 The quantifiers across space

The 20th was the century of the confirmation of the prescriptive premises. No sooner was the distinction between mass and count nouns postulated in the second half of the 18th century, than the rule was disseminated *ab hinc* in grammar books and usage guides and, more importantly, found more room in the usage of their contemporaries. Figure 5 reproduces the distribution of the quantifier use of *less* and *fewer* as premodifiers of count nouns in the period 1900–2019 in *COHA*, where it may be safely concluded that the rule was staunchly maintained throughout the whole century.[9] Even though we cannot assume the existence of competition proper, there seemed to be complementary distribution over the period with *fewer* standing out as the only dominant form for the expression of plurality.[10] The rise of *fewer* in the

7 These quotations are "Men have fewer or more simple ideas from without, according as the objects they converse with afford greater or less variety" and "The fewer still you name, you wound the more", by John Locke and Alexander Pope, respectively.

8 It should be noted that the corpora present, for the most part, printed material. While printers have often been regarded as regularising forces in the standardisation of the English language, their domain of influence seems to have been constrained to spelling and orthography. Since there are no extant documents attesting to their part in the re-configuration of these quantifiers, printing has been entirely disregarded from the discussion.

9 The distribution of these quantifiers with mass nouns has been disregarded in this section on the bases of the overwhelming preference for *less* in this domain. As far as *COHA* is concerned, it contains material from newspapers, magazines, fiction and non-fiction books, along with TV and movie subtitles, thus sampling edited prose that is likely to reflect prescriptive rules.

10 Although there are counter-examples, the general trend of usage shows that *less* was preferred for mass nouns and *fewer*, for count nouns.

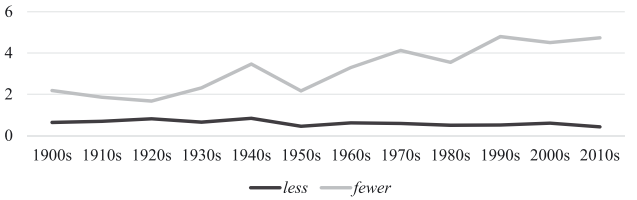

Figure 5: *Less* and *fewer* with count nouns in 20th- and 21st-century American English (normalised per 1 million words).

second half of the 20th century was not the result of linguistic competition insofar as the frequency of the other member of the paradigm was negligible all throughout the period, with sporadic instances in the second half of that century.

Figure 5 does not shed any light on the decline of *fewer*. Even if it were true that today the binary system with *more* and *less* is on the verge of winning out – as mentioned in some histories of the English language (Denison 1998: 124; Denison and Hogg 2006: 38) – then one would immediately wonder when *fewer* receded as the dominant marker for the expression of negatively-oriented quantification and, more importantly, how the process is now taking shape in the inner and the outer varieties of English. This section then pursues the analysis of the phenomenon as an ongoing change in Present-day English to determine whether the transition from the mass/count noun rule to the binary rule is actually taking place in English as a world language and, if so, what the particularities of the phenomenon in the first quarter of the century are. The remainder of this section will hopefully try to find a satisfying answer for these issues.

Figure 6 shows the distribution of *less* and *fewer* in combination with count nouns across the inner-circle varieties. The results confirm the present-day competition between the mass/count noun rule and the binary rule, even though the former is still the more common form across all the varieties. The incidence of *less* in favour of an eventual binary pattern presents differences across varieties. While there is still a clear preference for *fewer* in British, American, Canadian and New Zealand Englishes, Irish and Australian Englishes seem to be more welcoming of the use of *less*, where a similar distribution of both quantifiers is observed.[11] In sharp contrast with the other varieties, Australian English presents a more constrained

11 The distribution of *less* and *fewer* with count nouns only proved to be significant in Canadian (χ^2 (1) = 3.9145, p = 0.0478), Australian (χ^2 (1) = 52.68, p < 0.0001) and Irish Englishes (χ^2 (1) = 12.183, p < 0.0004), all of which were compared to the data in British English, their norm-provider. Nevertheless, the results of Cramér's V ultimately reveal that the only variety with a substantial effect size is Australian English (V = 0.1056, small), while in the remaining varieties it is negligible (V = 0.0286 in Canada and V = 0.0543 in Ireland).

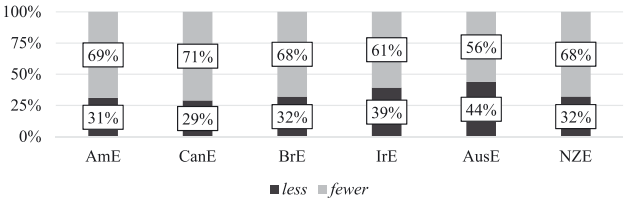

Figure 6: *Less* and *fewer* with count nouns in the inner-circle varieties in *GloWbE* (%).

distribution of *fewer* in the interest of *less*, as the latter amounts to roughly 44 % of the tokens for negatively-oriented quantification. As such, it stands out as the variety of the inner circle where these quantifiers are far from being in complementary distribution in view of the number of counter-examples. The incidence of *less* with count nouns suggests that it is striving for its continuity as the only member of the paradigm. Similarly, Irish English follows this trend where *fewer* occurs roughly 61 % of the time, as opposed to the 68–71 % in the other varieties of the inner circle.

The Asian varieties in the corpus, on the other hand, seem to have a looser attitude towards the validity of the mass/count noun rule. Figure 7 presents the distribution of both quantifiers with count nouns in Asian Englishes where it is concluded that *fewer* is still the preferred form across all the varieties. The legitimacy of the mass/count noun rule, however, is certainly open to discussion in view of the role of the quantifier *less* in some of the varieties. Hong Kong and Indian Englishes, on the one hand, stand out as the most conservative varieties and as most consistent with British English practices – where instances of *fewer* amount to 63 % and 59 %, respectively – and therefore more reluctant to the use of *less* with count nouns.[12] The

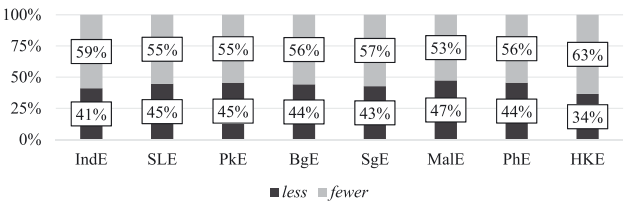

Figure 7: *Less* and *fewer* with count nouns in the Asian varieties in *GloWbE* (%).

12 For starters, the distribution of the quantifiers is not significant in Hong Kong English (χ^2 (1) = 2.3558, p = 0.1248) and, while it checks for independence in other varieties like Indian English (χ^2 (1) = 18.89, p < 0.0001), its effect size is negligible (V = 0.0577), which suggests that significance may be due to the large dataset that the corpus provides.

other Asian varieties, on the other hand, show a more balanced distribution of *less* and *fewer* with these types of nouns as an evidence of the ongoing competition between the mass/count noun rule and the binary rule. The figure shows that the use of *fewer* is lower, on average amounting to roughly 55 % of all tokens. Interestingly, the data and the statistics point to two outliers: Singapore and Bangladesh Englishes, where the use of *less* is more widespread.[13] The differences in the spread of the binary rule in some of these varieties – such as Hong Kong and Singapore Englishes – are hard to justify, as there might be both internal and external forces at play here, such as the underlying influence of the substrate language, the shifting model of use or the national second language learning policy in each region. Perhaps the substrate language is playing a significant role in the simplification of the system as a result of the sole existence of *kurang* in Malay (Dwibahasa 2007, s.v. *kurang*), of *kuṟaivāṉa* in Tamil (Jayadevan 2016, s.v. *kuṟaivāṉa*) and of *kômo* in Bengali (Mitra and Mitra 2017, s.v. *kômo*) for the expression of negatively-oriented quantification. It may be possible that these varieties no longer follow the British model of use, but have shifted to the Australian model, which – while also leaning towards simplification – has recently gained a relevant Asia-Pacific projection in the World Englishes paradigm (Kiesling 2008: 77; Leitner 2004). It is also possible that the ever-growing number of English speakers in these countries are influenced by the grammar that characterises each of these varieties as a recognition of their own identity. This is without a doubt the case of Singapore, where Singlish has been dismissed by the government since the year 2000 (Ling 2010: 232), though apparently to no avail. That Singapore English may have entered the phase of endonormative stabilisation (Schneider 2007: 160) surely provides the grounds for the expansion of non-British usage, as that of *less* with count nouns.[14]

The African varieties of English, on the other hand, continue to favour the mass/count noun rule. Figure 8 shows the distribution of *less* and *fewer* with count nouns in some varieties of African Englishes where it is gathered that the former

13 Other than proving to be statistically significant (χ^2 (1) = 16.008, $p < 0.0001$ in Singapore; χ^2 (1) = 13.934, $p = 0.0001$ in Bangladesh), the effect sizes of these varieties are very large ($V = 0.6434$; $V = 0.6119$, respectively), thereby highlighting the strength of the relationship between the variables in these varieties.

14 In Singapore, the use of English was explicitly fostered by the government after its independence from the United Kingdom. Today, over 85 % of the population is English-speaking, with the language performing regulative and instrumental but also interpersonal functions (Bautista and Gonzalez 2008: 131; Lim 2012: 282). Despite the success of its multilingualism policies, the Singaporean Government has not been able to put a stop to Singlish, which is not only alive in the collective imagination, but also seems to be encouraged by the speakers themselves. The failure of the so-called 'Speak Good English Movement' ultimately challenges the question of normativity, which seems to be changing for this variety (Schneider 2007: 160).

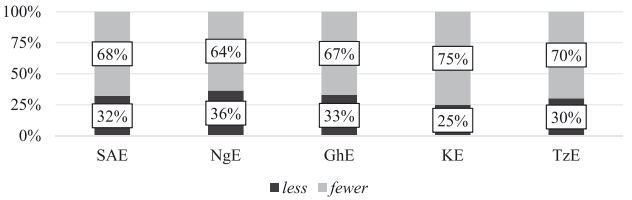

Figure 8: *Less* and *fewer* with count nouns in the African varieties in *GloWbE* (%).

systematically outnumbers the occurrence of the latter, as in South African, Tazanian and Kenyan Englishes in particular.[15] The constrained role of *less* in Africa, and more importantly when compared with the Asian varieties, is a matter of speculation, but surely connected with the general recognition of English usage proper in these varieties. When it comes to South African English, the distribution – so similar to other varieties in the inner circle – is taken as "the outcome of the policy of Anglicisation by the British when they retook control of the territory from Dutch hands in 1806 until 1910 when the Union of South Africa was formed giving English and Dutch the status of co-official languages" (Calle-Martín 2022: 199; see also Kamwangamalu 2008: 159–160). This 100-year period may thus have had a stronger impact on South Africa than on the other African varieties. The panorama was different in the other varieties of West and East Africa in the sense that the European languages arrived relatively late as a consequence of the colonialist expansion and English is mostly used there in a socio-educational context. This implies that English in these territories was not directly transmitted through native-speaker contacts, which would have prompted the varieties to become nativised over time (Schneider 2007: 40–48). Instead, present-day speakers seem to have acquired English in an institutionalised context and their usage is, thererefore, quite consistent with the theoretical British English norm in grammar (Calle-Martín 2022: 199; Schmied 2008: 191). In a nutshell, the low incidence of the quantifier *less* in African Englishes allows us to conclude that competition, if this is the case, is still incipient in Africa and the arrival of a would-be binary pattern without *fewer* is just envisaged in the very long run, probably following the path already initiated by the Asian Englishes.

15 The distribution of *less* and *fewer* is not, for the most part, significant across the African varieties. South African English (χ^2 (1) = 0.0004, p = 0.9827) and Tanzanian English (χ^2 (1) = 0.279, p = 0.5973) exemplify the configuration of these Englishes concerning negatively-oriented quantification. The statistical analysis, however, brings to the fore what seems to be *prima facie* an exception: the case of KE. The quantifiers check for statistical significance when compared to distribution in British English (χ^2 (1) = 5.8314, p = 0.0157), although its effect size is negligible (V = 0.0395). These results ultimately indicate that usage in Kenya is yet more conservative in the mass/count noun rule than in Britain itself.

4 Conclusions

This paper has dealt with the distribution of *less* and *fewer* with mass and count nouns from a dual scope, paying attention to the historical development of the phenomenon across British and American Englishes as well as to its configuration in World Englishes. From a diachronic perspective, the norm-providing varieties seemed to evolve in parallel to one another, as the patterns of usage presented similarities. While mass nouns systematically collocated with the quantifier *less*, the developmental pattern of count nouns was not as straightforward. In the two varieties, *less* seemed to precede *fewer* with count nouns, although the two would later enter into competition. By the end of the Late Modern period, *fewer* was the dominant quantifier modifying count nouns, though not by a large margin. *Less* was still in usage around by that time, though always behind *fewer*. The data for 20th-century American English – which were presented as a bridge connecting Late Modern and Present-day English – ultimately evinced how *fewer* predominated in the context of count nouns by the beginning of the new millennium.

This trend of usage favouring the mass/count noun distinction in negatively-oriented quantifiers is also observable in the synchronic data, though with exceptions. For the most part, the inner circle and the African varieties of the outer circle seemed to conform to this rule. This was certainly the case for British and American English – despite being sampled in the online medium, expected to be more colloquial – and also for varieties like Kenyan English, which proved to be more conservative of the distinction than the norm-providers themselves. Nevertheless, the distribution of the quantifiers in Australian and Singaporean Englishes – and to a lesser extent also Bangladesh – pointed elsewhere. In these varieties, a univocal system seemed to be coming into place, most likely influenced by the singularity of *more* at the other end of the scale of quantification. Regardless of the differences found across varieties in Present-day English, these still provided valuable insight into the phenomenon.

We started researching these quantifiers for the purpose of assessing how linguistic prescription may have affected the syntactic domains of *less* and *fewer*. We believed that the mass/count noun rule would have been the product of codification and that the source would be found among 18th-century grammarians. Much to our surprise, this was not the case. By the time Lowth published the first widely-known English grammar in 1762 and by the time Baker first mentioned the phenomenon in 1770, *less* and *fewer* were already in competition. The lack of references to the phenomenon prior to Baker may find an explanation in the Latin quantifier system, where *minus* was used for most nouns and there was no one-to-one correspondence

with *less* and *fewer*.[16] In her work on preposition stranding, Yáñez-Bouza (2007: 64; 2015) argues that structures that were not found in Latin were often overlooked in English grammars, which took the classical language and its codification as models to follow. This may explain why there are no references to our quantifiers across dictionaries or grammars from the 17th and the first half of the 18th centuries. Following on from this evidence, we might infer that the distinction that seems to underlie the selection of these quantifiers today was not a change from above, but from below. Indeed, the rule seemed to stem from the speakers themselves, especially as there are, to our knowledge, no other pieces of evidence pointing towards a conscious effort in distinguishing the two quantifiers. In the end, the emergence of some sort of functional distinction is what ecological niche differentiation consists of (see Aronoff 1976, 2019). Nevertheless, that is not to say that codification and prescription were entirely absent from the process. Though not in the selection, grammars and usage guides have certainly participated in the diffusion and the maintenance of this norm, an endeavour that certainly started with Baker.

Nevertheless, this investigation reveals a yet more relevant finding concerning the codification of English. While the configuration of *less* and *fewer* was already resolving itself by the time it made its way to the first grammars, the data in the study have shown that this process was not immediate. The development of American English has shown that the distinction was not clearly delineated until the late 20th century, which seems to contrast with our understanding of negative quantification today. Ask any native speaker or any learner of English how one is supposed to use *fewer* and *less* and, even if they do not comply with the rule, they will be able to recite it. It is this very awareness of the phenomenon among the speakers that seems to be fueling the discussion of the mass/count noun rule – as opposed to simplification – in the first place. No one at Tesco batted at an eye at the sign reading "10 items or less" at checkout a few years ago, but then the sign was changed to read "Up to 10 items" in 2008 (Ballinger 2008). It seems that, no matter our attitudes towards its usage, awareness of some issues alone is enough to enforce some precepts that may have otherwise not found a place in our language. Whether it is deliberately or not, "the Age of Prescriptivism is [certainly] *now*" in the 21st century (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2019: 9). How, then, is it possible for some varieties to be moving in the opposite direction? The issue in Australia, Singapore and Bangladesh – among others – can be understood as one of two outcomes: either the precept was never accepted by these communities of speakers or, if it was, they have still managed to move past it and leave it behind. Be that as it may, the data have

16 We would like to mention the existence of *paucior*, the comparative form of the adjective *paucus*, meaning *few*. Although the element can be transliterated into *fewer* and it may have been used for countable nouns exclusively, it was rare. This is why the negatively-oriented quantification system of Latin cannot be said to have been dual in the same way that the English is.

certainly illustrated that the count/mass noun distinction is more alive today than it has ever been before. Notwithstanding the claims for the simplification of negatively-oriented quantification (Denison 1998: 194; Denison and Hogg 2006: 38), it is still unclear whether the system will become binary or not. In fact, the topic lends itself to further examination considering other factors that might influence the choice of quantifier other than time and variety, not only extralinguistic parameters such as genre and text type, but also intralinguistic ones based on the incidence of particular nouns or constructions. For now, we can only wait for the outcome and then see whether the precept will be short-lived or whether it is deeply rooted into the language.

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