

We're moving away from synthetic to analytical speech

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk



■ The King James Bible of 1611 was the source for many words and phrases in the English language..

Sometimes we have a choice as to whether we are going to express things analytically or synthetically.

Here's an example of what I mean: we can either say "I don't go there often" or "I seldom go there". Seldom and not often mean the same thing, but the phrase not often expresses the two different components of the meaning analytically in two words. Seldom synthesises the negative aspect of the meaning and the frequency aspect into a single word.

I reckon that, in this part of the world, seldom is not employed as often as not often...

In the same kind of way, we can either say "I like neither of them" or "I don't like either of them". Does the analytical "not either" feel more natural to you than the synthetic "neither", as it does to me?

In the olden days, English speakers used the word thrice quite naturally in their everyday speech. Nowadays, although most of us are still familiar with the word – it occurs in the King James Bible, for instance – we never use it. Instead, we use the more analytical equivalent: three times. A linguistic change has taken place in our language, with the more analytical structure having won out over the

synthetic. Interestingly, this process appears to be continuing. Quite a lot of younger people now seem to be quite happy to say two times rather than twice. To older people this can sound rather childish, but doubtless our own usage of three times would have sounded childish to older speakers when thrice started falling out of use.

This trend to favour analytical forms has also led to the loss from our modern language of a number of other synthetic forms.

Whence, hence and thence have for the most part been replaced by from where, from here, from there. We no longer ask

"Whence have you come?" but "Where have you come from?" We do not say "Go hence!" but "Get away from here!". Similarly, whither, hither and thither have been replaced by to where, to here and to there. "Whither goest thou?" is now expressed as "Where are you going to?"

A similar case concerns possessive pronouns such as mine and yours and theirs.

If my observations are correct, many – particularly younger – people these days are increasingly saying, not "That's mine!", but "That's my one!" Anyway, that's my feeling. Maybe your one is different.