

# I'm laying it on the line - how our language is changing



■ Peter Trudgill thinks the verb to lie - as in having a rest in the horizontal position - may be lost over the years in favour of the word lay.

Our ancestral Anglo-Saxon language used to perform lots of grammatical operations by alternations between the vowels of related words. In modern English we do this much less, but we still have quite a few traces: foot-feet, take-took, sing-sang-sung, seat-sit, stink-stench.

Another example is this: if you fell a tree, it falls down; if you then raise it up again, it rises. Obviously fall and fell, and rise and raise, are related words. Verbs like fell and raise are called causatives: to fell means to cause to fall, to raise means to cause to rise. Lots of the world's languages have fully developed systems of grammatical

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causatives; and Old English used to have many pairs like this.

But modern English has only a very few of these old-style Anglo-Saxon causatives left.

We do still have sit and set: if you set a child down in a chair, you cause it to sit. And we do also still

have lie and lay: to lay means to cause to lie. But we have lost the medieval English word *sench*, which meant to cause to sink - these days, if you want a boat to sink, you don't *sench* it, you sink it. And nowadays it would occur to only a very few people that *drench* is derived from *drink*.

Even the causatives that we do have are gradually going the way of *sench*, and being lost: in our Norfolk dialect it is very normal to say "please set down" when you want someone to take a seat. Nobody misunderstands you.

And the distinction between lay and lie is also being lost in most forms of English.

This process is being helped along by the fact that lay is not just the present tense of the verb to lay but also the past tense of lie.

Very many of us these days tell the dog to lay down, and then perhaps go and have a nice lay-down ourselves. Some people don't like this - they think it's "careless".

But I think it's rather likely that in a couple of hundred years' time, the verb to lie, in the sense of being in a horizontal resting position, will probably have disappeared totally in favour of lay. No one will misunderstand: after all, if you stand things on the table, they stand on the table. And if you lay the carpet, it will lay on the floor.