VII

Language as a Historical Product: Drift

Every one knows that language is variable. Two individuals of the same generation and locality, speaking precisely the same dialect and moving in the same social circles, are never absolutely at one in their speech habits. A minute investigation of the speech of each individual would reveal countless differences of detail—in choice of words, in sentence structure, in the relative frequency with which particular forms or combinations of words are used, in the pronunciation of particular vowels and consonants and of combinations of vowels and consonants, in all those features, such as speed, stress, and tone, that give life to spoken language. In a sense they speak slightly divergent dialects of the same language rather than identically the same language.

There is an important difference, however, between individual and dialectic variations. If we take two closely related dialects, say English as spoken by the “middle classes” of London and English as spoken by the average New Yorker, we observe that, however much the individual speakers in each city differ from each other, the body of Londoners forms a compact, relatively unified group in contrast to the body of New Yorkers. The individual variations are swamped in or absorbed by certain major agreements—say of pronunciation and vocabulary—which stand out very strongly when the language of the group as a whole is contrasted with that of the other group. This means that there is something like an ideal linguistic entity dominating the speech habits of the members of each group, that the sense of almost unlimited freedom which each individual feels in the use of his language is held in leash by a tacitly directing norm. One individual plays on the norm in a way peculiar to himself, the next individual is nearer the dead average in that particular respect in which the first speaker most characteristically departs from it but in turn diverges from the average in a way peculiar to himself, and so on. What keeps the individual’s variations from rising to dialectic importance is not merely the fact that they are in any event of small moment—there are well-marked dialectic variations that are of no greater magnitude than individual variations within a dialect—it is chiefly that they are silently “corrected” or canceled by the consensus of usage. If all the speakers of a given dialect were arranged in order in accordance with the degree of their conformity to average usage, there is little doubt that they would constitute a very finely intergrading series clustered about a well-defined center or norm. The differences between any two neighboring speakers of the series[[122]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-122) would be negligible for any but the most microscopic linguistic research. The differences between the outer-most members of the series are sure to be considerable, in all likelihood considerable enough to measure up to a true dialectic variation. What prevents us from saying that these untypical individuals speak distinct dialects is that their peculiarities, as a unified whole, are not referable to another norm than the norm of their own series.

If the speech of any member of the series could actually be made to fit into another dialect series,[[123]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-123) we should have no true barriers between dialects (and languages) at all. We should merely have a continuous series of individual variations extending over the whole range of a historically unified linguistic area, and the cutting up of this large area (in some cases embracing parts of several continents) into distinct dialects and languages would be an essentially arbitrary proceeding with no warrant save that of practical convenience. But such a conception of the nature of dialectic variation does not correspond to the facts as we know them. Isolated individuals may be found who speak a compromise between two dialects of a language, and if their number and importance increases they may even end by creating a new dialectic norm of their own, a dialect in which the extreme peculiarities of the parent dialects are ironed out. In course of time the compromise dialect may absorb the parents, though more frequently these will tend to linger indefinitely as marginal forms of the enlarged dialect area. But such phenomena—and they are common enough in the history of language—are evidently quite secondary. They are closely linked with such social developments as the rise of nationality, the formation of literatures that aim to have more than a local appeal, the movement of rural populations into the cities, and all those other tendencies that break up the intense localism that unsophisticated man has always found natural.

The explanation of primary dialectic differences is still to seek. It is evidently not enough to say that if a dialect or language is spoken in two distinct localities or by two distinct social strata it naturally takes on distinctive forms, which in time come to be divergent enough to deserve the name of dialects. This is certainly true as far as it goes. Dialects do belong, in the first instance, to very definitely circumscribed social groups, homogeneous enough to secure the common feeling and purpose needed to create a norm. But the embarrassing question immediately arises, If all the individual variations within a dialect are being constantly leveled out to the dialectic norm, if there is no appreciable tendency for the individual’s peculiarities to initiate a dialectic schism, why should we have dialectic variations at all? Ought not the norm, wherever and whenever threatened, automatically to reassert itself? Ought not the individual variations of each locality, even in the absence of intercourse between them, to cancel out to the same accepted speech average?

If individual variations “on a flat” were the only kind of variability in language, I believe we should be at a loss to explain why and how dialects arise, why it is that a linguistic prototype gradually breaks up into a number of mutually unintelligible languages. But language is not merely something that is spread out in space, as it were—a series of reflections in individual minds of one and the same timeless picture. Language moves down time in a current of its own making. It has a drift. If there were no breaking up of a language into dialects, if each language continued as a firm, self-contained unity, it would still be constantly moving away from any assignable norm, developing new features unceasingly and gradually transforming itself into a language so different from its starting point as to be in effect a new language. Now dialects arise not because of the mere fact of individual variation but because two or more groups of individuals have become sufficiently disconnected to drift apart, or independently, instead of together. So long as they keep strictly together, no amount of individual variation would lead to the formation of dialects. In practice, of course, no language can be spread over a vast territory or even over a considerable area without showing dialectic variations, for it is impossible to keep a large population from segregating itself into local groups, the language of each of which tends to drift independently. Under cultural conditions such as apparently prevail to-day, conditions that fight localism at every turn, the tendency to dialectic cleavage is being constantly counteracted and in part “corrected” by the uniformizing factors already referred to. Yet even in so young a country as America the dialectic differences are not inconsiderable.

Under primitive conditions the political groups are small, the tendency to localism exceedingly strong. It is natural, therefore, that the languages of primitive folk or of non-urban populations in general are differentiated into a great number of dialects. There are parts of the globe where almost every village has its own dialect. The life of the geographically limited community is narrow and intense; its speech is correspondingly peculiar to itself. It is exceedingly doubtful if a language will ever be spoken over a wide area without multiplying itself dialectically. No sooner are the old dialects ironed out by compromises or ousted by the spread and influence of the one dialect which is culturally predominant when a new crop of dialects arises to undo the leveling work of the past. This is precisely what happened in Greece, for instance. In classical antiquity there were spoken a large number of local dialects, several of which are represented in the literature. As the cultural supremacy of Athens grew, its dialect, the Attic, spread at the expense of the rest, until, in the so-called Hellenistic period following the Macedonian conquest, the Attic dialect, in the vulgarized form known as the “Koine,” became the standard speech of all Greece. But this linguistic uniformity[[124]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-124) did not long continue. During the two millennia that separate the Greek of to-day from its classical prototype the Koine gradually split up into a number of dialects. Now Greece is as richly diversified in speech as in the time of Homer, though the present local dialects, aside from those of Attica itself, are not the lineal descendants of the old dialects of pre-Alexandrian days.[[125]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-125) The experience of Greece is not exceptional. Old dialects are being continually wiped out only to make room for new ones. Languages can change at so many points of phonetics, morphology, and vocabulary that it is not surprising that once the linguistic community is broken it should slip off in different directions. It would be too much to expect a locally diversified language to develop along strictly parallel lines. If once the speech of a locality has begun to drift on its own account, it is practically certain to move further and further away from its linguistic fellows. Failing the retarding effect of dialectic interinfluences, which I have already touched upon, a group of dialects is bound to diverge on the whole, each from all of the others.

In course of time each dialect itself splits up into sub-dialects, which gradually take on the dignity of dialects proper while the primary dialects develop into mutually unintelligible languages. And so the budding process continues, until the divergences become so great that none but a linguistic student, armed with his documentary evidence and with his comparative or reconstructive method, would infer that the languages in question were genealogically related, represented independent lines of development, in other words, from a remote and common starting point. Yet it is as certain as any historical fact can be that languages so little resembling each other as Modern Irish, English, Italian, Greek, Russian, Armenian, Persian, and Bengali are but end-points in the present of drifts that converge to a meeting-point in the dim past. There is naturally no reason to believe that this earliest “Indo-European” (or “Aryan”) prototype which we can in part reconstruct, in part but dimly guess at, is itself other than a single “dialect” of a group that has either become largely extinct or is now further represented by languages too divergent for us, with our limited means, to recognize as clear kin.[[126]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-126)

All languages that are known to be genetically related, i.e., to be divergent forms of a single prototype, may be considered as constituting a “linguistic stock.” There is nothing final about a linguistic stock. When we set it up, we merely say, in effect, that thus far we can go and no farther. At any point in the progress of our researches an unexpected ray of light may reveal the “stock” as but a “dialect” of a larger group. The terms dialect, language, branch, stock—it goes without saying—are purely relative terms. They are convertible as our perspective widens or contracts.[[127]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-127) It would be vain to speculate as to whether or not we shall ever be able to demonstrate that all languages stem from a common source. Of late years linguists have been able to make larger historical syntheses than were at one time deemed feasible, just as students of culture have been able to show historical connections between culture areas or institutions that were at one time believed to be totally isolated from each other. The human world is contracting not only prospectively but to the backward-probing eye of culture-history. Nevertheless we are as yet far from able to reduce the riot of spoken languages to a small number of “stocks.” We must still operate with a quite considerable number of these stocks. Some of them, like Indo-European or Indo-Chinese, are spoken over tremendous reaches; others, like Basque,[[128]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-128) have a curiously restricted range and are in all likelihood but dwindling remnants of groups that were at one time more widely distributed. As for the single or multiple origin of speech, it is likely enough that language as a human institution (or, if one prefers, as a human “faculty”) developed but once in the history of the race, that all the complex history of language is a unique cultural event. Such a theory constructed “on general principles” is of no real interest, however, to linguistic science. What lies beyond the demonstrable must be left to the philosopher or the romancer.

We must return to the conception of “drift” in language. If the historical changes that take place in a language, if the vast accumulation of minute modifications which in time results in the complete remodeling of the language, are not in essence identical with the individual variations that we note on every hand about us, if these variations are born only to die without a trace, while the equally minute, or even minuter, changes that make up the drift are forever imprinted on the history of the language, are we not imputing to this history a certain mystical quality? Are we not giving language a power to change of its own accord over and above the involuntary tendency of individuals to vary the norm? And if this drift of language is not merely the familiar set of individual variations seen in vertical perspective, that is historically, instead of horizontally, that is in daily experience, what is it? Language exists only in so far as it is actually used—spoken and heard, written and read. What significant changes take place in it must exist, to begin with, as individual variations. This is perfectly true, and yet it by no means follows that the general drift of language can be understood[[129]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-129) from an exhaustive descriptive study of these variations alone. They themselves are random phenomena,[[130]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-130) like the waves of the sea, moving backward and forward in purposeless flux. The linguistic drift has direction. In other words, only those individual variations embody it or carry it which move in a certain direction, just as only certain wave movements in the bay outline the tide. The drift of a language is constituted by the unconscious selection on the part of its speakers of those individual variations that are cumulative in some special direction. This direction may be inferred, in the main, from the past history of the language. In the long run any new feature of the drift becomes part and parcel of the common, accepted speech, but for a long time it may exist as a mere tendency in the speech of a few, perhaps of a despised few. As we look about us and observe current usage, it is not likely to occur to us that our language has a “slope,” that the changes of the next few centuries are in a sense prefigured in certain obscure tendencies of the present and that these changes, when consummated, will be seen to be but continuations of changes that have been already effected. We feel rather that our language is practically a fixed system and that what slight changes are destined to take place in it are as likely to move in one direction as another. The feeling is fallacious. Our very uncertainty as to the impending details of change makes the eventual consistency of their direction all the more impressive.

Sometimes we can feel where the drift is taking us even while we struggle against it. Probably the majority of those who read these words feel that it is quite “incorrect” to say “Who did you see?” We readers of many books are still very careful to say “Whom did you see?” but we feel a little uncomfortable (uncomfortably proud, it may be) in the process. We are likely to avoid the locution altogether and to say “Who was it you saw?” conserving literary tradition (the “whom”) with the dignity of silence.[[131]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-131) The folk makes no apology. “Whom did you see?” might do for an epitaph, but “Who did you see?” is the natural form for an eager inquiry. It is of course the uncontrolled speech of the folk to which we must look for advance information as to the general linguistic movement. It is safe to prophesy that within a couple of hundred years from to-day not even the most learned jurist will be saying “Whom did you see?” By that time the “whom” will be as delightfully archaic as the Elizabethan “his” for “its.”[[132]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-132) No logical or historical argument will avail to save this hapless “whom.” The demonstration “I: me = he: him = who: whom” will be convincing in theory and will go unheeded in practice.

Even now we may go so far as to say that the majority of us are secretly wishing they could say “Who did you see?” It would be a weight off their unconscious minds if some divine authority, overruling the lifted finger of the pedagogue, gave them *carte blanche*. But we cannot too frankly anticipate the drift and maintain caste. We must affect ignorance of whither we are going and rest content with our mental conflict—uncomfortable conscious acceptance of the “whom,” unconscious desire for the “who.”[[133]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-133) Meanwhile we indulge our sneaking desire for the forbidden locution by the use of the “who” in certain twilight cases in which we can cover up our fault by a bit of unconscious special pleading. Imagine that some one drops the remark when you are not listening attentively, “John Smith is coming to-night.” You have not caught the name and ask, not “Whom did you say?” but “Who did you say?” There is likely to be a little hesitation in the choice of the form, but the precedent of usages like “Whom did you see?” will probably not seem quite strong enough to induce a “Whom did you say?” Not quite relevant enough, the grammarian may remark, for a sentence like “Who did you say?” is not strictly analogous to “Whom did you see?” or “Whom did you mean?” It is rather an abbreviated form of some such sentence as “Who, did you say, is coming to-night?” This is the special pleading that I have referred to, and it has a certain logic on its side. Yet the case is more hollow than the grammarian thinks it to be, for in reply to such a query as “You’re a good hand at bridge, John, aren’t you?” John, a little taken aback, might mutter “Did you say me?” hardly “Did you say I?” Yet the logic for the latter (“Did you say I was a good hand at bridge?”) is evident. The real point is that there is not enough vitality in the “whom” to carry it over such little difficulties as a “me” can compass without a thought. The proportion “I : me = he : him = who : whom” is logically and historically sound, but psychologically shaky. “Whom did you see?” is correct, but there is something false about its correctness.

It is worth looking into the reason for our curious reluctance to use locutions involving the word “whom” particularly in its interrogative sense. The only distinctively objective forms which we still possess in English are *me*, *him*, *her* (a little blurred because of its identity with the possessive *her*), *us*, *them*, and *whom*. In all other cases the objective has come to be identical with the subjective—that is, in outer form, for we are not now taking account of position in the sentence. We observe immediately in looking through the list of objective forms that *whom* is psychologically isolated. *Me*, *him*, *her*, *us*, and *them* form a solid, well-integrated group of objective personal pronouns parallel to the subjective series *I*, *he*, *she*, *we*, *they*. The forms *who* and *whom* are technically “pronouns” but they are not felt to be in the same box as the personal pronouns. *Whom* has clearly a weak position, an exposed flank, for words of a feather tend to flock together, and if one strays behind, it is likely to incur danger of life. Now the other interrogative and relative pronouns (*which*, *what*, *that*), with which *whom* should properly flock, do not distinguish the subjective and objective forms. It is psychologically unsound to draw the line of form cleavage between *whom*and the personal pronouns on the one side, the remaining interrogative and relative pronouns on the other. The form groups should be symmetrically related to, if not identical with, the function groups. Had *which*, *what*, and *that* objective forms parallel to *whom*, the position of this last would be more secure. As it is, there is something unesthetic about the word. It suggests a form pattern which is not filled out by its fellows. The only way to remedy the irregularity of form distribution is to abandon the *whom* altogether for we have lost the power to create new objective forms and cannot remodel our *which*-*what*-*that* group so as to make it parallel with the smaller group *who-whom*. Once this is done, *who* joins its flock and our unconscious desire for form symmetry is satisfied. We do not secretly chafe at “Whom did you see?” without reason.[[134]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-134)

But the drift away from *whom* has still other determinants. The words *who* and *whom* in their interrogative sense are psychologically related not merely to the pronouns *which* and *what*, but to a group of interrogative adverbs—*where*, *when*, *how*—all of which are invariable and generally emphatic. I believe it is safe to infer that there is a rather strong feeling in English that the interrogative pronoun or adverb, typically an emphatic element in the sentence, should be invariable. The inflective *-m* of *whom* is felt as a drag upon the rhetorical effectiveness of the word. It needs to be eliminated if the interrogative pronoun is to receive all its latent power. There is still a third, and a very powerful, reason for the avoidance of *whom*. The contrast between the subjective and objective series of personal pronouns (*I*, *he*, *she*, *we*, *they*: *me*, *him*, *her*, *us*, *them*) is in English associated with a difference of position. We say *I see the man* but *the man sees me*; *he told him*, never *him he told* or *him told he*. Such usages as the last two are distinctly poetic and archaic; they are opposed to the present drift of the language. Even in the interrogative one does not say *Him did you see?* It is only in sentences of the type *Whom did you see?* that an inflected objective before the verb is now used at all. On the other hand, the order in *Whom did you see?* is imperative because of its interrogative form; the interrogative pronoun or adverb normally comes first in the sentence (*What are you doing?* *When did he go?* *Where are you from?*). In the “whom” of *Whom did you see?* there is concealed, therefore, a conflict between the order proper to a sentence containing an inflected objective and the order natural to a sentence with an interrogative pronoun or adverb. The solution *Did you see whom?* or *You saw whom?*[[135]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-135) is too contrary to the idiomatic drift of our language to receive acceptance. The more radical solution *Who did you see?* is the one the language is gradually making for.

These three conflicts—on the score of form grouping, of rhetorical emphasis, and of order—are supplemented by a fourth difficulty. The emphatic *whom*, with its heavy build (half-long vowel followed by labial consonant), should contrast with a lightly tripping syllable immediately following. In *whom did*, however, we have an involuntary retardation that makes the locution sound “clumsy.” This clumsiness is a phonetic verdict, quite apart from the dissatisfaction due to the grammatical factors which we have analyzed. The same prosodic objection does not apply to such parallel locutions as *what did* and *when did*. The vowels of *what* and *when* are shorter and their final consonants melt easily into the following *d*, which is pronounced in the same tongue position as *t* and *n*. Our instinct for appropriate rhythms makes it as difficult for us to feel content with *whom did* as for a poet to use words like *dreamed* and *hummed* in a rapid line. Neither common feeling nor the poet’s choice need be at all conscious. It may be that not all are equally sensitive to the rhythmic flow of speech, but it is probable that rhythm is an unconscious linguistic determinant even with those who set little store by its artistic use. In any event the poet’s rhythms can only be a more sensitive and stylicized application of rhythmic tendencies that are characteristic of the daily speech of his people.

We have discovered no less than four factors which enter into our subtle disinclination to say “Whom did you see?” The uneducated folk that says “Who did you see?” with no twinge of conscience has a more acute flair for the genuine drift of the language than its students. Naturally the four restraining factors do not operate independently. Their separate energies, if we may make bold to use a mechanical concept, are “canalized” into a single force. This force or minute embodiment of the general drift of the language is psychologically registered as a slight hesitation in using the word *whom*. The hesitation is likely to be quite unconscious, though it may be readily acknowledged when attention is called to it. The analysis is certain to be unconscious, or rather unknown, to the normal speaker.[[136]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-136) How, then, can we be certain in such an analysis as we have undertaken that all of the assigned determinants are really operative and not merely some one of them? Certainly they are not equally powerful in all cases. Their values are variable, rising and falling according to the individual and the locution.[[137]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-137) But that they really exist, each in its own right, may sometimes be tested by the method of elimination. If one or other of the factors is missing and we observe a slight diminution in the corresponding psychological reaction (“hesitation” in our case), we may conclude that the factor is in other uses genuinely positive. The second of our four factors applies only to the interrogative use of *whom*, the fourth factor applies with more force to the interrogative than to the relative. We can therefore understand why a sentence like *Is he the man whom you referred to?* though not as idiomatic as *Is he the man (that) you referred to?* (remember that it sins against counts one and three), is still not as difficult to reconcile with our innate feeling for English expression as *Whom did you see?*If we eliminate the fourth factor from the interrogative usage,[[138]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-138) say in *Whom are you looking at?* where the vowel following *whom* relieves this word of its phonetic weight, we can observe, if I am not mistaken, a lesser reluctance to use the *whom*. *Who are you looking at?* might even sound slightly offensive to ears that welcome *Who did you see?*

We may set up a scale of “hesitation values” somewhat after this fashion:

1. Value 1: factors 1, 3. “The man whom I referred to.”
2. Value 2: factors 1, 3, 4. “The man whom they referred to.”
3. Value 3: factors 1, 2, 3. “Whom are you looking at?”
4. Value 4: factors 1, 2, 3, 4. “Whom did you see?”

We may venture to surmise that while *whom* will ultimately disappear from English speech, locutions of the type *Whom did you see?* will be obsolete when phrases like *The man whom I referred to* are still in lingering use. It is impossible to be certain, however, for we can never tell if we have isolated all the determinants of a drift. In our particular case we have ignored what may well prove to be a controlling factor in the history of *who* and *whom* in the relative sense. This is the unconscious desire to leave these words to their interrogative function and to concentrate on *that* or mere word order as expressions of the relative (e.g., *The man that I referred to* or *The man I referred to*). This drift, which does not directly concern the use of *whom* as such (merely of *whom* as a form of *who*), may have made the relative *who* obsolete before the other factors affecting relative *whom* have run their course. A consideration like this is instructive because it indicates that knowledge of the general drift of a language is insufficient to enable us to see clearly what the drift is heading for. We need to know something of the relative potencies and speeds of the components of the drift.

It is hardly necessary to say that the particular drifts involved in the use of *whom* are of interest to us not for their own sake but as symptoms of larger tendencies at work in the language. At least three drifts of major importance are discernible. Each of these has operated for centuries, each is at work in other parts of our linguistic mechanism, each is almost certain to continue for centuries, possibly millennia. The first is the familiar tendency to level the distinction between the subjective and the objective, itself but a late chapter in the steady reduction of the old Indo-European system of syntactic cases. This system, which is at present best preserved in Lithuanian,[[139]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-139) was already considerably reduced in the old Germanic language of which English, Dutch, German, Danish, and Swedish are modern dialectic forms. The seven Indo-European cases (nominative genitive, dative, accusative, ablative, locative, instrumental) had been already reduced to four (nominative genitive, dative, accusative). We know this from a careful comparison of and reconstruction based on the oldest Germanic dialects of which we still have records (Gothic, Old Icelandic, Old High German, Anglo-Saxon). In the group of West Germanic dialects, for the study of which Old High German, Anglo-Saxon, Old Frisian, and Old Saxon are our oldest and most valuable sources, we still have these four cases, but the phonetic form of the case syllables is already greatly reduced and in certain paradigms particular cases have coalesced. The case system is practically intact but it is evidently moving towards further disintegration. Within the Anglo-Saxon and early Middle English period there took place further changes in the same direction. The phonetic form of the case syllables became still further reduced and the distinction between the accusative and the dative finally disappeared. The new “objective” is really an amalgam of old accusative and dative forms; thus, *him*, the old dative (we still say *I give him the book*, not “abbreviated” from *I give to him*; compare Gothic *imma*, modern German *ihm*), took over the functions of the old accusative (Anglo-Saxon *hine*; compare Gothic *ina*, Modern German *ihn*) and dative. The distinction between the nominative and accusative was nibbled away by phonetic processes and morphological levelings until only certain pronouns retained distinctive subjective and objective forms.

In later medieval and in modern times there have been comparatively few apparent changes in our case system apart from the gradual replacement of *thou*—*thee* (singular) and subjective *ye*—objective *you*(plural) by a single undifferentiated form *you*. All the while, however, the case system, such as it is (subjective-objective, really absolutive, and possessive in nouns; subjective, objective, and possessive in certain pronouns) has been steadily weakening in psychological respects. At present it is more seriously undermined than most of us realize. The possessive has little vitality except in the pronoun and in animate nouns. Theoretically we can still say *the moon’s phases* or *a newspaper’s vogue*; practically we limit ourselves pretty much to analytic locutions like *the phases of the moon* and *the vogue of a newspaper*. The drift is clearly toward the limitation, of possessive forms to animate nouns. All the possessive pronominal forms except *its* and, in part, *their* and *theirs*, are also animate. It is significant that *theirs* is hardly ever used in reference to inanimate nouns, that there is some reluctance to so use *their*, and that *its* also is beginning to give way to *of it*. *The appearance of it* or *the looks of it* is more in the current of the language than *its appearance*. It is curiously significant that *its young* (referring to an animal’s cubs) is idiomatically preferable to *the young of it*. The form is only ostensibly neuter, in feeling it is animate; psychologically it belongs with *his children*, not with *the pieces of it*. Can it be that so common a word as *its* is actually beginning to be difficult? Is it too doomed to disappear? It would be rash to say that it shows signs of approaching obsolescence, but that it is steadily weakening is fairly clear.[[140]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-140) In any event, it is not too much to say that there is a strong drift towards the restriction of the inflected possessive forms to animate nouns and pronouns.

How is it with the alternation of subjective and objective in the pronoun? Granted that *whom* is a weak sister, that the two cases have been leveled in *you* (in *it*, *that*, and *what* they were never distinct, so far as we can tell[[141]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-141)), and that *her* as an objective is a trifle weak because of its formal identity with the possessive *her*, is there any reason to doubt the vitality of such alternations as *I see the man* and *the man sees me*? Surely the distinction between subjective *I* and objective *me*, between subjective *he* and objective *him*, and correspondingly for other personal pronouns, belongs to the very core of the language. We can throw *whom* to the dogs, somehow make shift to do without an *its*, but to level *I* and *me* to a single case—would that not be to un-English our language beyond recognition? There is no drift toward such horrors as *Me see him* or *I see he*. True, the phonetic disparity between *I* and *me*, *he* and *him*, *we* and *us*, has been too great for any serious possibility of form leveling. It does not follow that the case distinction as such is still vital. One of the most insidious peculiarities of a linguistic drift is that where it cannot destroy what lies in its way it renders it innocuous by washing the old significance out of it. It turns its very enemies to its own uses. This brings us to the second of the major drifts, the tendency to fixed position in the sentence, determined by the syntactic relation of the word.

We need not go into the history of this all-important drift. It is enough to know that as the inflected forms of English became scantier, as the syntactic relations were more and more inadequately expressed by the forms of the words themselves, position in the sentence gradually took over functions originally foreign to it. *The man* in *the man sees the dog* is subjective; in *the dog sees the man*, objective. Strictly parallel to these sentences are *he sees the dog* and *the dog sees him*. Are the subjective value of *he* and the objective value of *him* entirely, or even mainly, dependent on the difference of form? I doubt it. We could hold to such a view if it were possible to say *the dog sees he* or *him sees the dog*. It was once possible to say such things, but we have lost the power. In other words, at least part of the case feeling in *he* and *him* is to be credited to their position before or after the verb. May it not be, then, that *he* and *him*, *we* and *us*, are not so much subjective and objective forms as pre-verbal and post-verbal[[142]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-142) forms, very much as *my* and *mine* are now pre-nominal and post-nominal forms of the possessive (*my father* but *father mine*; *it is my book* but *the book is mine*)? That this interpretation corresponds to the actual drift of the English language is again indicated by the language of the folk. The folk says *it is me*, not *it is I*, which is “correct” but just as falsely so as the *whom did you see*? that we have analyzed. *I’m the one*, *it’s me*; *we’re**the ones*, *it’s us that will win out*—such are the live parallelisms in English to-day. There is little doubt that *it is I* will one day be as impossible in English as *c’est je*, for *c’est moi*, is now in French.

How differently our *I*: *me* feels than in Chaucer’s day is shown by the Chaucerian *it am I*. Here the distinctively subjective aspect of the *I* was enough to influence the form of the preceding verb in spite of the introductory *it*; Chaucer’s locution clearly felt more like a Latin *sum ego* than a modern *it is I* or colloquial *it is me*. We have a curious bit of further evidence to prove that the English personal pronouns have lost some share of their original syntactic force. Were *he* and *she* subjective forms pure and simple, were they not striving, so to speak, to become caseless absolutives, like *man* or any other noun, we should not have been able to coin such compounds as *he-goat* and *she-goat*, words that are psychologically analogous to *bull-moose* and *mother-bear*. Again, in inquiring about a new-born baby, we ask *Is it a he or a she?* quite as though *he* and *she* were the equivalents of *male* and *female* or *boy* and *girl*. All in all, we may conclude that our English case system is weaker than it looks and that, in one way or another, it is destined to get itself reduced to an absolutive (caseless) form for all nouns and pronouns but those that are animate. Animate nouns and pronouns are sure to have distinctive possessive forms for an indefinitely long period.

Meanwhile observe that the old alignment of case forms is being invaded by two new categories—a positional category (pre-verbal, post-verbal) and a classificatory category (animate, inanimate). The facts that in the possessive animate nouns and pronouns are destined to be more and more sharply distinguished from inanimate nouns and pronouns (*the man’s*, but *of the house*; *his*, but *of it*) and that, on the whole, it is only animate pronouns that distinguish pre-verbal and post-verbal forms[[143]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-143) are of the greatest theoretical interest. They show that, however the language strive for a more and more analytic form, it is by no means manifesting a drift toward the expression of “pure” relational concepts in the Indo-Chinese manner.[[144]](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/12629/12629-h/12629-h.htm#fn-144) The insistence on the concreteness of the relational concepts is clearly stronger than the destructive power of the most sweeping and persistent drifts that we know of in the history and prehistory of our language.

The drift toward the abolition of most case distinctions and the correlative drift toward position as an all-important grammatical method are accompanied, in a sense dominated, by the last of the three major drifts that I have referred to. This is the drift toward the invariable word. In analyzing the “whom” sentence I pointed out that the rhetorical emphasis natural to an interrogative pronoun lost something by its form variability (*who*, *whose*, *whom*). This striving for a simple, unnuanced correspondence between idea and word, as invariable as may be, is very strong in English. It accounts for a number of tendencies which at first sight seem unconnected. Certain well-established forms, like the present third person singular *-s* of *works* or the plural *-s* of *books*, have resisted the drift to invariable words, possibly because they symbolize certain stronger form cravings that we do not yet fully understand. It is interesting to note that derivations that get away sufficiently from the concrete notion of the radical word to exist as independent conceptual centers are not affected by this elusive drift. As soon as the derivation runs danger of being felt as a mere nuancing of, a finicky play on, the primary concept, it tends to be absorbed by the radical word, to disappear as such. English words crave spaces between them, they do not like to huddle in clusters of slightly divergent centers of meaning, each edging a little away from the rest. *Goodness*, a noun of quality, almost a noun of relation, that takes its cue from the concrete idea of “good” without necessarily predicating that quality (e.g., *I do not think much of his goodness*) is sufficiently spaced from *good* itself not to need fear absorption. Similarly, *unable* can hold its own against *able* because it destroys the latter’s sphere of influence; *unable* is psychologically as distinct from *able* as is *blundering* or *stupid*. It is different with adverbs in *-ly*. These lean too heavily on their adjectives to have the kind of vitality that English demands of its words. *Do it quickly!* drags psychologically. The nuance expressed by *quickly* is too close to that of *quick*, their circles of concreteness are too nearly the same, for the two words to feel comfortable together. The adverbs in *-ly* are likely to go to the wall in the not too distant future for this very reason and in face of their obvious usefulness. Another instance of the sacrifice of highly useful forms to this impatience of nuancing is the group *whence*, *whither*, *hence*, *hither*, *thence*, *thither*. They could not persist in live usage because they impinged too solidly upon the circles of meaning represented by the words *where*, *here* and *there*. In saying *whither* we feel too keenly that we repeat all of *where*. That we add to *where* an important nuance of direction irritates rather than satisfies. We prefer to merge the static and the directive (*Where do you live?* like *Where are you going?*) or, if need be, to overdo a little the concept of direction (*Where are you running to?*).

Now it is highly symptomatic of the nature of the drift away from word clusters that we do not object to nuances as such, we object to having the nuances formally earmarked for us. As a matter of fact our vocabulary is rich in near-synonyms and in groups of words that are psychologically near relatives, but these near-synonyms and these groups do not hang together by reason of etymology. We are satisfied with *believe* and *credible* just because they keep aloof from each other. *Good* and *well* go better together than *quick* and *quickly*. The English vocabulary is a rich medley because each English word wants its own castle. Has English long been peculiarly receptive to foreign words because it craves the staking out of as many word areas as possible, or, conversely, has the mechanical imposition of a flood of French and Latin loan-words, unrooted in our earlier tradition, so dulled our feeling for the possibilities of our native resources that we are allowing these to shrink by default? I suspect that both propositions are true. Each feeds on the other. I do not think it likely, however, that the borrowings in English have been as mechanical and external a process as they are generally represented to have been. There was something about the English drift as early as the period following the Norman Conquest that welcomed the new words. They were a compensation for something that was weakening within.