The preposition *upon*

The preposition *upon* has declined markedly in frequency in written English since the beginning of the twentieth century. In fact, at the beginning of the twenty-first century in BrE, according to the BROWN family, it retains only 16% of the frequency it enjoyed a hundred years earlier.\(^1\) In addition to the three corpora B-LOB, LOB, and F-LOB, the evidence for this comes from two more recently developed BrE members of the BROWN family: Baker’s BE06 corpus from 2006\(^{3+2}\) mentioned in the chapter (see footnote 9), and a still incomplete 1901\(^{±3}\) corpus (under development by Smith, Rayson, and Leech). The frequency of *upon* at the beginning of the twentieth century is extrapolated from a representatively sampled cross-section of the 1901\(^{±3}\) corpus already collected, in which each genre category is given one-third of its representation in the BROWN family sampling frame, then scaled up. (The findings from the 1901\(^{±3}\) and 2006\(^{3+2}\) corpora, because of concerns about their strict comparability—the former being incomplete and the latter being web-derived—should be seen as provisional.) As the second row of figures in Table 1 shows, the decline was steepest in the interval 1931–61, and interestingly, the whole profile of decline resembles a reversal of the S-curve taken as typical of the growth of a linguistic innovation, with slower rates of change characterizing the earliest and latest phases.

*Upon* is generally regarded as semantically close, if not equivalent, to the shorter preposition *on*, and an obvious move is to compare the frequencies of *upon* and *on* over time, to see whether *on* shows signs of a compensatory increase. It does: Table 1 gives the (automatically derived and uncorrected) figures pmw for *on* as a preposition (distinguished from *on* as a prepositional adverb, which is not replaceable by *upon*).

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\(^1\) As Table 1 shows, the decline is from 1,233 instances pmw (scaled up, 1901\(^{±3}\) corpus) to 190 instances pmw (BE06 corpus). However, it is likely that the decline of *upon* dates at least from the seventeenth century (when *upon* was a variant spelling). According to a search of Early English Books Online (EEBO; using a subcorpus of 158 million words for the decades 1640–69), *upon* reached over 2,000 tokens pmw in the mid-seventeenth century and was actually more frequent than *on.*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1901†‡</th>
<th>1931±3</th>
<th>1961 (LOB)</th>
<th>1991 (F-LOB)</th>
<th>2006 (BE06)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency pmw on</td>
<td>(data not available)†</td>
<td>4,986 (84.8%)</td>
<td>5,497*** (93.1%)</td>
<td>5,503 (95.9%)</td>
<td>5,838** (96.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency pmw upon</td>
<td>(1,233)</td>
<td>891*** (15.2%)</td>
<td>407*** (6.9%)</td>
<td>238*** (4.1%)</td>
<td>190 (3.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (100%)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>(5,877)</td>
<td>(5,904)</td>
<td>(5,741)</td>
<td>(6,028)†</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† The count for 1901 is not available as the corpus is not yet part-of-speech tagged. The manual identification of on as preposition (vs. adverb) throughout the corpus would be impractical.
‡ The asterisks show increasing degrees of statistical significance († = LL critical value > 3.84; ‡ > 6.63; *** > 10.83. These equate to chi-square \( p < .05, p < .01 \) and \( p < .001 \), respectively. The significance is always calculated with reference to the immediately preceding data point. For the whole period 1901–2006, of course, the change for both on and for upon is very highly significant.

This result leads to the plausible surmise that the declining frequency of upon is motivated by an increasing preference for the simpler preposition—an obvious manifestation of the economy principle in language change. One difficulty we find in testing this surmise is that some uses of upon cannot be replaced by on (preposition), and vice versa. An example of the former case is the fixed phrase Once upon a time (cf. *Once on a time); the latter case, where on cannot be replaced by upon, is not so easy to pin down, as the comparative rarity of upon means that its substitution for on often has varying degrees of stylistic incongruity. The extremity of such incongruity seems to be reached with a colloquialism such as He snitched (i.e. ‘informed’) on me, where the oddity of upon in ?*He snitched upon me may be due more to the stylistic inappropriateness of combining a very informal expression (snitched on) with a preposition (upon) associated with formal written language. In general, despite such hypothetical oddities, it is reasonable to regard upon as a more formal and conservative variant of on. But can we justify regarding upon as a more formal variant?
Figure 1. Decline of frequency of *upon*: showing the four macro-categories Press, General Prose, Learned, and Fiction in B-LOB, LOB, and F-LOB.

Figure 1, depicting the normalized frequency of *upon* pmw in the four macro-categories and in the corpora overall, provides an answer. It shows that the decline of *upon* is more extreme in the Press, a variety that has been elsewhere noted as an “agile” genre spearheading language change (Hundt and Mair 1999). A negative interpretation of this trend should show a variety embracing innovation also taking a lead is abandoning more conservative stylistic forms such as *upon*, and this is confirmed in Figure 1. As a contrast, Figure 1 indicates a greater reluctance to abandon *upon* in the Learned variety, where the decline is less steep. This is again what one would expect in a variety where conservative habits of writing are well entrenched. Figure 1 also shows that Fiction is second to Press in steepness of decline, whereas General Prose (covering a wide range of nonfictional prose writing) is second to Learned in showing a gentler fall in frequency. Fiction, which has been seen in other studies (Leech et al. 2009: 75, 240), as tending to favor more colloquial forms (and therefore to disfavor more formal options), is in general the closest of the written macro-categories to speech. These factors would again tend to lead to an avoidance of conservative forms such as *upon*. However, Fiction and General Prose are macro-categories that show a great deal of variation in themselves. While exhibiting styles of language approximating to speech, Fiction also contains a fair admixture of conservative if not archaic features, as some fictional texts
have a historical setting, or else employ some dated features of usage for dramatic effect. These are among the contexts in which upon tends to occur:

(1) And I am called the Rose and travel upon a quest for vengeance. My journey has taken me through more than one realm. (F-LOB, M02—science fiction)

(2) His attire was that of a fancy English gentleman. There were polished buckles adorning his boots, a lace cravat at his throat and a heavy, full wig upon his head. (Frown, P10—romance and love story)

Similarly, General Prose manifests a broad stylistic range within which a more archaic vein is commonly found in religious texts (genre D):

(3) And all that we know of future blessing should have a present effect or good upon ourselves. (LOB, D11)

(4) Thirdly, God’s peace is a practical demand laid upon us. (BE06, D12)

In fact, among the text categories A–R of the BROWN family, D (Religion) shows the highest incidence of upon.

Given that upon has been sharply declining over the past 100 years, the question arises: Is it obsolescent? Will, one wonders, upon survive the next 100 years? One incipient sign of its obsolescence has already been noted—its increasing confinement to more conservative or even archaic levels of usage. Another such sign is the increasing restriction to idiomatic phraseology, hence gradual loss of productive use. We examined the three British corpora B-LOB, LOB, and F-LOB from this point of view and observed a high percentage of cases that could be considered lexically bound: i.e. cases where the selection of upon was determined by other lexical choices, rather than by the lexically free or open-choice use of upon for such meanings as “place”, “time”, and “aboutness”.

Examples of lexically bound use are more common:

(5) Each week an estimated 20 million patients call upon us doctors. (Brown, D07)

(6) Nord was as dependent upon Belgium for pig-iron for her metal industries as she was for coal, even before the obsolescence of charcoal smelting. (LOB, J55)

(7) Stoicism and neo-Platonism both exerted tremendous influence upon the Church fathers, as did other aspects of Greek and Roman belief patterns. (Frown, G25)
Examples of lexically free use are less common:

(8) Fosdyke stuck his face close to the boy, who briefly nodded at Charlotte then closed his eyes and went back to sleep, his dusty blond head resting upon his mother’s ample lap. (F-LOB, P04)

(9) Upon this point British Foreign Policy has never altered. (B-LOB, G67)

In extreme cases, the property of being lexically bound amounts to virtually complete fossilization, as in the place-names Stratford upon Avon and Newcastle upon Tyne. Far more usual, however, are cases where upon is governed by a lexical item—a verb, adjective, or noun such as depend upon, dependent upon, or dependence upon. Table 2 shows that the percentage of lexically free usage did indeed decline alongside the decline in overall frequency of upon.²

Table 2. Lexically free vs. lexically bound uses of upon in BrE 1931–91

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>upon lexically free</td>
<td>268 (30.1%)</td>
<td>106*** (26.0%)</td>
<td>37*** (15.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>upon lexically bound</td>
<td>623 (69.9%)</td>
<td>301*** (74.0%)</td>
<td>201*** (84.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total tokens of upon</td>
<td>891</td>
<td>407***</td>
<td>238***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

² However, puzzlingly, the percentage of lexically free usage marginally increased to 16.8% in the Web-derived BE06 corpus. It should be stated that the choice between lexically free and lexically bound is sometimes difficult to draw and reliant on impressionistic criteria, although help can be obtained from valency and collocation dictionaries, notably Herbst et al. (2004). However, as the same categorization principles were applied to each corpus, the general trend toward greater formulaicity is not in doubt.

References
