

# Language change in the domain of concessive prepositions: *In spite of* and *despite* in British and American English

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The related concessive prepositions *in spite of* and *despite* are generally regarded as largely interchangeable. Concerning style, Quirk et al. (1985) describe *in spite of* as “a general-purpose preposition of concession”, while they consider *despite* more formal. However, even a cursory inspection of synchronic and diachronic corpora of British and American English (BrE, AmE) reveals that, while those claims may hold true for BrE in the first half of the 20th century, *despite* has increased dramatically in frequency and appears to be the unmarked option in present-day English, both in written and spoken genres and across different (standard) dialects.

Building on work by Rissanen (2002), this paper traces the developments of the two prepositions from the early nineteenth century to the present day. The main research questions are the following: (i) When did *despite* become more frequent than *in spite of*, (ii) do the changes commence earlier or proceed more rapidly in BrE or AmE (or in speech or writing), and (iii) what do the patterns that are observed tell us about the ongoing grammaticalization of those connectives? Analyses are based on corpus data from COHA (Davies 2010–), the extended Brown family of corpora (e.g. Baker 2009), the Hansard corpus of British parliamentary speeches (Alexander & Davies 2015–), and ARCHER (cf. Yáñez-Bouza 2011).

It is shown that there is a steady general increase in the frequency of *despite* from the middle of the 19th century onwards, which speeds up and continues during the 20th century. *In spite of* also increases in frequency during the 19th century, but begins to decline again in the first half of the 20th century, resulting in the present-day dominance of *despite*. It is argued that the eventual preference of the shorter form results from a process of specialisation in ongoing grammaticalization within the domain of concessive prepositions (cf. Hopper 1991). The change begins in (written) AmE, followed first by spoken BrE and later by written BrE. Further, it can be shown that the genres of magazines and newspapers in AmE lead both the increase in frequency of *despite* and the decrease in frequency of *in spite of*, while both trends catch on later in fiction and non-fiction books. The paper thus identifies American English, speech and certain written genres as points of inception in changes affecting *in spite of* and *despite* in the 19th and 20th centuries. [394 words]

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