

The Role of Prescriptivism in the Development of English Irregular Verbs

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Abstract: *This paper examines the impact of prescriptivism on the evolution of past tense forms of irregular English verbs, including "dwell," "smell," "spell," "burn," "spoil," and "learn." The prescriptive approach to grammar, which aims to identify and enforce what are considered to be the correct grammatical forms, was particularly prominent during the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the century was not wholly prescriptive, with differing interpretations of what constituted a regular and irregular verb. The past tense of regular verbs was typically formed by adding -ed, whereas irregular verbs did not follow this predictable pattern. In light of Anderwald's research, this study posits that prescriptivism had a constrained effect on these verbs. This paper employs data from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British fiction to examine the historical evolution of these verb forms. The eighteenth century saw a proliferation of prescriptive grammar books aimed at a linguistically insecure middle class, with grammarians attempting to "fix" the language. However, these prescriptive efforts were often disconnected from actual linguistic changes. This study examines irregular verb usage in British fiction using the software AntConc to analyze texts from both centuries, dividing them into twenty-year segments. The analysis reveals the frequency of different past tense forms, offering insights into the historical variation and the limited prescriptive influence. The findings, supported by detailed data and methodology, contribute to understanding the complex interaction between prescriptive grammar and linguistic evolution.*

Keywords: prescriptive grammar, irregular verbs, COHA, British Fiction, Linguistic changes.

INTRODUCTION

“Prescriptivism is an approach to grammatical characterization one of whose primary objects is the identification of forms and usages which are considered by the analyst to be 'correct' and the proscribing of forms and usages felt to be 'incorrect'” (Trask 1993: 215). Although the eighteenth century is sometimes described as a time of prescriptive grammars, it is actually ‘far from being uniformly prescriptive’ (Beal, 2004: 90). Meanwhile, several grammarians tried to define the terms regular and irregular verbs.

In spite of the fact that, “at almost all points in time, regular – irregular was the terminology preferred by the majority of grammar writers (....). In Britain, alternative terminology, especially weak – strong, comes to dominate grammar writing after the 1850s” (Anderwald 2016: 37). According to Cobbin (1864: 48), “all verbs are irregular which do not end their past tense, or their past participle, in *-ed*”. Garner (2000: 195) observes, “irregular verbs form the past tense or past participle in unpredictable ways, usually by changing the vowel of the present-tense form, without the addition of an ending (e.g., *begin, began; rise, rose; wring, wrung*). Regular verbs, by contrast, form the past tense by adding *-ed, -d, or -t*, to the present tense.” Anderwald admits (2016: 38), “Regular verbs were defined positively as verbs that form their past tense and past participle by the addition of <ed>, and irregular verbs were defined negatively as not using this method.” This paper thus investigates the variation between the past tenses of English irregular verbs such as *dwell, smell, spell, burn, spoil, learn* and tries to analyze if prescriptive grammars have had any influence on the development of the past tense forms of these verbs. Primarily based on Anderwald’s research on irregular verbs, this paper argues that prescriptivism has had much less influence on these verbs. On the basis of the data from the eighteenth and nineteenth century British fiction, I will also try to show the historical development of the past tenses of the above mentioned irregular verbs.

Historical overview

The eighteenth century is well-known as the age of growing prescriptivism with ‘over 200’ (Beal 2004: 90) published English grammars, which indicates that there was a rise in the readership of grammar books among the new middle class society in Great Britain. As the readers were always worried about ‘grammatical solecisms’ (Beal 2004: 93), writers and publishers of the grammars took advantage of this ‘linguistic insecurity’ (Labov 1966: 13) and tried to allure as many readers from all sectors of life as possible. Besides “grammarians of this period are seen as wanting to ‘fix’ the English language in order to achieve the stability in language that they hoped to retain in government and in society” (Beal 2004: 95). Although Rydén strongly criticizes these grammarians by arguing,

these prescriptivist grammarians (for example Lowth and Murray), whose rules were largely a mixture of Latin grammar, ‘logic’, ‘reason’ and prejudice, were ignorant of or unwilling to accept the processes of linguistic change and unaware of the fact that usage is essentially a matter of social convention” (1981: 513-14).

Meanwhile, Anderwald (2014: 408) claims, “prescriptive grammar writing is shown to have been mostly ignorant of which verbs were undergoing change, in which direction, and to which degree”. To examine the influence of prescriptivism on irregular verbs, she compared the data from the Collection of Nineteenth-century Grammar books (CNG) to the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) which is a database of ‘more than 400 million words of text’ (<https://www.english-corpora.org/coha/>). Also, CNG is the digital storehouse of “256 grammars,

distributed across decades and countries” (Anderwald 2012: 268), where she found out that, “more than half of all grammars still explicitly acknowledge variation where there was none in the written language of the time, and in this sense(...) nineteenth-century grammar writing looks as if it was not particularly prescriptive” (2012: 278). In contrast to her work, I will focus on the irregular verbs in the eighteenth and nineteenth century British fiction. In the methodology section, I will describe in detail the data collection and sorting procedure.

Methodology and corpus data

Eighteenth Century British Fiction is “a collection of 96 complete works of English prose from the period 1700–1780 by writers from the British Isles (...). It was a period of great creative experiment as the structure and conventions of what would be termed the novel were shaped and developed” (www.proquest.com). In this research, I have divided the 18th century British fictional texts into four equal parts of twenty years. On the other hand, Nineteenth Century British Fiction covers the period from 1782 to 1903 unusually. It is a collection of “250 digitized works by key novelists” (www.proquest.com) from Britain and Ireland. I have also divided this century into five parts of twenty years starting from 1781 and the last (and sixth) part from 1881 to 1903 (to cover all the texts), because, unpredictably, the Nineteenth Century British Fiction begins in 1782 and ends in 1903.

Data from the 18th and 19th century British fiction were analysed by a computer software named ‘AntConc’, version 3.5.8 (Windows, 64 bit), to find out the past tense varieties of the irregular verbs – *dwelt* (*dwelt/ dwelled*), *smelt* (*smelt/ smelled*), *spelt* (*spelt/ spelled*), *burnt* (*burnt/ burned*), *spoilt* (*spoilt/ spoiled*), and *learnt* (*learnt/ learned*). As I have divided the data from each century into twenty years, it was easier to count and categorize the past tense forms and exclude the past participle forms. After that, I calculated the percentages of the irregular verb forms to see the frequency per twenty years. At the end of this paper I attached the two appendices (raw data) showing the usage of the past tense irregular verbs in the eighteenth and in the nineteenth centuries.

RESULTS

The following two tables show the use of past tense variants in both 18th and 19th century British fiction.

Table 1: 18th century BrE Fiction data (Use of past tenses)

	dwelt / dwelled	smelt/ smelled	spelt/ spelled	burnt/ burned	spoilt/ spoiled	learnt/ learned
1700 – 1720	7/ 0	3/0	0/0	19/0	0/1	13/14
1721 – 1740	19/0	5/0	2/0	39/6	0/7	19/78
1741 – 1760	68/ 0	2/2	12/3	82/11	10/24	58/ 526
1761 – 1780	20/ 2	2/3	1/0	20/8	2/11	49/ 144

Table 2: 19th Century BrE Fiction data (Use of past tenses)

	dwelt / dwelled	smelt/ smelled	spelt/ spelled	burnt/ burned	spoilt/ spoiled	learnt/ learned
1781 – 1800	94/ 0	4/ 3	2/ 0	32/ 23	18/ 8	55/ 289
1801 – 1820	80/ 1	5/ 0	3/ 3	64/ 49	32/ 36	130/ 164
1821 – 1840	162/ 1	15/ 4	5/ 3	170/ 53	19/ 50	108/ 510
1841 – 1860	130/ 0	69/ 0	30/ 1	191/ 112	57/ 74	237/ 501
1861 – 1880	171/ 11	54/ 4	17/ 5	193/ 149	76/ 74	113/ 572
1881 – 1903	95/ 7	39/ 5	11/ 9	111/ 85	37/ 40	149/ 206

From table 1, it can be noticed that, for the verbs – *dwell*, *smell*, *spell* and *burn*, most writers of the 18th century preferred irregular forms of the past tenses such as – *dwelt*, *smelt*, *spelt* and *burnt*; although, for the verbs *spoil* and *learn*, authors preferred the regular past forms such as *spoiled* and *learned*. *Dwelled*, *smelled* and *spelled* are attested as very low frequency alternatives of *dwelt*, *smelt* and *spelt* throughout the eighteenth century. The examples below exhibit the early occurrences of these verbs in British fiction.

(1) She related the adventure of the young peasant, who had been discovered in the vault, tho' with many simple additions from the incoherent accounts of the domestics; and she **dwelled** principally on the gigantic leg and foot which had been seen in the gallery-chamber. (Translated by William Marshall, *The Castle of Otranto – A Story*, 1764)

(2) A Contention had arisen between the Herdsmen of Abraham and the Herdsmen of his Nephew Lot, respecting the Propriety of the Pasture of the Lands wherein they **dwelled**, that could now scarce contain the Abundance of their Cattle. (Henry Brooke, *The Fool of Quality, or, the History of Henry Earl of Moreland*, 1765)

(3) Noah restored the antient rites of divine service, and built an altar to the Lord. And the Lord **smelled** a sweet Savour, and said, Never any more will I curse the ground for man's sake, tho' the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth (...). (Thomas Amory, *The Life of John Buncl, Esq*, 1756)

(4) This that follows is a copy of the letter left for Emily by this mother; which, tho' not well-**spelled**, might have been written by a better woman (...). (Samuel Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, 1754)

I categorized the data from table 1 into the line chart (Figure 1) below, which visualizes the trend of the past verb forms.

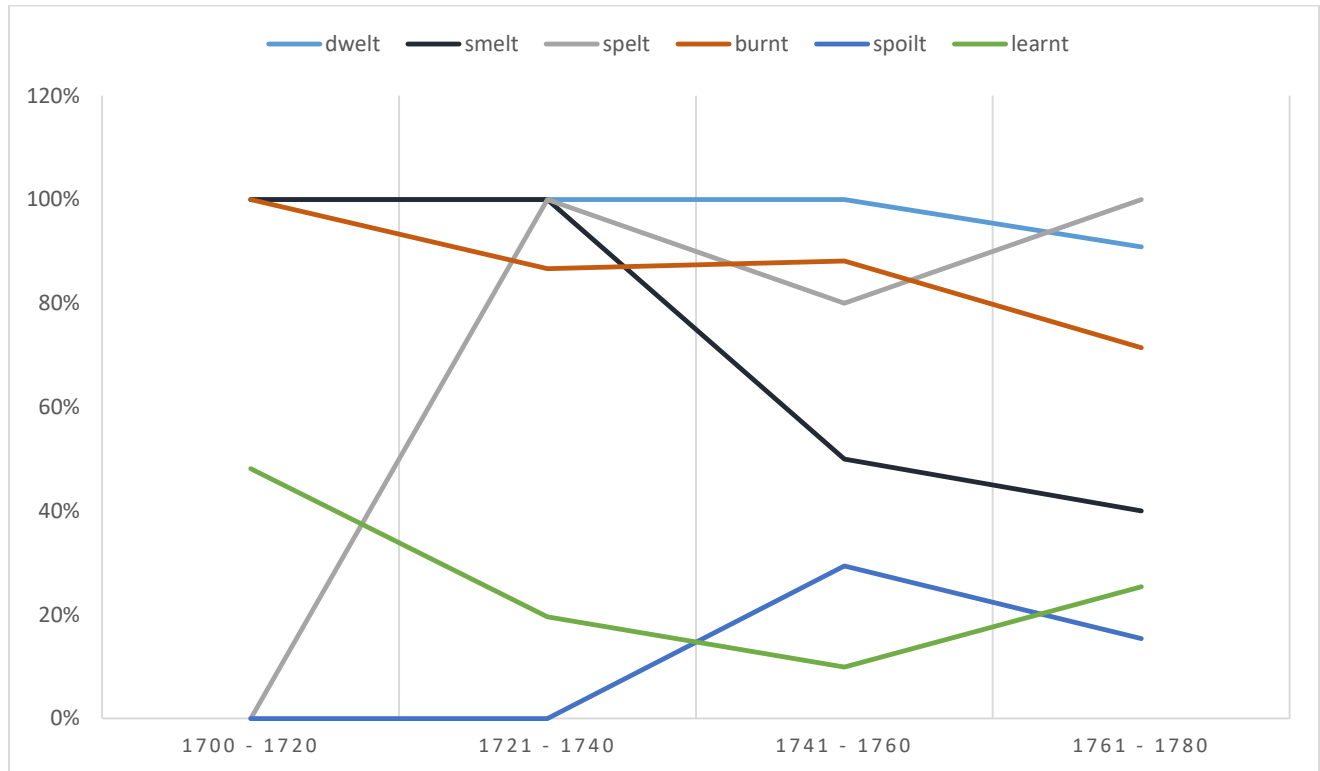


Figure 1: Usage of the irregular past tense forms during the 18th century.

The lines in figure 1 indicate the percentage of all past tense irregular verbs from 1700 to 1780. On a scale of zero percent to one hundred percent where zero indicates least irregular (i.e. regular) and one hundred refers to the highest degree of irregular forms, we can note that, *dwelt* is the most consistent irregular verb throughout the eighteenth century while the use of *spoilt* and *learnt* as irregular past forms saw a gradual decline which means, at the end of the eighteenth century, writers preferred *spoiled* and *learned* as past forms of the base verbs *spoil* and *learn* more than the irregular forms. Although *smelt* shows a sudden fall from 100% to 50% from the second quarter to the third quarter, it is to be noticed in table 1, that not much data was available to make a specific decision on the use of *smelt* over *smelled* by the then authors. Also, it is to be remembered that, *smelled* was not even in use until the third quarter i.e. – 1760, which is of very meagre - twice, and also in the fourth quarter as thrice. In Figure 1, *spelt* saw a sharp rise during the 1740s, yet, it does not mean that authors used it a lot, it only means (cf. table 1), the use of *spelt* and *spelled* were rarely used. Therefore, table 1 speaks more specifically about the data, while figure 1 demonstrates the development of the past forms in either regular or irregular forms throughout the eighteenth century.

Table 3: 18th century past forms in percentages (*spoilt vs spoiled and learnt vs learned*)

Year/ Verb form	spoilt	spoiled	learnt	learned
1700 - 1720	0%	100%	48.15%	51.85%
1721 - 1740	0%	100%	19.59%	80.41%
1741 - 1760	29.41%	70.59%	9.93%	90.07%
1761 - 1780	15.38%	84.62%	25.39%	74.61%

To make 18th century past forms easy to follow, table 3 above shows specifically the percentages of the past forms – *spoilt vs spoiled and learnt vs learned*. It can be noticed here that, gradually towards the end of the eighteenth century, past forms of *spoil* and *learn* become regularized. This regularization continued through the nineteenth century (table 4 below), except for a minor fluctuation in the years 1821-1840 and 1861-1880 for *spoilt* and *spoiled*.

Table 4: 19th century past forms in percentages (*spoilt vs spoiled and learnt vs learned*)

Year/ Verb form	spoilt	spoiled	learnt	learned
1781 – 1800	69.23%	30.77%	15.99%	84.01%
1801 – 1820	47.06%	52.94%	44.22%	55.78%
1821 – 1840	27.54%	72.46%	17.48%	82.52%
1841 – 1860	43.51%	56.49%	32.11%	67.89%
1861 – 1880	50.67%	49.33%	16.5%	83.5%
1881 – 1903	48.05%	51.95%	41.97%	58.03%

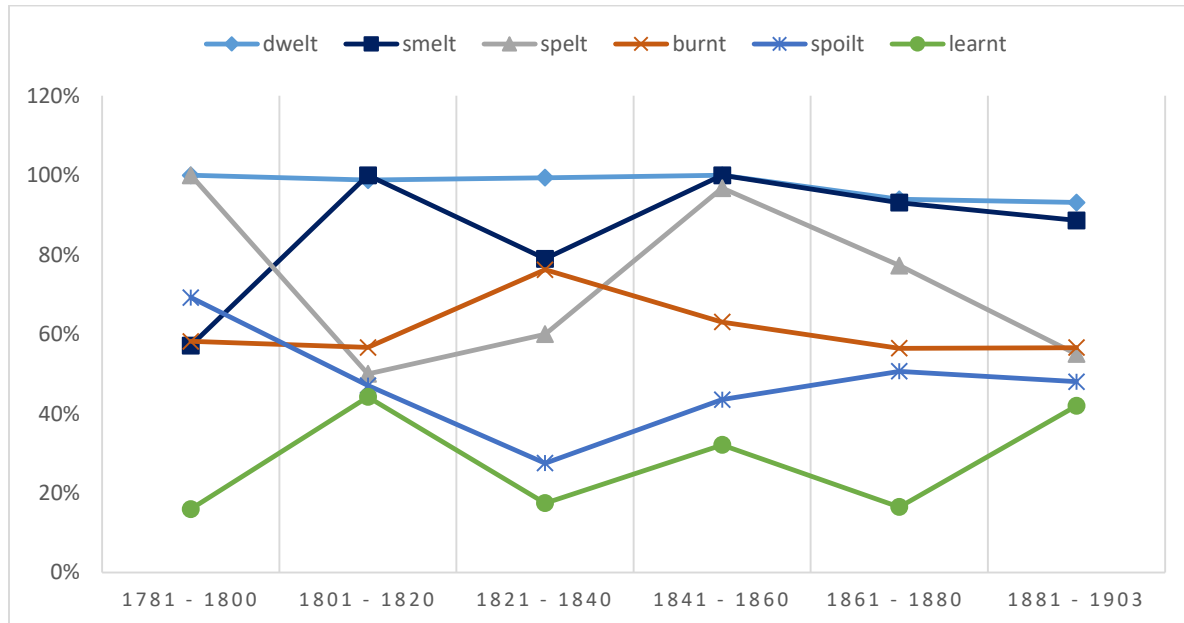


Figure 2: Usage of the irregular past tense forms during the 19th century.

Figure 2 illustrates the irregular past tense usage of the verbs – *dwelt*, *smelt*, *spell*, *burn*, *spoil* and *learn* from 1781 to 1903 in six sub periods. It can be noticed that *dwelt* continued to be used as an irregular past form since the eighteenth century through the nineteenth century with minimum fluctuation. As table 2 depicts, *dwelt* was used considerably more than *dwelled* in the past tenses, it only reminds us the steady use of irregular form *dwelt* by the nineteenth century authors. As the usage of *smelt* in past forms increases since 1782, with only a slight fluctuation (79%) during the 1821-1840, it continued to be used as an irregular verb form. In fact the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) confirms that *smelt* is now more frequent than *smelled* in British English (Levin 2009: 74). In addition to that, I would like to quote Anderwald (2016: 119), “*smell* is not attested in Old English, but occurs as a weak verb *smellen* since early Middle English; *spoil* is a Middle English loan word from Old French *espoillier* and was integrated into English morphology as a weak verb again”.

However, fig. 2 also demonstrates that both *burnt* and *burned* were used as past forms although *burnt* was used more (table 2: for specific numbers) than *burned*, as both forms were used with almost similar importance by the then authors, it seems that prescriptivism could not influence the past forms of these verbs. Although, *spelt* started its journey in the nineteenth century as the most frequently used past form compared to *spelled*, it could not hold its position and dropped to 50% during the 1820s, however, during the 1841 – 1860 it regained its usage as an irregular verb but eventually declined to less than 60% in usage to become a regularized form at the end of the nineteenth century. For the verb *spoil*, the more frequently used past form during the 18th century was *spoiled* (regular form), although it changed to the use of irregular form *spoilt* to almost 70%

in the beginning of the 19th century. It fell to less than 30% during the 1821 – 1840 and became regularized, however it rose gradually after that and fig. 2 indicates both the forms were used more or less by the authors. The corpus data for *learnt* shows that, during the nineteenth century, most authors preferred *learned* as the past tense, as we can see from fig. 2. The usage of *learnt* reached a high of 44.22% during the 1801 – 1820 period although the percentage was not consistent and fluctuated under 50% throughout the century. The line graph for *learnt* also signals an increase in the use of *learned* by the British authors, i.e. pointing towards regularization at the end of the nineteenth century.

DISCUSSION

From the analysis of the corpus data of eighteenth and the nineteenth century British fiction, it is clear that the verbs *spoil* and *learn* are on their way to regularization in the past tenses and *dwelt* holds its position as an irregular verb both in the 18th and in the 19th century. It can be easily noticed in the eighteenth century British data that *dwelled* didn't have any existence as a past form until the period 1761 – 1780. Similarly there was no use of *smelled* and *spelled* as past forms in the first forty years of the eighteenth century (table 1). On the other hand, the irregular form *spoilt* was not in use before the 1740s. In addition, *spell* and *burn* remained variable in the 19th century while *smell* showed a tendency towards irregularity. As described in the previous section, nineteenth century British fiction data is sizeable in amount for almost all the verbs I am discussing here, except for the *spelt/ spelled* and to some extent *smelt/ smelled*. The significant number of data for *spoil* and *learn* shows how much these verbs were in use in the past forms during the nineteenth century and subsequently become regular.

In this part, I would like to discuss the relationship between prescriptivism and the data I found from the 18th and 19th century British fiction. I will also attempt to compare these data with the data from Anderwald's research on American English. Lindley Murray (1795), while discussing irregular verbs, acknowledges *dwelt* to be a frequently used irregular verb in his list of irregular verbs. He mentioned *dwelt* in both past and past participle forms. Palmer (1989: 251) admits that the verbs *smell*, *spell*, *burn*, *spoil*, *learn* and *dwelt* can end in either *-t* or *-ed*. In addition, Murphy (2019: 292) suggests that the verbs under discussion can both be regular or irregular, however, he argues, in British English the irregular forms such as *-burnt* and *learnt* are more usual. Biber et al. (1999: 396) agrees that, "for *spoil*, the regular form is preferred for past tense, while the irregular form is preferred for past participles. For *burn*, however, the irregular form is preferred for past tense, while the regular form is preferred for past participles." If I compare the British data in this paper with the American ones' by Anderwald, it is interesting to note that in American grammars "*burn* is already variable at the beginning of the nineteenth century. *Burnt* is used in just over half of all cases in COHA in the 1810s and 1820s; after this time *burnt* declines steadily, and becomes a marginal form at the end of the century" (Anderwald 2016: 127). She also claims that, for the *burn* class, American English "prefers regular forms over irregular ones (although at different rates for different lexemes), and has higher incidences of regular forms than British English" (2016: 121). Latham (1843: 113) recognizes the verbs *-dwelt*, *spell*, *burn*, *spoil* and *learn*

for having “two forms for the preterite; one in *d*, the other in *t*” for the closer sounds. Anderwald (2016: 126) supports him saying, “he correctly distinguishes *dwelt* (and *knelt*) with irregular forms from the other lexemes, which have two forms for the preterite, and are thus correctly identified as variable”. Levin (2009: 74) also says that, British English has a substantial amount of variation between groups of verbs than American English. In fact he claims, “some linguists have assumed that the verbs are regularizing in BrE. However, the high proportion of irregular forms in BrE in the present material does not support this claim. The variation can instead be argued to be deeply entrenched in the BrE verb system, and since this variation correlates with meaningful variation, the *-ed/-t* difference is unlikely to disappear” (2009: 75). In her research of variable past tense usage in American English, Anderwald (2016: 77) suggests, “we can rule out ‘prescriptivism’ as a *cause* for the change that is observable in COHA: demonstrably language changes first, and much later the grammar books react”. She also comments that, “eighteenth-century grammar writing on the whole was not very concerned with prescribing or proscribing individual past tense forms” (2016: 63). Based on my research data from British fiction and also considering the views expressed by the linguists and grammarians, it can be said that, most British grammarians mentioned both the past tenses except mentioned in the tables above (using *-t* and *-ed*), and they do not seem to prefer one past form over the other. The usage of the past forms changes over time and among societies and as Anderwald said previously about the COHA, similarly, perhaps for British English, grammars react later than the language change in a society. So, the influence of prescriptivism on English irregular verbs is perhaps little or not much.

CONCLUSION

The corpus data in this paper shows the development of the variable past tense forms of the verbs – *dwelt*, *smell*, *spell*, *burn*, *spoil* and *learn* in the eighteenth and nineteenth century British fiction. In the introduction and in the historical overview section I provided the background of prescriptivism and some views of grammarians as well as I defined the regular and irregular verbs. In the methodology and corpus data section, I presented the data from the 18th and the 19th century British fiction and explained the trends. At the end, in the result and discussion part, I discussed the result along with the observations of the grammarians in the same field and subject. Finally, I would like to say that British English, in most cases shows more variation than American English. As Anderwald (2014: 435) argued in her research on prescriptivism in American English that, “there was no indication in the grammars that the specific regular past-tense forms I investigated were actually actively endorsed by grammarians”, similarly, I would like to conclude that, in the verbs that I discussed, perhaps there was less or almost no prescriptive influence of the grammars. It can also be mentioned that, regarding prescriptivism, Beal (2004: 120) asserts, “... we should not condemn the prescriptivism of eighteenth-century grammarians out of hand without considering the historical context in which their works were written” considering the fact that “... all grammars, however scholarly, are products of their time, and reflect the prevailing ideologies.”

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Appendix**18th century British Fiction**

Present form	Variable past form(s)	1700 - 1720	1721 - 1740	1741 - 1760	1761 - 1780
		7 corpus files	31 corpus files	33 corpus files	21 corpus files
dwell	dwelt	7 past , 2 pp	19 past, 7 pp	68 past, 14pp	20 past, 1 pp
	dwelled	0	0	0	2 past, 0 pp
smell	smelt	3 past, 0 pp	5 past, 2 pp	2 past, 0 pp	2 past, 1 pp
	smelled	0	0	2 past, 0 pp	3 past, 0 pp
spell	spelt	0	2 past, 1 pp	12 past, 3pp	1 past, 0 pp
	spelled	0	0	3 past, 0 pp	0
burn	burnt	19 past, 1 pp	39 past, 7 pp	82 past, 20 pp	20 past, 8 pp
	burned	0	6 past, 1 pp	11 past, 2 pp	8 past, 3 pp
spoil	spoilt	0	0	10 past, 1 pp	2 past, 3 pp
	spoiled	1 past, 3 pp	7 past, 1 pp	24 past, 24 pp	11 past, 9 pp
learn	learnt	13 past, 9 pp	19 past, 6 pp	58 past, 52 pp	49 past, 22 pp
	learned	14 past, 0 pp	78 past, 31 pp	526 past, 73 pp	144 past, 39 pp

Here, **past** means past tense form and **pp** means past participle form.

19th century British Fiction

Present form	Variable past form(s)	1781 - 1800	1801 - 1820	1821 - 1840	1841 - 1860	1861 - 1880	1881 - 1903
		25 corpus files	28 corpus files	42 corpus files	49 corpus files	60 corpus files	46 corpus files
dwell	dwelt	94 past, 13 pp	80 past, 12 pp	162 past, 34 pp	130 past, 21 pp	171 past, 31 pp	95 past, 14 pp
	dwelled	0	1 past, 1 pp	1 past	0	11 past, 2 pp	7 past
smell	smelt	4 past	5 past	15 past, 7 pp	69 past, 5 pp	54 past, 6 pp	39 past, 4 pp
	smelled	3 past	0	4 past, 3 pp	0	4 past, 1 pp	5 past, 2 pp
spell	spelt	2 past	3 past	5 past, 3 pp	30 past, 1 pp	17 past, 2 pp	11 past, 2 pp
	spelled	0	3 past	3 past	1 past	5 past	9 past, 1 pp
burn	burnt	32 past, 4 pp	64 past, 11 pp	170 past, 31 pp	191 past, 34 pp	193 past, 66 pp	111 past, 36 pp
	burned	23 past, 4 pp	49 past, 7 pp	53 past, 14 pp	112 past, 25 pp	149 past, 40 pp	85 past, 23 pp
spoil	spoilt	18 past, 6 pp	32 past, 7 pp	19 past, 9 pp	57 past, 25 pp	76 past, 36 pp	37 past, 15 pp
	spoiled	8 past, 7 pp	36 past, 14 pp	50 past, 14 pp	74 past, 41 pp	74 past, 37 pp	40 past, 21 pp
learn	learnt	55 past, 44 pp	130 past, 87 pp	108 past, 72 pp	237 past, 249 pp	113 past, 141 pp	149 past, 151 pp
	learned	289 past, 104 pp	164 past, 52 pp	510 past, 138 pp	501 past, 184 pp	572 past, 482 pp	206 past, 125 pp

Here, **past** means past tense form and **pp** refers to past participle form.