

Kibbitzer 4

Less and Fewer?

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Background

There is a basic school rule that is typically used to guide the choice of “less” or “fewer”. As you probably know, “less” is supposed to be used with uncountable nouns and “fewer” with plural countables. So, according to this rule, we should write or say “fewer dollars” but “less money”. Indeed, according to this rule, supermarket checkout signs should say “ten items or fewer” but most say “ten items or less”. Even if “ten items or less” is often considered not fully correct, there remain a few occasions where “less” will work with countable plurals. For instance, some years ago in Singapore posters could be seen which urged the populace to “Speak more Mandarin, speak less dialects”. This clearly meant “speak Mandarin more and dialects less” rather than “speak a smaller number of dialects”! So what is the situation with regard to academic speech at the University of Michigan at the end of the 20th century?

Findings

Fewer

In the MICASE data, there were many more examples of *less*. This is not surprising since *less* has a much wider spread of use than *fewer* does, as in “this is less good” or “she is studying less”. In fact, there are only 37 entries for *fewer*; three of these are indeterminate, but 34 are used to modify plural countable nouns. Two examples are:

- 1) Well, so there’s two basic dimensions, one is.... And the other is removing them altogether or replacing them with a task that requires *fewer* resources.
- 2) I like them in groups of eight or *fewer*.

It may be significant that only two of these 34 were uttered by young undergraduates. It is also the case that nobody “overcorrects” by using *fewer* when *less* would be more appropriate.

Less

According to Chen’s work cited in *The Grammar Book*, *less* as a replacement for *fewer* is less likely to occur directly before countable nouns than in other contexts (such as comparative structures (i.e. *less than ten people*). So let’s consider these cases first.

Of the 580 tokens for *less*, 73 are used directly before nouns with 16 before nouns that might be considered plural countables. So let’s look at some examples to try and work out what is going on.

There is one clear case of the Singapore-type instance noted above, and one less clear one. In

terms of the first, there are three repeated examples of *less sports* in the swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated*. Clearly “fewer sports” would be less appropriate here, because the speaker stresses that there is lower coverage of sports, rather than a reduction in the number of sports covered. The other potential candidate for traditionally correct usage is:

- 3) ...what do you do on a hot day? ...
take your clothes off i don't know, less clothes

This would work if a distinction is made between fewer items of clothes as opposed to less clothing covering the body.

Then there are two examples of *less data* (see Kibbitzer 1 for a discussion of the countability of this noun).

Of the remaining nine tokens (12% of the total), as many as four involve the noun *people*:

- 4a) if there's *less people* going to undergraduate school
4b) it's just *less people* hang glide than play football
4c) *less people* skydive than ski
4d) then there's *less people* available to go

Two things are worth noting here: 1) *people* is a frequent noun and grammatical change is often associated with high frequency items; and 2) *people* is an irregular plural, and maybe the absence of an “s” encourages this particular usage.

Finally, of the seven known speakers of these nine utterances, six are undergrads and one is junior graduate. This small finding, along with that of older speakers using *fewer* suggests that, in this particular aspect of speech, US usage is changing.

Less than

The Grammar Book (p.728) states that "Separation of *fewer* from the head noun encourages the use of *less*" followed by the example of "less than 50 people". So let's finally consider the case of *less than*. There are 142 examples of *less than* in MICASE, only five of which are adverbials like "women are paid less than men". Of the remaining 137, 97 (71%) have singular or uncountable complements. Therefore, some 40 instances remain to be accounted for.

Around 10 are clear cases where *fewer* would be formally preferred, and would most likely be chosen in writing:

- 5) and I think there's less than a hundred of these left,
6) and then there's been less than a hundred cases total in the past seven years
7) there's like less than five other places in Europe
8) now way at the bottom, less than ten thousand bucks
9) in United States less than five percent of the C-E-Os are women.

On the other hand, there would seem to be a rather different rule that applies to certain

mathematical or numerical calculations, a number of which are quite common in some speech events:

- 10) the order must be less than or equal to ten, by Fermatt's theorem.
- 11) the probability that X is less than six
- 12) photoelectrons are scattered forward at less than forty degrees.

Less in these cases seems to be operating as "some lower number than", as in:

- 10a) the order must be ten or some lower number than ten, by Fermatt's theorem.

Finally, there are cases like:

- 13) it'll go through in less than ten seconds

This seems perfectly reasonable if we interpret it as:

- 13a) it'll go through in less time than ten seconds

Rather than:

- 13b) it'll go though in fewer seconds than ten.

Since the great majority of these instances of *less than* with plural complements were spoken by faculty or senior graduate students, in this case there is no real evidence of any generational shift in usage.
