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(A)WAKE(N): A Study in Lexical and Grammatical Variation

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The knowledge that standards in English are often arbitrary does not seem to reduce the stigma attached to "folk" forms such as "them things," "you was," "have went." But standard grammar is an elusive, indeed in some ways illusory ideal. Thomas Creswell has shown that dictionaries have surprisingly little common ground in their precepts and prescriptions regarding usage (Usage in Dictionaries and Dictionaries or Usage, unpublished University of Chicago dissertation, 1974). His study concludes that, for the 228 items treated in the usage notes of The American Heritage Dictionary, no correlation can be made between the judgments of its usage panel and the treatment of these items in nine other famous dictionaries. The historical reasons why English so singularly defies the efforts of purists can be demonstrated by variant forms: An anomaly that most manifestly and manifoldly tells the protean story of English is that of the verbs made upon the base form wake (past tense variants waked, waked up, wakened, wakened up, woke, woke up, awoke, awaked, awakened).

The forms of (a)wake(n) are remarkable not only for their variety but for the fact that almost all of them seem to be within the bounds of standard grammar. Several questions come to mind: 1) why did so many forms arise, 2) how much have they been differentiated in meaning, 3) what patterns of social and geographical distribution exist for these forms. In dealing with the third question I have drawn upon data, as yet unpublished, from the files of the Linguistic Atlas of the North Central States and of the Dictionary of American Regional English.

Part of the reason for the existence of such a variety of forms for the same meaning is easy to explain: the hodgepodge has existed from the earliest times in our language. In Old English there were eight relevant infinitive forms for these verbs, owing to strong and weak variants, and forms with the prefixes on- or a-.

1 The a- prefix is a reduced equivalent of the on- prefix.

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1) *wacan, pas. woc, p.p. wacen (usu. intrans.): waken, be born, spring to life
2) waecnan (waecnian), -ede or ode (intr): waken, be born, spring to life
3) wacian, -ode (intr. & tr.): keep watch, wake
4) awacan, pas. awoc, p.p. awacen (intr.): awake from sleep; come into being
5) awacian, -ode (intr.): awake from sleep
6) awaecnan (awacnian; awaecnian), -ode (intr.): awaken, revive, originate
7) onwacan, pas. onwoc, p.p. onwacen = awacan
8) onwaecnan (onwaecnian; onwaecnian), -ede or ode (intr.): awake, arise, be born or derived (= awaecnan)

Cf. weccan, pas. wehte (trans.): rouse, stir, excite, wake up

(Definitions summarized and collated from the Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary and Oxford English Dictionary (OED)).

All these forms were at first ordinarily intransitive, the transitive use being weccan. Eventually, the intransitive forms were adapted to transitive use, tending to displace weccan. The only clear distinction in meaning among these intransitive Old English variants seems to be that of the weak verb wacian, "to keep watch." The other verbs seem to be interchangeable, in the various closely connected literal or metaphorical meanings "to awake from sleep, come into being, be born, be derived, spring to life, revive, originate, arise," except that the forms with n infix, from which derives ModE (a)wake(n), are chiefly metaphorical.2

In Middle English, the verbs became levelled to four main infinitive forms that are the basis of modern disparate usage: 1) awaken, 2) awaknen, 3) wake, 4) waken. The final -n forms waken and awaken in modern English are due to the presence of -n in the root of the Old English weak forms waecnan, awaecnan, onwaecnan. The wake verbs are almost the only ones to have -n forms and n-less forms continuing to exist side by side in contemporary English. Modern English verbs with the -n suffix are mostly new formations on a noun or adjective base, e.g., lengthen, strengthen, lighten, tighten, darken, flatten. In Middle English, the strong and weak variants in the finite forms seem to have been used at random interchangeably, and all four base forms were used both transitively and intransitively. Already in Middle English, however, the final -n form waken was losing ground to wake in the main meaning, "to arise from sleep." In Middle English times, the form wake became the exclusive verb to mean "keep watch or vigil," and remains so today. This seems to be the chief differentiation in meaning among the forms of Middle English, though a collation of definitions and examples from the OED and the Middle English Dictionary (H. Durath and S. Kuhn, University of Michigan Press, 1956), shows the following breakdown:

1) awaken, pas. awoke or awakened, p.p. awaken, awake(n)
   a) to awake from sleep or lethargy (intr.)
   b) to watch (intr.)
   c) to happen, originate (intr.)
   d) to cause (trans.)
   e) to wake up (trans.)
   f) to arouse, excite (trans.)
   g) to attack (trans.)

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3 Exceptions to this seem for the most part to be archaic, e.g., hark and harken.

4 Note the sameness in context in the following examples from the Middle English Dictionary: c.1175 "On maregen . . . he awoc," HRood 2/15. c.1230 "pa he awakede," Ancr. 64a. "Theseus of his sleep awakened," Ch., KnT. A2523. "His spirit God restored . . . and he awook," Ch., Sum.T. D1703. 1375 "Softili he a-wakede," WPal. 677. c.1380 "Flo-ripppe a-wok and cryde an haste," Pirumb. (1)2432. 1470 "The Kynge awoke and myssed his scauberde," Malory, Wks, 151/1. 1500 "He a-wakyd and meruaylede of this vision," Spec. Sacer. 197/18. The employment of the n infix form for figurative uses occurs in Middle English as in Old English, though perhaps not so pronounced as in Old English. More than half of the citations for awakenen in the MED are in a figurative sense.
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2) awak(e)nen (OE awaecn(i)an and onwaecn(i)an), pas. awak(e)ned, or awakenen  
   a) awake from sleep (intr.)  
   b) awake (trans.)  
   c) come to exist (intr.)  
   d) cause (trans.)  

3) wake, pas. woke, waked, p.p. waken, woken, woke, waked  
   a. become awake (intr.)  
   b) remain awake (intr.)  
   c) keep watch (intr.)  
   d) guard (trans.)  
   e) keep a vigil or prayer, or a wake over a corpse (intr.)  
   f) study late (intr.)  
   g) wake someone up (trans.)  

4) waken, pas. wakened, p.p. wakened  
   a) become awake (intr.)  
   b) become stirred up or active (intr.)  
   c) rouse from sleep (trans.)  

For some reason, the strong forms woke and awoke fell into disuse during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Thus today we say /wok/ instead of /wuk/, which would be the pronunciation now if the strong forms had been used during the centuries of the Great Vowel Shift. Even well into the seventeenth century these strong forms were eschewed in literary English, as, for example, in Shakespeare and Milton. But woke and awoke did become reintroduced in the seventeenth century on the pattern of break--broke. The other significant development in the early modern period was the addition of the particle up, attested in the OED as early as 1535 (Coverdale, "Wake up, ye dronckards," co. King James  

5 Shakespeare has wak'd, waken'd, wakened, but not woke or awoke (Harvard Concordance to Shakespeare, Harvard University Press, 1973). The King James Bible, besides awaked (eight instances) has the prefixed form awoke in the past tense (eight instances), but only waked (one instance) and wakened (two instances) in the unprefixed past tense and past participle (James Strong, An Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, New York, 1890). Milton has waked, awaked, and awakened, not woke, awoke, or wakened (John Bradshaw, A Concordance to the Poetical Works of John Milton, Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965).
Bible, "Awake, ye drunkards," Joel 1.5), and the form wake up has gained in frequency ever since.

We now come to consider the state of these verbs in English today. It is to be either lamented or celebrated that English has not achieved the neatness and precision of the use of these forms that is manifest in modern German: the transitive verb in German is wecken, the intransitive aufwachen meaning "full wakefulness," the common term for ordinary waking up being wach werden; special senses exist as follows: metaphorical use--erwecken; literary word--erwachen; waken from the dead--auferwechen (tr.), auferwachen (intr.). By contrast, in English the forms have been more or less in free variation historically, and no less so at present. Dictionaries and dictionaries of usage tend to feel uncomfortable about this situation. In A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage, Bergen and Cornilia Evans comment as follows:

The past tense is woke, waked, or wakened. The participle is waked, wakened, woke, or woken. Each of these ... forms may have the prefix a, as in awake, awaken, awoke, and so on, or it may form a compound verb with up, as in wake up, woke up, wakened up, and so on. This gives us twenty-seven forms for the principal parts of this verb, where ordinarily two forms are enough, as in talk, talked. This is certainly more words than we need for such a simple act.


7Cf. Early Modern English (King James Bible), Judges 16.14, "And he awaked out of his sleep." Judges 16.20, "And he awoke out of his sleep." The figurative sense of the n infix verbs that was seen in Old English and to a degree in Middle English is nicely illustrated (though in past participle rather than past tense) in one verse: "And the angel that talked with me came again, and waked me, as a man that is wakened out of his sleep." Zech. 1.4. As to the contemporary English, the citations in Webster's Third New International for the item awaken imply that its usual application is for figurative senses. Six of the seven citations illustrating the use of the word are in a figurative sense. The figurative function of the unprefixe d form waken, however, is not so pronounced according to the evidence of the citations under waken.
The only distinction they make as to usage, however, is a mild proscription concerning the past participles:

The participles that have a vowel o, as in had woke, has awoken, and so on, are not considered standard in the United States but are still acceptable in Great Britain. Aside from this all the forms are equally acceptable and which one is used is entirely a matter of individual taste.

Fowler (A Dictionary of Modern English Usage) devotes half a page to making subtle distinctions, for example, "Awake & awaken are usually preferred . . . in figurative senses," but in general acknowledges that "Distinction between the forms is difficult." The American Heritage Dictionary, however, makes specific, ostensibly descriptive but intuitive sounding assertions:

The verbs wake, waken, awake, and awaken are alike in meaning but differentiated in usage. Each has transitive and intransitive senses, but awake is used largely intransitively and waken transitively. In the passive voice, awaken and waken are the more prevalent: He awoke to the danger; his suspicions were awakened. Wake is frequently used with up; the others do not take a preposition. The preferred past participle of awake is awaked, not awoke: He had awaked several times earlier in the night.

Other works such as The Random House Dictionary portray a sense of the synonymy of the variants. Although providing separate entries for the variants, the RHD defines them in terms of each other: awake means "to wake up"; waken means "to awake, [or] waken," wake means "to awake, awaken, [or] waken," waken means "to wake, awake, [or] waken." And one is hard put to credit the differentiation in the specific definitions of these words in the RHD, e.g., "to rouse to action," (awake) "to rouse from sleep," (waken) "to rouse from inactivity," (wake).

With regard to grammaticality, even the more exotic of these forms seem to have respectability in some areas. Whereas participial forms such as in have broke, though standard or literary in the eighteenth century (cf. Gray's Elegy, "Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke") are no longer in reputable use, have woke is within the realm of Standard British English, and have woken, though perhaps tainted to American ears, is good enough for the Times Literary Supplement (cited in the OED). The fact that the various aberrant forms are accepted into standard English--British and American--probably owes to the circumstance that no one of these forms is stereotypical of folk usage,
becoming a badge of illiteracy or lack of education. So, for example, though the historically prominent weak variants waked, etc., are now somewhat rural and archaic, and forms such as wakened have become in England quite localized, they are not thought of as substandard.

In the United States a very mixed, not to say mixed up situation obtains regionally and socially. The files of the Linguistic Atlas of the North Central States, for example, list twelve variants in the past tense, in the context of the frame "I woke up early," viz. woke, woke up, awoke, waked, waked up, awakened, wakened, wakened up, awakened, got awake, woked up, awoken. Only the last two of these are so bizarre as to be readily called nonstandard or uneducated usages. The Handbook of the Linguistic Geography of New England lists a mere nine variants: awakened, awoke, waked, waked up, wakened, woke, woke up, woken. In the east, as elsewhere both in England and the U.S., the common form is woke up. The weak form waked is found mostly in New England and the South. A fifth of the older informants in eastern New England used waked, only one-eighth of the younger informants. In North Carolina, however, waked appeared in fully two-thirds of the cultured informants. Rarer forms including waked, wakened, awakened, and also the prefixed form awoke are all found in cultured informants, and we do not call these relatively uncommon variants nonstandard.

In a synopsis of the grammatical data in the Linguistic Atlas of the Upper Midwest, Harold Allen indicates that in general grammatical variation decreases as one moves west, at least as far as the Upper Midwest is concerned:


9 At the University of Chicago, and being edited for publication. The "North Central States" are Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, and the Canadian province of Ontario.


Some of the older minor [verb form] variants contributing to regional subdialect differences along the Atlantic coast failed to survive during the western migration; others persist so weakly as to be inadequate criterions for geographical patterns.12

This is illustrated by the fact that in the Upper Midwest "Only two forms not school-approved have clearly gained in frequency, drank ppl. and dove pret." (p. 84). The possibilities of language variation begin infinite, however, a Utopian grammatical uniformity is, clearly, not in sight. Despite Allen's observation that "the Upper Midwest has fewer [grammatical variations] than the North Central States," the picture is not a simple one. In the forms selected for the present study, we find problems and developments that indicate it is hard to predict what will happen in certain features of grammar from one time and place to another.

The files for the North Central States, for example, show somewhat different patterns for the verbs in question from what one might guess on the basis of the Atlas materials for the East Coast and the Upper Midwest.13 Whereas, to take the commonest form, the incidence of the predominant woke up is inversely proportional to age and education in the Upper Midwest, this relationship does not exist in the North Central States.14 Educated speakers in the North Central States have a higher rate of conformity than those in the Upper Midwest. Using the criterion of age alone, two-thirds of the younger speakers (Type B according to the Atlas classification) use woke up in the NCS, only slightly higher than the rate in older speakers (60 percent in Type


13Much of the data on verb forms for the North Central States is presented by Virginia McDavid, Verb Forms of the North Central States and Upper Midwest, University of Minnesota dissertation, 1956. The data that I am using is my first-hand examination of the updated Atlas files themselves, for a breakdown of the wake verbs in greater analytical detail.

14The relative incidence of woke up is about 65 percent in Type I, about 60 percent in Type II, but almost 70 percent in Type III.
A), which is scant evidence of a trend toward levelling. The only form that shows much difference in incidence with respect to age is that of waked up, an uncommon form in any case, showing up in 10 percent of older speakers and only 3 percent of younger speakers. These latter statistics do accord with the information from the East Coast that the waked forms are recessive.

Even these recessive forms have peculiar staying power. The eight to ten major variants of the wake verbs following their erratic paths even within the bounds of standard grammar. Thus, while waked and waked up, being historically archaic forms, have the expected higher incidence in Type I speakers, other more or less common variants persist in low profile among various speaker types. The prefixed weak form awakened has more than double the incidence in NCS Type II and III speakers as in Type I. From Old English times up through Fowler we recall that this form is somewhat literary or metaphorical; it is indeed rarefied in its usage, at the rate of 2 percent incidence in Type I speakers, up to a healthier 5 percent in Types II and III in NCS. Concerning strong form variants other than the common woke up, the naked form woke has nearly double the incidence in Type II (13 percent) compared to Type I (7 percent), while apparently being eschewed by the more learned (4 percent incidence, Type III). The prefixed but unparticled awoke is just slightly more popular in Types II and III (10 percent) vs. Type I (7 percent) in the NCS.

The up adjunct seems to perform no essential semantic function in these verbs. It does not change the essential meaning of the base, except as it would distinguish the common meaning of the verb from the specialized meaning "to keep a vigil." The popularity of the up forms is perhaps an upshot of the modern addition of up to any number of common verbs. Yet whereas up often not only adapts its verb to a new sense but imparts a colloquial touch to the modified form, as in touch up, give up, mess up, ring up, the wake verbs are essentially unaffected in meaning by up, the modification being one of idiom rather than of tone or meaning. The variants without up, since more uncommon in contemporary English, probably have a formal effect in speakers who use or hear more than one form. In the NCS, usually the uncommon variant forms were given together with a more common form, e.g., "woke up," or "wakened" (a southeastern Wisconsin informant), "awoke," or "woke," or "awakened" (a south central Michigan informant). Forms with up dominated three to one in both Type I and Type III, confirming the long establishment of these forms, and their fully standard status among educated speakers. In Type II speakers the incidence of up forms was somewhat less but still high--two to one.
Geographically, in the NCS only a couple of these forms show a ready pattern. The recessive weak forms (waked, waked up, awaked) appear in rural areas, heaviest in Kentucky, southern Indiana, and western Ohio, though scattered instances occur throughout the NCS in the urban areas of the Type III informants. For items that are scattered and sporadic, as these forms are, it is particularly desirable to get as much data over as wide an area as possible. An overall view for the geographical distribution of the wake verbs can be gotten from the material in the files for the Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE) located at the University of Wisconsin and currently being edited for publication. Without respect to criteria of age or educational background, though such information is also available for analysis, the relative frequency of the various forms of these verbs nationwide is roughly what it is regionally in the NCS: two-thirds incidence of woke up, and a range of from 15 to 5 percent incidence, in descending order, for awoke, awakened, woke, and waked up. The incidence of wakened is 5 percent in the NCS files and 2 percent in the DARE files (nationwide). At one percent or less are waked, awaked, and wakened up. One form, got awake, historically from the Pennsylvania Dutch area, nationwide (DARE data) appears in only two states other than Pennsylvania (one informant each in Ohio and Virginia), confirming the localization of this form that had been indicated by the data for the various regional linguistic atlases. The form waked up, which the Atlas materials had shown to be recessive in New England though somewhat fashionable in the South, shows up in a broad band throughout the South into Texas, but hardly at all in New England among DARE informants. A particular one of these variants thus will gain ground in one region while losing ground in another. Some of the less common forms are shown to be thinly but widely and fairly even dispersed, rather than withering away in isolated pockets. Rarefied forms like awakened and wakened have become nonregionally established nationwide in centers of population. Most of the regional patterns are fairly large. The strong forms woke and awoke, excluding woke up, are distributed throughout the North and East but almost absent in much of the inland South and the far West. West of the Mississippi, even the DARE data provide only scanty evidence for forms that are uncommon, as some of these variants are, for DARE used a rather small handful of informants in the less populous Rocky Mountain states (e.g., nine in Nevada, five in Montana), and thus rare or scattered variants will not be represented in these areas.

15 Atwood, p. 25.
Brief conclusions are in order. One is that standard grammar can tolerate more variation than is commonly believed. There forms demonstrate that variants of themselves need not be stigmatized: in some areas the majority form woke up is more pervasive among informants of lower education. The variants of the wake verbs have arisen for explicable historical reasons, namely, the collapsing and proliferating of several related verbs in Old English—prefixed and unprefixed forms, strong and weak forms. That such a glorious profusion of alternate forms should exist for a given lexical idea should not surprise or annoy us. There are several merits that we could ascribe to the persistence of these many forms, as, for example, that they remind us of the historical richness of our tongue, of the fine choices of rhythm and idiom at our disposal in any given context (a potential for subtle differentiation that is "not likely to be fully carried out," it has been said), and of the diversity of our language in various areas and social settings. But in a more fundamental sense, for the sake of their variety, we need all these forms. That is why they do exist. These forms vividly demonstrate that standard English grammar is not and can not be completely neat and tidy, nor should we want it to be so.