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# The Grass Does Not Grow Greener Still: Word Replacement in “Give, Said the Little Stream”

Peggy Worthen

Those who are familiar with the children’s song “‘Give, Said the Little Stream” and know the phrase “I’m small I know but wherever I go, the grass grows greener still” may be surprised to learn that in the current edition of the *Children’s Songbook*, it is not the “grass” that grows greener still, but the “fields” (1989).

When I first heard this, I was surprised. In fact, I did not believe it. To verify this information, I looked in the *Children’s Songbook*. Sure enough, it reads “fields.” My first impression was that the songbook’s publisher, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, had changed the phrase for some reason—a practice that is not unheard of. In order to determine when and why this word substitution had been made (someone suggested it was because the Church was concerned that “grass” had taken on the slang meaning of marijuana), I referred to an older version of the songbook. To my surprise it reads “fields” as well. Upon checking all the former songbooks back to the 1929 edition, I discovered that not one of them use the word “grass”; in each of them it is “fields” that the little stream makes greener.

While there had indeed been a word replacement in the way the song was commonly sung, it became clear that there had been no formal word replacement made by the Church. Somehow, at least some members of the Church had themselves made an informal word replacement over the years.

To try to determine how widespread this informal word replacement is and why it has occurred, I designed a survey which was administered randomly to members of the Church in various parts of the United States. The survey asked respondents to fill in the blank in the following line from “Give, Said the Little Stream”: “I’m small I know, but wherever I go, the \_\_\_ grows greener still.” The survey then requested various bits of demographic information (such as gender and age) and asked questions about where, when, and how respondents had learned the song. While the survey was not complete enough to provide definitive results, it did provide some interesting information that led to some preliminary thoughts about why the word replacement occurred.

First, how widespread is the misconception that the correct word is “grass” and not “fields”? Of the 146 who responded to the survey, 120 (or 82 percent) indicated that the word was “grass”; 23 (or 16 percent) indicated it was “fields” and 3 (2 percent) gave another answer (see table 1). Thus, it seems clear that a fairly significant word replacement has occurred over the years.

A review of the other data raised several other interesting points. One surprising result is that there is very little correlation between learning the song from the songbook and learning it correctly. Of the 36 respondents who indicated that they had learned the song directly from the songbook, 27 (or 75 percent) stated that the word was

“grass” and not “fields” (see table 2). One possible explanation for this rather curious result may be that the respondents honestly thought they had learned the song from the songbook, when in reality they had not. A more likely explanation is that the respondents really did learn it from the songbook, but later fell into the word replacement trap for other reasons. While this may sound far-fetched at first, a discussion with a noted LDS songwriter convinced me that word replacement occurs much more frequently than one might at first imagine.

Songwriter Janice Kapp Perry told me that she experienced a case of word replacement. In her song “The Test” there is a phrase that says “Help me see, if you understand, why doesn’t He who healed the lame man come with healing in His wings?” One day, after this song had been published and recorded, she sang it for an audience; after she was finished a woman commented on the change she had made in the song. Perry replied that she had not made any changes. The woman pointed out that instead of singing the word “wings,” Perry had sung the word “hands.” The woman was right. Perry had inadvertently sung “hands” instead of “wings” because “hands” rhymes with “understand” and sounds better. Now whenever she sings the song she intentionally sings “hands” in hopes that others will start singing it that way, too. Perry changed a word in performance without realizing it, because the word rhymed and it came naturally to her. Perry’s experience shows that even the author can unconsciously engage in word replacement when other linguistic factors are at work. In her case, it was the rhyming scheme that proved to be so attractive. In the case of “Give, Said the Little Stream,” the word replacement may have arisen from the “allure of alliteration.” “Grass grows greener” is simply more pleasing to the ear, easier to say, and more likely to be remembered than “fields grow greener.”

This may have an especially strong influence on Primary-age children. It seems that they are much more adept at learning and remembering alliterative verses—such as “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers” or “she sells seashells by the seashore”—than a plain verse that uses no alliteration. This explanation also draws support from one of the three survey responses that gave an answer other than “fields” or “grass.” The respondent indicated that it was the “ground” which “grows greener,” a response which seems to be prompted almost exclusively by the power or allure of alliteration.

A third possible explanation is suggested by survey data focusing on another way in which respondents learned the song. Eighty-six percent of those respondents who had learned the song through visual aids, rather than from the songbook or from another person, learned the word “grass” instead of “fields” (see table 2). That is eleven percent higher than those who learned it from the songbook. A visual aid showing a green field may easily be mistaken for green grass. A child learning “fields grow greener still” from such a picture could well remember the picture and forget the exact word being taught. Later the child might use the word which first popped into her mind when she remembered the picture rather than the word she was first taught.

That this may be at least a partial explanation of the word replacement is supported by the data collected concerning the nature of the area in which the respondent learned the song. Those who learned the song in an urban area were 37 percent more likely to have learned the word “grass” rather than “fields.” Eighty-nine percent of those in urban areas learned “grass”; only 52 percent of those in rural areas did so (see table 3). Those in an urban setting are more likely to view a picture of green grass as grass or lawn than as a field (which is something they don’t see every day), whereas

those who live in a rural setting seem more likely to perceive the same picture as a field, something that they do see around them every day.

Another possible reason the word was replaced is revealed by another interesting item in the data—the current age of the respondent. The older a person is, the more likely he is to have learned the song correctly. Only eight percent of the respondents who were below the age of 50 learned “fields,” while 41 percent of those 50 and over did so (see table 4). Again, several explanations are possible. The word replacement may be picking up steam by sheer momentum. Or there may have been some other means of learning or reinforcement that was going on when the younger respondents were learning the song.

One such reinforcement may have been that The Three Ds, a popular LDS singing group in the late 1960s and early 1970s (when many of today’s under 50 group were learning the song), sang and recorded the song using the word “grass” instead of “fields.” During this time period, The Three Ds performed in places like Las Vegas, opening for celebrities such as Bob Hope and Bob Newhart, and they recorded with Capital Records. “Give, Said the Little Stream” was one of their more popular songs, both in concert and on record. In fact, they would often end their concerts with the song, according to one member of the group, because it added to the mood. Many LDS people had copies of their recordings; thus, they were able to hear it often. It may well be that the power of the recorded version boosted the word replacement considerably, thus accounting for the generation gap revealed in the survey. (Incidentally, one of the members of the Three Ds, Duane Hiatt, told me that people familiar with the version of the song using “fields” would occasionally correct them, but he believed the word “grass” sounded better because of the alliteration).

If part of the source of the word replacement is the influence of recorded popular music, a return to the original version of the song could be expected because there is a current CD by LDS singer Brett Raymond entitled “Especially for Grown-ups” on which the song is recorded using the word “fields.” Perhaps this version may have an effect on those that hear it and change the common use of the word “grass” back to “fields.”

While highly suggestive, these conclusions must remain until a larger and more comprehensive study is conducted. Such a study could provide important insights into how and why word replacement occurs in popular culture.

## REFERENCES

- Children’s Songbook*. 1989. Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Table One. Responses to "The \_\_\_\_\_ grows greener still"

	Number of Respondents	Responses and Percentages		
		"grass"	"fields"	other
	146	120 (82%)	23 (16%)	3 (2%)

Table Two. Sources of Learning

	Number of Respondents	Responses and Percentages		
		"grass"	"fields"	other
From songbook	36	27 (75%)	8 (22%)	1 (3%)
From visual aid	74	64 (86%)	8 (11%)	2 (3%)
From another source	42	33 (78%)	9 (22%)	0 (0%)

Table Three. Urban vs. Rural

	Number of Respondents	Responses and Percentages		
		"grass"	"fields"	other
Learned in urban area	88	78 (89%)	7 (8%)	3 (3%)
Learned in rural area	27	14 (52%)	13 (48%)	0 (0%)

Table Four. Age of Respondents

	Number of Respondents	Responses and Percentages		
		"grass"	"fields"	other
Under 50	119	107 (90%)	10 (8%)	2 (2%)
50 and older	27	15 (56%)	11 (41%)	1 (3%)

Table Five. Gender of Respondents

	Number of Respondents	Responses and Percentages		
		"grass"	"fields"	other
Male	46	39 (85%)	6 (13%)	1 (2%)
Female	100	81 (81%)	17 (17%)	2 (2%)