

In the ever changing world of words there's a lot to take in

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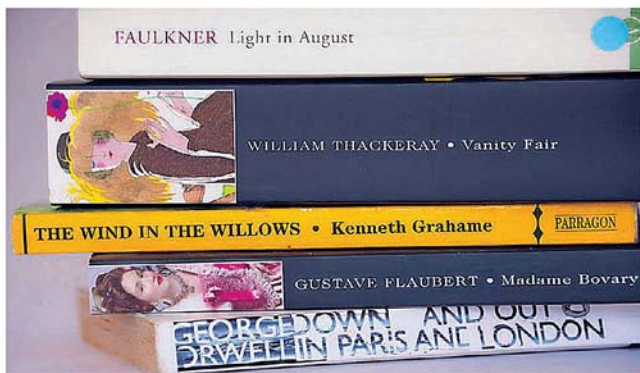
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I've recently been reading a book which was written in the 1860s. At one point, the author uses the expression "the new comers". Now, 150 years later, we would write "newcomers" and would pronounce it differently. The two-word spelling indicates that the Victorian pronunciation put the emphasis on come: new COMers. The modern spelling reflects the fact that we now put the stress on new: NEWcomers. What this change in stress shows is that the two original words have become a single word, just as "week END" has become "WEEKend".

I have previously written about how the phrase "three times" has replaced "thrice" in modern English; and that the word "mine" may be giving way to the expression "my one". This is part of a pattern where analytical, multi-word forms have taken over from more synthetic, single words in English.

But of course the opposite process must take place as well. There has to be a history of analytical forms becoming more synthetic, otherwise we wouldn't have had words like *thrice* in the first place.

Sometimes this two-words-become-one kind of development can have interesting grammatical consequences. Currently, the



■ Is it really wrong to say 'there's some books on the table?' asks Peter Trudgill.

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phrase "there is" is gradually turning into the single word "there's" in some contexts. We can see this happening by comparing speech and writing.

If we are writing, or speaking formally, we would normally make a difference between "There is a book on the table" and "There are some books on the table". But in normal everyday speech, it's quite usual for most of us to contract there is to there's and to say not only "There's a book on the table" but also "There's some books on the table".

Some people think this is wrong. They say "there is" is singular while "books" is plural. Those two assertions are perfectly

true. It's also correct that there's was originally a contracted form of there is.

But in contemporary English, it's very clear that "there's" is now both singular and plural. Really, it should be written "theres" – with no apostrophe – because it has turned into a single word, like newcomer. A similar example is provided by the French word *voilà*, which derives originally from the two-word sequence "vois là", "see there". This is grammatically interesting too, because *vois* is singular, while *voilà* can now be used when addressing several listeners.

In the world's languages, there's lots of other examples like this...