

Why there should be more chances to use the word 'less'

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In a light-hearted column in the EDP last week, new grandfather Paul Durrant came to some entertaining decisions about what role he could play in the new baby's life. A couple of his decisions, though, seemed a bit questionable to me.

First, Paul wants to make sure his grandson will be able to recite the names of the West Bromwich Albion side that won the FA Cup in 1954. Really? Surely what he actually means is the names of the Norwich City side that made it to the semi-final replay in 1959?

And he wants the little boy to know the grammatical difference between less and fewer. I think he's on to a loser there too. Paul has probably been listening to self-appointed grammar experts who reckon that 'less' should apply only to singular nouns, while 'fewer' applies to the plural: less cheese, less water, less time, less money; but fewer biscuits, fewer drinks, fewer minutes, fewer coins.

'Less of it', they say, but 'fewer of them'. But millions of people do actually say 'less biscuits, less drinks'. English-speaking people have always done that, ever since



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the time of King Alfred. The "less-fewer rule" was invented at the end of the 18th century by someone who had nothing better to do.

So I don't think we can be at all surprised if normal English-speaking people say 'less drinks'. It's been normal in English for a millennium and a half. And, anyway, what these would-be grammarians tell us is that the use of 'fewer' versus 'less' is a purely automatic consequence of whether these words modify plural or singular nouns. Plural – fewer. Singular – less. That's it.

But if an alternation is totally automatic, then it's useless. It doesn't do any work. It doesn't tell you anything. It has no signifi-

cance. There is no point in differentiating between them at all, so it's no surprise if people don't.

After all, what is the opposite of less cheese? More cheese.

What is the opposite of fewer people? More people.

If 'more' works perfectly well for both singular and plural, then 'less' can do the same. If we don't need a separate word for 'more' in the plural, then we don't need 'fewer' either.

However, if you do prefer to say 'fewer of them' – and why not, if you want to – be sure to pronounce it in the correct Norwich way. So that will be: Fur on 'em.