

# British heads and American asses

**Regional, register and recent variation  
in the Body Part *Off/Out* Construction**

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# The Body Part *Off/Out* Construction

*Susan worked / swam / danced her head off last night.*

*Fred talked his head / his ass / his butt off, but to no avail.*

(Jackendoff 1997a: 551)

*John cried his head off / his eyes out / his heart out.*

(For full references, see our abstract.)

# The Body Part *Off/Out* construction

A subtype of the resultative (or caused-motion) construction?

*... we've developed a whole new set of exercises that tone every part of your body, and **blowtorch the fat off** in no time. (www)*

Not really. Syntactically yes, semantically no.

*I have been **exercising my ass off** for the past 3 weeks and I think I have lost oh about ONE POUND!!!! Discouraging much!!!! (www)*

# Claims in this presentation

There's a lot of **conventionality** in the use of the BPOC because of differences

1. between languages (e.g. English and Dutch)
2. between verbs (and the body part nouns they combine with)
3. between registers → **register variation**
4. between BrE and AmE → **regional variation**
5. between periods of time → **recent variation**
6. between individual speakers, no doubt

# 1. Differences between languages

En *He's laughing his ass off.*

Du *\*Hij lacht zijn gat af.*

En *\*She sang her lungs out of her body.*

Du *Ze zong haar longen uit haar lijf.*

En *\*That boy runs him(self) the balls off of the body.*

Du *Die jongen rent zich de ballen van het lijf.*

En *\*I'm laughing my(self) a hunch.*

Du *Ik lach me een bult.* (intensifying double object construction)

## 2. Differences between verbs (and choice of body part noun)

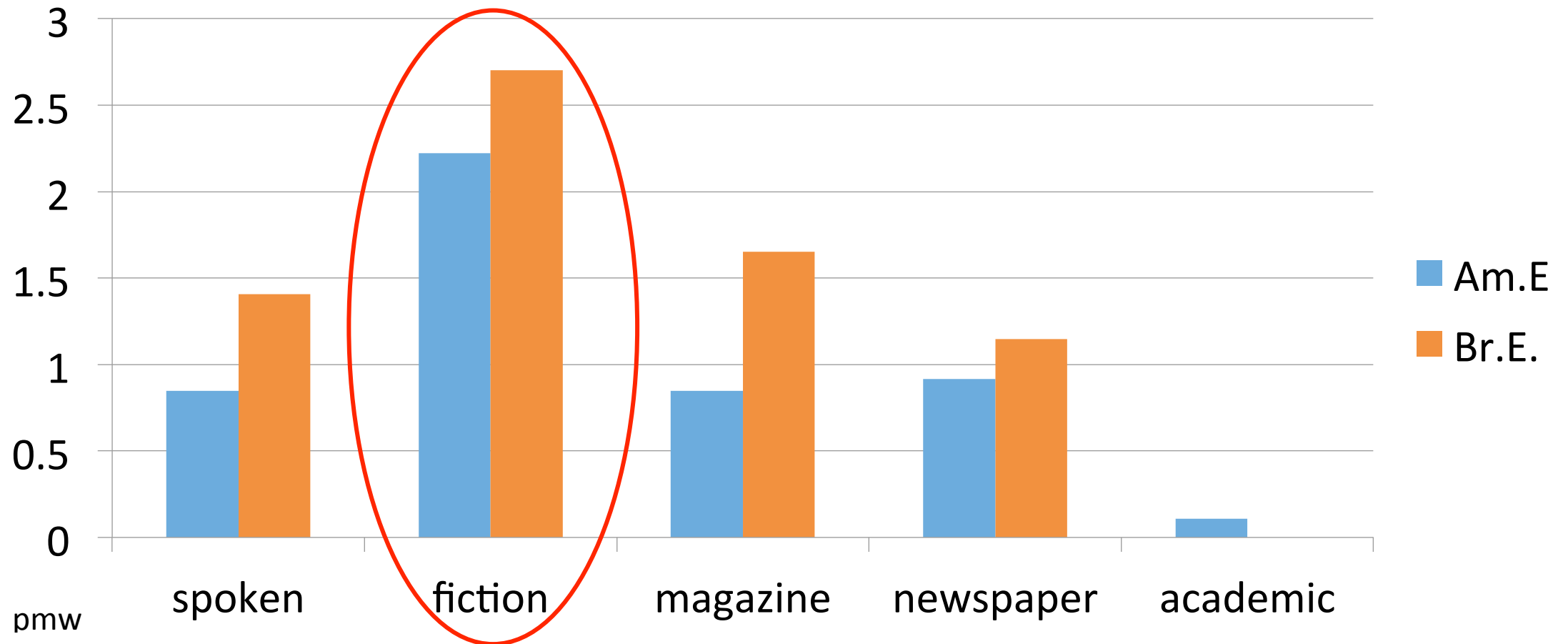
Jackendoff (2002a: 86): “the choice of verb seems totally open, whereas by contrast, the choice of NP is totally fixed”.

Jackendoff’s statement is not accurate:

- more **nouns** than just *head, heart, ass* and *butt*
  - but
    - there are only so many different body parts
    - not all of them are used
- the choice of **verb** is not unconstrained

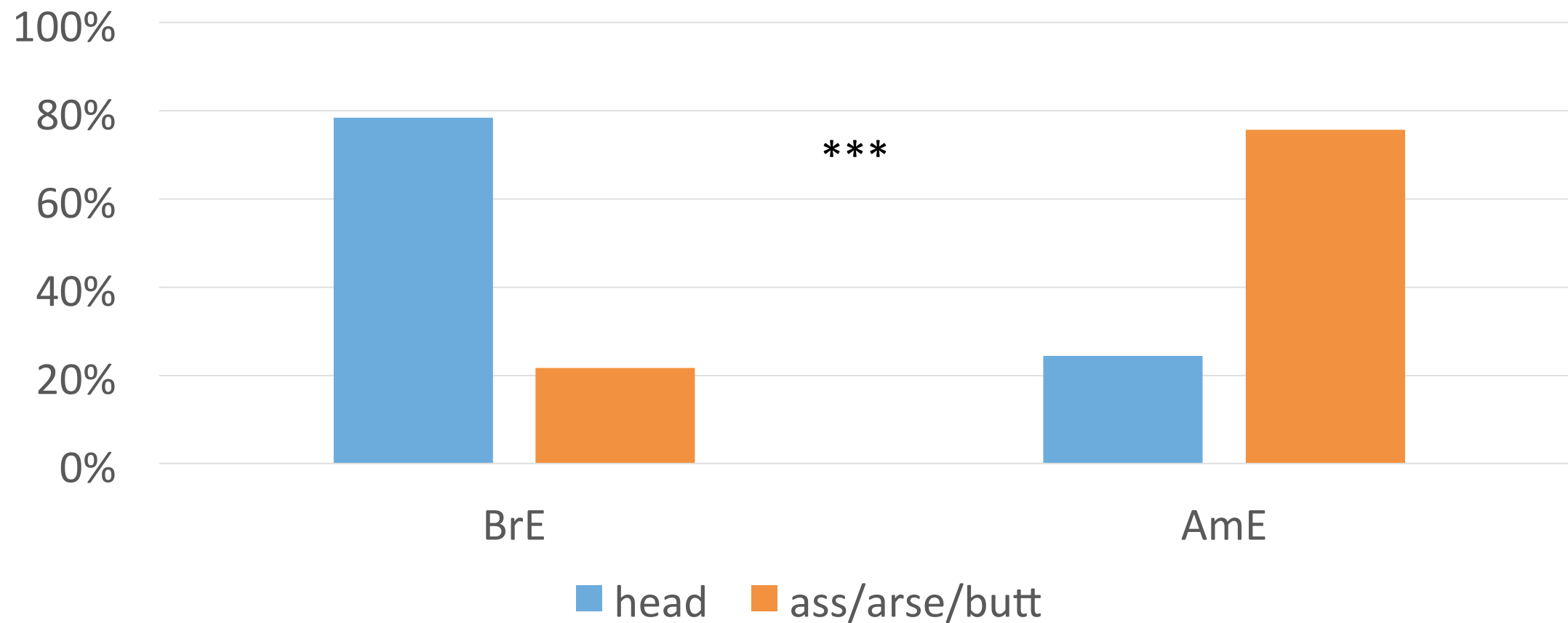
	<i>one's ass off</i>	<i>one's heart out</i>	<i>one's head off</i>	<i>one's eyes out</i>	<i>one's butt off</i>	<i>one's tail off</i>	<i>one's guts out</i>	<i>one's lungs out</i>	<i>one's balls off</i>	<i>one's tush off</i>	
<i>work</i>	66	19	1		69	43			1		199
<i>cry</i>		17	4	80			2	1			104
<i>scream</i>	2	2	44				3	13			64
<i>laugh</i>	25		30					1			56
<i>bawl</i>	1	2	4	39			1				47
<i>sing</i>	1	43	1				1				46
<i>freeze</i>	24				8	1			8	1	41
<i>play</i>	2	16			5		3		1		27
<i>puke</i>							19				19
<i>dance</i>	8	8			1	1					18
<i>run</i>	4	5			3						12
<i>bark</i>	1		10								11
<i>sob</i>		9		2							11
<i>fight</i>		5			2		2				9

### 3. Differences between register varieties

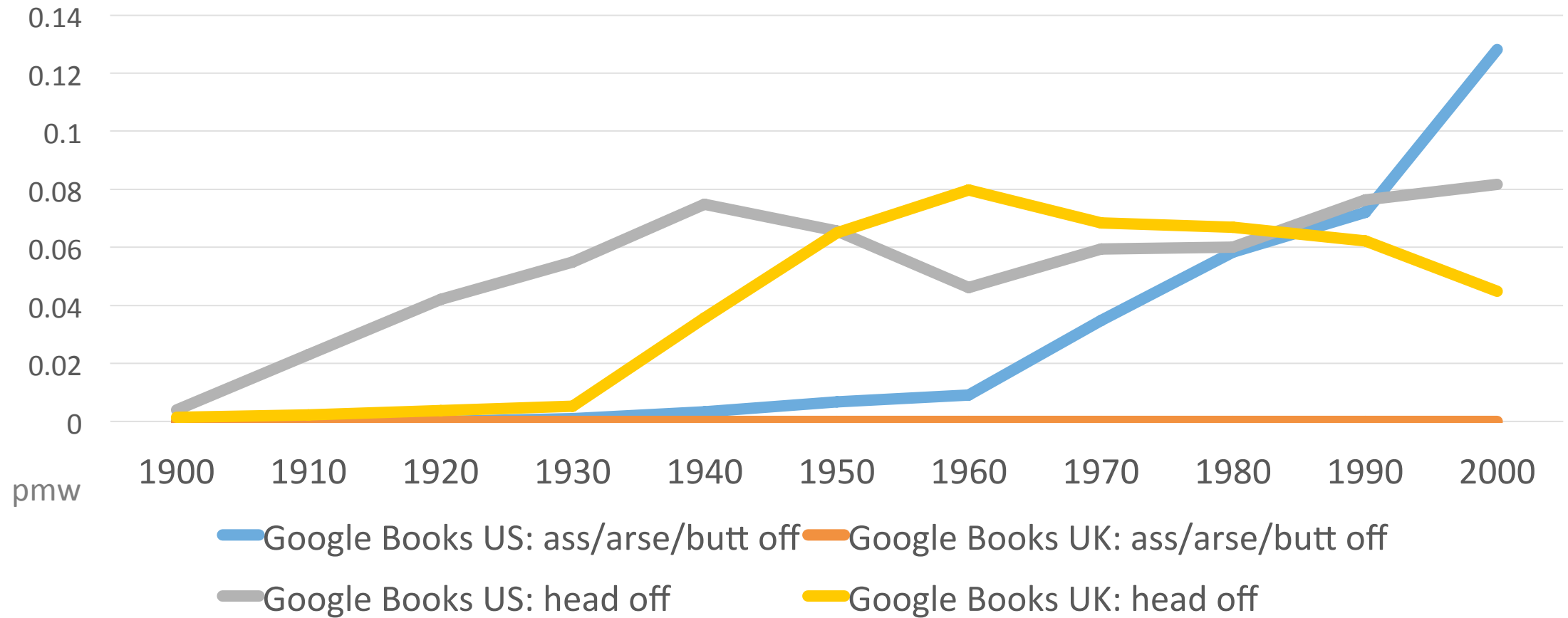




## 4. Differences between regional varieties



## 5. Differences between periods of time



work | worked | working | scream | screamed | screaming | laugh | laughed | laughing | bawl | bawled | bawling | sing | sang | singing

# Conclusions

- The Body Part *Off/Out* Construction varies a lot
  - **Register variation**  
obviously more infml than fml
    - strong affective value
    - common in fictional writing, more so than in other genres (even than in spoken subcorpus)
  - **Regional variation**  
AmE especially *ass/butt*, BrE especially *head*
  - **Recent variation**  
in recent decades, the BPOC has increased (in printed books)
    - but only in AmE
    - and most notably for the *V one's ass off* subconstruction
- OK, nice. But so what?

# Conclusions

Can the BPOC help to give us an answer to one of the Big Questions?

What is **language**?

- Does it exist in the **brain/mind**?
- Does it exist in the **community**?

What is **linguistics**?

- a **cognitive** science?
- one of the **social** sciences?

Yes it can, and the answer is...

# Conclusions

... language is both.

Thank you!

Yes, but why?

Language involves knowledge of units stored in the brain/mind.

These units are stored precisely to the extent that they are conventional in a given community in a certain area, in a certain era.