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ABSTRACT

The author of this paper argues that, in the study of current usage, we need to supplement data from corpus studies by using methods that elicit use, reports of use, and evaluations of use on items which interest them. Ten methods for experimental elicitation of such data are described, related to one another, and illustrated with examples of data from previous studies by the author. A supplement to the paper provides more detailed results for one series of experiments and additional bibliographical information. (AA)

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CURRENT USAGE AND THE EXPERIMENTER*

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Margaret Bryant's [redacted] reference work on frequently debated usages contains about 240 alphabetical entries. Even if we allow that some entries deal with more than one point and that some debated usages have not been included, we need no more than an introductory course in English Linguistics to realize that the normative tradition focuses on just a few dots in the vast and complex universe of the English Language. They would be hardly worth considering, were it not for the anxieties they provoke among the insecure and the prejudices they arouse among the assured. Happy are the indifferent, who are immune to such inflictions.[1] But I suspect that few of us are numbered among their ranks: most of us are anxious about some usages and prejudiced against others.

Guides to usage deal with choices that are thought to trouble at least some users of the language. [redacted] There is an immense amount of variation that is not recorded in usage handbooks or school textbooks - and rightly so, since it is of no concern to the ordinary speaker. Within the last decade, in their attempts to reach the very limits of the language, linguists have highlighted the extent of language variation that exists even among people sharing the same regional, social, and educational background. Indeed, the same individual may alternate between variants and vacillate between evaluations - without

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any apparent stylistic motivation. It has become dubious theory to postulate a homogeneous speech community, even as an idealization.[2] Standard varieties of the language are no exception. Speakers of Standard American English also differ as to what they would be prepared to use. Those addicted to reading books and articles on linguistics frequently experience the irritation of disagreeing with grammaticality judgements at crucial points in the analysis. We might try now a little experiment (which I recently tried out in a graduate seminar) that will demonstrate variation in grammaticality judgements. The ten sentences on your handout appear in a reader on transformational-generative grammar, marked as either grammatical or ungrammatical, but I'm not going to say which at this stage. Imagine that you heard them spoken. Perhaps you would take a few moments to indicate on the handout your reactions to the sentences. There are no prizes for the correct answers, but we will soon see how far we agree with each other and with the original evaluations.[3] We are not likely to find guidance from usage handbooks.

What evidence should we look for to find out the status of such constructions or the debatable usages that we are more familiar with? For some purposes, a corpus is valuable. We can collect samples of actual speech and actual writing and examine them for the presence or absence of particular items and for the relative frequencies of competing variants. Indeed, a corpus is essential if we want to know whether variants are restricted to certain varieties of the language or are more frequent in those varieties; for example, whether they are current in Written as well as Spoken English or whether they are restricted to formal language.

Speech samples can tell us whether the presence of variants or their relative frequency correlates with regional differences or sociological differences, such as level of education, socio-economic class, or ethnic group. Corpus studies have often been used to provide data for language description and occasionally, as in Bryant's book, for debatable usages.

But we are handicapped if we rely solely on corpus studies. We cannot always extrapolate from a corpus to the language in general or even to some subset of the language. If, for example, we are looking at syntactic data, it may be a matter of chance that a particular syntactic feature is absent or rare in our corpus. Only for very common constructions can we be certain of finding sufficient evidence. We cannot be sure that our sampling is sufficiently large or representative to be confident that the absence or rarity of a feature is significant. But there is a more serious reason for not restricting our investigations to what we can find in a corpus. Would we, for example, want to use a corpus to decide the grammaticality of the ten sentences we just looked at? What surfaces in actual use reveals only a part of our command of the language. In addition to actual use - which ranges in a continuum from the habitual to the rare - there is also potential use: what we might use if the opportunity arises or the occasion requires. Even if someone doesn't use the adverbs *utterly* and *indisputably*, would he know where to position them in a sentence if required to do so? Even if he never uses the modal auxiliary *ought*, would he know how to negate it? And if he had occasion to intensify *interested*, *alarmed*, and *appreciated*, could he use *very* for all three? An individual's knowledge of his language is made manifest by such tasks and by his evaluations of potential use.

To supplement data drawn from corpus studies we can turn to methods methods that elicit use, reports of use, and evaluations. that elicit information specifically on the items that interest us. Elicitation techniques are commonly employed by dialectologists and sociolinguists. Figure 1 displays the types of elicitation tests I have used among college students. I shall refer to some experiments that I have conducted in America.[4]

The simplest form of elicitation is for the investigator to ask direct questions about language use. I have asked students to rate sentences on a five-point scale for their overall frequency in the English Language. The sentences were presented in pairs, each pair appearing on a separate page in a stapled booklet. Among these frequency judgement tests were the following pairs of sentences:

1a We recommend that he pay full tuition.
 b We recommend that he pays full tuition.

2a We recommend that he pay full tuition.
 b We recommend that he should pay full tuition.

In (1) the subjunctive pay is contrasted with the indicative pays and in (2) it is contrasted with the modal periphrasis should pay. The subjunctive received a somewhat higher frequency rating than the other two options. According to usage handbooks, the subjunctive is the norm in subordinate clauses after expressions of recommending and demanding. There was also a slight but consistent tendency, through four sets of such contrasts, to rate the indicative higher than the should form. Usage handbooks are not in agreement on the should form, but they explicitly exclude the indicative from these contexts.

The same experiment contained pairs of sentences that were constructed to provide evidence for the perceived positional norms for adverbials:

3a We were waiting for three hours on Monday.
b We were waiting on Monday for three hours.

4a She goes swimming for a few minutes every afternoon.
b She goes swimming every afternoon for a few minutes.

5a Our electricity was cut off several times two months ago.
b Our electricity was cut off two months ago several times.

6a I eat my lunch at the office on Wednesdays.
b I eat my lunch on Wednesdays at the office.

My hypothesis was that the normal order for time adverbials at the end of the sentence was

duration - frequency - time WHEN

and that place adverbials preceded time adverbials.[5] In each pair the (a) sentence follows the predicted order, whereas the (b) sentence deviates from it. The frequency ratings were in accordance with the prediction. The (b) orders are non-normal rather than abnormal: they might be chosen for various reasons, such as balance or a decision about the relative informational prominence to be given to the two adverbials.

I have also used word placement tests to elicit information about positional norms. This type of test allows a free choice of positions rather than displaying alternatives. Students were presented with individual sentences and were asked to write down each sentence using a given adverb. Among the adverbs were some that are often classed together as sentence adverbs: *luckily*, *wisely*, *foolishly*, *rightly*. The positions most commonly selected are shown in (7):

7a Luckily your father owns a car.

b Your father foolishly rents a car.

c The reviewer rightly praises the actors.

d The reviewer wisely praises the actors.

e Wisely nobody supports his views.

The results were as predicted. [redacted] *Foolishly*, *rightly*, and *wisely* differ from *luckily* in that they necessarily express the speaker's evaluation both of the content of the sentence as a whole and of the speaker in particular. That is not necessarily so for *luckily*.[6] The difference is demonstrated by the possibility of saying *Luckily for you, your father owns a car*, but not **Foolishly for you, your father rents a car*. The norm for [redacted] disjuncts like *foolishly* and *wisely* is after the subject, whereas for *luckily* it is before the subject. However, this norm applies only to positive declarative sentences. With a negative subject the norm for subject-related disjuncts [redacted] is also pre-subject, as in (7e). Notice that one paraphrase of (7d) is *The reviewer is wise to praise the actors*, but we do not have a corresponding **Nobody is wise to support his views* for (7e).

The word placement tests supply information about perceived norms. It could be argued that perception and reality are not identical, that what we think we *should* say may influence both what we *believe* we say and what we *report* we say, and therefore our reports are not reliable. The scope for self-deception certainly increases when we suspect that the variant in question stigmatizes the user as uneducated. But though we should distinguish opinion from use, we cannot disregard evidence on opinions. Perceptions of norms influence usage, and so do the attitudes elicited in *evaluation* and *preference* tests. We take account of them in using the language - at least in our more careful speech and writing, when we have a greater opportunity to monitor our use of the language.[7] And our attitudes affect our tolerance of the language that others use.

Elicited attitude and elicited usage often, of course, converge. In one word placement test the students were asked to use *hardly* with the sentence *He could sit still.* Nearly all of them placed the adverb between the auxiliary and the verb:

He could hardly sit still.

This evidence for the positional norm of *hardly* was corroborated in the results of two *compliance* tests. Compliance tests are designed to elicit usage. We give students a sentence and tell them to carry out a small change but to leave the sentence otherwise unaltered. The changes that students make despite that general instruction pinpoint the reasons for their dissatisfaction with the sentence. In the course of a battery of tests, students were given the sentences

8a He could hardly sit still.
b He hardly could sit still.

In each case, they were asked to replace *He* by *They*. They all complied for (8a), but for (8b) half of them moved *hardly* to the position between the auxiliary and the verb, a reflection of their natural tendency to use it in that position. Their ratings of the two sentences in (8), later elicited in evaluation tests, tallied with their performance in the compliance tests.

Selection tests are like compliance tests in requiring a change to be performed on a sentence, but the change forces a choice between variants. When I asked students to negate They need to see a lawyer, I was interested in whether they would select lexical negation:

9a They don't need to see a lawyer.

or modal negation:

9b They need not see a lawyer.

Most of them selected lexical negation, a selection later endorsed in a preference test. The results were less clear-cut for similar tests on the negation of dare. Not only were there several competing variants (none of which emerged as dominant in both types of tests), but in addition there was considerable inconsistency between performance and judgement. Informants sometimes indicate their dissatisfaction with all the variants by a radical change. When required to negate a sentence with ought, a substantial number of the students responded with a negative of should, presumably the equivalent they normally use in the negative - and perhaps also in the positive.[8]

The forced choice completion test allows much less freedom than the selection test. We present a pair of sentences, each containing a blank. The blanks are to be filled with two alternatives, each of which is to be used once only. By varying the contexts we can isolate the factors that influence choices. One experiment included these three pairs of sentences:

10a That team _____ going to beat us.

b That team _____ going to beat them.

11a That gang _____ gonna do us in.

b That gang _____ gonna do them in.

12a That team _____ going to beat us.

b That team _____ gonna beat us.

The blanks in each pair were to be filled with is and are. The subjects in the six sentences, team and gang, are collectives. In American English they would generally take singular concord, though not invariably. If the students were given a free choice, they might well have chosen is for all six sentences. But they were forced to put are in one of the sentences in each pair. In the event, the choices were not random; and they went in the predicted direction. The majority inserted singular is in 1a, 2a, and 3b, and plural are in the alternatives 1b, 2b, and 3a. Attitudinal and stylistic factors appear to affect the choice of number concord with collectives. In pairs (10) and (11), one of the sentences (10a, 11a) conveys that the referent of the subject is about to perform an action that is disagreeable to the speaker (us). That unfavorable perception is reflected grammatically in the greater choice of the singular for those two sentences: the team and the gang are more readily perceived as impersonal units and less readily personalized as individuals when the contemplated hostile or unfavorable action is to affect the speaker and others that he associates with himself.[9] The difference between the sentences in (12) is stylistic. The tendency is for the more formal style to be given the singular, which is perceived as the norm, whereas the more informal style takes the 'deviant' plural.

To the layman it must seem odd to conduct experiments to find out about language. But a variety of experimental techniques are being developed for eliciting information on use and attitude in language. As I think I have shown, these can be applied also to the investigation of debated usages. Experiments like those I have described can supply us with the facts.

As teachers of English Language we have a particular responsibility. We should be aware of our own prejudices and those of our students. We should be interested in what is known about the present status of debated usages, the relative frequency of competing variants, and current attitudes towards them, though it would be very naive to expect that if we could tell all the facts the prejudices and anxieties would immediately disappear. We should certainly make our students aware of the distinction between normative rules and descriptive rules. And, above all, we should retain for ourselves, and foster among others, a sense of proportion.

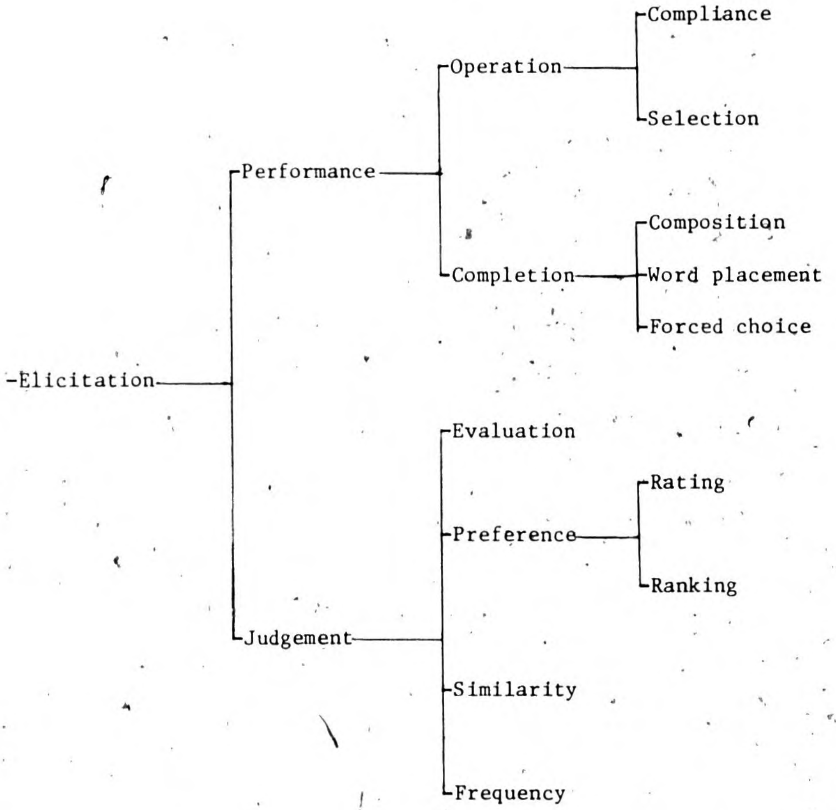
Elicitation
Performance
Operation
Compliance
Selection
Completion
Composition
Word placement
Forced choice
Judgement
Evaluation
Preference
Rating
Ranking
Similarity
Frequency

Figure 1: Types of Elicitation Tests

FOOTNOTES

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[1] The British linguist J.R. Firth divided the population linguistically into the assured, the insecure, and the indifferent.

[2] See, for example, Bailey 1973a and 1973b.

[3] The sentences are 10 of the 14 sentences that Levelt selected for evaluation in an informal experiment (Levelt 1974, 15f). They are taken from Jacobs and Rosenbaum 1970, where sentences 3, 5, 6, and 10 were judged grammatical (pages 70, 91, 92, and 149 respectively) and 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, and 9 were marked as ungrammatical (pages 91, 70, 91, 94, 96, and 147).

[4] For a discussion of these types of elicitation techniques, see Quirk and Svartvik 1966 and Greenbaum and Quirk 1970. For data on American English see Kempson and Quirk 1971; Greenbaum 1974, forthcoming a, and forthcoming b, Leech and Pepicello 1972 and Quirk 1970. For a general survey of the problems involved in investigating acceptability in language, see Greenbaum 1975b.

[5] See Quirk et al. 1972, 8.70 and 8.77, and Quirk and Greenbaum 1973, 8.41 and 8.46.

[6] See Quirk et al. 1972, 8.82-8.88; Quirk and Greenbaum 1973, 8.50, 8.52; Greenbaum 1969, 153-163.

[7] There are several possibilities: (1) we might impose a stylistic constraint; for example, avoiding *like* as a conjunction in writing; (2) we might avoid a set of variants because of dissatisfaction with all the possibilities, as when we replace *data* as subject by (say) *information*, because on the one hand we know that the singular is condemned by some as uneducated and on the other hand we consider the use of the plural to be pedantic; (3) we might overcompensate for possible errors by extending the use of a form to contexts where the original objection does not apply, as in the hypercorrective use of *whom* as subject.

[8] For an analysis of elicitation experiments concerned with the negation of modals in American English, see Greenbaum 1974.

[9] See Greenbaum 1975a, 76f. for a discussion of similar experiments on number concord with collectives.

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