Teaching unit 18: Good or bad grammar?

Background

This unit explores how and why elements of grammar come to be judged as good or bad. The discussion explores factors such as awareness, exposure to other dialects, and personal beliefs and ideologies about language. The unit provides a hands-on usage judgement exercise in which students can be asked to identify grammatical problems in a job application letter. The unit provides the results of a survey using this sample text, and illustrates differential awareness of grammatical points, reflecting changing awareness and therefore changing norms over time with respect to how grammar is judged. The exercise can be used to remind students that language norms are particular to a specific point in time. In this perpetual cycle of prescriptivism, one person's 'bad grammar' can be another (often younger) person's new norm. All data and examples are from Ebner (2017). Activities and discussion points are suggested at the end.

Data and a link to a relevant Linguistics Research Digest article are available at: http://www.teachrealenglish.org/TU18

Discussion points

Attitudes to grammar

Whether you are aware of it or not, you are most likely judging people when they speak. You will listen for cues which may help you identify a speaker's regional, social or educational background. These linguistic cues can be subtle or salient. If you are from Southern England, you may find the pronunciation of (r) after a vowel (called "postvocalic r") by Scottish speakers striking as most Southern English varieties lack this particular feature.[1] Similarly, an older speaker may perceive the use of *literally* as an intensifier, as in *I literally dropped dead*, by younger speakers as wrong because the usage does not conform to their own.

Whether a person's attitudes towards linguistic forms, language varieties and speakers themselves are positive, neutral or negative depends on various factors, including their personal experience with and exposure to the variety and its speakers, as this will have influenced their attitudes to and more importantly their awareness of a particular feature. Awareness influences not just listeners' responses but also speakers' usage of accent or dialect forms: if a person is not aware of the stigmatised non-standard status of some feature in their speech, they will not have the ability to switch codes and avoid being judged negatively by a listener.

Another factor that influences listener attitudes is whether their personal beliefs and values regarding language differences is fairly descriptive, accepting that language changes over time and tolerating a degree of variability, or more aligned with prescriptive rules, with a focus on normative speech behaviour.

Prescriptivism: an approach to the study of language which looks at how language is supposed to be used

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[1] Milroy (2007, p. 25)

Descriptivism: an approach to the study of language which looks at how language is actually used by speakers

Differences in attitudes and in degrees of awareness of a stigmatised feature can have repercussions in real-life. For example, some people may use a speaker's lack of awareness of what constitutes "good" English as a selection criterion for friendship, as illustrated in example 1.

1. [I] [t]hink bad language use shows poor education and intelligence and yes I do judge people on their use of English. However, I also think it's a good indicator of people I do or do not want to be friends with, so I don't want it taught for the sake [o]f it, if [y]ou see what I mean!
(Digital marketing consultant, 31-40 years old, female)

More serious repercussions can occur if we find diverging attitudes in situations such as job applications. Examples 2 and 3 below illustrate such consequences.

2. Grammar and spelling are certainly in decline. Personally I never employed anybody who wrote a cv/application letter with spelling mistakes …
(Retired arts consultant, over 60 years old, female)

3. I think there are many people who try to fossilise English and are not accepting of natural change in the language. Nevertheless, if u rite lyk dis den u iz neva gona get a job, so it is important to be aware of the standard rules of grammar and orthogra[p]hy of English.
(Writer and journalist, 26-30 years old, male)

These observations indicate clearly that a successful job application does not simply depend on your qualifications, but also on your ability to produce an application letter that matches social and linguistic conventions. But *what features* are stigmatised or frowned upon?

The usage judgment test
A job application letter containing some linguistic features that have been described as usage problems —features considered to be non-standard and stigmatised by some speakers — was given to 63 participants in a study (Ebner 2017). They were asked to correct or highlight anything that they considered inappropriate for this particular text type or writing genre. This method allows us to access attitudes in a rather indirect manner, as the alleged non-standard features are not highlighted. The text therefore tests the participants' awareness as well as tolerance of non-standard features.

Take a look at the job application letter below and try to identify any features you might consider unacceptable.

Figure 1: Job application letter

While the job application letter could be improved with respect to style and contents, let us look specifically at the nine usage problems that were intentionally incorporated in the letter.

Starting sentences with *And*

One prescriptive norm in English writing is that the conjunction *and* should not be used at the beginning of sentences. Having been first criticised in the 19th century, this feature constitutes a stylistic feature rather than a grammatical one.[2] A recent analysis of the treatment of this feature in usage guides, from Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926) onwards, has however shown that the feature is now widely advocated by usage guide authors.[3] The job application letter above contains two instances of sentence-initial *and*: see (5) and (8) in Figure 2 below.

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[2] Peters (2004, p. 38)
[3] Ebner (2017, p. 417)

Dangling participle

A dangling participle, also known as a dangler, refers to a participial clause that is intended to modify a subject that is missing in the main clause. This mismatch is often said to cause ambiguity and confusion and has thus been widely proscribed (discouraged) in usage guides since the early 20th century.[4] Two instances of dangling participles can be found in the job application letter: see (1) and (3) in Figure 2 below.

Flat adverb

Flat adverbs, often referred to as suffixless or zero adverbs, are considered an old chestnut in the usage debate as they have featured very frequently in usage guides since the mid-18th century. Flat adverbs lack the suffix –*ly* which is usually found with adverbs. A limited number of adverbs do not carry the *-ly* suffix in any case (e.g. *He drove the car fast*). These adverbs are not considered problematic. It is only cases where the –*ly* suffix is possible, but is not realised, that prescriptivists object to. We can identify two flat adverbs in the job application letter: see (2) and (6) in Figure 2 below.

Split infinitive

One of the most widely cited usage problems is the notorious split infinitive, frequently cited as a prototypical usage problem.[5] Prescriptivists argue that the English infinitive consists of two elements (the infinitive marker *to* and the infinitive verb form) that should not be separated, e.g. through the insertion of an adverb. A famous violation of this prescriptive norm occurs in the opening lines to Star Trek, *to boldly go where no man has gone before*. The validity of the prescriptive rule has been questioned in recent years, as the roots of the rule lie with the Latinate infinitive form which, contrary to English grammar, consists of a single word that cannot be split (e.g. *amare* 'to love'). The split infinitive has become less stigmatised and more acceptable, and has been removed from many publishers' style guides.[6] You can find one split infinitive in the job application letter above: see (4) in Figure 2 below.

Very unique

The use of *very unique* has been criticised by prescriptivists on the basis that adjectives such as *unique* and *perfect* are considered to be non-gradable 'absolute' adjectives, i.e. something is either unique or not.[7] Recent research has shown that it is mainly the use of *very unique* that has been criticised, although more supportive evaluations have emerged in the last decade[8]. One instance of *very unique* can be found in the job application letter: see (7) in Figure 2 below.

Impact as a verb

Conversion of nouns into verbs, as in *to impact* and *to hospitalize*, are frequently regarded as Americanisms. Language purists and prescriptivists often reject such new word formations: see (9) in Figure 2 below. Here Alex uses it to make his account of how easy it is to make a hole in a spray can more lively and vivid.

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[4] Ebner (2017, p. 266)
[5] Pullum & Huddleston (2002, p. 581)
[6] Ebner (2017, p. 285)
[7] Pullum & Huddleston (2002, p.532)
[8] Ebner (2017, p. 421)

Dear Mr Darcy,

I am writing to apply for the IT manager position advertised in *The Times*. As requested, I am enclosing my job application including all required certificates. (1) Having worked as an IT administrator, the job seems to be the perfect match for my skills and experience.

My responsibilities included maintaining appliances and documentation, planning new acquisitions as well as helping and educating users. I worked (2) close with IT management which allowed me to gain insights and experience in the field of IT management. (3) Having worked in my previous company for four years, my aspiration after a new challenge has taken over and made me seek a job in IT management.

With my Master's degree in Computational Sciences I have obtained a solid understanding of programming and IT networks. Moreover, I am fully aware of the importance of keeping up-to-date with new technological developments. I know how (4) to effectively set goals and achieve them. (5) And furthermore, I have the ability to grow with a job and handle tasks (6) responsible.

Working as an IT manager in your company is a (7) very unique opportunity. (8) And I believe that my previous work experience as well as my educational background will make me a suitable candidate for this position. I am confident that this job will (9) impact my future career considerably.
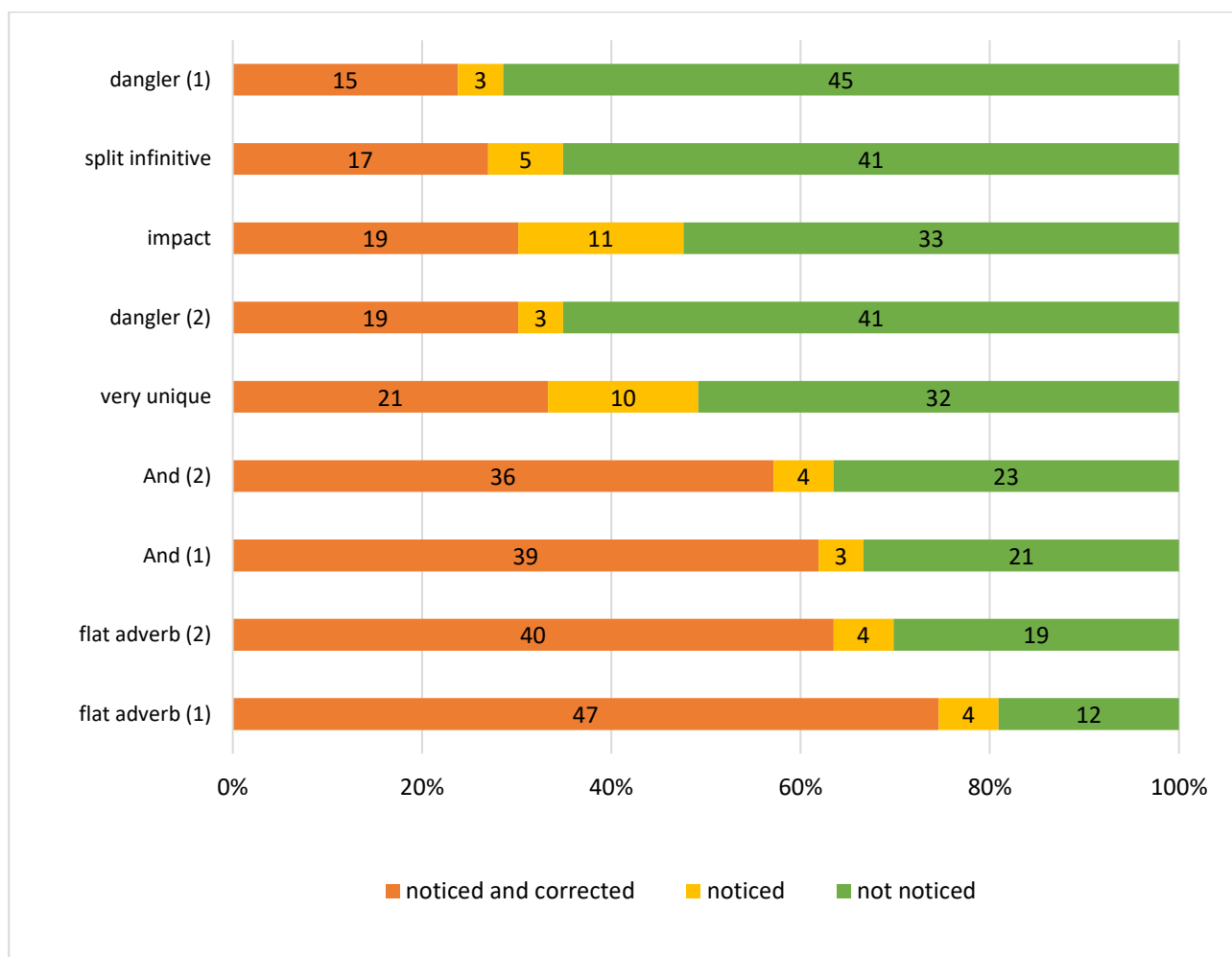
Thank you for your consideration.

Faithfully,

Figure 2: Job application letter with nine usage issues underlined

Awareness of usage problems

Now let us have a look at which of the nine usage problems were most frequently corrected or highlighted by the 63 participants in the survey.

Figure 3: Degree of salience of usage problems (raw figures in bars)

In Figure 3 we can see that both flat adverbs were among the most noticed usage features, followed by the two instances of sentence-initial *and*. Interestingly, dangling participles, which are said to cause confusion and ambiguity, are among the least noticed or highlighted usage problems. The split infinitive, the prototypical usage problem, is also among the least noticed and corrected usage problems.

Why were some forms noticed more than others? The 63 participants in the usage judgment test fell into two broad age groups: young (mean age 31; range 20-50) and old (mean age 66; range 53-86). A number of statistically significant age effects account for the patterns in Figure 3. Older informants tended to notice and correct the two flat adverbs, the split infinitive, the use of *very unique*, the use of *impact* as a verb more than younger informants.

This indirect attitude elicitation test helps to identify what the general public considers to be inappropriate language use for a letter of application. What were once considered linguistic shibboleths seem to no longer carry the same gate-keeping function, but clearly newer shibboleths are constantly being generated.

Suggested activities and discussion points

- Go through letter of application highlighting and correcting anything they found inappropriate/unacceptable
- Discuss and compare their findings with each other, and with the findings of study
- Discuss what the reasons could be for different degrees of awareness among speakers
- Discuss some of the new shibboleths of bad grammar that students may have noticed (e.g. use of *literally*)
- Conduct database search for one of the usage problems included in the job application (HUGE database: http://huge.ullet.net/). (How many usage guides include a comment on the feature? Which was the earliest mention of it?)

References

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