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When intuition IS needed: the importance of judgment data for the study of syntactic variation

Syntactic variation still remains a field of study raising fundamental conceptual problems (cf. Cheshire, 1987; Winford, 1996). One of the most challenging issues concerns the definition of syntactic variants, which requires thorough argumentation in terms of formal syntactic (and semantic) theory. As already pointed out by Coveney (1996: 121), such an approach has the paradoxical consequence that variationist work on syntax will require the use of judgments, as well. However, judgment data have so far played a marginal role. One of the reasons for the present situation is the prevailing opinion that variationist studies have to focus on spontaneous speech. An additional possible reason is the low validity attributed to this data type. Labov (1996) expresses this position in his “principle of validity” and enumerates five conditions that can promote the failure of linguistic intuitions (cf. also Schütze, 1996).

I will, firstly, point out that grammaticality judgments do map systematic social variation and, secondly, bring forward arguments in favour of the validity and reliability of (controlled) judgment data.

Adli (2002) studies social variation of different word order variants in French interrogative sentences, revealing a significant effect of the variable life-style (cf. Bourdieu, 1979). As a further step, the present work extends the range of syntactic phenomena and investigates different structural variants of French subject and object interrogatives. These structures relate to the syntactic debate on extraction vs. parenthesis analyses (cf. Reis, 2000) and include suboptimal and ungrammatical constructions like the subject extraction with that-trace effect, i.e. constructions beyond the range of speech data. The sample consists of 78 French native speakers, who participated in a graded grammaticality judgment test.

The variable life-style takes into account responses on 68 items concerning activities and media use, statistically reduced to four lifestyle groups. Multi-way ANOVAs confirm the results of Adli (2002), insofar as life-style is the only significant variable - age, gender, level of education and educational orientation do not show any effect. However, this result pattern is restricted to grammatically felicitous structures, i.e. it does not show up with suboptimal or ungrammatical constructions. The latter reveal, nevertheless, a particular effect of education (interpreted in terms of cultural capital): Participants with a higher level of cultural capital make a sharper difference between marginal and clearly ungrammatical structures.

Based on these results, a *complementarity principle* is postulated, according to which life-style and cultural capital show an effect in opposite regions of the grammaticality scale. Thus, judgment data are sensitive to social effects and the grammaticality status of the construction determines the social variable for which the variation is particularly marked.

Validity of the measurements can be assumed as a result of a thorough instruction and training at the beginning of the graded grammaticality judgment test. Furthermore, this instrument, applying the principle of graphic rating, reveals satisfactory ICC- and Cronbach’s α -values in a subsequent reliability analysis.

Based on these results, I argue that a “rehabilitation” of judgment data in sociolinguistics will allow a more satisfactory study of syntactic variation and, moreover, open the promising perspective of a *complementary* use of production and judgment data in terms of a broader empirical basis.

keywords: (i) syntactic variation, (ii) variationist methodology

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