

Linguistic Variation
Models and Methods

Edited by

David Sankoff

Center for Mathematical Research
University of Montreal
Montreal, Quebec, Canada



ACADEMIC PRESS New York San Francisco London
A Subsidiary of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers

*Grammatical Ideology
and Its Effect
on Speech*

Anthony Kroch / Cathy Small

INTRODUCTION

Modern linguistics entirely rejects prescriptivism in grammatical analysis. Rightly so, since prescriptivism is simply the ideology by which the guardians of the standard language impose their linguistic norms on people who have perfectly serviceable norms of their own. Unfortunately, rejection of prescriptivism as a basis for analysis is generally coupled with disregard for it as an object of study. The effect of prescriptivist ideology on language use and structure is rarely addressed. Indeed, linguists tend to believe that prescriptive norms have no significant effect on usage, at least in speech. The few instances where such norms are known to have influenced speech are termed isolated cases whose rarity and triviality make them exceptions that prove the rule. Recent sociolinguistic work on hypercorrection and the role of the upper middle class in the suppression of sound change, however, belies this view. Conscious prestige norms can have a powerful influence on speech, and the whole question of their role in language is worth another look.

PRESCRIPTIVISM AND GRAMMATICAL IDEOLOGY

This paper is a brief presentation of work currently in progress on the effect of prescriptive norms on the syntax of speech. The basis of the work is the hypothesis that one significant factor influencing speakers' choices among linguistic variants is the belief that the forms of the standard language are logically superior to those of nonstandard dialects. This supposed logical superiority of the standard language is asserted on a number of grounds, including accuracy in the use of inflections, precision of vocabulary, and richness of derivational morphology. In syntax, however, the claim to superiority is based on a grammatical ideology which (a) assumes that a syntactic alternant whose surface form more closely parallels the logical form of the proposition it expresses is more logical than one in which the parallel is less close and (b) claims that standard language constructions are consistently closer to logical form than nonstandard alternatives. Examples of this argumentation are easy to find. Thus, a double negation is said to be illogical because two negatives logically equal a positive, and the construction *the reason is because . . .* is similarly labeled on the ground that the clause following the verb *to be* is adverbial and adverbs cannot be predicate nominals. Interestingly, such reasoning is used not only against nonstandard forms but also to condemn certain pandialectal usages, as when grammar books insist that a sentence like (1) not be used with the meaning of (2):

- (1) *John only eats cabbage.*
 (2) *John eats only cabbage.*

The argument here is that the word *only* logically modifies the constituent to its immediate right; and therefore, sentence (1), while usable in a context like (3), is incorrect in the more usual context of (4):

- (3) *John only eats cabbage; he doesn't grow it.*
 (4) *John only eats cabbage; he eats nothing else.*

Similarly, the ubiquitous split infinitive is criticized for separating two parts of a single semantic unit.

Of course, the linguist can easily show that the superior logic claimed for the preferred constructions is spurious since the basic assumption—that there is a simple relation between surface syntactic form and logical form—is false. Thus multiple negation, while nonstandard in English, may be perfectly acceptable in other standard languages (for example, Spanish and Portuguese). Similarly, the placement of *only* in preverbal position

when it modifies an object noun phrase is simply a particular case of the widespread syntactic process of quantifier movement. Even the stigmatization of *the reason is because . . .* loses its logical support when the linguist points out that adverbial phrases function quite often as semantic substantives.

We should note, of course, that prescriptivism, being ideological, does not use the argument from logic consistently. For example, according to the argument from formal logic, triple negation ought to be acceptable since three negatives are logically equivalent to simple negation (Burling, 1973); but, of course, sentence (6) is just as nonstandard as (5):

- (5) *John didn't sell no car.*
 (6) *John didn't sell nobody no car.*

Such inconsistencies are more the rule than the exception. Indeed, whenever a standard form appears to violate logic, as in the rule governing *shall* versus *will*, or when a stigmatized usage seems perfectly logical, as in the use of *-wise* as an adverb forming suffix, the appeal to logic is relinquished in favor of references to tradition and convention.

Inconsistent though it be, the grammatical ideology we have been discussing has a long history and a wide geographic distribution. It is perhaps universal in stratified societies with standard languages. As Chomsky (1966) has pointed out, the Cartesian linguists of the seventeenth century held that the form of speech reflected the form of thought; and some of them argued for the superiority of French over other languages on the grounds that its structure was more logical. Even the founder of modern linguistics, Saussure, had little to say about syntax, believing that sentence formation was less governed by linguistic rule than by the requirements of propositional thought. As far as geographic distribution is concerned, we refer to the Arab belief that classical Arabic is superior to other languages because of its logical structure (Ferguson, 1968) or to the Chinese attitudes concerning their standard language, Mandarin. The sociological importance in our society of the grammatical ideology of standard language syntax is clear. It provides the appearance of a reasoned basis for the stigmatization of nonstandard dialects by interpreting the syntactic conventions of these dialects as evidence of inferior reasoning. But of how much linguistic importance is this ideology? In particular, to what extent does it influence the syntax of actual speech? This question is a difficult one to answer, but we have some suggestive evidence that the influence is significant and that it goes beyond the obvious effect of promoting avoidance of nonstandard forms. What we have found is a tendency for people to make speech choices,

even between standardly acceptable syntactic alternants, on the basis of the grammatical ideology.

TWO EXAMPLES

We have been studying two syntactic alternations, particle movement and complementizer *that* deletion after verbs: that is, the alternations responsible for the paired sentences of (7) and (8):

- (7) a. *John pointed out the mistake.*
 b. *John pointed the mistake out.*
- (8) a. *Sally knows that Harry ate the salami.*
 b. *Sally knows Harry ate the salami.*

Our sample, chosen both for availability and in the hope that it would include identifiably more and less standard speech, was several hours of talk-show conversation on Philadelphia's all-talk radio station WWDB-FM. In future studies, this sample should be supplemented with interviews, where the sampling of informants is more representative and controlled; but the taped broadcasts have proved an excellent source of pilot data, especially for studying the effect of standard norms. We defined two sociolinguistic groups of speakers in the shows, the callers and the show hosts with their studio guests. We assumed that for reasons both of social status and role in the radio talk-show interaction, the host/guest group generally speaks a more standard English than the caller group. This assumption seems justified based on our subjective impressions of the data, but could also be tested by a comparative frequency count of nonstandard linguistic features in the speech of the two groups.

The overall results of our analysis are given in Tables 1 and 2. These tables show that the caller group places the particle away from the verb and deletes complementizer *that* substantially more frequently than does the host/guest group. We have separated *think* from the other verbs in Table 2 because its frequency of occurrence and the frequency of complementizer deletion after it are both so high that including it with the other verbs would distort the results.

Our hypothesis is that the reason for the differences between the caller and host/guest groups exhibited in Tables 1 and 2 is a greater adherence by the latter to the grammatical ideology of the standard language that favors the most direct correspondence between propositional form and surface syntax. This greater adherence would follow from the group's generally greater loyalty to and concern for the norms of the standard. In

TABLE 1
 Particle Placement, Overall Results ($N = 305$)^a

Particle position	Speaker		
	Caller	Host/Guest	
V NP Prt	$\frac{73}{138}$ (53%)	$\frac{62}{167}$ (37%)	$p < .01$
V Prt NP	$\frac{65}{138}$ (47%)	$\frac{105}{167}$ (63%)	

^aChi square was used to check statistical significance. Chi square probabilities are reported for all comparisons for which there are at least ten tokens per cell.

TABLE 2
That Deletion, Overall Results ($N = 506$)

	Speaker				
	Caller		Host/Guest		
	\emptyset	<i>that</i>	\emptyset	<i>that</i>	
<i>think</i>	$\frac{112}{126}$ (89%)	$\frac{14}{126}$ (11%)	$\frac{122}{155}$ (79%)	$\frac{33}{155}$ (21%)	$p < .05$
Other verbs	$\frac{140}{233}$ (60%)	$\frac{93}{233}$ (40%)	$\frac{64}{173}$ (37%)	$\frac{109}{173}$ (63%)	$p < .001$

the case of the particle alternation the surface syntactic configuration V Prt NP would correspond to propositional form more directly than would V NP Prt because only the first reflects in its word order the semantic unity of the verb and particle (compare the split infinitive). In the case of *that* deletion the presence of the complementizer would correspond more directly to propositional form than its absence because the presence of the complementizer can be said to indicate more explicitly the logical relationship between the matrix verb and the complement clause.

LINGUISTIC CONDITIONING

In order to test our hypothesis and eliminate the possibility that the difference we had observed was actually due to the effects of linguistic conditioning factors, we analyzed the linguistic factors likely to influence each of the alternations. In the case of the particle alternation we analyzed

the effects of the following factors: (a) length of object noun phrases (*L*), (b) degree of semantic dependence of particle on the verb (*D*), and (c) stress (*S*). The length of object noun phrase was given two values: *L*₁—the direct object is less than three words long; and *L*₂—the direct object is three or more words long. Sentences where the object noun phrase was a pronoun were excluded from analysis since, with normal intonation, the pronoun must be placed between the verb and the particle. The sentences of (9) and (10) illustrate the two values of *L*:

- (9) *L*₁ a. *Bill pointed out John to the woman.*
 b. *Sally called Mary up on Saturday.*
 c. *The circus set the tent up.*
 d. *Carter played out his options.*
- (10) *L*₂ a. *The FBI turned the incriminating documents over.*
 b. *We put up all three of my cousins.*
 c. *Harry mulled over the idea that his wife suggested.*

The semantic dependence factor was given three values, listed here in order of increasing semantic dependence of the particle on the verb: *D*₂—the particle functions as an adverb of direction; *D*₁—the particle can be interpreted metaphorically as an adverb of direction; and *D*₀—the particle has no semantic content except as part of the verb. Cases where the particle is an adverb and functions as such in nonparticle as well as particle constructions (e.g., *bring home the bacon*) were excluded from the analysis of this factor. The three values of *D* are illustrated in the following sentences:

- (11) *D*₂ *The quarterback threw the ball away.*
 (12) *D*₁ *Let me throw this idea out.*
 (13) *D*₀ *He called the mayor up.*

The stress factor was given two values: *S*₁—heaviest stress falls on the constituent (particle or noun phrase) immediately following the verb; *S*₂—heaviest stress falls on the second constituent following the verb. Because of the complexities associated with contrastive stress, sentences containing it were excluded from the analysis of the stress factor. The values of *S* are illustrated in the following sentences:

- (14) *S*₁ a. *I turned the light *on*.*
 b. *I turned *on* the light.*
- (15) *S*₂ a. *I turned the light *on*.*
 b. *I turned *on* the light.*

The results of our analysis appear in Tables 3, 4, and 5, which show that the linguistic factors analyzed will not account for the difference between the host/guest and caller groups since when each factor is held constant the difference remains. Therefore, the difference between the two groups in particle placement choice is unlikely to be due to differences in the linguistic environments in which they customarily use the verb particle construction, although a multivariate analysis on a larger sample is still needed. The results in Table 4 are interesting for a further reason. They show that the degree of difference between the caller and host/guest groups (as measured by *R* = the ratio of the two groups' percentages of the V NP Prt alternant) decreases as the semantic independence of the

TABLE 3
Effect of Object NP Length on Particle Placement (*N* = 305)

Length of object NP	Speaker				
	Caller		Host/Guest		
	V NP Prt	V Prt NP	V NP Prt	V Prt NP	
<i>L</i> ₁	$\frac{58}{99}$ (59%)	$\frac{41}{99}$ (41%)	$\frac{48}{106}$ (45%)	$\frac{58}{106}$ (55%)	<i>p</i> < .05
<i>L</i> ₂	$\frac{15}{36}$ (42%)	$\frac{21}{36}$ (58%)	$\frac{17}{64}$ (27%)	$\frac{47}{64}$ (73%)	<i>p</i> > .05, NS

TABLE 4
Effect of Semantic Relationship between Particle and Verb on Particle Placement (*N* = 246)

Degree of semantic dependence	Speaker				<i>R</i> ^a	
	Caller		Host/Guest			
	V NP Prt	V Prt NP	V NP Prt	V Prt NP		
<i>D</i> ₀	$\frac{24}{63}$ (38%)	$\frac{39}{63}$ (62%)	$\frac{16}{90}$ (18%)	$\frac{74}{90}$ (82%)	2.11	<i>p</i> < .01
<i>D</i> ₁	$\frac{11}{21}$ (52%)	$\frac{10}{21}$ (48%)	$\frac{12}{28}$ (43%)	$\frac{16}{28}$ (57%)	1.21	<i>p</i> > .05, NS
<i>D</i> ₂	$\frac{15}{21}$ (71%)	$\frac{6}{21}$ (29%)	$\frac{16}{23}$ (70%)	$\frac{7}{23}$ (30%)	1.01	

^a
 $R = \frac{\% \text{ of V NP Prt alternant for Callers}}{\% \text{ of V NP Prt alternant for Host/Guests}}$

TABLE 5
Effect of Stress Pattern on Particle Placement ($N = 256$)

Stress pattern	Speaker				$p < .001$
	Caller		Host/Guest		
	V N Prt	V Prt NP	V NP Prt	V Prt NP	
S_1	$\frac{33}{35}$ (94%)	$\frac{2}{35}$ (6%)	$\frac{35}{42}$ (83%)	$\frac{7}{42}$ (17%)	
S_2	$\frac{28}{69}$ (41%)	$\frac{41}{69}$ (59%)	$\frac{20}{110}$ (18%)	$\frac{90}{110}$ (82%)	

particle increases. In other words, to the extent that the particle has an adverbial function the difference between the two groups tends to disappear; that is, the host/guest group uses the V Prt NP order more than the caller group only to the extent that this order reflects the closeness of the semantic relationship between verb and particle. This result, we would argue, confirms our hypothesis that grammatical ideology is the cause of the intergroup differences. After all, it is precisely and only when the particle is semantically independent of the verb that the grammatical ideology we have postulated would not favor its placement next to the verb.

Turning now to the *that* deletion alternation, we find similar results. Table 6 shows the deletion percentages for the five most common verbs. Together these verbs account for more than 90% of the tokens analyzed, and for each of them the difference between the caller and host/guest groups is clear. Another linguistic factor we analyzed was the effect of phrases intervening between the verb and the complement clause, on the assumption that the presence of such phrases would decrease the frequency of *that* deletion. The number of such cases was too small to allow any conclusions, but this factor certainly does not account for the variance between our two groups.

Tables 7 and 8 show the correlation of verb frequency and of Germanic versus Romance origin of the matrix verb with *that* deletion. Our findings on frequency agree with those of Cofer (1972). There is an effect but it is small. The effect of verb origin is much larger. Moreover, all of the verbs with 10 or more tokens are Germanic so that the relatively high deletion percentage for verbs with less than 10 tokens must be due to the infrequent Germanic verbs having a high enough deletion percentage to offset the low deletion percentage of the Romance verbs. These results

TABLE 6
That Deletion, Five Most Common Verbs ($N = 621$)

	Speaker				
	Caller		Host/Guest		
	\emptyset	<i>that</i>	\emptyset	<i>that</i>	
<i>think</i>	$\frac{112}{126}$ (89%)	$\frac{14}{126}$ (11%)	$\frac{122}{155}$ (79%)	$\frac{33}{155}$ (21%)	$p < .05$
<i>say</i>	$\frac{52}{85}$ (61%)	$\frac{33}{85}$ (39%)	$\frac{32}{73}$ (44%)	$\frac{41}{73}$ (56%)	$p < .05$
<i>know</i>	$\frac{25}{35}$ (71%)	$\frac{10}{35}$ (29%)	$\frac{16}{41}$ (39%)	$\frac{25}{41}$ (61%)	$p < .01$
<i>tell</i>	$\frac{18}{34}$ (53%)	$\frac{16}{34}$ (47%)	$\frac{9}{36}$ (25%)	$\frac{27}{36}$ (75%)	$p < .05$
<i>believe</i>	$\frac{6}{10}$ (60%)	$\frac{4}{10}$ (40%)	$\frac{11}{26}$ (42%)	$\frac{15}{26}$ (58%)	
Total	$\frac{212}{290}$ (73%)	$\frac{78}{290}$ (27%)	$\frac{189}{331}$ (57%)	$\frac{142}{331}$ (43%)	
Total (not including <i>think</i>)	$\frac{111}{174}$ (64%)	$\frac{63}{174}$ (36%)	$\frac{69}{176}$ (39%)	$\frac{107}{176}$ (61%)	

TABLE 7
Effect of Verb Frequency on *That* Deletion ($N = 492$)

Verb frequency	All speakers		
	\emptyset	<i>that</i>	
Verbs with 10 or more tokens (not including <i>think</i>)	$\frac{134}{291}$ (46%)	$\frac{157}{291}$ (54%)	
Verbs with less than 10 tokens	$\frac{76}{201}$ (38%)	$\frac{125}{201}$ (62%)	$p > .05, NS$

indicate that lexical formality, which for English verbs correlates with Romance as opposed to Germanic etymology, is an important factor inhibiting *that* deletion. This is as we would expect. Speakers associate formality with the standard language so the grammatical ideology has more power when the context, here lexical, is more formal.

TABLE 8
Effect of Verb Origin on *That* Deletion ($N = 502$)

Verb origin	All speakers		
	\emptyset	<i>that</i>	
Germanic (not including <i>think</i>)	$\frac{208}{442}$ (47%)	$\frac{234}{442}$ (53%)	$p < .001$
Romance	$\frac{10}{60}$ (17%)	$\frac{50}{60}$ (83%)	

CONCLUSION

Not surprisingly, people's prescriptive grammatical intuitions confirm our findings on the relationship between the alternants of particle movement and *that* deletion. As Table 9 shows, the sentence *John called up*

TABLE 9
Prescriptive Judgments on Particle Placement ($N = 32$ Temple University Undergraduates)

<i>John called Mary up</i>		<i>John called up Mary</i>	
Substantially more correct	Slightly more correct	Substantially more correct	Slightly more correct
2 (6%)	5 (16%)	14 (44%)	11 (34%)

Mary was judged to be substantially more correct than its alternant by 44% of a sample of Temple University undergraduates while only 22% favored the other alternant, whether marginally or strongly. Similarly, as Table 10 shows, 46% of a sample of Philadelphia speakers interviewed by Cofer (1972) thought deletion of *that* to be incorrect in both of the two cases presented to them. Only 31% thought deletion correct in both of the two cases. These figures illustrate how people do assign different prescriptive values to the alternants of particle movement and *that* deletion, thus providing further evidence for the existence of the grammatical ideology we have hypothesized and making more plausible our claim that this ideology is responsible for the pattern of the data in our speech sample.

Grammatical Ideology and Its Effect on Speech

TABLE 10
Prescriptive Judgments on *That* Deletion ($N=26$)^a

Deletion correct:	
after <i>sure</i> only	2 (8%)
after <i>announce</i> only	4 (15%)
after both	8 (31%)
after neither	12 (46%)
Total	26

^aAdapted from Cofer (1972).

REFERENCES

- Burling, R. *English in black and white*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971.
- Chomsky, N. *Cartesian linguistics: A chapter in the history of rationalist thought*. New York: Harper and Row, 1966.
- Cofer, T. Linguistic variability in a Philadelphia speech community. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1972.
- Ferguson, C. A. Myths about Arabic. In Fishman (Ed.), *Readings in the sociology of language*. The Hague: Mouton, 1968, 375-381.