Socially-evaluated syntactic variation? A perception study of the English particle verb alternation

Can syntactic variation be socially evaluated?

TESTING PREVIOUS PROPOSALS

Many researchers suggest that syntactic variables are less likely to be socially evaluated than variables at other levels of the grammar.


To test this claim, we need precise definitions of social evaluation and syntactic variation.

WHAT IS SOCIAL EVALUATION?

Social abilities comprise: (Campbell-Kibler 2016)

1. Speaker production of forms in ways that reflect the speaker’s social characteristics
2. Listener perception of a speaker’s social attributes through that speaker’s choice of form
3. Social ideologies about forms

WHAT IS SYNTACTIC VARIATION?

Generative morphosyntactic theory (Minimalism, Distributed Morphology) identifies two distinct phenomena that can fall under sociolinguists’ umbrella of “syntactic variation”:

1. Variation in spell-out (How morphemes are pronounced)
2. Variation in word order (Distibuted deletion under Copy and Delete theory of movement)

Our meta-study of Language Variation and Change articles finds little social evaluation of word order variables.

METHOD

- Linguistic variables coded as spell-out or word order
- Studies coded for:
  - whether the authors looked for social effects in speaker production
  - social judgments in listener perception
  - and whether they found either.

RESULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification of variables</th>
<th>Social effects in speaker production</th>
<th>Social judgments in listener perception</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spell-out (n=140)</td>
<td>Looked for: 92</td>
<td>Looked for: 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word order (n=27)</td>
<td>Looked for: 10</td>
<td>Looked for: 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

- Social judgments in listener perception are more likely for spell-out variables than word order variables.

- However, very few studies have actually looked for social perception of word order variables.

- One study found social perception of the dative alternation (D’Arcy & Tagliamonte 2015):
  - Double object dative: I gave John the book.
  - Prepositional dative: I gave the book to John.
  - The prepositional dative was considered more prestigious in Late Middle English due to analogy with French.

Our perception study of the English particle verb alternation finds no social evaluation of non-standard word order.

THE PARTICLE VERB ALTERNATION

I took the trash out vs. I took out the trash

verb object particle verb particle object

Do listeners socially evaluate this variable word order?

Kroch & Small (1978): Radio show hosts use the VPO order more than their guests, presumably to adhere to prescriptive norms disfavoring sentence-final prepositions.

This suggests speaker social characteristics are reflected in production of the different orders. Is this also reflected in perception?

METHOD

- “Newscaster paradigm” (Labov et al. 2011)
  - Listeners hear recordings of a speaker who is said to be applying for a job as a newscaster and are asked to rate her professionalism.
  - 296 native speakers of American English
  - Administered over Prolific, an experimental crowdsourcing platform.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

- Linear regression finds no significant difference in ratings between the two participant groups.
- All participants rate the second recording higher than the first, regardless of particle verb order in the second recording.
- This suggests that, despite Kroch and Small’s findings, listeners do not socially evaluate this alternation in perception.

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