

Grammatical Variability and the Difference between Native
and Non-native Speakers*

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*This paper was prepared for presentation at the Second International Congress of Applied Linguistics (Cambridge, September 1969) while the author held a Guggenheim fellowship.

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A currently popular method of teaching syntactic theory involves contrastive presentation of 'grammatical' and 'non-grammatical' sentences. There is, however, an increasing amount of evidence that native speakers do not agree among themselves with regard to grammaticality judgments (Elliott, Legum, and Thompson, 1969; Quirk and Svartvik, 1966). The use of the grammaticality criterion may therefore be questioned on theoretical grounds. A concrete problem arises in teaching a syntax course to a group of students including both native and non-native speakers of the language from which the examples are drawn: non-native speakers frequently fail to see the rationale for a particular decision as to whether a sentence is or is not grammatical, if this rationale consists of an appeal to the native speaker's intuition.

The notion of grammaticality is admittedly difficult to define, and even more difficult to explain to linguistically naive users of a language (Solinger, 1968). One way to explore the reliability of native speakers' grammaticality judgments would be to compare the actual use of a grammatical feature by a group of monolingual native speakers of English with the use of the same feature by a group of bilinguals for whom English is the second language. In this manner,

direct reference to grammaticality should be avoided.

I conducted a small experiment, the purpose of which was to compare the ranges of grammatical variability within two such groups, with the view of finding out whether the difference between the two groups, if any, was in any way significantly different from the variation within the native group.

I selected a set of 91 English sentences which had already been used to test the range of variability within a group of native speakers of English (D. Terence Langendoen, Elements of English Grammar, in press). The subjects of this study were a group of junior high and high school teachers of English, who participated in a summer institute at Ohio State University in 1968. The structural feature which the sentences were designed to test was the formation of 'tag questions'. This term is used to refer to questions asking for confirmation of the content of a declarative sentence. For example, the statement "The sky looks threatening" might be followed by "doesn't it", which would constitute an appropriate tag question. The responses given by the 46 native speakers are analyzed in detail in Langendoen's forthcoming book. A gross indication of the amount of grammatical variability found within this group is provided by the fact that the test subjects showed complete agreement in only 33 instances out of 91. In other cases, the number of different responses to a single statement varied between two and eight.

I presented the same set of sentences to a comparable group of 46 Estonian-English bilinguals ranging in age from 17 to 51. The bilinguals, who are long-term residents of the United States and

Canada, took the same test under similar conditions. The particular structural feature, formation of tag questions, is very suitable for testing with this group, since Estonian does not know tag questions of the English kind; a statement might be turned into a question by the use of a phrase similar to the German nicht wahr or the French n'est ce pas, but even that would not be very common. The older bilinguals have Estonian as first language and English as second language both in order of acquisition and in order of fluency. The younger members of the group have learned Estonian from their parents and English from the surrounding community, and consider themselves to be more fluent in English than in Estonian. Almost all bilinguals use English in more situations than Estonian, although most of them continue to speak Estonian within their immediate family. The educational level of the bilingual group is at least comparable to that of the monolingual group, and all bilinguals have had some formal instruction in English grammar; they cannot, however, be expected to be as familiar with formalized "school grammar" as the monolingual group consisting of teachers of the English language.

I started out with the expectation that there would be considerable variation within the bilingual group, and that the younger bilinguals would be progressively more similar to the native speakers of English than the older bilinguals in their formation of tag questions. I hoped to find a way to express the degree of similarity in some concrete terms which might be used as a measure of 'degree of bilingualism' or, perhaps, 'degree of nativeness'. I should say from the outset that the results of the experiment turned out largely negative.

In order to establish some measure of the degree of similarity between the two groups, I arbitrarily defined the notion of 'deviant response' as a variant of a tag question not included among the set of variants offered by the members of the monolingual group in response to a specific sentence calling for confirmation. For example, if the statement was "The boy looks sleepy" and all 46 native speakers formed the tag question "doesn't he", then a bilingual's "does he not" was classified as a deviant response. (Later I shall present a more detailed analysis of deviant responses.)

A gross comparison of the two sets of 4186 tag questions yielded 701 deviant responses on the part of the bilinguals, amounting to 16.7% of the total. A separate analysis of 23 younger members of the group, below the median age of 27 years, showed 297 deviant responses; the 23 older members had 404 deviant responses. Thus the younger bilinguals contributed about 42% of the deviant responses, while the older half of the group was responsible for 58% of the deviations. This difference does not seem to be particularly striking.

A separate analysis of the deviant responses of each bilingual subject showed that the number of deviant responses ranged from one to 68 (out of 91). A large proportion of deviant responses was furnished by six individuals, whose scores were 68, 62, 54, 54, 41, and 35. The curve became fairly smooth after that. It is perhaps significant that the subgroup of six contained the two oldest members of the group; but these were balanced out by an 18 year-old and a 19 year-old at the other extreme of the age range. Together, the six subjects with the highest number of deviations accounted for almost

half of the difference between the monolinguals and the bilinguals. If these six individuals were discounted, there would remain less than ten deviant responses for each remaining bilingual.

It is of course questionable whether the notion 'deviant response' has any validity at all. It should be kept in mind that there was extensive variability within the monolingual group, even though it consisted of English teachers. This variability was reflected in the number of possible responses to a given statement, which ranged from one to eight. There is no evidence as to how a less uniform monolingual group would have performed under similar circumstances, and what the number of their deviant responses might be relative to the responses given by the reference group. It is likewise unknown whether the same two groups would have produced identical responses when re-tested on a different occasion. As I emphasized before, the counting of deviant responses constitutes only a very gross measure of the differences between the younger and the older half of the bilingual group on the one hand and between the monolingual and the bilingual groups, on the other. With these reservations in mind, I cannot consider the differences in any way conclusive, and the starting hypothesis does not appear to be confirmed.

Let us look now a little more closely at the deviant responses. In fact many of the apparent deviations have no linguistic significance. The monolingual group, being English teachers, had a clear notion of what a tag question is; the bilingual group seemed to have considerable difficulty in grasping what was required of them, and many of their responses suggest that the subjects must have thought they were

participating in a free association test. For example, all monolinguals responded to the sentence "I have five cents in my pocket" with either "Haven't I?" or "Don't I?"; but two of the bilinguals asked "How much do you have?". There were altogether 95 deviant responses of this type.

Another set of discountable deviant responses consisted of elsewhere acceptable variants that did not occur among the monolinguals' responses at a given time. On numerous occasions, the variants of tag questions given by monolinguals might include "don't they" and "do they not" in response to one sentence, but only "don't they" in response to an analogous sentence. The bilinguals may have used "do they not" as a variant in both instances; it would have been accepted in one case, and treated as a deviant response in the other. This applies in particular to lack of inversion with regard to negation or affirmation. The general rule of the formation of tag questions requires that the statement and the tag question oppose each other with respect to negation, but there were many exceptions to this rule within both the monolingual and the bilingual group. Again, an exception to the rule within the bilingual group was counted as a deviant response if there were no exceptions within the monolingual group with regard to a given sentence. It seems to me that all such cases should be considered together, and if exceptions to a general rule occur within the monolingual group, analogous exceptions within the bilingual group should be excluded from the list of deviant responses.

The majority of the bilinguals' deviant responses fell into the

two categories just described--"free association" deviations and elsewhere acceptable variants. If these two categories are excluded, as I believe they should, there is very little left to indicate a possible difference between the monolingual native speakers and the bilingual non-native speakers of English.

The residual difference consists of two types of deviant responses. There were, first of all, five responses that seem to translate the Estonian equivalent of nicht wahr or n'est ce pas. These included two occurrences of isn't it so?, two instances of right?, and one occurrence of no?. The ages of the subjects who provided these responses ranged from 19 to 35; the 35 year old individual provided both isn't it so? responses.

And there were 27 pronoun references in which he was used for she and vice versa. This is a deviation which could be attributed to an Estonian substratum, since there is no grammatical gender in Estonian, and there is only one form for the pronoun of the third person. Sixteen of these 27 instances occurred in the bilinguals' responses to the sentence "My uncle's spouse won't eat caviar". Evidently "My uncle's spouse" did not equal "My uncle's wife" for the individuals who referred to "My uncle's spouse" as "he", and the deviance may be a matter of lexical limitation rather than a matter of being unsure in the selection of the proper masculine or feminine pronoun.

If the mistakes with regard to "My uncle's spouse" are discounted, the concrete, quantizable differences between the monolingual and the bilingual group consist of five translated nicht wahr responses and

eleven wrongly chosen pronouns, which would contribute about .4% of the 4186 responses. To these might be added a greater grammatical variability: within the bilingual group, the number of possible responses varied between 2 and 13, whereas among the monolinguals, the number of variant responses ranged between 1 and 8. One should, however, at least consider the possibility that this greater variability might be due to the lesser degree of homogeneity within the bilingual group.

And then there are the six individuals who seem to have selected the statistically less frequent responses in a relatively great number of times. While each individual deviant response used by these six may be explained and accounted for, their very accumulation leaves a definite non-native impression. I cannot find any more precise way to define this lack of nativeness, much less express its degree in a quantizable way.

I would like to return now to the question of the grammaticality of the tag questions used by the monolingual and bilingual speakers. Langendoen's study of the responses used by the monolingual group revealed extensive variability within that group. My study of the responses used by the bilingual group has shown similar variability within the bilingual group, and a rather small difference between the two groups. Yet we speak confidently of the native speaker's unerring ability to determine what is grammatical in his language. If there is so much variation among the native speakers and so much similarity between native and non-native speakers, the appeal to the native speaker's intuitive knowledge of grammaticality seems to lose much of its force.

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