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6. Describing the (Usage) Problems

6.1. Introduction

As mentioned in the Introduction (see § 1.3), usage problems have been defined as linguistic features which are characterised by their widespread, actual use and their ability to be discussed without giving offence (Ilson, 1985, p. 167). Using aesthetic, historical and logical arguments, prescriptivists have tried to secure the status of the variant which had been chosen to be part of the standard variety in the standardisation process. By doing so, other variants have become the subject of stigmatisation. The usage problems investigated in this study have already been presented in the Introduction (see § 1.5), yet a more detailed description as to why these linguistic features are considered problematical needs to be undertaken, which is the purpose of this chapter.

Each of the fourteen usage problems will be discussed in order to explain why these features are considered problematical by prescriptivists and by summarizing scientific studies investigating these features. A more detailed analysis of the treatment of the investigated usage problems in British usage guides will be undertaken in Chapter 7 below. However, since two usage problems, the use of sentence-initial *and* and *very unique*, are only part of the usage judgment test, I will present the description of these features and the analysis of usage guides included in HUGE in Appendix F.

The HUGE database will be analysed making use of a slightly modified version of Yáñez-Bouza’s (2015) tripartite categorisation into advocated, neutral and criticised treatments of usage problems. Since the categorisation of usage entries can be complex, Yáñez-Bouza (2015 p. 30) distinguished grammarians’ precepts by applying a mutually exclusive categorisation method in her study of grammarians’ attitudes towards preposition placement. Grammarians were accordingly classified as being either advocates, neutrals
or critics of preposition stranding. The mutual exclusivity of these three categories makes it easier to obtain diachronic and synchronic overviews of how usage advice on the investigated usage problems has developed over time. I will therefore apply a similar categorisation of usage guide entries into the categories “criticised”, “neutral” and “advocated” in the analysis of usage guide entries. The category “neutral” contains usage advice which is neither straightforwardly advocating nor criticising the use of a linguistic feature, but rather contains contextual preferences. The descriptive overview of the usage problems provided in this chapter will not only lay the basis for a better understanding of the usage debate, but also offer the necessary background information on the usage problems investigated in this study. The usage problems will be discussed in the order in which they appeared in the online questionnaire.

6.2. Different From/Than/To

According to prescriptivists, different should be followed by from, rather than to or than. Their judgment is often based on the fact that the verb differ is also followed by from thus making different from the only legitimate construction (cf. Baker, 1770, pp. 7–8; Taggart, 2010, p. 67). Yet, different to and different than are also commonly used in American and British English, albeit with different preferential frequencies. While different to is said to be found more frequently in British English, different than seems to be more prevalent in American English (Longman Dictionary, s.v. different). That different than has, however, been used for a long time in British English is shown by the OED, which provides an example of its use dating back to the seventeenth century (OED, s.v. than). A comparative corpus study using British and American corpora to investigate usage frequencies of different from/than/to conducted by Busse and Schröder (2010b, p. 97) showed that different from
Describing the (usage) problems has indeed been the most frequently used construction in both varieties. However, their study demonstrates that there is a difference between British and American English with regard to the second most frequent variant. The corpus evidence gathered by Busse and Schröder (2010b, p. 97) showed higher frequencies for different to in British English than in American English, which, on the other hand, showed a clear secondary preference for different than over different to.

Despite the criticism found in prescriptive usage guides, different than has also been considered useful in specific contexts. Its usefulness has been demonstrated in a frequently cited example in usage guides from the novelist Joyce Carey, who is quoted as using the following sentence: “I was a very different man in 1935 from what I was in 1916”. (Carey, quoted in Burchfield et al., 1984, pp. 101–102). While Cary used the construction favoured by prescriptivists, the sentence was also criticised as being “awkward” (Allen, 1999, p. 170). Using different than instead of different from would not require repeating already given information in the form of a relative construction. The sentence could accordingly be recast in the following two manners, which make use of the descriptive variant than:

1. a) I was a very different man in 1935 than I was in 1916.

   b) I was a very different man in 1935 than in 1916.

Although 1.a) and 1.b) are both grammatical, the tendency among prescriptivists to condemn different than seems to be founded mainly on their insistence on the legitimacy of different from because it is based on the verb differ from.

For my study, I decided to include the following stimulus sentence in an online questionnaire:
S1. The Americans look at this differently than the British.

The stimulus sentence was adapted from Leonard (1932, p. 156), whose study of usage attitudes in American English included the stimulus sentence The British look at this differently than we do. Mittins and his colleagues (1970, p. 56) also investigated attitudes towards the use of differently than using the sentence They behaved differently at school than they did at home in their study. While Leonard’s study showed a wide range of judgments ranging from 15 per cent of his informants considering differently than formal English to 50 per cent condemning its use as illiterate (1932, p. 157), it seems as if the British did indeed look at this usage differently than the Americans did. Mittins et al.’s (1970, p. 58) study showed that differently than only achieved an average acceptability rating of 30 per cent at the time. This could hint at the construction’s association with American usage. These findings from earlier usage attitude studies are also in line with Busse and Schröder’s (2010b) corpus study.

This secondary preference of different to in British English was furthermore incorporated in an indirect elicitation test, the open-guise test (see § 5.3). Besides investigating attitudes towards different than, Mittins and his colleagues also included a stimulus sentence in their questionnaire which aimed at eliciting attitudes towards different to: Roller-skating is very different to ice-skating. The results of Mittins et al.’s study showed that this particular stimulus sentence also obtained a 30 per cent acceptability rating. Even though different to has been argued to be the second most frequent variant, it is somewhat surprising to find Mittins et al.’s respondents passing a similar judgment on this variant in comparison to different than. The reason for these findings could lie in the presentation of the stimulus sentences as the feature investigated was highlighted and could have consequently biased Mittins et al.’s informants towards disapproving of different to. As my open-guise test
consisted of recordings containing either the unmarked and accepted variants or their disputed counterparts, I used a slightly modified version of Mittins et al.’s stimulus sentence for the recordings. The recording containing the unmarked variants included the stimulus sentence *Roller skating is different to ice-skating*, while the marked counterpart made use of the stimulus sentence *Roller skating is different than ice-skating* (cf. Table 5.3). The use of these two stimulus sentences was purposefully selected as I was aiming at eliciting subconscious attitudes and hence the unmarked variant *different from*, which is the most dominant variant in both British and American English (Busse & Schröder, 2010b, p. 97), would have increased the obviousness of the test in that the participants would presume a clear-cut distinction between the two recordings contrasting a speaker making use of ‘correct’ and ‘proper’ English with a speaker of ‘incorrect’ and ‘improper’ English. In my view, using the secondary preference in British English, *different to*, therefore serves to conceal the purpose of the test better.

### 6.3. Latinate Plurals

Is it *data are* or *data is*? Is it the *media are* or *is*? Falling under Curzan’s (2014, p. 36) restorative prescriptivism strand in the sense that an attempt is made to restore an older meaning or usage, British prescriptivists insist on words such as *data* and *media* being considered plurals and are consequently required to take a plural verb form. The reason for their insistence on words such as *data* to be used as plurals lies in their Latin origin. According to some usage guide authors such as Partridge (1942, p. 89), who condemns the use of *data* as a singular noun, the widespread use of *data is* in British English is due to the influence and spread of American English, in which this variant is allegedly acceptable: “*data* is wrong when it is used for the correct singular, *datum*. ’… [In American English, *data* may be singular or plural. *Webster’s,*
Krapp, Perrin.].” Distinguishing between the singular *datum* and its plural form *data* has, however, despite prescriptivists’ disapproval, lost ground due to technological advances made in the twentieth century, in particular in computing (*OED*, s.v. *data*).

Mittins et al. (1970) investigated this usage issue as well, by using the following stimulus sentence: *The data is often inaccurate*. Their study showed that the use of *data* as a singular had already become widely acceptable in the late 1960s. The usage item ranked fifth of the 50 investigated usage problems, achieving an average acceptability rating of 69 per cent (Mittins et al., 1970, p. 13). The Newcastle researchers provide detailed information on the contextual judgments made by the questionnaire respondents by stating that *data is* was considered acceptable by 82 per cent in informal speech and by 55 per cent in the context of formal writing (Mittins et al., 1970, p. 32). I used the following stimulus sentence in the online questionnaire:

S2. The data are often inaccurate.

Though the online questionnaire contained a fairly similar stimulus sentence to the one in Mittins et al.’s study, I decided not to use *data is*, but rather the *data are* variant as the former appears to have been widely accepted nowadays, as was shown in the Mittins study. Using the accepted version, *data are*, should therefore have a similar effect to using the disputed variant. While *data are* was used to elicit attitudes in the online questionnaire, I included the noun *media* in the open-guise test. As shown in the overview in Table 5.3 above, the recording containing the unmarked standard variants included the stimulus sentence *The media are covering the story intensively*, while the marked variant *media is* was used in the recording containing the disputed usages. As mentioned in Section 5.3.2, the indirect elicitation tests conducted as part of the interview sessions aimed at assessing the participants’
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What needs to be borne further in mind here is the distinction between customary usage and usage norms.

6.4. Flat Adverbs

Flat adverbs, also known as suffixless or zero adverbs (Peters, 2004, p. 591), constitute a usage feature which has often been considered problematical by usage guide authors and seems to hold the status of an old chestnut in the usage debate. An iconic example of this particular usage problem is the frequently cited go slow example as found, for instance, in Swan (1980, p. 13). While flat adverbs have been part of “most non-standard dialects” in British English, some variants of flat adverbs also occur in “colloquial Standard English” (Hughes et al., 2005, p. 33). A study conducted by Opdahl (2000) investigated differences between British and American English making use of corpora, and it showed that in British English the prescribed -ly variant is preferred. According to Peters (2015, p. 201), the reason for the preference of -ly variants in British English is the result of moral panic, a phenomenon which has been discussed in Chapter 2 and which has engulfed Great Britain as part of the usage debate from the 1980s onwards, as well as the potential influence of usage guide authors such as Eric Partridge and his Usage and Abusage (1942) after the Second World War. Partridge’s advice on this issue does not only brand the use of flat adverbs as a sign of illiteracy, but it also includes a comment which identifies -ly variants as being more polite than flat adverbs (Partridge, 1942, p. 14).

A recent survey of attitudes towards flat adverbs conducted by Lukač and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (forthc.) showed how attitudes varied according to age and gender among a sample of Americans, Brits and non-native speakers of English. Among the investigated usage problems in their study is the flat adverb go slow, which was also studied in Mittins et al.’s Attitudes to
Mittins and his colleagues showed that the flat adverb obtained an average acceptability rate of 54 per cent. What needs to be borne in mind, however, is that their stimulus sentence, *That's a dangerous curve; you'd better go slow*, was restricted in the choice of contexts (Mittins et al., 1970, p. 108). The researchers only allowed informal contexts, a decision which, as discussed above, they came to regret later. Lukač and Tieken-Boon van Ostade’s study (forthc.) reports considerably higher acceptability rates for the stimulus sentence including *go slow* than the Mittins study. An acceptability rate of 92.1 per cent as the result of the analysis of an online questionnaire made them conclude that flat adverbs, such as *go slow*, no longer constitute a usage problem. Yet, it has to be borne in mind that the means of survey distribution they employed, i.e. through mailing lists of universities and research blogs, as well as highlighting the usage feature as in the Mittins study, could have had an influence on the survey respondents. Lukač and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (forthc.) also conducted a corpus analysis, which showed that *go slow* does indeed occur more frequently in COCA than in BNC and thus may be considered more an American usage problem than a British one. The details of this corpus study will be presented in the data analysis in the next chapter.

The stimulus sentence I used in the questionnaire is identical to the two studies previously mentioned, the only difference being that in my case the flat adverb was not highlighted in the stimulus sentence so that informants would not be biased towards the investigated feature (§ 5.3.1). The stimulus sentence used was the following:

S3. That’s a dangerous curve; you’d better go slow.

The flat adverb stimulus used in the open-guise test highlighted the alleged association of flat adverbs with American English, as the flat adverb *real great*
was used in the marked recording. The stimulus sentence used in the un-marked recording made was *This is really great.*

### 6.5. The Use(s) of *Like*

The word *like* has numerous uses and functions, not all of which seem to be considered acceptable in Standard English, British or American. Some discourse-pragmatic functions of *like* have featured prominently in the usage debate, particularly in more recent years. The use of *like* both as a quotative particle, as in *be like*, and as a discourse particle, as in “She’s like really smart” (D’Arcy, 2006, p. 340), have been the subject of a great number of linguistic studies (e.g. Tagliamonte & D’Arcy, 2004; D’Arcy, 2006, 2007; Fox, 2012; Durham et al., 2012; Nestor, 2013), and are often considered to be nonstandard language features by prescriptivists. While such uses of *like* are widely believed to be indicative of the decay of Standard English and are frequently associated with young and particularly American English speakers (see Durham et al., 2012, p. 317), sociolinguistic studies such as the ones mentioned here not only provide an insight into the development and spread of vernacular uses of *like*, but they also enable a better understanding of who the users of vernacular *like* are. Based on those studies, which seem to focus on the function of *like* as a quotative and a discourse particle, a clear gender difference was identified according to which quotative *like* tends to be favoured by female speakers (see Tagliamonte & D’Arcy, 2004; Durham et al., 2012, Fox, 2012). Hughes et al. (2005, p. 23) note that discourse-pragmatic functions of *like*, such as that of a discourse or quotative particle, are “becoming increasingly frequent in the speech of younger British and Irish people, regardless of whether they speak standard or nonstandard dialects”. For this reason, I decided to include the alleged nonstandard *like* in my study of usage attitudes in England.
One function of *like* has only recently started to attract scholarly interest: the function of *like* as an approximative adverb. Standard approximative adverbs such as *about* and *roughly* as in *about two years ago* were found to be gradually replaced by *like* in Canadian English, as D’Arcy (2006) has shown in her ground-breaking study. While discourse particles are said to be void of semantic meaning and seem to be “imbued instead with pragmatic meaning(s)”, D’Arcy (2006, p. 340) argues for *like* to carry “approximative meaning”. This meaning is found in contexts where *like* appears in close proximity of numerical quantities, in the sense of “about”, a usage which, D’Arcy argues, goes back to the early nineteenth century (2006, p. 340). An example of such usage can be found in 2.:

2. The guy weighed like a hundred pounds (D’Arcy, 2006, p. 343).

While previous studies did not distinguish between discursive and approximative *like*, D’Arcy (2006) urges scholars to be more cautious and precise about this distinction, which admittedly is difficult to make. The reason for this, she argues, is that *like* is found to be replacing the approximative adverb *about* in Toronto English, as is shown in her apparent-time study making use of a corpus of spoken vernacular Canadian English. Concluding her study’s findings, D’Arcy states the following:

… *like* has … accelerated in the system to the point where it is currently the preferred adverb for expressing approximation in numerical contexts among speakers under 30, at least in Toronto. The crossover pattern in the relative proportions of *like* and other approximative adverbs such as *about* … indicates a pattern of lexical replacement, one that has progressed swiftly in the community (D’Arcy, 2006, p. 351).

D’Arcy’s (2006) findings reveal an ongoing lexical change. What is of interest in such lexical changes is their perception by members of the speech community. Emphasising how speakers’ awareness tends to be greater in response to
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lexical changes, she continues by quoting Chambers (2000, pp. 193–194) as follows:

Words come to be associated with certain social groups, and their currency waxes or wanes depending on the social status of the groups. When a word declines in frequency, it almost invariably goes through a period when its use becomes increasingly restricted to older people.

While age did play a crucial role in the variation of like as an approximative adverb in D’Arcy’s study, the speakers’ sex played a less important role. D’Arcy (2006, p. 350) showed that while men tend to use approximative adverbs more frequently than women, their use of like and about was proportionally similar. The replacement of about with like is especially interesting given the findings of Biber et al.’s (1999, p. 113) study, which showed that the approximative adverb about is the most frequently used adverb in all registers they investigated.

Having discussed the distinct uses and functions of like, in particular its adverbial use, I would like to investigate attitudes towards the approximative adverb like in British English, as this function of like could potentially be considered an emerging usage problem which has so far been overshadowed by like’s uses as discourse particle and quotative. Nevertheless, approximative like is gaining ground and is seemingly replacing the traditional approximative adverb about. The argument for the approximative adverb like being considered a usage problem is based on D’Arcy’s (2006) findings for adverbial like varying according to age and to speakers’ potential awareness of the feature. I created the following stimulus sentence to be included in my questionnaire:

S4. The new restaurant is like 2 minutes up the road.
I included a different nonstandard function of *like*, namely that of a discourse particle, in the open-guise test in order to cover this frequently discussed nonstandard function of *like*. The stimulus sentence used in the marked recording was the following: *I, like, don’t know what to do.* As presented in the overview in Table 5.3 above, the unmarked stimulus sentence did not include *like* as a discourse particle.

### 6.6. Americanisms

American English has often been regarded as a threat to British English by laypeople, as it exercises its influence through “films, television, popular music, the Internet and the World Wide Web, air travel and control, commerce, scientific publications, economic and military assistance, and activities of the United States in world affairs” (Algeo, 2010, p. 183). According to Algeo (2010, p. 183), technological and cultural developments such as these have made American English to “the most important and influential dialect of the [English] language”. That American variants are hence seemingly in competition with British English variants is a notion which has already emerged in the discussion of the previous usage problems investigated in this study.

*Different than*, the use of *data* as a singular noun, and flat adverbs (see §§ 6.2–6.4) are associated with American English and are often classified by British English speakers as Americanisms. This categorisation is, however, subject to change, as many formerly-known Americanisms, such as the word *reliable*, are no longer regarded as such in Great Britain (Thomas, 1999, p. 177).

For this study, I decided to investigate attitudes towards the process of turning nouns into verbs, a practice which has been described as being more common in American English than in British English in which it is a frequent object of criticism (Thomas, 1999, p. 178). The formation of new words by means of verb conversions can be realised either by maintaining the noun
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without adding any derivational affixes, as is the case with the verb *to impact*, or by adding suffixes such as *-ize* (Biber et al., 1999, p. 400). An example of the latter would be the verb conversion of *to euthanize/euthanise* originating from the noun *euthanasia*, which was discussed by Allen (2003, pp. 19–20) in his *BBC News Styleguide*. As discussed in Chapter 2, the BBC is seen as a defender of Britishness by many viewers and listeners (cf. Ebner, 2016, p. 317), which explains Allen’s careful advice against turning nouns into verbs by stating the following:

> English is not averse to the practice, but we should not risk alienating our audience by rushing to adopt new words before their general acceptance at large. *Euthanise* is not a verb you will find in any dictionary and it has no place in our output. (But who can say what will happen in the future?) … Our listeners and viewers must not be offended or have their attention diverted by the words we use (Allen, 2003, p. 20).

Shea (2014, p. 61), however, counters Allen’s rejection of this alleged Americanism by stating that the first occurrence of *euthanise*, albeit in its *-ize* spelling variant, can be found in *The Times* (London) dating back to 1931 (*OED, s.v. euthanize*). Shea (2014, pp. 61–62) goes on to prove his claim that verb conversion should not be solely attributed to American English by showing how the majority of the examples listed by Allen in his *BBC News Styleguide* originated in Great Britain. It has to be noted that *-ise* is considered to be the British spelling variant of the *-ize* suffix (Biber et al., 1999, p. 402).

The stimulus sentence I used to investigate attitudes towards Americanisms in the online questionnaire was the following:

> S5. The bank was burglarized twice last week.

The first occurrence of *burglarize* recorded in the *OED* is found in the *Southern Magazine* and dates back to 1871 (*OED, s.v. burglarize*). The author of this first citation is Maximilian Schele de Vere (1820–1898), a Swedish
philologist who emigrated to America and published *Americanisms: The English of the New World* in 1872, which aimed at describing the characteristic way Americans talked. The book contains a description of how *burglarize* had been used at the time, with Schele de Vere describing the word as follows:

Burglarize, to, a term creeping into journalism. ‘The Yankeeisms donated, collided and burglarized, have been badly used up by an English magazine-writer.’ (*Southern Magazine*, April, 1871.) The word has a dangerous rival in the shorter burgle (Schele de Vere, 1872, p. 587).

Schele de Vere’s description is intriguing in many ways. The spread of the word *burglarize* is mentioned not only as “creeping into journalism”, but also in that it had been used by “an English magazine-writer”, which is criticised by Schele de Vere (1872, p. 587) who continues by stating that the American *burglarize* is under threat of the standard English verb *to burgle*. Hence, Schele de Vere not only attempts to distinguish between the two variants, but also to establish *burglarize* as the legitimate American variant.

In order to cover a wider range of Americanisms, I decided to include the phrasal verb construction *to meet up with*, which was also investigated by Mittins et al. (1970, p. 45). Allen (2003, p. 20) mentions a similar construction, namely *to meet with*, which he categorises as an Americanism, while Luscombe (2012, p. 158) shows how the construction *to meet up with* was first proscribed by the BBC in the 1960s. Mittins et al. (1970, p. 46) mention Gowers’s discussion of the feature in his usage guide *Plain Words*, in which he described the spread of this feature from “across the Atlantic” (1948, p. 42). The results of Mittins et al.’s study showed that *to meet up with*, which was incorporated in the stimulus sentence *We met up with him at the Zoo*, obtained a low average acceptability rate of only 14 per cent (1970, p. 47). Their stimulus sentence was updated and included in the marked recording in my own study: *So we met up with them at the station*. The modifications made
to the stimulus sentence were meant to increase its suitability for the open-
guise test, as participants in this test were told to be listening to snippets of a
conversation (see § 5.3.3). As mentioned in the preceding chapter (see §
5.3.4), a third attitude elicitation test was developed in the form of a letter of
application. In this letter, I incorporated a verb conversion frequently
associated with American English, i.e. *to impact*: *I am confident that this job
will impact my future career considerably*. The test will show how salient the
use of *to impact* was to the participants in my study. What this description of
Americanisms has hopefully shown is that this kind of usage problem comes
in many forms and shapes, be it verb conversions, phrasal verbs, or flat
adverbs, as discussed above.

6.7. Less Than

The relationship between the determiners *less* and *fewer* is described as “fairly
complex” in the *CGEL* (Huddleston, 2002, p. 1127). While non-countable
nouns are usually modified by *less* if a negative notion is expressed, as in *Kim
has less money than Pat*, countable nouns can either take *fewer* or *less*. An
example of such an instance would be the following sentence discussed by
Huddleston (2002, p. 1127): *He made fewer/less mistakes than the others.*
This variability in usage between *less* and *fewer* with countable nouns is
regarded as a usage problem. While descriptive grammarians such as
Huddleston (2002, p. 1127) in the *CGEL* argue that *less* can indeed be used in
connection with countable nouns, prescriptivists hold on to a strict distinction
between *less* and *fewer* for uncountable and countable nouns respectively.
Huddleston (2002, p. 1127), arguing in favour of both variants, writes that a
sentence like *She left less than ten minutes ago* should contain *less* rather than
*fewer* as “*ten minutes* expresses an amount of time rather than a number of
individual units”. He goes on to claim that “in such cases *fewer* is virtually
impossible” (Huddleston, 2002, p. 1127). Whether countable nouns such as
minutes should indeed be viewed as expressing a single inclusive amount or rather as individual units seems to be the essence of the usage conundrum which is embodied in the iconic “10 items or less”-debate. The use of less in signs found at supermarket checkouts has often caused controversy in Great Britain. The BBC, for instance, reported how a British supermarket chain started to change their “10 items or less” signs to “Up to 10 items” after coming “under criticism from linguists” (“When to Use ‘Fewer’ Rather Than ‘Less’?”, 2008). While the article did not provide any information on who these linguists were, the Plain English Campaign, a British organisation which has been “fighting for crystal-clear communication since 1979” is mentioned as supporting the supermarket chain in question in finding an alternative (Plain English Campaign, 2016). Given linguists’ passive role in the usage debate discussed in § 1.2, it does come as somewhat of a surprise to find them being the driving force behind the criticism of this use of less. Notable exceptions are, however, to be found in that some linguists, such as David Crystal (1984) and Peter Trudgill, in corporation with Lars Andersson (1990), have participated in the debate.

Mittins et al. (1970, p. 48) investigated attitudes towards the use of less with a countable noun by making use of the following stimulus sentence: There were less road accidents this Christmas than last. The sentence obtained an average acceptability rating of 35 per cent in the Mittins study and was consequently situated in the lower half of the list of usage problems investigated in the overall acceptability ranking (Mittins et al., 1970, p. 13). For my own questionnaire, I decided to draw on the “10 items or less”-debate, and composed the following stimulus sentence:

S6. Pay here if you have less than 10 items.
By using this stimulus, the awareness as to whether ten items are supposed to
be considered one single inclusive amount or individual units is investigated.
An instance of less followed by a countable noun was also included in the
open-guise test (cf. 5.3.3). The stimulus sentence used in the marked recording
was based on Mittins et al.’s study (1970, p. 48), but it was shortened for the
speakers’ convenience in the recording process of the open-guise test to There
were less road accidents last year. The variant fewer was included in the
unmarked recording (cf. Table 5.3).

6.8. Double Negatives

“Double negatives”, “multiple negation” or “negative concord” are terms used
to describe the co-occurrence of two or more negative elements in a single
clause (cf. Anderwald, 2002, p. 101). While numerous studies have gone into
great detail discussing negation and double negatives in particular (e.g.
Cheshire, 1998; van der Wurff et al., 1999; Anderwald, 2002; Tieken-Boon
van Ostade, 2008a), my interest in this phenomenon lies in its stigmatisation
and the impact of this on laypeople. While double negatives are found in “most
parts of the British Isles”, they are not considered part of Standard English
(Hughes et al., 2005, p. 24). Hughes et al. (2005, p. 24) elaborate on this
situation by stating that “it is in fact the standard dialect which has diverged
from the other varieties, not the other way round”. Pullum and Huddleston
(2002, pp. 846) include a discussion of negative concord in CGEL stating that
despite being “a grammar of Standard English, … the negative concord
phenomenon is so widespread and salient that it deserves some mention here”.
That this particular linguistic feature has, however, become regarded as
“wrong”, “illogical” and “inferior” is due to its association with “working
class speech”, and is consequently being marked as a feature of “low prestige”
The rule often applied against the use of double negatives stems from logic stating that two negatives make a positive (see Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 1982). Pullum and Huddleston (2002, p. 847) argue that the application of a logical rule is “completely invalid” as it “applies to logical forms, not to grammatical forms”. Pullum and Huddleston (2002, p. 847) conclude that double negatives are not supposed to be considered a matter of logic, but of grammar. What is even more striking about their argument, given the lack of linguistic involvement in the usage debate, is their explicit judgment of those who consider double negatives incorrect.

Despite its non-standard character every experienced user of English needs to be passively acquainted with the negative concord construction in order to be able to understand English in such ordinary contexts as film soundtracks, TV dramas, popular songs, and many everyday conversations. Those who claim that negative concord is evidence of ignorance and illiteracy are wrong; it is a regular and widespread feature of non-standard dialects of English across the world. Someone who thinks the song title *I can't get no satisfaction* means “It is impossible for me to lack satisfaction” does not know English (Pullum & Huddleston, 2002, p. 847).

Providing a historical perspective, Burchfield (1996, pp. 226–227) argued that double negatives used to stress the negativity of a phrase, yet sometime between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries the use of double negatives became “socially unacceptable”. Whatever the reason for this development, the stigmatisation of double negatives has continued, as was shown in two studies conducted by Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2005) and De France (2010). De France (2010) conducted a small-scale survey among university graduates in The Netherlands who were asked to rank ten usage problems, including the double negative, according to their acceptability from least to most acceptable. This study was based on an earlier study by Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2005), who used the same ten usage problems to elicit attitudes from participants of the Federation of Finnish-British Societies. Comparing the findings of these two studies, De France (2010) shows that the double negative was the least
acceptable usage problem, which is indicative of the feature’s stigmatised status. For this reason, I decided to include the double negative in my own study by using the following stimulus sentence:

S7. He wasn’t seen nowhere after the incident.

I included the double negative in the open-guise test by using the stimulus *He didn’t do nothing. He is innocent.* Both stimulus sentences used in the elicitation tests aim at identifying the feature’s unacceptability, yet at the same time it has to be borne in mind that double negatives are frequently found in British English dialects. Since the informants of my study had the opportunity to comment on the stimuli, a more detailed insight into their attitudes can be obtained than a simple “acceptable/unacceptable” answer.

### 6.9. Dangling participles

Dangling participles are widely considered problematical due to a syntactical mismatch of subjects between the main clause and modifying clause which causes ambiguity and confusion. Syntactically, in such constructions the subject of the participle clause is not the same as the subject of the main clause which it is supposed to modify. In actual fact, however, discussions about the acceptability of dangling participles in the usage debate have often neglected the role played by context (cf. Ebner, 2014). This tendency to neglect contexts and to focus exclusively on written language is also reflected in the fact that dangling participles fall into the category of grammatical errors rather than stylistic ones (Aarts, 2014). That dangling participles cause sentences to be considered ungrammatical is also discussed in *CGEL* (Pullum & Huddleston, 2002, p. 611). While the main reason for the rejection of dangling participles seems to lie in the possible confusion and ambiguity caused by dangling modifiers, some participles, such as speaking or provided, have gained the
status of idiomatic usages and are now generally considered absolute con-
stractions (DeBakey & DeBakey, 1983, pp. 233–234). To provide an example,
the following sentence including generally speaking can be found in the BNC.

3. Generally speaking, individual cleverness by British players is abysmal
compared to 90 per cent of overseas players. (AKE, written (newspaper))

Idiomatic constructions like the one in example above are no longer prob-
lematical. This is confirmed by a later analysis conducted by Hayase (2011,
p. 90), who conducted a corpus-based analysis of dangling participles in the BNC and questioned the acceptability of some participles while others are
supposedly “formally unacceptable”.

Since dangling participles have been said to cause ambiguity, pro-
scriptions are not uncommon, as are studies of their occurrence. One of these
was conducted by Bartlett (1953, p. 354), who describes this particular usage
feature as common in English literature and goes on to explain that “[t]he ubiquitous dangler which offends against sense and style is the fault of half-
educated writers, trying seriously and awkwardly to sound like a book”. Mittins and his colleagues included a dangling participle in their study with the
stimulus sentence Pulling the trigger, the gun went off unexpectedly. Their
analysis showed that this stimulus sentence was one of the least acceptable
usage features in their general acceptability ranking as it only obtained an
average acceptability rating of 17 per cent (Mittins et al., 1970, p. 14). Findings such as these enhance the status of dangling participles as
problematical usage features. Drawing on Mittins et al.’s Attitudes towards
English Usage (1970), I used a slightly modified version of their stimulus
sentence in the online questionnaire:

S8. Pulling the trigger, the gun went off.
As mentioned in Section 5.3.3, the open-guise test also included an example of a dangling participle. Since this particular test was designed to contain snippets of a conversation, the following stimulus sentence was included in the marked recording: *Rushing to catch the last bus, Susan’s shoe slipped off her foot.* The standard counterpart, *When Susan was rushing to catch the last bus, her shoe slipped off her foot,* was included in the recording containing the unmarked and accepted variants (cf. Table 5.3). Since I am interested in the role of context, I included two dangling participles in a letter of application as well, i.e. *Having worked as an IT administrator, the job seems to be the perfect match for my skills and experience,* and, *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.* The aim of this test was to assess the usage features’ salience among speakers in cases where stimuli are presented in context.

### 6.10. I for Me

The use of the first person singular nominative pronoun *I* in places where the accusative pronoun *me* would be more appropriate from a prescriptive perspective seems to cause problems in cases where the pronoun appears in a context with another pronoun or proper name. This is most notoriously captured in the iconic phrase *between you and I,* which grammatically speaking, should read *between you and me.* However, it has to be noted here that this “I for me” issue encapsulates a wider variety of alleged pronoun misuse. Hence, it is possible to find this usage problem not only in prepositional phrases such as *between you and I,* but also after verbs, an example of which would be *She told Charles and I the whole story,* which was also included in Mittins et al.’s (1970, p. 89) investigation of usage attitudes. Although the use of the nominative pronoun *I* in the phrase *between you and*
I was in common use in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this linguistic practice became strongly criticised from the eighteenth century onwards (Mittins et al., 1970, p. 110). Mentioning yet another iconic instance of alleged pronoun misuse, Gowers (1954, p. 147) states the following about the perception of this usage issue in the mid-twentieth century: “… most people would think ‘it is I’ pedantic in talk and ‘it is me’ improper in writing”. Gowers’s comment thus indicates an interesting divide between different norms operating for speech and writing.

Mittins et al. (1970, p. 110) discuss two possible reasons for the persistence of this usage conundrum. Quoting Partridge’s usage guide (1942), the Newcastle researchers argue that the pronoun confusion could possibly stem from the pronoun you, which remains you in both the nominative and the accusative (Mittins et al, 1970, p. 110). Secondly, referring to Gowers’s The Complete Plain Words (1954), Mittins and his colleagues draw a possible connection between the I for me issue and a general confusion of me for I, as in an example quoted in Gowers (1954, p. 147): Mrs. Forster and me are such friends. Gowers elaborates this further by stating that “[o]ne might suppose that this mistake was corrected by teachers of English in our schools with such ferocity that their pupils are left with the conviction that such combinations as you and me are in all circumstances ungrammatical” (1954, p. 147). The phenomenon of hypercorrection, which is clearly at issue here, was already discussed by Menner in 1937, who describes this common process as “leaning over backward to be correct”, which occurs “when a dialectal or substandard pronunciation which differs from that of Standard English occurs in Standard English in other words” (Menner, 1937, p. 165). Labov and Trudgill identified hypercorrections of phonological features in the speech of working-class speakers in the United States and England respectively (Trudgill, 1974, Labov, 2006). The use of nominative personal pronouns in coordinates such
as *between you and I* are described as a form of hypercorrection by Payne and Huddleston (2002, p. 463). Yet, it seems as if this particular usage problem has developed a special status in the usage debate and in the speech community, as its use is also found in the speech of news presenters and educated speakers (cf. Howard, 1993; Blamires, 1994). Thus, it seems as if the use of nominative personal pronouns is perceived as posher, more polite and correct than its prescribed standard counterpart with the accusative pronoun.

The Mittins study included the stimulus sentence *Between you and I, she drinks heavily*, which was, however, restricted in context choice to all contexts excluding formal writing (Mittins et al., 1970, p. 111). Regardless of this restriction, the stimulus sentence obtained an average acceptability rating of 23 per cent, which the researchers argued would have been even lower if the formal writing context had been included. Consequently, this usage problem was the least or close to the least acceptable features investigated (Mittins et al., 1970, p. 111). In my study, I included the following stimulus sentence, which was more formal:

S9. *Between you and I, he will not be considered for this job.*

The stimulus sentence used in the open-guise test was modelled on a different sentence also used by Mittins et al. (1970, p. 89), i.e. *She told Charles and I the whole story*, which was used to elicit attitudes towards the alleged misuse of *I*. The stimulus sentence was shortened to *You told Mike and I the story* and then included in the marked recording, while the standard counterpart including *Mike and me* was part of the unmarked recording. As I argue that awareness is a crucial component of usage attitudes, these two stimulus sentences could be perceived as deviating from other stimuli used in the recordings, which is due to the possible occurrence of hypercorrection, as described above.
6.11. Split Infinitives

The split infinitive is an intriguing usage problem due to its special status in the usage debate as a so-called “old chestnut” and prototypical usage problem (Weiner, 1988, p. 173). Its recurring character has made the split infinitive into a prototypical and well-nigh mythological usage problem, which has garnered considerable notoriety among speakers. Pullum and Huddleston (2002, p. 581), for instance, describe split infinitives as “probably the best-known topic in the whole of the English pedagogical grammatical tradition”.

The insertion of an adverb between the infinitive marker to and the infinitive, as in the famous Star Trek trailer to boldly go where no man has gone before, was first criticised in 1834 by an anonymous author in The New England Magazine, who proscribed against the use of split infinitives (Bailey, 1996, p. 248). The anonymous author P. argued as follows:

_The particle, TO, which comes before the verb in the infinitive mode, must not be separated from it by the intervention of an adverb or any other word or phrase; but the adverb should immediately precede the particle, or immediately follow the verb_ (1834, p. 469).

The origin of this particular usage problem can be traced back to the influence of Latin on earlier normative grammarians. While in Latin infinitives consist of only one word, English infinitives were supposed to reflect this inseparable character as well (Tieken-Boon van Ostade & Ebner, 2017). What is intriguing about this first proscription against the split infinitive is not only that it occurred in a magazine, but that the author also described how the split infinitive was used and perceived by his contemporaries. Hence, splitting infinitives was described by P. (1834, p. 469) as frequently occurring in the language used by “uneducated persons” as well as by language professionals like editors who had not received “a good education” and were therefore responsible for the occurrence of split infinitives in newspapers. The Latinate origin in the proscription of splitting infinitives can be seen as an explanation
for why uneducated speakers were more prone to this practice, since Latin was a central part of the education system at the time (see § 2.2). The anonymous author’s comment also shows that Lowth, who has frequently been mentioned as the creator of the rule against split infinitives, cannot be held responsible for this stricture (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2011, pp. 117–118). In Great Britain, the earliest critical comment against splitting infinitives dates from only a few years later, and it was made by “a certain editor and co-founder of the publishing company Taylor and Francis, Richard Taylor, in 1840” (see also Tieken-Boon van Ostade & Ebner, 2017), who stated: “Some writers of the present day have a disagreeable affectation of putting an adverb between to and the infinitive” (as discussed in Visser 1972, pp. 1036–1037). Both critical comments were made in the nineteenth century, which can be seen as an indication of the construction’s beginning stigmatisation. Reflecting the linguist’s perspective, Pullum and Huddleston (2002, p. 581) describe not only how proscriptions against the split infinitive are caused by the “disapproval” of language changes among nineteenth-century grammarians, but they also argue how “[n]o reason was ever given as to why the construction was supposedly objectionable”. The latter argument refers to how Latin served as a basis for English grammar description and the inclination of viewing English infinitives in the same manner as Latin infinitives. Thus, Pullum and Huddleston (2002, p. 581) call the term ‘split infinitives’ “a misnormer”, as in their view “nothing is being split”. Furthermore, it has to be borne in mind that splitting an infinitive with an adverb is not only done for rhythmical reasons, but also to add emphasis or to change the meaning of a sentence, as is shown in the examples below (cf. Crystal, 2006b, pp. 126–127).

4. a) I’ll ask her and then get back to one of you two to actually do the letter contact. (FM2, spoken (meeting))

b) They failed completely to understand the problem.
c) They failed to completely understand the problem.

While 4.a), an example taken from the BNC, illustrates a split infinitive for added emphasis, 4.b) and 4.c) serve as examples which show how the placement of the adverb can cause a difference in meaning (Crystal, 2006b, p. 127).

Mittins et al. (1970, p. 72) included the stimulus sentence *He refused to even think of it* in their study, which obtained an average acceptability rate of 40 per cent and was ranked in a middle position of the 50 usage problems investigated. Referring to the comments obtained by their respondents, Mittins and his colleagues argue that “[m]any of the comments referred to the issue in general terms”, though they suggest that some respondents rated the stimulus sentence “in isolation and found [it] to have no advantage over the more puristic ‘He refused even to think of it’” (Mittins et al., 1970, pp. 72–73). A similar stimulus sentence was used in my online questionnaire:

S10. He refused to even think about it.

Both the open-guise test and as the usage judgment test contained stimulus sentences which aimed at eliciting attitudes towards the split infinitive. While the marked recording of the open-guise test contained the stimulus sentence *She used to secretly admire him* (see Table 5.3), the following stimulus sentence was included in the usage judgment test: *I know how to effectively set goals and achieve them.*

6.12. **Literally**

The alleged misuse of *literally* instead of *figuratively* or *metaphorically* has caused a heated debate among prescriptivists and descriptivists in the last few decades. Thus, a sentence like *He literally was heartbroken* is deemed incorrect by prescriptivists, who argue that the original meaning of *literally* to mean *really* or *to the letter* would leave the gentleman with a physically
broken heart. In their view, *literally* would need to be properly replaced by *figuratively* since a figure of speech is described. This debate in Great Britain was fuelled by the *OED*’s acceptance of *literally* in a non-literal sense in September 2011 (*OED*, s.v. *literally*). The meaning of *literally* in the *OED* entry, which is labelled “colloquial”, states the following: “Used to indicate that some (freq. conventional) metaphorical or hyperbolical expression is to be taken in the strongest admissible sense: ‘virtually, as good as’; (also) ‘completely, utterly, absolutely’” (*OED*, s.v. *literally*). The *OED*’s description suggests that *literally* is often used as a hyperbole and in fact expresses the complete opposite of the word’s original meaning. This function of *literally* has also been discussed by Claridge (2011, pp. 108–111), who emphasises its intensifying function. The *OED* further explains that the colloquial, hyperbolic use of *literally* has developed into “one of the most common uses” of the word, while adding that this particular use is regarded as “irregular in standard English since it reverses the original sense of *literally* (‘not figuratively or metaphorically’)” (*OED*, s.v. *literally*).

The use of *literally* as an intensifier and in a non-literal meaning is not only often seen as a sign of the decaying state of the English language, but it is also made responsible for such developments (Nerlich & Chamizo Domínguez, 2003, p. 193). What may come as a surprise perhaps is that the first recorded use of the alleged ‘new’ meaning of *literally* in the *OED* dates back to as early as 1769. Hence, despite its recent popularity and the frequency of the feature in the usage debate, *literally* as an intensifier has a seemingly longer usage history than stigmatisation history as *literally* in a non-literal sense was first discussed only in Strunk’s *The Elements of Style* published in 1918. Kostadinova (2015, p. 3) connects the spread of prescriptive sentiments towards *literally* to the popularity of usage guides such as *The Elements of Style*. 
Despite its disputed status, the word *literally* rarely seems to be the subject of linguistic research. Israel (2002) investigates the semantic and pragmatic change of *literally* and argues for *literally* not being considered misused or incorrect:

… people use the word in this [non-literal] way precisely because they do understand the notion of literal meaning, and they associate it, naturally enough, with plain speaking and honest expression. *Literally* seems to be following a well-traveled path which has taken words like *really*, *truly*, and *very* from early metalinguistic functions to later expressive functions. *Very* has completed this path to become a full-fledged scalar intensifier; *literally* still has a long way to go (Israel, 2002, p. 424).

Nerlich and Chamizo Domínguez (2003, p. 193) also describe the lack of linguistic studies that deal with the different uses and meanings of *literally*. In their study, they point out that *literally* is often taken to have either a literal or non-literal meaning, while a possible double meaning of *literally* is neglected. For all that, speakers’ attitudes towards the use of non-literal *literally* were also investigated in the Mittins study, in which the stimulus sentence *His eyes were literally standing out of his head* was used which obtained an average acceptability rating of 35 per cent; accordingly, it ranked 31st of the 50 usage problems investigated (Mittins et al., 1970, p. 63). While their stimulus sentence achieved an acceptability rate of 16 per cent in the most formal context, formal writing, its acceptability rating was much higher in informal speech with 58 per cent (Mittins et al., 1970, p. 63). Mittins and his colleagues indicated how *literally* in its non-literal meaning was gaining enough popularity for them to conclude that “discouragement [of its use], it seems, might prove nothing more than a retreating action” (1970, p. 63). The stimulus sentence used in my own study is a slightly modified version of the one used by Mittins and his colleagues.

S11. His eyes were literally popping out of his head.
Another instance of literally as an intensifier was included in my study by incorporating the following stimulus sentence in the marked recording of the open-guise test: *The new store is literally just around the corner*. The un-marked variant, on the other hand, did not include the intensifier literally, as was shown in Table 5.3 above.

6.13. Concluding Remarks

The description of the usage problems investigated in this study constitutes an important part in the analysis of usage attitudes as this chapter provided an insight into earlier scientific studies dealing with the usage problems, such as the comparative corpus studies of literally discussed in § 6.12. The aim of this chapter was not only to discuss my selection of usage problems as to why these features are considered problematical, but it was also important to illustrate the linguists’ point of view in the usage debate. As mentioned in the Introduction (Chapter 1), linguists are often accused of having avoided an active participation in the debate. Yet, linguists such as Geoffrey Pullum, Rodney Huddleston and Douglas Biber et al. have indirectly contributed to the usage debate in the form of their grammars CGEL (2002) and Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (1999), both of which took an overtly descriptive approach. Thus, the addition of their attitudes to some of the usage problems studied is the first step to bridging the gap between the three key players in the debate. Two usage problems, sentence-initial And and very unique (see §§ 6.13–6.14), have not been included in this chapter but are discussed in more detail in Appendix F. This is due to the fact that they have only been included in the usage judgment test, while all other usage problems feature in more than one elicitation test (§ 1.5). Hence, I have decided to provide both the linguists’ and usage guide authors’ points of view on these
two issues in the appendix, which makes the description of usage problems complete.