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8. Current Usage Attitudes in England: the Online Questionnaire (Part Two)

8.1. Introduction
In this chapter, I will present my analysis of the second part of the online questionnaire, which contained twelve statements on the current state of English as well as an open question aiming to elicit further qualitative data. Applying a mixed-methods approach when studying usage attitudes does not only mean combining both quantitative and qualitative data, as shown in the questionnaire analysis in the preceding chapter, but also means having to draw on the use of elicitation techniques that are characterised by varying degrees of explicitness. This means that a combination of the three main approaches I adopted in studying language attitudes discussed in Chapter 3, i.e. the Direct Approach, the Indirect Approach and the Societal Treatment Approach, should be applied. While the first and main part of the questionnaire makes use of the Direct Approach and was predominately quantitative in nature, of which the findings have been discussed in Chapter 7, the second part of the questionnaire included elicitation techniques which are less direct and produced mainly qualitative data. In order to provide a systematic analysis of my data, I will first discuss the twelve language statements in Section 8.2 before presenting the results of the open question in Section 8.3 below.

8.2. Meta-Societal Treatment Analysis of Comments on English Usage
By asking the questionnaire respondents to agree or disagree with these statements on a four-point Likert scale, I aimed to add an additional perspective to the study of usage attitudes in England today, which will allow for a better understanding of currently held beliefs with respect to nonstandard language use and the state of the English language. While some of the statements reflect
prescriptive notions, others are more lenient and can be taken to reflect the
descriptive side of the debate.

The analysis of these statements will be conducted in two ways. Firstly,
the respondents’ overall agreement or disagreement will be analysed by ar-
raging the statements into categories ranging from most to least agreement
with the statement in question. Secondly, I calculated a usage judgment index
which reflects the respondents’ attitudes towards the stimulus sentences dis-
cussed in Chapter 7. The range of the index spans from zero to eleven – the
questionnaire comprised eleven usage questions – with respondents who reject
all descriptive uses obtaining the highest scores. The lower the usage judgment
index the more lenient the respondent is. I expect to see a correlation between
the degree of agreement and the index. To identify such correlations, I am
using the non-parametric Kendall tau-b correlation coefficients. This analysis
will allow an additional perspective on current usage attitudes in England.

In Table 8.1 below, the statements have been ordered according to the
degree of cumulative agreement from the most frequently agreed with state-
ment to the one least agreed with. While the majority of the statements in the
list express prescriptive sentiments, the last two offer more lenient attitudes
towards language change and are therefore separated from the other state-
ments in the table. At almost 88 per cent, respondents agree with statement 1
in Table 8.1 on how the use of “bad spelling and grammar” can be perceived
negatively. This statement is followed by two statements which touch on
grammar teaching, and obtained the same percentage of agreement, namely
72.3 per cent. While statement 2 describes the public’s perception of the low
priority status of grammar teaching in schools, statement 3 complements this
notion in that schools are seen as providers and propagators of a uniform code
of English. That both comments obtained the same percentages of agreement
shows that these two notions are very likely connected.
Table 8.1 Agreement with statements in percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Agreement cumulative</th>
<th>Disagreement cumulative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1  Yes, bad spelling and grammar does make you look like an idiot.</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  Grammar often seems to be a low priority in education</td>
<td>72.3</td>
<td>27.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  I think it is necessary for all British citizens to be educated in the same form of English to enable easy communication between each other.</td>
<td>72.3</td>
<td>27.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  Texting is causing a decline in standards of grammar and spelling in teenagers.</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5  I think that the web is responsible for the explosive spread of what linguists will be calling “Bad English” in the future.</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6  Is proper English dying? Yes it is. Unfortunately, it is being hurried along towards its grave by nearly everything that we are exposed to in the print and electronic media.</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7  Grammar is not just an educational issue. For some adults, it can sabotage friendships and even romantic relationships.</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>50.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8  Twitter is influencing the development of the English Language negatively.</td>
<td>47.3</td>
<td>52.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9  Good grammar in this country seems to have gone out the window and you only have to listen to the BBC news for proof of it.</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>73.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Most young people today cannot even complete a sentence whether written or spoken orally.</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>77.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 It’s good to know the (supposed) rules, but clear communication is obviously better.</td>
<td>78.6</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 To say that texting is killing language is to show ignorance of how language is a living thing that grows and adapts to changing use.</td>
<td>74.1</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statements 4 and 5 deal with a commonly held belief about language change being propelled by technology. Texting in particular has often attracted a lot of criticism in this respect which, however, seems to be unfounded (Crystal, 2008, p. 7). According to the figures presented above, 62.5 per cent
of respondents agree with statement 4 and believe texting to be responsible for a perceived “decline in standards of grammar and spelling in teenagers”. Slightly fewer respondents, 52.7 per cent, agree with statement 5 which attributes the blame to the internet. The alleged negative influence of the social media messaging service Twitter, as described in statement 8, is not perceived as strongly and negatively as statements 4 and 5.

Statement 6, which deals with the perceived doom of the English language, provides an interesting insight into the respondents’ overall sentiments with respect to this issue. As Table 8.1 shows, a clear divide between the respondents can be identified, with 50 per cent agreeing with statement 6 about the decay of English. While the most agreed with statement deals with how grammar and spelling mistakes are perceived negatively, the topic of statement 7, which describes the social consequences of such mistakes, is agreed with by only 49.1 per cent of all respondents. What needs to be borne in mind with these two statements is, however, that while statement 7 deals with personal relationships, statement 1 takes a more general perspective. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise to find more lenient attitudes towards language use in informal and personal contact situations.

The two least agreed with statements, 9 and 10, provide an interesting insight into the respondents’ attitudes towards language change in English with regard to two special themes which have already emerged in my analysis of the questionnaire findings, i.e. the use of Standard English in the media and the importance of age as a social factor in the usage debate. The role of media institutions such as the BBC has been discussed in detail in Chapter 2, where I demonstrated how the language use of the BBC is praised by some parts of its audience, while other audience members point out the many mistakes the BBC commits. That is why statement 9 was of particular interest to me, as it was expected to reflect this divided perception of the BBC. The questionnaire
respondents seem to regard the BBC’s language use positively, as only 26.8 per cent of respondents agree with statement 9. Lastly, statement 10 deals with the generation gap which has been identified as a factor with some of the usage problems investigated, e.g. the split infinitive or literally as an intensifier (cf. 7.2.1.10 – 7.2.1.11). While statement 10 expresses a commonly held belief about the inadequate language command of young speakers, only 22.3 per cent of respondents actually agree to some extent with this statement.

Statements 11 and 12 exhibit more lenient views towards perceived language change. With 78.6 per cent agreement, statement 11, which discusses the importance of clear communication at the expense of rule knowledge, obtained the second highest agreement rate. A similarly high rate of 74.1 per cent can be identified for statement 12, in which language is considered a living entity which is naturally prone to change. This statement also contains the notion of texting as a potentially “killer language”, which can be contrasted with statement 4, which received a rating of 62.5 per cent. The slightly narrower scope of statement 4 in which texting is blamed for the alleged falling standards in grammar and spelling among teenagers, however, needs to be taken into account. In contrast, statement 12 does not restrict texting to a specific age group. That age plays a crucial role in the sociolinguistic stratification of usage attitudes has already been shown in the discussion of attitudes towards the eleven usage problems included in the online questionnaire (cf. §7.2.1).

The extent to which respondents agree with commonly held beliefs about the decay of English has added another dimension to the present study of usage attitudes. The analysis of the questionnaire respondents’ agreement with commonly held beliefs about nonstandard language use and the state of English made it possible to confirm respondents’ overwhelming agreement
with the need for the teaching of grammar in schools, as well as the respondents’ perceptions of how technological advancements have influenced language negatively. On the other hand, respondents disagree with commonly held beliefs about young speakers’ language abilities and the BBC’s flawed language use. What needs to be taken into account when analysing the above statements, however, is a social desirability bias, which most likely plays a greater role in this part of the questionnaire than with the stimulus sentences in light of the directness of the elicitation test. Unlike in the above-mentioned results of the online questionnaire in which the usage problems were not highlighted in the stimulus sentences, asking respondents to agree or disagree with commonly found beliefs is an approach characterised by its directness. As the statements express a positive or negative attitude more straightforwardly, respondents will be more prone to answer in a manner which they consider to be socially acceptable or desirable (Garrett, 2010, p. 44).

Having analysed the agreement rates of the respondents towards the twelve statements in the questionnaire, I would now like to see whether a correlation exists between the extent to which respondents agree or disagree with a particular statement and their judgments on the investigated stimulus sentences, as reflected in the usage judgment index. The respondents’ judgments have already been discussed in Sections 7.2.1.1–7.2.1.11 above. To this end, I drew on the Kendall tau-b correlation coefficients, a correlation test which was chosen for reasons of its suitability for non-parametric data (Field, 2013, p. 278). The results of these correlation tests are displayed in Table 8.2 below. The order in which the statements are presented depends on the statistical significance of their correlation with the usage judgment index, starting with the most significant correlation.
Table 8.2 Correlations between the usage judgment index and agreement ratings, ordered by statistical significance ($p$-value)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Correlation (Kendall $\tau$-b)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9 Good grammar in this country seems to have gone out the window and you only have to listen to the BBC news for proof of it.</td>
<td>$\tau_b = -.308, p = .000^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Is proper English dying? Yes it is. Unfortunately, it is being hurried along towards its grave by nearly everything that we are exposed to in the print and electronic media.</td>
<td>$\tau_b = -.215, p = .004^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 I think that the web is responsible for the explosive spread of what linguists will be calling “Bad English” in the future.</td>
<td>$\tau_b = -.188, p = .013^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Grammar often seems to be a low priority in education.</td>
<td>$\tau_b = -.164, p = .031^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Twitter is influencing the development of the English Language negatively.</td>
<td>$\tau_b = -.148, p = .048^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 I think it is necessary for all British citizens to be educated in the same form of English to enable easy communication between each other.</td>
<td>$\tau_b = -.135, p = .074$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Texting is causing a decline in standards of grammar and spelling in teenagers.</td>
<td>$\tau_b = -.107, p = .153$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Most young people today cannot even complete a sentence whether written or spoken orally.</td>
<td>$\tau_b = -.099, p = .196$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Yes, bad spelling and grammar does make you look like an idiot.</td>
<td>$\tau_b = -.031, p = .695$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Grammar is not just an educational issue. For some adults, it can sabotage friendships and even romantic relationships.</td>
<td>$\tau_b = -.018, p = .807$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 To say that texting is killing language is to show ignorance of how language is a living thing that grows and adapts to changing use.</td>
<td>$\tau_b = .222, p = .004^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 It’s good to know the (supposed) rules, but clear communication is obviously better.</td>
<td>$\tau_b = .157, p = .041^*$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Statistically significance ($p \leq .05$)
Of the twelve statements analysed, seven show a statistically significant correlation between agreement ratings and the usage judgment index (marked with an asterisk in the table). While five of these seven statements, which also projected a negative sentiment towards the state of English (statements 9, 6, 5, 2, and 8), showed negative correlations between the index and agreement levels measured, the two statements expressing a more descriptive view towards the state of English, i.e. statements 11 and 12, revealed positive correlations between these two variables. A negative correlation, such as the one identified for the statement “Good grammar in this country seems to have gone out the window and you only have to listen to the BBC news for proof of it”, indicates that respondents who disagree with this statement also have a lower usage judgment index, which means that they found the usage features investigated in Chapter 7 above acceptable. While most of the significant correlations identified are weak negative correlations, the above statement showed a moderate negative correlation ($r_b = -0.308$, $p = .000$). Interestingly, statements 11 and 12, which reflect more lenient attitudes towards language change and the state of English, both showed weak positive correlations with the usage judgment index, as can be seen in Table 8.2. This means that those respondents who agree with these two statements also scored lower on the usage judgment index, which is indicative of their lenient attitudes towards the usage problems investigated.

By including statements made by members of the general public which reflect commonly held beliefs about the state of the English language and language change I aimed to add another layer to my analysis of the respondents’ attitudes. While such statements are most likely to provoke socially desirable answers, for reasons already explained, their correlation with the calculated usage judgment index can be considered suggestive in the sense that respondents who rated the usage features investigated as unacceptable are more likely
to agree with statements expressing prescriptive notions. This can be seen as a confirmation of the currency of such commonly held beliefs. If usage attitudes have so far been discussed as single attitudes towards a particular usage feature, the usage judgment index tries to present these single attitudes in a wider scope and to provide an insight into prescriptive and descriptive stances on usage as a whole. Having analysed respondents’ agreement with statements on the state of the English language, I would now like to turn to the analysis of qualitative data provided by the respondents in response to an open question. These qualitative data enable us to gain an insight into the respondents’ beliefs about the current state of the English language.

8.3. The State of the English Language

I will now turn to the analysis of the open question “What do you think about the state of the English language?”. Answering this question was, however, not compulsory, which explains why only 83 of the 112 questionnaire respondents provided an answer to it. As with the comments on the eleven usage problems discussed in Chapter 7, I looked for recurring patterns and classified the respondents’ answers accordingly. While some informants provided only a short positive or negative evaluation of the state of English, as exemplified in (111) – (114), others went into more detail and will be discussed further below.

(111) Vibrant as ever.
    (Education adviser, over 60 years old, male)

(112) It’s as healthy today as it’s always been and always will be.
    (Teacher, 41–60 years old, male)

(113) It’s better than the state of the American language!
    (Consultant, 18–25 years old, male)

(114) I have noticed a sad decline.
    (Retired, over 60 years old, female)
As can be seen from these comments, evaluations of the state of English vary, with English being either perceived as “vibrant” and “healthy” or as being in a “sad decline”. What becomes obvious from the answers obtained are two central issues which occur frequently in the respondents’ answers. Firstly, the issue of education is mentioned in connection with a perceived decay of the language. Secondly, possible consequences of what is seen as a potential misuse of the language are discussed by the informants. Both topics will be analysed in detail and representative comments will be provided to illustrate both issues.

As demonstrated in Chapter 2 (see § 2.3.1), the use of a standard variety fulfils a gatekeeping function in education, which seems to have played a crucial role in the usage debate. Changes in teaching methods and approaches towards grammar teaching in the 1980s triggered a moral panic, which appears to have persisted even until today. Some respondents commented on the alleged decay of English and attributed the blame for this development to a lack of grammar teaching in the schools or to poor education in general. Comments (115) – (118) below illustrate such allocations of blame.

(115) I think that there is a lack of guardianship and that it is too easily being corrupted by poor education.
(Graphic designer, over 60 years old, male)

(116) I think that more focus should be placed on teaching grammar in schools. We seem too comfortable with poor grammar.
(Social worker, 31–40 years old, female)

(117) Inevitable evolution – driven by both neglect and modern teaching methods.
(Old nuisance, over 60 years old, male)

(118) Language evolves. The evolving process used to be somewhat slow, but just as technology has helped to speed up communication, it has sped up the process of evolving language. It’s
disconcerting to be subject to the change, and it takes some getting used to, but I do think there is somewhat of a decline in teaching English in general.
(Youth worker, 26–30 years old, female)

While all four comments emphasise a perceived decline in teaching English grammar, the respondent in (115) further adds that there is a “lack of guardianship” with respect to Standard English, while another respondent in (117) also mentions neglect in teaching practices as playing a role in the current state of English. In addition to mentioning poor education, both female respondents in (116) and (118) comment on current teaching issues in schools. While a bigger focus should be put on grammar teaching, according to the respondent in (116), the informant in (118) comments on her perception of a decline in English teaching. These comments essentially express a dissatisfaction with current teaching practices in schools. In stark contrast to these comments, another respondent, whose education fell in the period in which confusion about grammar teaching prevailed (see Chapter 2), considers the English grammar teaching of her children better than the education she herself received in the 1970s (119).

(119) I have to say that my children (15 and 18) have received a much better education in English grammar than I did when I was at school in the 1970s.
(Housewife, 41–60 years old, female)

Technological advances and their influence on English were frequently mentioned by the questionnaire respondents. Comments (120) and (121) deal with the creation of new types of English due to technological advances such as texting or Twitter. Neither of these respondents condemn these new types of English, but rather stress the need for teaching to be adapted to these changes.
(120) I don’t think that texting/e-communication are negatively affecting the English language, although they are definitely affecting it. I do think that because there is perhaps a greater difference between formal and informal types of grammar than there used to be, and therefore that moving between them is a skill which we need to cover in more depth when teaching grammar. (Archaeologist, 26–30 years old, female)

(121) The types of English used in texting, Twitter, etc. are absolutely fine, so long as people know that, in other contexts, they would be unacceptable or inappropriate. Furthermore, it’s the duty of educationalists to help learners use all types of communication effectively; people should be able to move effortlessly from one mode of discourse to another and be confident in all of them. People should know about ‘less/fewer’; ‘me/I’; ‘was/were’ and so on, and be able to speak and write in correct Standard English when the occasion requires it. Teachers who fail to take this duty seriously are disadvantaging their students. (Retired school teacher, over 60 years old, male)

One respondent’s observation in (120) shows how the formality dimension seems to have widened to incorporate these new types of English increasing the differences between formal and informal language. Accommodating this new formality scale in teaching is considered a “skill” that needs to be taught in school, this particular respondent argues. In a similar manner, the respondent in (121), a retired school teacher, emphasises the importance of understanding contextual appropriateness. He emphasises the responsibilities of teachers to enable their students to comply with these new requirements as they would otherwise disadvantage students. In addition, the respondent in (121) mentions usage problems such as the distinction between less and fewer, the confusion between personal pronouns I and me, as well as the dialectal usage of was and were, and argues that students should be able to “speak and write in correct Standard English”. Thus, it seems as if he does not only distinguish between different types of contextual appropriateness, but also believes in enforcing the teaching of a standard variety in schools.
There is no doubt in that people tend to judge others by their language. 
The digital marketing consultant in (122), for example, claims that using “bad 
language” indicates not only “poor education and intelligence”, but also that 
it serves as a personal indicator of who could potentially become her friend. 
While she does not go into further detail, it can be assumed that the respondent 
would dismiss people as potential friends based on their poor language use. 

(122) Think bad language use shows poor education and intelligence and yes I do judge people on their use of English. However, I also think it’s a good indicator of people I do or do not want to be friends with, so I don’t want it taught for the sake if [sic] it, if [y]ou see what I mean! I think language isn’t in decline but changing but that’s no excuse to forget the basics which have spent hundreds of years getting established, and for a good reason. (Digital marketing consultant, 31–40 years old, female) 

The following three comments (123) – (125) provide an insight into how in- 
correct language use is perceived and what kind of consequences can to be 
pected when language is used inappropriately. In particular, respondents tend 
to mention potential consequences of incorrect language use in job appli- 
cations. 

(123) English is changing, as it always has, in response to the changing demands placed on it by the society that uses it and its contexts of use. Individuals need to be made aware that everyone makes judgements on people’s use of language and different context demand different patterns of use - answering job interview ques- tions for most jobs with Facebook-style comments are unlikely to secure you the position. The only thing that does not change is the desire to harness the power of language by select groups w[h]o then place a hierarchy on different patterns of use & de- clare their own arbitrary patterns as superior. (University lecturer, 41–60 years old, male)
The respondent in (123) not only mentions how English changes with the changing needs of society, but also describes how an unsuccessful job interview situation can be caused by inappropriate language use. As he puts it, “answering job interview questions for most jobs with Facebook-style comments are unlikely to secure you the position”. While the changing character of English is not perceived negatively, this respondent emphasises that “select groups” aim at garnering “power of language” and establishing a hierarchy through which their language use is considered “superior”. Comment (123) shows how important it is to be aware of power relations within a speech community, as these relations are exercised through language and hence foster potential social exclusion based on language use. Such power relations take effect especially in situations in which compliance with and command of the standard variety fulfils a gatekeeping function. Job applications represent a type of glass ceiling which seems cannot be broken when using nonstandard variants or nonstandard spelling. Comments (124) – (126) below provide an insight into these issues.

(124) Yes, language is a living thing which adapts and changes over time. Grammar and spelling aren’t always the most important thing. However, I think people use this as an excuse. If you apply for a job, your potential employer is first looking at a resume and/or email in the first instance. They WILL make a snap judgement about you based on how well or poorly it is written. To say proper grammar serves no purpose (which some people do claim) is unrealistic. Conversational and formal English are two different things and children need to be taught how to utilize both.
(Customer service administrator, 31–40 years old, female)

The respondent in (124) emphasises the fact that, according to her, snap judgments are inevitable. While agreeing with the commonly held belief that “language is a living thing”, she also believes that “grammar and spelling” should not be given highest priority all the time. Interestingly, she continues by
stating that the assumption of language being a living entity is utilised by others “as an excuse” for their language use, and explains how the reality of the importance of “proper grammar” can affect the success of a job application. Therefore, she argues, the differences in formality between linguistic styles should be taught in schools. In a very similar manner, the respondent in (125) acknowledges the “natural changes in the language”, yet argues for the application of “standard rules of grammar and orthography of English” in job applications. Pointedly, he provides an example by using nonstandard orthography and grammar to demonstrate what not to do in the professional world:

(125) I think there are many people who try to fossilise English and are not accepting of natural changes in the language. Nevertheless, if you write like this, you will never get a job, so it is important to be aware of the standard rules of grammar and orthography of English.

(Writer/journalist, 26–30 years old, male)

In the last comment to be discussed here, (126), a respondent confirms the gatekeeping function of written Standard English, discussed above, in that she claims never to have employed an applicant whose application documents were flawed by spelling mistakes.

(126) Grammar and spelling are certainly in decline. Personally I never employed anybody who wrote a cv/application letter with spelling mistakes...

(Retired arts consultant, over 60 years old, female)

By including a qualitative analysis of comment, I was able to foreground questionnaire respondents’ perceptions of the role of Standard English, which, as discussed in Chapter 2, is often found to fulfil a gatekeeping function, while at the same time inadequacy of grammar teaching in schools is criticised. That
written Standard English seems to be particularly prone to notions of correctness needs to be highlighted, as text types such as job applications seem to be particularly subject to scrutiny.

8.4. Concluding Remarks

The second part of the questionnaire aimed at eliciting attitudes towards commonly held beliefs regarding the state of the English language. Making use of the Societal Treatment Approach to extract such beliefs, I aimed at eliciting the questionnaire respondents’ degrees of agreement with these widely-held beliefs. This part, together with the open question on how respondents perceived the state of the English language, was characterised by a slightly less direct elicitation methods. The quantitative data obtained through the first part of the questionnaire provided not only an insight into whether specific usage features were considered acceptable or not, but also into the contextual preferences and appropriateness of the stimulus sentences as determined by the respondents. This highlighted the role of Standard English and its function as a gatekeeper. Besides emphasising the importance of education, respondents frequently mentioned in the second part of the questionnaire how non-compliance with usage norms of Standard English can affect one’s social standing and mobility, as it restricts speakers’ access to certain domains. In the next chapter, I will continue the analysis of my data by focussing on the interview sessions in which 63 informants completed further attitude elicitation tests (see § 5.3.2).