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10. Discussion of Results

10.1. Introduction

Having presented the findings of the elicitation tests I have conducted for the purpose of identifying current usage attitudes in England in the preceding three chapters, I will now turn to the discussion of my results and will contextualise them within the usage debate. This will be done by drawing on the theoretical background presented in the previous chapters and by combining concepts and historical developments, such as Preston’s concept of language regard (Chapter 3) and the Milroyan standardisation process (Chapter 2), respectively, with the results of the conducted usage elicitation tests.

Firstly, I will discuss the social variables which have been identified in Chapters 7 – 9 as relevant to the variability of usage attitudes by providing an overview of the results of the questionnaire. I will also discuss in detail the differences in the respondents’ judgments based on their correlations with degree of certainty and judgment basis. Applying a mixed-methods approach has offered a detailed insight into current usage attitudes in England as the informants were able to comment on their usage decisions, by which they provided elaborative qualitative data. Thus, relevant concepts have come to light which would have remained concealed if I had used a traditional questionnaire to elicit such delicate attitudes. Concepts such as self-presentation and the speaker’s distancing from usages perceived as unacceptable play a central role in the usage debate and will be discussed further.

My overview of previous usage attitude studies has shown that studies of usage attitudes held by the general public tend to be more frequent in the United States of America than in Great Britain. Why this is the case remains subject to speculation. However, a comparison is made between the findings of the questionnaire data presented in this study (see Chapter 7) and Mittins et al.’s *Attitudes to English Usage* (1970). However, it should be borne in mind
that attitude studies are difficult to replicate in general. Therefore, any findings of the comparison between these two snapshots of usage attitudes in British English need to be considered as mere tendencies of potential changes in usage attitudes.

My aim in applying a mixed-methods approach to studying the usage attitudes of laypeople has been to obtain a fuller picture of current usage attitudes. This approach resulted in the elicitation of both consciously and subconsciously offered attitudes. Despite being prone to the social desirability bias, consciously offered attitudes, which have so far been central in the general discussion on usage attitudes due to their elicitation through the Direct Approach (see Chapter 3), can confirm commonly held beliefs about language use. Moreover, they also provide an insight into the effects of the usage debate on laypeople. These effects will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. Lastly, it is important to highlight the advantages of the mixed-methods approach I applied while also taking account of its pitfalls, as these can influence the outcome of my study and can have implications for future studies in the field.

10.2. The Social Stratification of Usage Attitudes in England

While previous usage attitude studies only gradually incorporated sociolinguistic theory and scarcely investigated the sociolinguistic variability of usage attitudes (cf. Mittins et al., 1970; Sandred, 1983; Albanian & Preston, 1998), the aim of my own study was to examine whether and how social variables such as age, gender, education level and nativeness affect the usage attitudes of a speech community. What needs to be borne in mind here is that the speech community investigated in this study comprises the wider population of England, which consists of further smaller speech communities. Therefore, it was necessary to acknowledge regional differences of the English varieties spoken
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in England, as was done for double negation investigated in this study (see § 6.8).

While the focus of previous studies has mainly been on the social variables age and gender, other variables have not been included in this study of usage attitudes (see § 4.3), despite the fact that they play an equally crucial role in language change and variability in general. A notable exception to this pattern is Sandred’s (1983) investigation of attitudes towards Scots which also involved the variable social class. How nativeness, level of education or other social class membership markers can affect usage attitudes towards variation in usage still has to be investigated in detail. Undoubtedly, social class plays a crucial role in Great Britain, and its influence, especially in the usage debate, should not be overlooked. The importance of social class and its scholarly treatment have been described by Halliday (1992, p. 72) who states:

It is acceptable to show up sexism – as it is to show up racism – because to eliminate sexual and racial bias would pose no threat to the existing social order: capitalist society could thrive perfectly well without sexual discrimination and without racial discrimination. But it is not acceptable to show up classism, especially by objective linguistic analysis … because capitalist society could not exist without discrimination between classes. Such work could, ultimately, threaten the order of society.

That social class plays a central role in British society is acknowledged by a renewed interested in the subject and by numerous recent publications on class issues (e.g. Skegg, 2004; Sayer, 2005; Savage, 2015; Jones, 2016). The reasons for this renewed interest is said to lie in the changes affecting society and an awareness about social class as a consequence of the growth of neoliberalism. Block (2014, p. 9) establishes a link between “the liberalisation of the British economy from the mid-1980s onwards” and a subsequent change in public discourse about social class in Great Britain. This change is reflected in the shifting emphasis from society as defined by “collectivist principles” to an emphasis on the individual, as is demonstrated by Margaret Thatcher’s
often-cited comment: “… who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families …” (as quoted in Block, 2014, p. 9). Despite attempting an investigation into the relationship between usage attitudes and social class, the questionnaire sample I drew upon for the purpose of this analysis turned out more homogeneous than expected, not only with regard to the social class marker level of education which I intended to take into consideration, but also in terms of nativeness. Thus, a thorough analysis of social class differences could not be conducted, but will be pursued in future research. Nonetheless, my qualitative analysis of attitude data provided by the questionnaire respondents and interviewees brought to light the effects of social class in the usage debate and hence will allow me to offer an insight into how usage features are connected to social class differences.

In Table 10.1 below I have presented an overview of the eleven usage problems investigated in the online questionnaire. This overview shows the average acceptability rating for each of the usage problems investigated in the questionnaire, but also any social variable which correlated with the respondents’ usage judgments. Furthermore, the overview contains a summary of how degree of certainty and judgment basis correlate with the respondents’ usage judgments, as well as of when the usage problem was first discussed in the usage guides included in HUGE. The latter information is relevant because the usage problems’ treatments in the advice literature has been a central part in the analysis. Empty cells in the table indicate that no significant relationship was identified in the analysis, or, in the case of the HUGE analysis, that the usage problem was not included in the database.

The overview of the findings presented in Table 10.1 demonstrates the importance of age in the usage debate, which shows a significant correlation with usage judgments for four of the eleven usage problems investigated.
Table 10.1 Overview of the eleven usage problems investigated in the questionnaire (Chapter 7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Usage problem</th>
<th>Average acceptability (%)</th>
<th>Social variable</th>
<th>Degree of certainty</th>
<th>Judgment basis</th>
<th>First mention in HUGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>split infinitive</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>acceptable – feeling, unacceptable – rule</td>
<td>Alford1864</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>data are</em></td>
<td>48.5</td>
<td>nativeness</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>acceptable – feeling, unacceptable – rule</td>
<td>Fowler1926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>go slow</em></td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>gender</td>
<td>both same degree of certainty**</td>
<td>acceptable – feeling, unacceptable – rule</td>
<td>Baker1770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>less than</em></td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>both same degree of certainty**</td>
<td>acceptable – feeling, unacceptable – rule</td>
<td>Baker1770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>literally</em></td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>age*</td>
<td>unacceptable judgments show higher degree of certainty</td>
<td>acceptable – feeling, unacceptable – rule</td>
<td>Fowler1926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>different from/than/to</em></td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>age*</td>
<td>unacceptable judgments show higher degree of certainty</td>
<td>acceptable – feeling, unacceptable – rule</td>
<td>Baker1770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I for me</em></td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>age</td>
<td>unacceptable judgments show higher degree of certainty</td>
<td>acceptable – feeling, unacceptable – rule</td>
<td>Anon1826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dangling participle</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>unacceptable judgments show higher degree of certainty</td>
<td>acceptable – feeling, unacceptable – rule</td>
<td>Fowler&amp; Fowler1906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>like</em></td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>age</td>
<td>both same degree of certainty**</td>
<td>acceptable – feeling, unacceptable – rule</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>burglarize</em></td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>both same degree of certainty**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>double negative</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>both same degree of certainty**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Baker1770</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* main effect, however no longer significant in binary logistic regression
** median is the same in the U-test
With all four of these usage problems, *literally, different from/ than/to, I for me* and *like* the same pattern could be identified in that older respondents reveal an increased tendency of linguistic intolerance (see § 7.2.1). The importance of this age effect needs to be emphasised as the result of changes and trends in usage over time, such as Mair’s (2006, p. 187) colloquialization of English usage, are noticeable in the language use of a speech community as well as between different generations. Thus, a colloquialization of English will most likely be noticed by older generations of a speech community, which would account for an increased linguistic intolerance found among these speakers. Identifying an age effect in four of the usage problems investigated confirms Mittins et al.’s (1970, p. 23) finding that there is a “well-defined decline in tolerance” with growing age. As younger respondents are seemingly more lenient towards usages such as the use of *literally* as an intensifier, this could suggest that such usage features may stop being considered problematic in the future.

Two previous usage attitude studies have investigated the effect of gender on usage attitudes, i.e. Sandred, (1983) and Albanyan & Preston (1998), which confirmed Trudgill’s (1974, p. 94) findings of female speakers’ overt appreciation of standard language forms, while male speakers openly favour language features carrying lower prestige. Gender proved to be the most influential social variable behind usage attitudes towards flat adverbs in that women were three times more likely to find the flat adverb in the stimulus sentence (*That’s a dangerous curve; you’d better go slow*) unacceptable than men. Similar results were obtained by Lukač and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (forthc.) in their study of usage attitudes with respect to the differences they identified for native and non-native speakers of English. The reason why women favour standard language features more frequently than men was discussed by Trudgill (1974, p. 94) in his study of language variation in Norwich,
which showed that women tend to be “more status-conscious than men, generally speaking, and are therefore more aware of the social significance of linguistic variables”. Due to their less secure social position in society, at the time of Trudgill’s study at least, women feel the need to compensate for this unequal standing through the use of linguistic features. Trudgill (1974, p. 94) further states that

[m]en in our society can be rated socially by their occupation, their earning power, and perhaps by their other abilities: in other words, by what they do. For the most part, however, this is not possible for women, who have generally to be rated on how they appear. Since they cannot be rated socially by their occupation, by what other people know about what they do in life, other signals of status, including speech, are correspondingly more important.

That Trudgill’s explanation for finding overt prestige with women is based on what were then perceived as traditional occupations for women, such as secretarial work, housework and raising children, needs to be borne in mind here. The lack of prestige of such work resulted in women turning to prestigious language features because it allowed women to signal their social belonging. More than four decades have passed since Trudgill’s Norwich study, but similar findings of overt prestige have strengthened the effects of gender on language use, which thus suggests the validity of the phenomenon of overt prestige in relation to studies that deal with norms and usage. However, Trudgill’s (1974) explanation for overt prestige being connected to the lower social standing of women at the time remains one of the most frequently cited reasons for findings of overt prestige. Other studies have put forward further explanations for women overtly favouring prestigious language features. Gal’s (1978) study of a language contact situation in Austria, for instance, showed that bilingual women turned to German at the expense of Hungarian, as the former was perceived as more modern than Hungarian. Gal’s study highlights how women are not only often the driving force behind internal
language change, but also behind language shifts. In her study, Gal identifies the desire to modernise as a possible reason for women showing overt prestige. In a more recent study, Gordon (1997, p. 48) argues that overt prestige is caused by women who wish to distance themselves from the stereotypical speech of lower-class speakers, whereby she draws a connection between gender and social class. Connections such as these often seem to be overlooked in sociolinguistic analysis. That the avoidance of stereotypes, as in the case of the use of double negation, plays a role in the usage debate has already been mentioned above (see § 7.2.7), but will be discussed in more detail further on in this chapter.

One of the latest contributions to the discussion on the relationship between language and gender was made by Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (2003, p. 10), who argue that gender is a social construct. They propose that gender is a “set of practices through which people construct and claim identities” (2003, p. 305). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet suggest that men tend to avoid “extreme usages”, while women are more likely to use language as a means to “construct social differences among themselves” (2003, p. 302). In an earlier study on the language use of two social categories of American high school students, so-called jocks and burnouts, Eckert (1989) illustrated this phenomenon on the basis of multiple negation. It has to be noted that these two categories seem to reproduce adult social class categories in an adolescent context (Eckert, 1989, p. 4). While jocks showed generally the lowest and burnouts the highest uses of multiple negations (Eckert, 1989, p. 68), the most frequent uses were recorded among female participants only with burnout girls even outdoing burnout boys (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003, p. 295). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet’s observations provide an interesting perspective on gender and language variation and could also help us explain how language is used to construct linguistic identities. However,
this view on gender makes questions on language variation even more complex than they already are, as language use needs to be seen in light of the self that a speaker is constructing. Which social factor influences the identity constructed by a speaker needs to be clarified as factors such as gender, social class membership or age could even vary from one communicative encounter to another.

If we define the speech community as inclusive of non-native speakers, the social variable nativeness also needs to be taken into consideration. However, the survey sample analysed in Chapters 7 and 8 only included a small number of non-native speakers of English, which, nevertheless, reflects the wider representativeness of the English population (see § 5.2). One of the usage problems investigated shows a significant correlation between usage judgments and nativeness: *data are*. Native speakers found the prescriptive use of *data are* more frequently acceptable than non-native speakers. An explanation for this finding could potentially be that different approaches and materials were used in the teaching of English to foreign language learners. Interestingly, Lukač and Ticken-Boon van Ostade’s (forthc.) investigation, which included not only native speakers of American and British English but also non-native speakers of English, did not show any significant correlations between usage attitudes and the social variable nativeness. Nevertheless, finding a significant correlation between acceptability judgments and the social variable nativeness emphasises the importance of including non-native speakers’ attitudes in the study of usage attitudes as these speakers are not only part of the speech community, but also participate in the usage debate in similar ways as native speakers do.

Although the questionnaire analysis has highlighted the importance of age, gender and nativeness in the variability of usage attitudes of respondents, the influence of other social variables, such as level of education or other
social class markers, cannot be rejected, though an equally balanced sample would be necessary to identify any possible correlations. What has also been shown in my analysis of social variables is that a covariance between such variables should be allowed for. While main effects have been identified for the social variable age in the analysis of the intensifier *literally* and *different from/ than/to*, the binary logistic regression analysis has shown that the influence of these main effects is diminished when all social variables investigated in this study are included in the analysis.

While the online questionnaire allowed me to conduct a detailed analysis of a possible sociolinguistic variation of usage attitudes, the open guise and usage judgment tests I decided to carry out were restricted in the sense that only two social variables were tested: age and gender. Although gender did not show any significant differences with regard to the respondents’ identification of usage problems in the usage judgment test, age proved to be, yet again, a crucial variable. Older informants were more likely to notice and correct flat adverbs, the split infinitive, *very unique* and *impact* as a verb in the sentences presented to them. The open-guise test not only showed age differences, but also differences between the judgments of male and female speakers. By analysing intra- and inter-speaker differences between the female and male speakers of the recordings, I was able to highlight usage judgment tendencies for older and younger informants participating in the open-guise test. Older informants rated the male speaker’s unmarked recording, which contained usage features generally accepted by prescriptivists, more favourably on the agreeableness factor than the marked recording. This tendency was also identified for the comparison between the female speaker’s unmarked and marked recordings. These rating differences, which were all statistically significant, were found only in the older group of informants. My analysis of the open-guise test also brought to light how the informants, who I had split up
into two age groups, rated the unmarked recordings of both speakers more favourably on the status-orientation factor than their marked counterparts. Although the traditional questionnaire I carried out (see § 7.2) has confirmed an increased linguistic intolerance among older speakers, the open-guise test showed that both the older and younger informants show statistically significant rating differences. That such rating differences can be influenced by other social variables, such as the variable gender, cannot, however, be ruled out. As for gender differences, female informants rated the marked recordings of the female and male speakers more favourably on the agreeableness factor when compared to their status-orientation factors respectively. Additionally, a significant rating difference by male informants was identified in the comparison of the male speaker’s agreeableness factors across the usage dimension, i.e. comparing the unmarked to the marked recording. According to this rating difference, the male speaker was rated more favourably on the agreeableness factor when using the prescribed variants. From the analysis of the open-guise test it is clear that variables such as “literate – illiterate” and “wealthy – not wealthy”, which composed the status-orientation factor, seem to correlate with the unmarked recordings. Since the female speaker was thought to use a variety closer to the standard, it does not come as a surprise to find that the female informants’ linguistic behaviour reflects overt prestige.

Table 10.1 above also reveals an interesting pattern with respect to how prescriptive usage judgments in the answers to the questionnaire were made with a higher certainty level than descriptive judgments, and also how prescriptive usage judgments tend to be based on self-reported rule knowledge, while descriptive judgments frequently are the result of a gut feeling. These findings bring to light the essential distinction between usage norms and actual usage (see § 2.2). Whether usage advice should be based on idealistic norms or rather on how language is customarily used is a quintessential enquiry
which raises not only the question concerning authority but also that of ownership of the language. Even though England never appointed an official authority of the English language, unlike France or Spain whose academies have served as the official guardian of the languages respectively, authoritative power has been assigned to other institutions. As discussed in Chapter 2, the need felt by linguistically insecure speakers for an authority on language was met with the increasingly becoming popular genre of usage guides. Taking on the role of self-appointed guardians and authorities on language, usage guide authors did not eschew instructing linguistically insecure speakers who wished to improve their social standing in society by means of their language usage. In the course of time, the structure of British society has changed, resulting in a growing middle class and a working class which has become somewhat “demonised” and looked down upon (Jones, 2016), yet language use has kept its power to distinguish classes. What needs to be borne in mind here is that a discussion of such class differences entails an extension of the discussion into the schooling and education speakers in England receive, which will be discussed in more detail below.

My analysis of usage attitudes has shown that, as discussed in Section 3.3.1, some usage features constitute sociolinguistic stereotypes, as the possession of “naïve linguistic awareness” (Rácz, 2013, p. 26). Such sociolinguistic stereotypes are the Americanism burglarize, like as an approximative adverb, and I for me for example, because speakers possess a relatively great awareness of the disputed status of features such as these, as can be seen from the average acceptability rating and qualitative analysis of respondents’ comments (see Chapter 7). However, it needs to be borne in mind that linguistic awareness plays a crucial role, which is reflected in Rácz’s definition of sociolinguistic stereotypes (see § 3.3.1). Hence, for speakers who are highly aware of stigmatised usage features, these features will function as sociolinguistic
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stereotypes which are associated with uneducated or sloppy speakers. For speakers who are not aware of a usage feature’s stigmatised status this will not be the case and such features could be perceived as mere indicators or markers. The split infinitive could potentially be considered a marker as it is socially stratified according to age and is reportedly more acceptable in informal styles or contexts than it is in formal contexts (see § 6.2.10).

10.2.1. Self-presentation, distancing and linguistic identity

My qualitative analysis of attitude data, which I obtained through the elicitation tests I conducted, has added an important layer to the understanding of usage attitudes as informants not only provided explanations of their acceptability judgments, but the information obtained in this way brought themes to light which would have otherwise been left in the dark. Based on this information, it was possible to identify how speakers negotiate their identity and self-image on the basis of usage problems and perceive other speakers’ identities on the same grounds.

How distancing can serve as a means to preserve a national linguistic identity has been described by Thomas (1991, p. 44), who states that together with differentiating between languages, distancing a group’s language from other competing varieties can foster and strengthen the group’s identity. In a similar manner, the questionnaire respondents distanced themselves from what they perceived as foreign, dialectal, or incorrect language use. Doing so strengthens their perception of themselves as knowledgeable and authentic speakers of British or English Standard English. Block (2014, p. 5) describes the notion of self-presentation and defining one’s identity not only through the process of affiliation, but also through disaffiliation by quoting Sayer (2005, p. 54), who describes the frequently used “practice of defining one’s identity
through a contrast with a stigmatised other”. This tendency has also been mentioned by Gordon (1997, pp. 49–50) in her study of women’s linguistic behaviour in New Zealand, which showed that overtly prestigious language features were used by female speakers in order to avoid a negative association with lower-class speakers. Such differences in language use, be they regional or sociolectal, are said to fulfil a function of signalling “social belonging” according to Joseph (2013, p. 140). This indexicality of language is complex and can comprise not only regional or social class indices, but also ethnic and religious ones (cf. Joseph, 2013, p. 141). According to Joseph (2013, p. 141) a difference between native speakers and non-native speakers needs to be foregrounded in that non-native speakers need to make “intense efforts” to learn and be able to understand and fully grasp the indexicality qualities of a language, which native speakers learn and get accustomed to right from the start. More importantly, however, the function of indices to indicate belonging brings with it the possibility to distinguish between “us” and “them”, which according to Joseph (2006, p. 262) shows how linguistic identities are “double-edged swords”. This type of othering is enforced by the distancing from unacceptable usage features my respondents showed in their comments on the usage features investigated. Numerous examples of this process have been provided in the analysis of the questionnaire (see § 7.2.1), such as example (49) replicated here:

(49) Only chavs make up stupid words.
(Digital marketing consultant, 31–40 years old, female)

Distinguishing one’s personal usage from that of others and simultaneously assigning the binary distinction “acceptable/unacceptable” to either of the two groups is reflected in the above example. The respondent clearly assigns the “stupid” word *burglarize* to a particular group of speakers: chavs. Doing so, she draws a line between this group and herself. Negatively connoted words
such as “chavs” and “stupid” reflect her attitude not only to the use of bur-
glarize but also to the group she associates with this usage. Examples such as
this highlight how respondents perceive linguistic identities.

In the following quotation, Joseph (2013, p. 144) stresses an important
issue which needs to be borne in mind in relation to linguistic identities.

Whether or not a speaker is trying to project an identity is a relatively minor
issue, compared to the much more important one of how that speaker’s identity
is perceived by other people – if only because everyone we encounter con-
structs an identity for us, based on whatever indices interpret us as projecting,
whether or not we are aware of projecting them, let alone intending it. There
are countless versions of you out there in the minds of others, each different
from the persona you imagine for yourself, because everyone brings their own
experience of life and of reading other people to bear in this work of
interpreting the identity of those we meet.

What is intriguing in Joseph’s argument presented here is the importance he
assigns to how the identity of a speaker is perceived by other speakers. Their
interpretation of the above-mentioned indices will result in a constructed
identity and is influenced by their experiences whenever the speakers en-
counter one another. The notion of experience has already been discussed
above and has been identified as key to the understanding of particular usage
attitudes. Linking Joseph’s argument to usage attitudes, it can be assumed that
a speaker’s identity will be constructed by others who interpret indices in the
speaker’s language use, no matter whether they are regional, social or ethnic
indices. Speakers’ experiences of stigmatised language features and of inter-
preting such linguistic cues will shape their perceptions of a speaker’s identity.
To provide an example, while double negation is found in numerous English
varieties, it is not considered part of Standard English (cf. 5.2). The identity
of a speaker who uses double negatives may then be constructed on the basis
other speakers’ experiences with dialectal varieties. Thus, a regional identity
could be constructed for such a speaker, as could a social class identity, for
example, as has also been illustrated from the questionnaire respondents’
answers. It is essential to acknowledge the importance of context in that the place and circumstances in which an encounter between speakers takes place could influence the identity construction of a speaker. Additionally, the relationship between speakers should be acknowledged as to whether the speakers are friends, acquaintances, or complete strangers. The situation speakers find themselves in and the relationship between the participants in the speech event bring to light a very important related concept, i.e. the concept of “face”, which, however, needs to be distinguished from the concept “identity”. While face in politeness theory has been defined as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61) and is considered to be a “punctual phenomenon” which takes place in an encounter between interlocutors (Joseph, 2013, p. 141), identity or more broadly speaking self-image is more “durative”.

My discussion in Chapter 3 of Preston’s (2010, p. 100) concept of language regard, which comprises both reactions towards language production and comprehension, can therefore be connected to the perception of a speaker’s identity. As illustrated in Figure 3.3 above, the language regard process draws on iconization, through which linguistic features are turned into representations of social images. If speakers perceive the language use of another speaker, they will construct an identity of that speaker by drawing on this experience and on their ability to read indices. This process requires them to draw on their knowledge of the linguistic features or variety used. It is, however, possible that speakers do not draw on their previously gathered knowledge, but rather establish a direct link between the language comprehension and production of a speaker and a previously imbued judgment (Preston, 2010, pp. 102–103). An example illustrating such a language regard process has already been given in Section 3.3.1 above. Thus, if speakers were to perceive another speaker making use of a double negative, they could either
draw on their knowledge and experience with respect to the linguistic features encountered or make a direct link between the speaker’s language use and any previously made judgments in order to form their language regard towards this particular speaker.

My findings with respect to the variability of usage attitudes and my discussion of them have shown how self-image and identity play a crucial role in the usage debate. Especially speakers who are aware of the existence of stigmatised usage features will distance themselves from what they perceive as unacceptable or incorrect usages. These affiliations with and disaffiliations from speakers with particular usages are essential in explaining how stigmatisations of usage features are kept alive. Usage problems can thus serve as linguistic indices which may reveal information about a speaker to others. Besides regional, social class and ethnic indices, usage problems can also hint at a speaker’s age or educational background, as has been shown in my analysis of the questionnaire and open-guise test (see Chapters 7 – 9). Furthermore, the use or avoidance of particular usage problems is perceived by other speakers in particular ways, in that compliance with usage norms is considered to be a sign of a higher degree of status-orientation, as was also shown in the open-guise test. That it is as important, if not more so, to identify how speakers’ identities are perceived by others as to identify how speakers intend to portray themselves has been stressed by Joseph (2013, p. 145). Yet, a crucial side-effect of perceived linguistic identities is the frequently made distinction based on social belonging between an in-group and an out-group. What comes with this distinction is the phenomenon of othering, which fosters a better understanding of how linguistic identities are constructed and interpreted.
10.2.2. Resurgence of prescriptive attitudes

The results of the questionnaire analysis included not only the linguists’ perspective on the usage matters at hand, but also an investigation of usage advice literature. The latter adds the perspective of usage guide authors to the discussion and analysis of usage attitudes of the general public, not only to contextualise the public’s attitudes to disputed usage features but also to bridge the gap between the key players in the usage debate. Thus, it is made possible to identify possibly diverging views on language use between the general public and usage guide authors.

Nine of the eleven usage problems investigated in the questionnaire, such as the dangling participle and the split infinitive (see Chapter 7), were included in the HUGE database and formed the basis of this discussion. The treatment of these nine usage problems was analysed by applying a modified version of Yáñez-Bouza’s tripartite categorisation into “advocated”, “neutral” or “criticised” treatment. This method did not only allow an overview of how the treatment of the usage problems has developed over time, but also provided the possibility to look at usage guide authors’ usage attitudes in more detail. By combining the information gathered through the tripartite categorisation for all nine usage problems, I was able to identify how strict or lenient usage guide authors are in their usage advice. A list of the usage guides investigated and their respective treatment of the usage problems can be found in Appendix H. In Figure 10.1 below, an overview of the treatment frequencies is presented. The usage guides used in the treatment analysis are grouped into decades according to their date of publication. Despite comprising 240 years of the usage debate, the selection of usage guides included in the HUGE database shows gaps in which no new usage guide could be identified (see Figure 5.4). The three usage guides published in 2010 were incorporated in the overview in the decade of 2000 as they do not represent a complete decade,
which slightly skews my data. However, it has to be mentioned that these three usage guides exhibit mainly critical views on the nine usage problems, as can be seen in Appendix G. Two usage problems, sentence-initial *And* and *very unique*, are not included in the overview presented below, as they were not part of the online questionnaire.

![Figure 10.1 Usage advice per decade for the nine usage problems investigated](image)

The overview in Figure 10.1 shows that only from the 1960s onwards do we find advocative treatments of usage features made by the usage guide authors. This development is most probably due to the growing influence of linguistics as a science, which, with its strict focus on descriptiveness, clearly had an effect on the treatment of disputed usage features as well. Interestingly, an enormous increase of usage guide publications, as indicated by the squares in the table above, can be detected in this overview. While the decades prior to 1980 experienced the publication of one or two usage guides, the 1980s in the
HUGE database comprises eight usage guide publications. The reason for this could lie in the changes affecting the education system which have been described in Chapter 2 in more detail (see § 2.3.1). When reading the introductions and prefaces of usage guides published from the 1980s onwards, one comes across comments such as the ones stated below:

Something has gone seriously wrong, when so many people find themselves looking back at their English grammar lessons at school, remembering only the pain, or boredom, or – nothing. (Crystal, 1984, p. 10)

It is widely believed that the reaction against teaching to a strict standard is responsible for a decline in the general quality of writing. Whether in fact there has been such a decline (and what, if so, has caused it) cannot be regarded as other than speculative and controversial. What is certain is that very many people indeed feel uneasy about their own usage and the usage around them. University professors of English receive a steady stream of serious inquiries on these matters from people in all walks of life: accountants, local government officers, teachers, clergymen, bank managers, secretaries, journalists, broadcasters, trade union officials, doctors. (Quirk in Greenbaum & Whitcut, 1988, p. iv)

Education advisers are agreed that English is the most important subject in the curriculum. It is also the most contentious. There is much talk of ‘traditional values’, without any agreement on how far back they should go. Language reflects society, illumines new understandings, and problems near the end of the 20th century cannot be frozen in a 19th century idiom. We have never thought so much before about the language we all use. (Howard, 1993, p. vii)

It so happens that this is a good time to explore error in English usage. There is a lot of it about. We hear complaints about falling standards of literacy in our country. We hear claims that our educational system is not doing its job in this respect. We may well wonder how justifiable the complaints are. No doubt there are always individuals for whom criticising the current state of our language is a favourite pastime, like criticising the state of our railways. There are always those who relish writing letters to the press in protest against some contemporary fad in English usage. Recently, however, doubts about the level of literacy in our country have assumed a new urgency. The concern has ceased to be a minority interest. (Blamires, 1994, p. vii)

Crystal (1984, p. 10) and Quirk (1988, p. iv) make a connection between the lack of appropriate education and linguistic insecurity among speakers. The
shift in teaching approaches with respect to English grammar occurring in the 1960s seems to point towards the possible influence English teaching can have on whether a speaker feels linguistically insecure or not. As discussed above, a higher degree of certainty about usage judgments was identified with speakers who claimed to base their decisions on a rule (see Table 10.1). This finding could suggest that linguistic insecurity would have increased through the absence of explicit grammar teaching, yet a thorough investigation of this subject is needed to confirm this hypothesis. Howard (1993, p. vii) and Blamires (1994, p. vii) emphasise how English and the teaching of English have become a central issue in British society. Their comments are significant as they mention the public discourse evolving around the state of the English language.

Figure 10.1 also shows an increase in prescriptive as well as descriptive usage attitudes expressed by usage guide authors at the expense of neutral usage advice. This tendency seems to harden the front between prescriptivists and descriptivists in the usage debate and could be indicative of the public’s need for straightforward usage advice. Tieken-Boon van Ostade’s (forthc./a) argument for the Age of Prescriptivism being today rather than the eighteenth century, as is often claimed, confirms the findings of my analysis, not only with respect to the numerous usage guides being published in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but also in the fact that these publications take a firmer stance on language issues, be it a prescriptive or descriptive stance.

10.3. Usage Tendencies: a Comparison with the Mittins Study

As stated in the Introduction (Chapter 1), a study conducted in the late 1960s forms the starting point for my investigation of usage attitudes in England. Although a comparison between these two snapshots of usage attitudes needs to be conducted with care for reasons explained in Chapter 7, it does allow an insight into how tendencies towards usage problems have developed over the
last four decades. Eight of the eleven usage problems investigated in the questionnaire had also been dealt with by Mittins et al. I used the same or slightly modified versions of the stimulus sentences which were also used in the Mittins study (cf. 5.1). What needs to be borne in mind in this comparison is the different approach applied, as well as the different survey population I drew on for my own study. While the Mittins study largely focussed on identifying current usage attitudes of educationalists and students, my study’s aim was to include the general public in the usage debate by assessing their usage attitudes. As for the different elicitation approaches adopted, Mittins et al. (1970) applied a more direct elicitation technique in that the researchers decided to highlight the usage feature investigated. As a consequence, their respondents could have been biased towards assuming an issue with the underlined part even if they would have otherwise not noticed it. The average acceptability ratings have been mentioned in the discussion of the usage problems in the previous chapter, yet a direct and detailed comparison is necessary here. In Table 10.2, an overview of the changes in the average acceptability ratings for the usage problems investigated is presented, grouped according to the change in acceptability. The usage issue of Latinate plurals is excluded from this comparison as I included the variant *data are* in my study, while Mittins et al. included the singular alternative. The reason for this decision has already been discussed in Section 6.3.

Table 10.2 below illustrates an interesting pattern in the changes affecting the average acceptability ratings according to which an increase in acceptability can be identified for each of the seven comparable usage problems. This is in line with Mair’s (2006, p. 187) notion of colloquialization which English underwent in the course of the last centuries. Whether making the investigated usage features less explicit, that is, by not highlighting the investigated phrases, has influenced the judgment is difficult to determine, yet
it could be assumed that highlighting the usage features would have caused more respondents to make negative judgments, given the social desirability bias discussed above (see § 3.4.1). Nonetheless, it has to be noted that the differences between some of the usage features are rather marked and therefore could be indicative of their generally wider acceptance in spite of the elicitation method applied.

Table 10.2 Comparison of my own survey with Mittins et al.’s (1970) 
*Attitudes to English Usage*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proper English Usage survey</th>
<th>average acceptability (%)</th>
<th>change (%)</th>
<th>Attitudes towards English Usage (1970)</th>
<th>average acceptability (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>split infinitive</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>+23.5</td>
<td>split infinitive</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dangling participle</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>+8.2</td>
<td>dangling participle</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>less than</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>+5.2</td>
<td>less than</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>between you and I</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>+5.1</td>
<td>between you and I*</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>go slow</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>+3.9</td>
<td>go slow*</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>differently than</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>+2.6</td>
<td>differently than</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>literally</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>+2.1</td>
<td>literally</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>data are</td>
<td>48.5</td>
<td></td>
<td>data is</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* restricted in context choice

While the split infinitive shows an increase of 23.5 per cent, the use of *literally* as an intensifier only shows an increase of 2.1 per cent. Having been subject to a growth in the level of awareness among the general public, *literally* as an intensifier has developed into a social stereotype, which is evaluated negatively as the analysis of the questionnaire showed (see § 6.2.11). On the
other hand, the split infinitive does not seem to possess this quality anymore, so it could be considered an indicator only, as it was the group of older respondents who showed an awareness of its disputed usage. With an increase of 8.2 per cent in acceptability, the dangling participle ranks second in Table 10.2 above, though coming at a considerable distance from the split infinitive, followed by \textit{less than} and the \textit{I for me} issue in \textit{between you and I}, which show an increase in acceptability of 5.2 and 5.1 per cent respectively. That some of the changes in acceptability over the years are small could be due to the differences in the directness of the elicitation approaches between my own and the Mittins study. This could be the case for \textit{literally}, \textit{different from/than/to} and the flat adverb \textit{go slow}, which all show relatively small percentages in their increase of acceptability.

Although a comparison between usage attitude studies is tricky, doing so provides an intriguing insight into how attitudes towards usage problems could have changed in the course of four decades. The comparison, moreover, not only highlighted considerable differences in acceptability ratings, but also in the topicality of particular usage problems. Whether a usage problem is likely to be recognised by the general public is linked to its topicality and any public discussions evolving around it. As mentioned above, \textit{literally} as an intensifier failed to increase in acceptance over the years, but instead has become a usage problem which many speakers find irritating and associate with younger speakers (see § 7.2.11). On the other hand, public discussions on the split infinitive are few and far between (Lukač, in progress). As discussed in the Introduction (see §1.3), usage problems have been characterised by their actual and widespread use, as well as by their ability to be discussed without giving offence (Ilson, 1985, p. 167). Hence, it could be argued that the difference in increased acceptability ratings between the split infinitive and other usage problems presented in Table 10.2 above stems from the fact
that split infinitives are not as frequently discussed in public as are other usage features which have a greater social salience. Splitting infinitives is no longer considered a cardinal sin by the majority of the general public, a view which is gradually reflected in the advice of usage guide authors (see § 7.2.10). The salience of usage features, therefore, plays a crucial role in determining whether a feature is considered problematical or not by the general public.

### 10.4. The Role of Education in the Usage Debate

As was discussed in detail in Chapter 2 (§ 2.3.1), the English education system fulfils a gatekeeping function which needs to be explored further as the findings of my elicitation tests indicate education to be a major factor and a recurring theme in the usage debate. Although schools are seen as purveyors of a standardised form of English, different teaching approaches have caused changes in the way English is taught in schools. These changes have also influenced the perceptions and attitudes of the general public with regard to what they think about language use, linguistic correctness and the suitability of the current teaching approach. Hudson (2010, p. 35) explains how an “extreme reaction against arid grammar-teaching in the 1960s and 1970s produced a language-vacuum”, which he argues was ultimately filled by the growing scientific field of linguistics. This reaction is said to come from both “top-down official legislation”, i.e. pressure from the government with respect to establishing educational policies, and “bottom-up grassroots enthusiasm among teachers” (Hudson, 2010, p. 35). Three key stages in English grammar teaching in England have been established by Hudson and Walmsley (2005, p. 593), who demonstrated how these changes have caused the so-called “death of grammar teaching”, and furthermore resulted in the introduction of an English component into the National Curriculum in 1989. What Hudson (2010, p. 35) described as an “extreme reaction against arid grammar-teaching” resulted in
the abandonment of traditional grammar teaching. As a consequence of these developments the “first grammarless generation” was said to leave the British education system in the 1960s (Keith, 1990, p. 83). Following a period of confusion about what to teach and how to teach grammar in particular, the English component of the National Curriculum was finally implemented in primary and secondary schools in 1989.

The National Curriculum is an important step in the development of the usage debate due to the circumstances surrounding its creation and implementation. The involvement of the conservative government in its creation by commissioning a number of reports can be seen as a form of top-down pressure on the committees composing these reports and on finding a solution for the teaching of English grammar which suited the government’s agenda. While reports such as the ones by Kingman (1988) and Cox (1989) were criticised by the government, the National Curriculum for English was characterised by the absence of prescriptivism (see Chapter 2). Hudson (2010, p. 41) puts it as follows:

One of the main changes in our schools which is at least partly due to the influence of linguistics is a remarkable reduction in prescriptivism both among teachers and among those who draft official documents. Indeed, prescriptivism came to such a complete end that many English teachers were reluctant even to teach standard English.

That the government did not accept the findings of the Kingman and Cox reports caused a heated public debate and resulted in a moral panic concerning the decay of English and consequently the decay of British society which has subliminally subsisted in England to this day (cf. Cameron, 1995, p. 86).

My study has also shown how recent developments and changes affecting the testing and assessment of English in schools have, once again, caused a public debate and a resurfacing of the moral panic concerning the decay of
The English language (see § 2.3.1). Interestingly, a connection has been established between testing and language policies by Marshall (2016, p. 8) who argues that the Conservative Party’s failed attempts to re-introduce traditional grammar teaching have now been successful in that a “testing regime” was introduced with the new SPaG test, which shifts the focus onto more traditional teaching methods. This finding is further enforced by the conservatives’ plan to establish more academies, a school type which is not bound to the National Curriculum (Types of School, 2016), and to lift the ban on creating new grammar schools (cf. Riley-Smith, 6 August 2016). By freeing schools from the obligation to teach according to the National Curriculum and by introducing tests such as the SPaG test, schools will very likely start to “teach to the test”, an approach in which the test defines what is taught in school. That social mobility is fostered by the opening of new grammar schools is doubtful, since Cribb et al. (2013) showed that “less than three per cent of all pupils going to grammar schools are entitled to free school meals, against an average of 18% in other schools in the areas where they are located” (2013, p. 3). This indicates the social mobility restrictions with which working-class children and children from disadvantaged homes are confronted, as these children are less likely to attend grammar schools.

The changes in teaching approaches as well as the introduction of the National Curriculum have affected the perceptions and attitudes of the general public towards language use considerably, since speakers have been exposed to the moral panic propelled by the media. The findings of my elicitation tests, in both the questionnaire and the interview sessions, bore evidence of this moral panic. This became especially evident in the respondents’ answers to the open question on the state of English (cf. § 7.2.3). Numerous respondents commented on a perceived decay of the English language which they argued
to be triggered by a lack of appropriate teaching. That the open-guise test contained recordings made by two speakers one of whom had an accent which was perceived as more standard than the accent of the other speaker further highlights the importance of education. Yet, the open-guise test showed that speakers using the prescribed variants were considered more hard working, literate and orderly as well as wealthier than when using the marked and disputed counterparts (see § 9.2.1).

Given the developments in English grammar teaching in schools in England, it is significant that the number of usage guide publications has increased from the 1980s onwards. As discussed above, the lack of explicit grammar teaching is commented on in prefaces and introductions of usage guides published in the 1980s and 1990s. It is possible that such “grammar-less” generations, as described by Keith (1990, p. 83), turned to usage guides for guidance on usage issues about which speakers felt insecure.

10.5. Testing Usage Attitudes

One of the research questions on which this study is based deals with identifying an effective and thorough method for the elicitation and assessment of usage attitudes. Having provided the necessary background information on what attitudes are and on what is in fact elicited in the course of perception tests, I proposed a mixed-methods approach to study the general public’s attitudes towards usage problems. Combining both direct and indirect elicitation techniques, I aimed at providing a fuller picture and better understanding of usage attitudes.

As the findings of the three different elicitation tests I devised to this end have shown, usage attitudes can both be expressed in a conscious and subconscious manner. While a scientific focus has traditionally been put on subconsciously offered attitudes (cf. Kristiansen, 2015, p. 87), consciously
offered or explicit attitudes are equally important in the usage debate since subconsciously offered attitudes inform us about social conventions and norms idealised in society. This is due to the so-called desirability bias according to which respondents are said to answer questions in a way which they consider to be socially desirable or acceptable. What kind of attitude will be elicited greatly depends on the elicitation technique used.

While the questionnaire was based on a form of the Direct Method Approach to studying language attitudes, even though its directness was diminished by not underlining the usage features investigated, the open-guise and usage judgment tests I set up are part of the Indirect Method Approach. Both approaches have been described in detail in Chapter 3 (see § 3.4). The combination of these two approaches, as well as studying qualitative and quantitative data, have allowed a detailed study of contemporary usage attitudes in England, producing both conscious and subconscious attitudes, even in the direct elicitation test, the questionnaire. The indirect elicitation tests add important information to the discussion of usage attitudes in England, not only in that they have brought to light the validity of notions of correctness and standardness, but also in that these tests have provided an insight into the social salience of usage attitudes. Respondents have shown different degrees of awareness towards stigmatised usage features. Issues such as the use of *literally* as an intensifier or the nonstandard dialectal use of double negatives are more salient than old chestnuts such as the split infinitive.

As was discussed in Chapter 4, the pitfalls and disadvantages of elicitation techniques applied in previous usage attitude studies have influenced the compilation of the mixed-method applied in this study. That this study is subject to limitations, however, needs to be stressed as well. Since a comparison of usage attitudes between my own study and the Mittins study was a desired outcome of this study, I used Mittins et al.’s stimulus sentences, some
of which I decided to update because of their somewhat outdated character. For all that, basing the selection of stimuli for the questionnaire on previous usage attitude studies resulted in a few complications in that some stimulus sentences proved to contain more than one issue which could have caused the elicitation of usage attitudes towards another, unintended feature. This was the case with stimuli sentences such as the one used to examine attitudes towards the flat adverb and the use of *like*. The former contained a semi-colon which some respondents found unacceptable, while the latter contained a cardinal number rather than a spelt-out number, which some respondents commented on as well. Despite piloting the questionnaire, these issues did not seem to provoke any comments in the initial testing phase and the sentences were left unchanged in the final version of the test. As mentioned in Chapter 7, my sample of questionnaire respondents was rather homogeneous with regard to their level of education, which was most likely due to the sampling techniques applied. Proportionally stratifying the sample according to the 2011 Census of England (§ 7.2), I was able to achieve what I consider to be a representative sample of the English population with regard to the social variables age and gender. However, the sample is not fully balanced due to the questionnaire respondents’ high conformity in educational background, which makes the sample not completely representative of the survey population. For the same reason, I was unable to conduct a thorough analysis of usage attitudes in correlation with social class, a key social variable in the English context. A study focussing on social class and education would provide further insights into the workings of usage attitudes.

### 10.6. Concluding Remarks

The discussion of my results brought to light crucial themes in the usage attitude data I collected by means of a mixed-methods approach and connected
my findings to the theoretical concepts introduced in previous chapters (cf. Chapter 2). I was able to identify a pattern of increased average acceptability ratings (cf. Table 10.2) in the comparison between the results of my questionnaire and the Mittins study (1970). Yet, given the studies’ different aims and populations, these numbers should be considered as a mere indication of changes in usage tendencies. In addition to highlighting these changes in acceptability, a connection between the growing market of usage guides and changes affecting the teaching of English in schools could be established. It seems as if linguistically insecure speakers, such as Keith’s (1990, p. 83) “first grammarless generation”, are seeking guidance in language advice literature. My analysis of the usage guides included in HUGE showed that the genre of usage guides has experienced a boom since the 1980s (cf. Figure 10.1).

The application of a mixed-methods approach to the study of usage attitudes has brought to light current usage attitudes of the general public in England towards the usage problems investigated in this study. The inclusion of the general public’s attitudes in the usage debate was a vital step to enabling a better understanding of social conventions, the compliance or non-compliance with existing norms, and the social consequences of language use. How speakers distance themselves from usage features they consider unacceptable brings forth both an in-group and an out-group mentality and highlights how speakers’ perceptions of stigmatised and unacceptable language use are tied to their perceptions of a speaker’s identity. That speakers who use such stigmatised features are rated less favourably than speakers using features which are considered to be part of the standard variety can be confirmed by the findings of the open-guise test (§ 9.2.1). Nonetheless, the social salience of usage problems and the awareness of speakers of such stigmatised features
needs to be taken into account when investigating and discussing attitudes towards usage problems.