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11. Conclusion

Spanning more than 300 years, the debate evolving around usage in England has produced the specific literary genre of usage guides. These usage guides have been predominantly compiled by prescriptivists as an attempt to correct English usage which they felt had deteriorated in the course of time. Prescriptivists, who have been the driving force behind the development of the usage debate, do not shy away from expressing their opinions publicly and in a straightforward manner. On the other hand, descriptivists, usually comprising linguists, have often avoided an active participation in the discussion on proper English usage. Linguists in particular tend to follow the mantra of “linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive” (Cameron, 1995, p. 5). The third key player in the usage debate is the often-forgotten general public, which plays an important part in the debate as they form the speech community using the variety prescriptivists would like to see purged and ascertained, while linguists study and describe language change and variation in this same speech community. It is intriguing to see scholars focussing on the attitudes of prescriptivists towards what are considered usage problems, while the attitudes of the general public seem to be widely neglected.

The aim of this study was to incorporate the general public fully into the usage debate by identifying and assessing their attitudes to a selection of fourteen usage problems. The inclusion of the general public’s attitude in the usage debate was achieved by a systematic analysis of their attitudes towards what are often considered nonstandard language features. Applying a mixed-methods approach by combining both the Direct Method and Indirect Method approaches as well as by eliciting and analysing qualitative and quantitative data, I was able to identify consciously and subconsciously offered attitudes. These attitudes do not only provide an insight into how acceptable the usage
features investigated are in England today, but also highlight the social salience of these features.

Being a tricky subject to study, attitudes, and in particular usage attitudes, have been defined by various scholars from both social psychology and sociolinguistics. In spite of numerous definitions, one of the most frequently cited definition of what attitudes are is Allport, which dates back to the 1950s (Allport, 1954, p. 45). Defining attitudes as “a mental and neural state of readiness” which he argues to be “organized through experience”, Allport emphasises how an attitude affects “the individual’s response to all objects and situations with which it is related”. The reason for the popularity of this definition of attitudes is Allport’s incorporation of awareness and experience as vital factors in the composition of attitudes. In my study, I have also made use of Preston’s (2010, p. 100) language regard concept, as it is a useful concept to illustrate laypeople’s judgments about language. That such judgments are often formed as a result of previous experience and stereotypical perceptions of a speaker makes language regard an interesting addition to the study of usage attitudes. All these different definitions and concepts were used in my attempt to define usage attitudes as evaluations of usage problems which are either acceptable or unacceptable to use in a specific context which has been agreed upon within a speech community, or as evaluations of speakers who make use of such usage problems. As discussed throughout this study, a key feature of usage attitudes is the speaker’s awareness of the stigmatised usage problems, which can either be acquired through being exposed to discourse revolving around disputed language features and through being made aware of their stigmatisation during a speaker’s education, in their social environment or through the media.

Given the historical characteristics of the English usage debate and some of the usage problems studied, a historical dimension was added to this
study by describing how the debate has evolved. This discussion involved the concept of Standard English and the notion of correctness, which are two key issues in the usage debate. By drawing on Milroy and Milroy’s (2012, pp. 22–23) standardisation process model, according to which prescription forms the last stage in the language standardisation process, I aimed at highlighting the fundamental differences between prescriptive and descriptive tendencies in the discussion of Standard English. The notion of basing descriptions of language use on the so-called norma loquendi which describes customary usage (cf. Lynch, 2009, p. 92; Kamm, 2015, p. 80) was included in the discussion and contrasted with the notion of basing language descriptions on idealised norms as these notions lie at the heart of the usage debate.

A focus was put on two institutions which serve as gatekeepers and alleged purveyors of the standard variety: the media and education. The use of the standard variety in these two institutional settings has also been investigated from a historical perspective, yet their present-day uses were foregrounded due to the character of this study. In the case of the media’s use of the standard variety, it was important to emphasise the fact that the general public often assigns the role of a language guardian to media institutions such as the BBC (cf. Luscombe, 2009, Ebner, 2015). The media’s output is, however, often subject to close scrutiny, and complaints are made by their audience members about alleged misuses of language. This has been captured in Milroy and Milroy’s (2012, pp. 24–46) so-called complaint tradition (cf. Lukač, in progress.). Being aware of their complex role, the BBC acknowledges the importance of their audience and explains in their 2003 BBC News Styleguide the delicate task of treading “a fine line between conservatism and radicalism, to write in such a way that we do not alienate any section of our audience” (Allen, 2003, p. 8). This reflects Bell’s (1995, p. 23) argument that media institutions tend to reflect the language use of the public, as it serves as
a mirror of what is going on in society. As for education, its gatekeeping function plays a vital role in the usage debate as well, and is connected to a moral panic which has engulfed English society for more than three decades. Changes in the teaching of English grammar in schools in England taking place during the mid-twentieth century have caused what has been described by Hudson (2010, p. 35) as a “language-vacuum”, which resulted in the abandonment of traditional grammar teaching that has often been described as rigid. These changes in teaching and the creation and implementation of the National Curriculum for English in 1989 have proved to be linked to the usage debate resulting in the increase of usage guides published from 1980s onwards. Not only have more usage guides been published since the 1980s, but usage guide authors have also commented on the effects and consequences of the changes in the education system. Thus, it seems as if linguistically insecure speakers, who are very likely the product of a “grammarless” education (Keith, 1990, p. 83), will turn to usage guides to find guidance on language issues causing confusion. Furthermore, the changes in the approach taken towards grammar teaching have also influenced the general public’s perceptions of the current state of the English language, as its allegedly decaying state has often been connected to a lack of appropriate education.

An overview of previous usage attitude studies brought to light the lack of scientific studies of the general public’s usage attitudes in Great Britain. Besides Mittins et al.’s (1970) study, one further study investigated usage attitudes in Scotland, albeit towards Scots. Although the reasons for the lack of British English usage attitude studies are somewhat obscure, different standard language ideologies in the United States, where such studies are found more frequently, and Great Britain could serve as an explanation for this lack. Lesley Milroy (2001, p. 70) discusses these ideological differences and argues that while ethnicity seems to be connected to standard language ideology in
the United States, social class characterises standard language ideology in Great Britain. Attention has been paid to accents and dialects with regard to this standard language ideology (cf. Giles & Coupland, 1991; Mugglestone, 2007), whereas the domain of language usage has been widely neglected. In contrast, the subject seems to have found more fruitful ground in the United States as a higher number of studies investigating usage attitudes towards American English can be identified there (cf. Leonard, 1932; Bryant, 1962; Hairston, 1981; Albanyan & Preston, 1998; Gilsdorf & Leonard, 2001; Queen & Boland, 2015; Kostadinova, in progress). Nonetheless, Mittins et al.’s (1970) *Attitudes to English Usage* served as a starting point for my own investigation of usage attitudes in England and offered an opportunity for a comparison of possible changes in the acceptability of usage problems. By discussing in detail five previous usage attitude studies and compiling an overview of the characteristics of these studies I was able to demonstrate a gradual move towards a sociolinguistic analysis of usage attitudes as well as identify the different approaches applied to the study of usage attitudes (see Chapter 4). I was furthermore able to detect methodological pitfalls in the study of usage attitudes. What kind of usage attitudes are being obtained, i.e. consciously or subconsciously offered attitudes, depends on the elicitation method applied. The directness of the Direct Method Approach leads to eliciting possibly biased attitudes as the social desirability bias comes into play, while subconsciously offered attitudes can be elicited by making use of the Indirect Method Approach. For this reason, I decided to apply a mixed-methods approach and to combine a Direct Method Approach with an Indirect Method Approach, and this has led to satisfying results.

Applying a mixed-methods approach to the study of usage attitudes involved developing an online questionnaire, which included eleven usage problems and was based on the Direct Method Approach, and conducting
interview sessions consisting of an open-guise test and a usage judgment test, both of which followed the principles of the Indirect Method Approach. The questionnaire was completed by 230 respondents from England only. In order to make the sample more representative of the English population, I proportionally stratified the sample according to gender and age, which resulted in the reduction of the sample to 112 questionnaire respondents (see § 7.2). Since this study is a sociolinguistic investigation of usage attitudes in England, social variables important for the usage debate were included in order to determine whether usage attitudes vary according to age, gender, level education, or nativeness. The reason for including these four social variables lies in their analysis in previous usage attitude studies. Age was shown by Mittins and his colleague to play an important role in the stratification of usage attitudes with older respondents exhibiting a higher tendency for linguistic intolerance, while gender was included in Sandred’s (1983) and Albanyan and Preston’s (1998) investigations. Women have been found to be more critical with regard to language use favouring standard variants and prestigious varieties. Sandred’s (1983, pp. 74–77) study of attitudes towards Scots was the only study which included a social class element illustrating how lower classes show higher acceptability rates of nonstandard language features. Nativeness has been included in a study conducted by Lukač and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (forthc.), but was not found to show any significant correlations.

The results of the online questionnaire showed a detailed picture of current usage attitudes held by my sample of the general public in England. Each usage problem was discussed in terms of its stigmatised status and historical development. In order to provide an insight into the actual use of the investigated usage feature, a corpus search was done making use of corpora such as the BNC and the Hansard corpus and where applicable COCA and COHA. The corpora’s subsections in which a usage feature occurred most
frequently were discussed together with each feature’s standardised frequency rates. It needs to be pointed out, however, that the corpus analysis was used as an exploratory tool highlighting each feature’s usage tendencies. Since the focus of this study is on the sociolinguistic analysis of usage attitudes, corpus evidence was merely used to indicate differences in usage between British and American English and contextual usage frequencies (cf. Kostadinova, in progress). As some of the investigated usage features were part of corpus-based studies, I reported their findings in order to provide a more detailed insight into the usage debate and actual language use. Whether any of the social variables showed a statistically significant correlation with the acceptability judgment made by the respondents was determined by using Whitney-Mann U-tests, bivariate correlation tests and binary logistic regression analyses. Thus, I was able to identify not only the main effects of the social variables, but also to see whether there was a covariation of variables. The sociolinguistic analysis showed that age, gender and nativeness showed significant correlations with acceptability judgments. Mittins et al.’s finding of increased linguistic intolerance in older informants was confirmed in my study for four of the usage problems investigated, i.e. literally as an intensifier, the I for me issue, different from/than/to and the use of like. Gender showed one significant correlation with acceptability judgments for the use of the flat adverb go slow, which women are three times more likely to reject than men. With regard to nativeness, the use of data are showed higher tendencies of rejection with non-native speakers than with native speakers.

Besides providing an analysis of the sociolinguistic stratification of usage attitudes, I also included a qualitative analysis of comments made by the questionnaire respondents, which provided further elaborations and explanations on the respondents’ decisions. I was able to highlight the distancing applied by speakers, which serves to identify an in-group and out-group
among speakers with respect to usage. The analysis of the questionnaire also
contained an analysis of the respondents’ certainty level and judgment basis,
which showed that unacceptable judgments were made with a higher degree
of certainty and were frequently based on the knowledge of a rule as opposed
to a gut feeling. The aim of this additional analysis was to highlight the differ-
ences between customary usage and norms. Drawing on the HUGE database,
I was able to present the stigmatisation history of nine of the eleven usage
problems which were included in my study.

As part of the online questionnaire, respondents were asked to state
their agreement with twelve language statements representing commonly held
beliefs and myths about the English language. Their agreement was then
correlated with the respondents’ usage judgment index, which was compiled
from the respondents’ judgments made on the usage problems investigated. It
turned out that seven of the twelve statements presented to questionnaire
respondents showed a correlation between agreement and usage judgment.
For five of these statements, which represented a negative emotion towards
the state of English, a negative correlation could be identified with the re-
spondents’ usage judgment index, which means that respondents who dis-
agreed with these statements also showed a lower index score indicating their
lenient attitudes towards the usage problems investigated. The two statements
expressing a positive attitude towards the state of English showed a weak
positive correlation, which means that respondents agreeing with these
statements also tended to exhibit lenient attitudes towards the usage problems
investigated in the questionnaire. Since the statements represent authentic
attitudes held by members of the general public, for this test I drew on the
Societal Treatment Approach. The use of this test made it possible to identify
not only the respondents’ attitudes towards such commonly held myths, but
also to test the consistency of their usage attitudes. The last part of the online
questionnaire consisted of an open question, which was, however, not compulsory and was completed by only 83 of the 112 respondents (see § 8.3). A qualitative analysis of the respondents’ answers brought to light the importance of education in the usage debate. Frequently, answers contained comments on a perceived lack of education, which respondents found to be responsible for the decaying state of English.

The interview sessions were conducted in Cambridge, London and Oxford with 63 participants selected on the basis of a quota sampling method (see § 9.2.1). The two main elicitation tests conducted with the participants during the interview sessions aimed at eliciting subconscious usage attitudes. The results of these tests demonstrated how speakers evaluate those who use nonstandard language features. As the open-guise test showed, the speakers using the unmarked and accepted variants were rated more favourably on the status-orientation and agreeableness factors than when using the marked variants. Breaking the factors up into the variables of which they are composed, such as “arrogant – humble” and “literate – illiterate”, allowed a more detailed analysis of the informants’ attitudes. According to this analysis, informants rated both the male and the female speakers significantly as being more hard working, literate and orderly as well as wealthier when using the unmarked variants than when using the marked ones. The sociolinguistic analysis of informants’ ratings showed that older informants tended to rate the male and female speakers more favourably on the agreeableness factor when using unmarked variants. Comparing the two age groups in the inter-speaker analysis, no significant differences could be identified. While the questionnaire’s findings showed an increased linguistic intolerance for disputed usage features with older respondents, the open-guise test proves that younger informants also make similarly strict judgments, yet their judgments do not
differ from those of older informants. As for gender, women’s higher awareness of the social significance of language use was confirmed in the open-guise test, which revealed that female informants showed more statistically significant rating differences than male informants.

The second implicit elicitation test consisted of a usage judgment test. This test consisted of a letter of application in which nine usage problems were incorporated. The informants were asked to highlight and correct anything they found unacceptable for this formal text type. The results of this test provide an insight into the social salience of the usage problems investigated. The two flat adverbs incorporated were the most frequently noticed and corrected usage problems, while two dangling participles were among the least noticed usage problems. In contrast to the online questionnaire and the open-guise test, the usage judgment test did not produce any evidence of overt prestige judgments among the female informants. Nevertheless, age was identified in the sociolinguistic analysis as a contributing factor in that older informants exhibited a higher tendency to correcting and noticing flat adverbs, the split infinitive, very unique and impact as a verb. As part of the debriefing of the informants, usage rules were presented to them with which they were asked to agree or disagree. This further provided an insight into the social norms and conventions of language use which seem to have been agreed upon within the speech community, as the social desirability bias could be identified through this test.

Having summarized the findings of the sociolinguistic investigation of usage attitudes presented in this study, I can now conclude that the general public’s usage attitudes in England vary according to several social variables, i.e. age, gender and nativeness. Yet, the social salience of individual usage problems needs to be taken into account here as significant correlations could not be identified for all usage problems. This means that usage attitudes on
some of the investigated usage problems, such as *less than* for *fewer than*, *burglarize* and the double negative, are more unanimous than others. The age-effect has clearly proved to be a significant social factor in the variability of usage attitudes. That older informants tend to reject specific usages indicates possible differences in their upbringing or in the education they received. It can be assumed that objections to specific usage problems, such as the split infinitive, will sooner or later stop, as younger informants tend to exhibit more lenient attitudes towards these issues. My study has shown that gender and nativeness are further social variables which explain differences in usage judgments. Hence, women are more likely to reject the use of the flat adverb *go slow*, while non-native speakers seem to consider the use of *data are* unacceptable. Women’s preference of standard variants confirms the phenomenon of overt prestige as a factor influencing women’s language use (cf. Trudgill, 1974, p. 94). The inclusion of non-native speakers in my sample has proved to be significant as non-native speakers constitute an important part of the speech community in the sense that they are not only passively involved in the debate as part of the target audience of usage guides, but seem to assume a more active role in the usage debate (see Chapters 7 – 9). Just like native speakers, non-native speakers have been shown to express attitudes towards disputed usage features.

The application of a mixed-methods approach to the study of usage attitudes proved to be fruitful as both consciously and subconsciously attitudes have been obtained through the combination of direct and indirect elicitation tests. Thus, my study does not only provide a new methodological approach to investigate usage attitudes, but it also enabled a long overdue insight into usage attitudes in England. My aim in this study was to provide a better understanding of current usage attitudes in England by including the often-forgotten general public in the usage debate. Attempting to bridge the gap between the
three key players – prescriptivists, linguists and the general public – I included
the perspective of each group in my investigation. This allowed me to identify
usage issues which seem to provoke similar attitudes between all three key
players, such as the nonstandard use of double negatives, as well as usage
features which brought to light diverging usage attitudes between the three
groups. Such diverging attitudes have for example been identified for the use
of *literally* as an intensifier which seems be considered acceptable by the
majority of speakers included in my sample, while the majority of usage guide
authors attempts to uphold the traditional use of *literally*. Hence, it seems as
if language use remains a dividing matter in England. The more than 300-
year-old debate between prescriptivists and linguists seems far from being
settled, as new usage features, such as the approximative adverb *like*, are likely
to evolve into usage problems in the near future, while old chestnuts, such as
the split infinitive and the dangling participle keep featuring in usage guides.
Extending the study of usage attitudes to the general public has brought to
light not only the general public’s awareness of specific usage problems, but
also the social stratification of attitudes towards usage problems. Including the
general public’s attitudes in the debate requires a reconsideration of the
dynamics of the usage debate which has so far been dominated by prescriptive
usage guide authors and descriptive linguists.