

Experimental explorations on grammatical taboos in Standard German

Ralf Vogel, University of Bielefeld

Kolloquium Linguistik, 28.6.2017 (abstract)

Since about 20 years, the use of experimental methods in syntactic research has been growing steadily. Recently, Sprouse et al. (2013) nevertheless showed that linguists' expert judgements have a very high degree of accuracy as compared to the outcomes of elicitation experiments.

Experimental methods are therefore best applied when *complementing*, not replacing expert judgements. Such a situation occurs when a phenomenon exceeds the capacities of the expert's judgements. I see (at least) two sources for such excessive demands:

A psychological one: differences between expressions might be too subtle to assess reliably from the linguists' armchair (e.g. gradient acceptability, degrees of markedness).

A sociological one: certain expressions might have a controversial status within the speech community. The expert judgement (perhaps then even controversial among linguists) in such a situation will only be one opinion among others.

Grammatical taboos have both features: they are *socioculturally induced instances of grammatical markedness*.

Grammatical taboos have a paradoxical nature. They are structures or constructions that are part of the language insofar as they are used by the speakers and therefore obviously a natural consequence of the language's

grammatical system. Nevertheless speakers at the same time *believe* (to varying degrees) that they are not part of their language. This is usually due to prescription that can occur in various ways and comes along with a particular ideology of standard language that is dominant within the speech community and therefore also an important influence on participants' behaviour in grammatical experiments.

I will present several explorative experimental studies on grammatical taboos. My example cases from standard German are auxiliary "tun", V2-Sentences with "weil", d-Pronouns and the double perfect. I am trying to find answers to the following questions, a.o.:

- Can we adjust our experimental methods in order to minimize the influence of prescription?
- Can grammatical taboos be distinguished empirically from other cases of syntactic markedness?
- Can we decide for very strong taboos, using experimental methods, whether those are instances of markedness or ungrammaticality?
- Can we identify sociolinguistic factors that correlate with subjects' evaluation of grammatical taboos?

Two main results of my studies are:

- i) There is reason to be optimistic with respect to the issue of successfully establishing and evaluating the category of grammatical taboos, using the observational means provided by experimental syntax;
- ii) There is good reason and perhaps even an urgent need for theoretical and empirical grammarians to include the sociocultural dimension of grammar into their models. ("la langue est un fait social", de Saussure)

References

Sprouse, Jon, Carson T. Schtze, Diego Almeida (2013). A comparison of informal and formal acceptability judgments using a random sample from Linguistic Inquiry 2001-2010. *Lingua* **134**, 219-248