

Sociocultural Determinants of Grammatical Taboos

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I will present results of several empirical studies on the acceptability of a class of phenomena that I have termed *grammatical taboos*: grammatical constructions that are part of the language, but stigmatised for use in the (written) standard and considered “bad language” in general. My previous work focused on the empirical status of grammatical taboos and the effects of prescriptive thinking in acceptability studies. In the studies presented here, I look at sociolinguistic variables that might correlate with the evaluation of grammatical taboos. We will see that university students are a quite interesting population for this investigation.

Depending on the studied phenomenon, we find that family background, gender (of the participant and/or the stimulus) and even students’ major subjects play a role in modeling the variation that we observe in the data. The results are very much in line with a robust sociolinguistic finding from various communities all over the world: females follow standard language norms more strictly than males do, but in a paradoxical way. They are more conservative with stable linguistic variables, but at the same time (mostly) the main agents of innovation. We see that this also seems to hold of our student community at the university. However, our results suggest that some of the inspected phenomena are led by males.

The lesson for grammatical theory and experimental linguistics is that core sociolinguistic factors should not be ignored in data analysis, though in most cases the effects of these factors on the outcome of acceptability studies are moderate.