

Using gradient acceptability judgments to investigate a syntactic construction

With the exception of stochastic OT, many current theories of grammar do not address the possibility of gradient acceptability, considering a construction either part of the grammar or not. Studies of variation have acknowledged (Zwicky 2002) that new constructions can develop by extending from one (more conservative) use to other (less conservative) uses. A study of developing syntactic constructions without gradient acceptability judgments models this extension as the separate acquisition of each new pattern, failing to distinguish among all patterns that are not fully acquired. The goal of this paper is to demonstrate the usefulness of the additional information contained in gradient judgments. We present gradient results from a study of the GoToGo construction (as in (1)) that suggest that constructions extend in parallel through a population and through a speaker's grammar.

(1) *I am going to the sanatorium and get my wife and daughter and quit this place forever.*

Schütze (1996) concluded his examination of the adequacy of acceptability judgments by stating that, if properly controlled, they can provide a window into a speaker's grammar. And in recent years, several studies (e.g. Keller 2000; Sorace & Keller 2004) have used magnitude estimation (Bard et al. 1996) to assess gradient acceptability of linguistic structures; we used magnitude estimation to elicit gradient acceptability judgments on the GoToGo construction.

We conducted an online study with 120 participants (from all over the USA) who judged the acceptability of 72 sentences (of which 30 were fillers). We focused on the degree to which different extensions of the construction are acceptable for speakers and in the population. Here we consider two extensions of the basic GoToGo construction: examples with verbs other than *going* (as in (2), where the verb is *coming*) and examples without locative complements (as in (3)).

(2) *I'm coming over there and drag you out myself.*

(3) *I worked on a little while longer and then I decided well, I'm going and get my Master's Degree.*

The data collected indicate that examples involving the verb *going* (more conservative examples) were rated significantly higher than examples involving other verbs ($p < 0.0001$) on average; examples containing a locative complement (also more conservative) were rated significantly higher than examples without one ($p < 0.0001$). In addition, 83% of speakers rated examples with *going* higher than examples with other verbs, and 79% of speakers rated examples with locative complements higher than examples without them, demonstrating that the pattern evident in the population as a whole is reproduced within speakers. Thus the relationship between different extensions of a construction is more adequately described as a hierarchy of gradient acceptability than by a traditional implicational rule involving absolute grammaticality, which fails to capture this generalization.

Findings like those presented here argue for a model of grammar that provides measures of to what extent a given extension of a construction has been established in the grammar of a speaker (and therefore, ultimately, in a language community).