

LSA.376: Some thoughts for the last class (7/26/07)

1. Overall strategy in looking at variants X and Y: Look for differences in them, beyond differences in their syntax and their sociolinguistic status. That is, look at the places where they can in principle alternate in the speech/writing of (some) individuals.

Expect that they will be interchangeable in many of these contexts, but that there will be some contexts in which one is preferable, or even the only acceptable choice.

2. These differences can be, at least:

sensitive to lexical choices in the surrounding context

[degree muchalot: preferences according to modified A]

sensitive to syntactic factors

[VP adverbial muchalot: preferences according to position]

semantic/pragmatic (differences in sense, entailments, presuppositions, conventional implicatures)

discourse-functional

stylistic (differences in formality, colloquialness, etc.)

[whichthat, muchalot, howeverbut, P+of]

prosodic/phonological

[whichthat, muchalot, howeverbut, P+of]

tied to processing factors (in production or comprehension)

3. Typically, it will turn out that many different factors are relevant, and these factors will have different weights.

4. One very common difference is that, in semantics/pragmatics or discourse function, $Y = X +$ something; from the muchalot.notes file:

difficult = *hard* + something

nearly = *almost* + something

subordinator *once* = *after* + something

restrictive relativizer *which* = *that* + something

sentence-initial connective *however* = *but* + something

determiner *a lot* = *much/many* + something

and now possibly:

out of = plain *out* + something

(Bear in mind that variants can differ in more than one way.)

5. But X and Y can simply be different, though maybe overlapping on occasion: double categorization of some nouns (*e-mail*, *spam*) as Count and Mass.

6. And in still other cases, the variants can represent two different resolutions of a conflict between conditions: doubling vs. truncation of articles (Faithfulness vs. Well-Formedness, in this case, though there are other sorts of conflicts).

7. Asking people what they think they do, or what they think people in some group do, is mostly hopeless as a research program, though it can give you some initial suggestions about what to look at and where to look.

[There are ways of carefully collecting judgments on individual examples, and there are ways of systematically examining the practices of particular people or groups, but people don't have access to accurate *generalizations* about what they do (or what anyone else does), and they don't have access to *generalizations* about the practices of groups (instead, they only know the sampling that's come their way, and what they believe about that sampling is subject to many distorting effects – of selective attention, stereotyping, prescriptive teachings, etc.).]

8. The advice literature is largely built on this sort of self-inquiry, so is suspect, even as an account of the advice writers' own tastes (which you can study by examining their practices).

On the other hand, the advice literature is a rich source of phenomena to study and of first guesses about what factors might be relevant (though these guesses are often seriously off-base).

9. Recommendations about which variant to choose frequently rest on bits of language ideology which, at the very least, could use some critique. (In particular, appeals to "logic" and to abstract generalizations like Omit Needless Words are generally suspect.)

10. The surprise factor: Be prepared to discover that lots of people do things you thought weren't possible, and do these things systematically, not through inadvertent error. What they do might not be standard, but it's not just fumbling.

Also be prepared to discover that things you thought people do an awful lot are actually pretty rare.

11. Non-standard, colloquial, innovative, etc. variants almost always have linguistic virtues (regularity, clarity, brevity, etc.) as well as social values. More generally, two variants (even those not opposed as more or less "high") will almost always *both* have linguistic virtues.

12. People differ in their personal preferences for variants. On top of everything else (in particular, on top of correlations of various strengths between choices of variants and social factors), there are individual tastes in choosing variants. Recall the difference between Mark Liberman and me on *howeverbut*.