
Medium range acceptability and its sources

Ralf Vogel

Universität Bielefeld

ralf.vogel@uni-bielefeld.de

The acceptability rating task is perhaps the most direct way to elicit the grammaticality status of a linguistic expression or pattern by empirical means. Corpus evidence alone, especially in the case of rare patterns, does not help in making the crucial distinction between performance errors and acceptable patterns, and production studies, like corpora, are mainly useful for the elicitation of preferences, and not so much for the exploration of the boundary that is so central for grammatical theory, the one between (still) right or acceptable, and wrong.

Acceptability judgements by speakers as well as linguists are not binary. Whereas in the linguistic literature we frequently find annotations like ‘?’ and ‘??’ and others, rating experiments are often based on rating scales, and these usually are exploited systematically by the participants. Experiment results with mean medium range ratings are especially useful for linguistic analysis, because the statistical distributions of ratings and subjects may vary in different ways in those cases, offering more insights about the phenomena at hand than the clear-cut cases at the edges of the rating scale.

I will discuss results from a range of acceptability rating studies on grammatical phenomena of German, in order to explore to what extent the distributional statistics of medium range ratings in those studies are characteristic of different kinds of markedness phenomena, in particular: true grammar-internal markedness, sociolinguistically induced markedness, situations of ongoing language change and different kinds of grammatical creativity.

From a broader perspective, the insights that we may gain in this kind of explorations may lead to an understanding of grammars as genuinely social phenomena. In this view, the main task for modelling the synchronic state of a grammar lies in the integration of intra- and extra-grammatical factors, in modelling their interplay, the grammar’s creative potential, and the dynamics of language use and language change.