

Does the level of education of participants in linguistic experiments matter?

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The last 10-15 years have seen a growing debate within the field of theoretical linguistics and, in particular, of theoretical syntax, on the scientific validity of informal, intuition-based research (Bard et al., 1996; Schütze, 1996; Gibson and Fedorenko, 2010) As a result, a good deal of syntactic research is now based on formal experiments with naive participants. The vast majority of these experiments, however, use only undergraduate or postgraduate students as participants. This is routine practice in other fields of linguistics, as well as in psycholinguistics.

In my paper, I will discuss the problems of developing linguistic and psycholinguistic theories on the basis of the performance and intuitions of a very small and very specific subset of speakers. I suggest that, issues of practicality aside, the reliance on university population is based either on assumptions that have never been tested (e.g. that native speakers converge on more or less the same grammar), or on two unrecognized biases, which I name the Written Language Bias and the Literate Speaker Bias.

I will review research which shows that lowly-educated and non-literate speakers perform very differently from well-educated ones in a range of linguistic, metalinguistic and psycholinguistic tasks (Mulder and Hulstijn, 2011; Street and Dąbrowska, 2010; Kuvers et al., 2006, inter alia).

Finally, I will present the experiments I am conducting with participants recruited from literacy classes around Edinburgh. These experiments aim to establish whether, compared to highly educated people, low-literacy speakers have a) lower metalinguistic awareness; b) difficulty comprehending more complex grammatical structures that are not found in spontaneous spoken language; c) different production in terms of grammatical complexity (e.g. subordination).

References

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