

Schwa

Language and Linguistics

Winter 2025 | Issue 32

Schwa: Language and Linguistics is published by the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Brigham Young University. Its contents represent the opinions of the authors and editors and not necessarily those of the faculty or administration of Brigham Young University. We are always looking for submissions and staff members. If you are interested, please visit us at schwa.byu.edu.

© 2025 by Brigham Young University. All rights reserved.

Cover design by Megan Redford

Contents

iv	Staff
v	About <i>Schwa</i>
vii	Editor's Note
1	Sup, Bro? A Study of Gendered Vocatives <i>Makayla Erickson</i>
13	Usage of Proscribed Word Forms in Different Written Registers <i>Sophia Runyan</i>
25	Implicit Bias or Sound Preference: A Study on Judgment of Languages <i>Kelsey Slade</i>
37	The Usage of Modified Tone Emojis in Racial Spaces on YouTube <i>Amelia Holbrook-Brown</i>
47	Gendered Language: The Approval of “Guys” <i>Elen Reed</i>
57	An Investigation into Editing Students' Evaluations of Quotative “Like” in Popular Fiction <i>Emma Todd</i>
79	The Relationship Between Grammar and Poetic Effect <i>Kara Haack</i>
85	The Effect of Filler Words on Perceptions of Prestige <i>Mia Todd</i>

Staff

Editor in Chief

Rachel Hart

Managing Editor

Ciera Griggs

Web Director

Jenni Overy

Senior Editors

Jenni Overy

Halli Romero

Elijah Clark

Staff Editors

Megan Redford

Beth Nielsen

Gillian Dangerfield

Lydia Olson

Design Team

Rachel Hart

Ciera Griggs

Jenni Overy

Elijah Clark

Megan Redford

Gillian Dangerfield

Lydia Olson

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Dirk Elzinga

About *Schwa*

We are an academic journal produced by the students of Brigham Young University. Our mission is to increase the amount and accessibility of linguistic scholarship—especially for those without graduate school experience—while simultaneously training editors and designers in the ways of modern publishing. Some of our articles are strictly theoretical and academic. Others are less technical and more personal in nature. Experiments, surveys, corpus analyses, and essays are all acceptable. We have published on all the following subdisciplines of linguistics and more:

- Phonetics, the perception and production of speech sounds
- Phonology, the system of speech sounds used in a given context
- Semantics, the meaning constructs of words and sentences
- Syntax, the structure of permissible and meaningful sentences
- Pragmatics, real-world language use and other speech-related actions
- Sociolinguistics, language variation based on sociological factors
- Psycholinguistics, the cognitive tasks necessary for language
- Fieldwork notes from living in a foreign language-speaking community
- Forensics linguistics, the role of language in law

We are always accepting submissions. Articles on any language are welcome, including cross-linguistic studies, but they must be written in English.

Our staff includes both editors and graphic designers. We extend an open invitation for new staff members. Go to our website at schwa.byu.edu to submit an article or join our staff.

Editor's Note

Change is inevitable in life and linguistics. Languages and varieties evolve over time, never quite the same from day to day. New technology requires new terms, expanding vocabulary and keeping lexicographers busy. At the same time, we leave behind old terms that are no longer useful in our everyday lives. Change in language is both melancholy and beautiful.

It's the same with life. Change is natural, and while it can be good, it can also be hard. I look back on my time with *Schwa* with gratitude for what I've learned and those I've been able to work with. I look forward to graduation with hope for a new chapter of life. I will miss working on *Schwa*, but I know the journal will be in good hands as the next generation of linguists and editors steps up.

I'm profoundly grateful to the *Schwa* staff for stepping up this semester. I'd like to thank my managing editor Ciera for being constant, always ready to get things done. I'd also like to thank Jenni, our web director, for her great work with the website. Thank you to our senior and staff editors for putting in the effort to make this issue shine. And thank you to our amazing authors for your courage and your hard work!

We'd like to thank the Department of Linguistics and the professors who have helped us grow and learn, both as editors and as people. We'd especially like to thank our faculty advisor, Dr. Dirk Elzinga. We're always grateful for everything he does to help us grow.

And to you, reader, thank you. Thank you for coming along with us on this exploration of language and the ways it changes and develops. We hope you enjoy issue 32 of *Schwa: Language and Linguistics*.

Rachel Hart
Editor in Chief



Sup, Bro?

A Study of Gendered Vocatives

Makayla Erickson

This study examines gendered vocatives in contemporary American English by surveying 133 participants on their usage of masculine (e.g., bro, dude) and feminine (e.g., sis, girl) terms and demographics. The findings reveal a predominant use of masculine terms—even among female speakers—suggesting a “default male” bias in informal address. Age and context influence usage, with younger individuals favoring terms like bro more frequently. This research contributes to our understanding of sociolinguistic trends and challenges conventional notions of gendered speech by highlighting evolving dynamics in informal use.

On July 19, 2024, Threads user @hissambajwa posted the following: “‘DUDE’ and ‘BRO’ are gender neutral terms. Thoughts?” This post gained traction as others posted their opinions in response. Many agreed on their neutrality, some mentioning other terms such as *homie*, *sis*, and *dudette*, while others expressed indignation at the idea of women being referred to with masculine identifiers. One user, @chocolaterayne, raised the point of a man “marrying his ‘bro’” and said, “Still gender neutral?” From this case alone, we see disagreement on the idea of gendered slang. While many people are perfectly comfortable with these words, others are offended at the sheer informality and neutrality of the situation. I myself was once reprimanded after I accidentally called my own mother “bro.” Therefore, I decided to pursue this idea in a sociolinguistic study by conducting a survey about these gendered terms of address, or *vocatives*. In a world where gender politics remains controversial, I hoped to reach a conclusion regarding the general public’s stance on these terms.

My research question explores whether there is variation in the use of gendered vocatives, particularly with regard to demographics of age, sexuality, and gender. Additionally, I examine how specific gender interactions influence variation. This inquiry aims to capture current attitudes toward gendered terms in a climate where gender has become a political flashpoint.

Literature Review

To establish historical context of slang use, I researched the proliferation of informal language in English through time. In her study of Victorian era slang, Jessica March (2023) explores the concept of “verbal hygiene” and cites a conduct book that states, “Slang is bad enough in young men, and they indulge in far too much of it; but in a young woman, it is disgusting” (32). This example underscores an early double standard in attitudes toward informal speech, raising questions about such biases that exist today. Are women still held to this higher standard?

More recently, Scott Kiesling’s 2005 study on the use of *dude* explored its development as a marker of male solidarity. Intriguingly, he predicts, “The casual stance indexed by *dude* is becoming more ‘prestigious’ throughout the United States, so perhaps it will be used by all ages and in most situations in America” (300). Indeed, this term has seen widespread adoption. Similarly, Anna Stacey’s research examines the vocative *bro* as a closely

related term. Additional studies, such as those by Flesch (2023) and Rashid (2024), provide a broader look at vocatives, though they focus on corpus research and grammatical patterns. While these works can enhance one's understanding of vocatives, many are either outdated, overly specific, or lack a crucial sociocultural perspective.

Conversely, many studies place significant emphasis on the social dimensions of language. Qing's 2015 study examines gendered slang in more recent contexts. Holmes and Meyerhoff's comprehensive 2003 novel contextualizes gender interactions across disciplines, particularly linguistics, through a collection of articles and studies. While not as relevant, it provides a valuable sociological framework for the gender discussion. Other research delves specifically into these reference terms but also focuses on specific groups or speech communities. For example, Saffa's 2022 study investigates the use of gendered slang among Indonesian teenagers, revealing differences in one cultural context. A broader perspective is offered with studies examining vocatives across the English-speaking world. Leech's 1999 research compares the distribution of vocatives in American and British English, noting higher frequency of usage among Americans. Similarly, Pastorino's 2022 study focuses on the use of *dude* in British English, deducing that "the findings in this study reject the masculine connotation that *dude* has had in previous research, as it is now used by female and non-binary speakers as much as by male speakers" (27). On another note, Marley Pauls's 2024 pilot study investigates terms of address among LGBT+ women in Canada, emphasizing that "subgroup identity categories appear to be critical in the selection of *bro* and *girl* and participants mention their experience of usage in the community as reflecting that" (21). Additionally, Ongstad (2024) and Hallapaju (2024) have explored vocatives in the context of online communities, with the former highlighting male bias in gaming websites and the latter uncovering masculine assumptions on Reddit. Together, these studies illustrate the diversity of vocative usage in many contexts, emphasizing the role of social factors in preferred terminology.

While this body of research offers valuable insights, it also reveals gaps that I aim to address. Many studies are now outdated and fail to capture the ever-evolving sociolinguistic landscape. While Kiesling's study is comprehensive, its conclusions about the term *dude* may no longer reflect its current status. Moreover, although the research reaches meaningful conclusions about

various phenomena, most studies are isolated to specific communities and thus are limited in applicability. My research seeks to address these limitations by examining gendered vocative terms as they are used in American English in 2024, providing an updated and grounded understanding of this concept.

Methods

For this study, I designed a sixteen-question survey to evaluate vocatives in contemporary American English. The survey began with four demographic questions on age, gender, sexuality, and English L1 status (whether English is the speaker's first language). I then broke down usage across several relational contexts: male/female friend, brother/sister, significant other, male/female friend online, male/female colleague, and interactions without knowing gender. By narrowing the scope, I aimed to explore the gender divide while controlling for relationship status. In retrospect, I would refine certain aspects of the survey, particularly clarifying what "online" means. It would also be illuminating to examine vocative use in other domains—such as with parents, children, teachers, and religious leaders—but I did not want to overburden the survey.

Within each domain, participants were presented with eight vocatives: four masculine (*bro*, *dude*, *man*, and *king*) and four feminine (*sis*, *girl*, *lady*, and *queen*). These terms were intentionally chosen for their contextual similarities and prominence, such as sibling references and royal titles. Participants rated the frequency of their use for each term on a four-point scale: *would never use*, *rarely use*, *occasionally use*, and *use often*. This structure provides a strong foundation for analyzing gender disparity, levels of formality, and the relative popularity of specific terms.

I distributed the survey by leveraging a wide range of personal connections to reach as many groups as possible. These efforts included emails to classmates, messages in group chats, emails to immediate and extended family members, and outreach to various extracurricular groups. This survey was conducted throughout November and December of 2024, based primarily in Utah but extending across multiple states. In total, 133 individuals participated and 122 completed the survey in its entirety. I do recognize limitations in this methodology, particularly the lack of a clearly defined population. My goal was to capture a broad perspective, but convenience sampling introduced definite biases. The groups I sent the survey

to unintentionally led to a participant pool that skewed younger and predominantly female. I would be interested to see how responses might differ among other populations, such as older or more male-dominated demographics.

Results

The demographic results aligned with expectations. The highest-frequency age groups surveyed were nineteen to twenty-two (35%), sixteen to eighteen (19%), and thirty-one to forty-five (16%), while the lowest were ten to fifteen (3%) and, unexpectedly, twenty-six to thirty (2%). Gender responses showed sixty-four percent identifying as female, thirty-one percent as male, and five percent as other. Sexuality was similarly distributed, with seventy-seven percent heterosexual, eleven percent bisexual, five percent homosexual, and seven percent other. All but two participants were English L1 speakers.

To simplify the results moving forward, I will present the frequency of vocatives using a four-point scale, where 4 indicates a ubiquitous term and 1 signifies no usage. The three most-used vocatives across all questions were *dude* (2.53), *bro* (2.352), and *man* (2.06). Mid-range terms included *girl* (1.8) and *queen* (1.53). At the lower end were *sis* (1.37), *lady* (1.255), and *king* (1.25). These low scores were unsurprising, as these terms are more common within specific communities (e.g., LGBT+ individuals), though *king* falling so low on the list was somewhat unexpected.

Building off of this, I observed an intriguing split in frequency of use between male and female terms; figures 1 and 2 illustrate this divide. Figure 1 demonstrates the difference in use between male- and female-associated terms across specific domains, using the aforementioned numbering system. The greatest male skew appeared in terms used for brothers (+1.37) and male friends (+1.23). The only domain to lean slightly female was usage with sisters, which showed a modest +0.105 female. If masculine and feminine terms were used equally across genders, this figure (and others) would likely approximate the absolute value of male-skewed numbers—around 1.2. However, the actual disparity was far greater. Figure 2 highlights this discrepancy in the general findings.

Figure 1

Male Skew vs. Domain

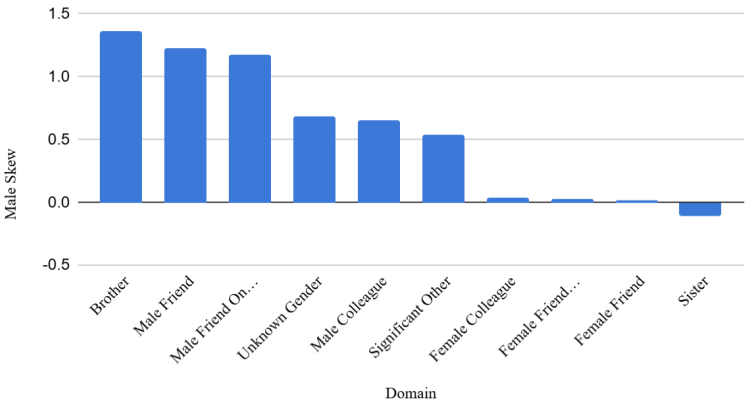
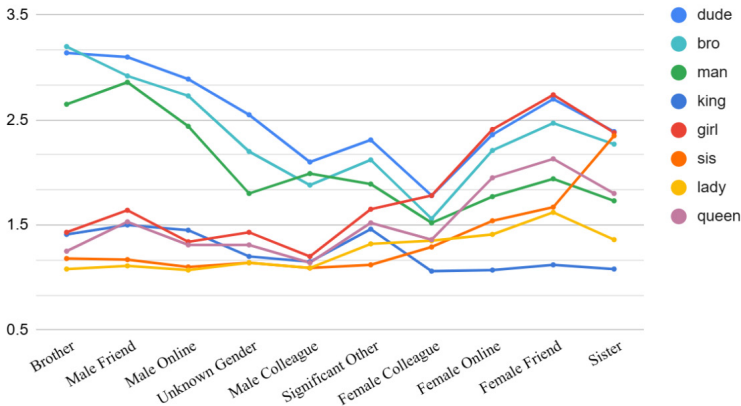


Figure 2

Gendered Terms vs. Domains of Use



The cool-colored male terms (aside from *king*, ever an outlier) consistently scored higher than warm-colored female terms, even in domains where the latter skewed female. This pattern is evident across the graph: On the left, there is a noticeable gap between male and female terms, while on the right, they appear at fairly even intervals. Thus, while masculine terms were often applied in female-dominated domains, the reverse was rarely true.

An analysis of demographic data juxtaposed against other responses reveals fascinating patterns in the terms certain blocs are more prone to use. For instance, *man* among males and *girl* among females emerged as two terms of endearment used in same-sex interactions. In the case of male friends, the p-value for males using *man* was 0.0205, while the p-value for females using *girl* with female friends was 0.0090—both indicative of high statistical significance against the threshold of $p < 0.05$. Based on my data, these appear to be the two terms most exclusively associated with same-gender interactions, as they index camaraderie and closeness.

Gender interactions with other terms also yielded notable findings. For example, the p-value for women calling a brother *king* was 0.0090, illustrating that women are considerably more likely to use *king* when addressing males than men are to use the term with one another. Additionally, *girl* showed statistical significance in interactions with male friends, with the highest frequency of use among participants who did not specify a gender. This aligns with Pauls's aforementioned study, which asserts, "*Girl* [is] integral to the shared experience of queer girlhood" (28). Therefore, those who use these terms most often likely identify as members of the LGBT+ community and consciously defy traditional gender roles.

Age-related discrepancies revealed some truly amazing data. For instance, the term *bro* was predominantly used by younger generations (primarily under thirty), a truth manifested throughout the study. The p-value for individuals using *bro* when addressing someone of unknown gender was nearly zero, indicating very strong significance. Thus, younger generations are more inclined to use *bro* as a neutral term than their older counterparts. These results were further corroborated in interactions with male and female friends. The graphs below illustrate this data, figure 3 for the former and figure 4 for the latter.

Figure 3

Q6_1: Which terms would you be li...to use with a male friend? Bro				
Q1: What is your age?	Would never use	Rarely use	Occasionally use	Use often
10-15	5.6%	0.0%	2.6%	2.0%
16-18	0.0%	12.0%	13.2%	33.3%
19-22	0.0%	24.0%	39.5%	49.0%
23-25	0.0%	4.0%	13.2%	7.8%
26-30	0.0%	4.0%	5.3%	2.0%
31-45	38.9%	32.0%	13.2%	2.0%
46-60	16.7%	16.0%	7.9%	3.9%
61+	38.9%	8.0%	5.3%	0.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 4

Q7_1: Which terms would you be li...o use with a female friend? Bro				
Q1: What is your age?	Would never use	Rarely use	Occasionally use	Use often
10-15	2.4%	0.0%	6.3%	0.0%
16-18	4.8%	18.2%	31.3%	25.0%
19-22	9.5%	45.5%	37.5%	5.6%
23-25	7.1%	0.0%	9.4%	11.1%
26-30	2.4%	4.5%	3.1%	2.8%
31-45	33.3%	13.6%	6.3%	5.6%
46-60	19.0%	9.1%	6.3%	0.0%
61+	21.4%	9.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The data above reveals a trend toward the use of *bro*, which is increasingly filling the semantic space of *dude*. This was particularly evident among sixteen to twenty-two year-olds, a significant portion of whom said it was acceptable to use *bro* for a female friend. While this word is predominantly used by younger generations, *lady* is favored by an entirely different group. Specifically, the term is most commonly used by individuals aged thirty-one to forty-five, while youth largely avoid it. I myself do not use this word, but I have heard family members and friends at church use it as an indicator of female closeness. While the gender aspect is central to my analysis, age-related trends are equally compelling and could be the basis of another study.

Overall, the data reveals several remarkable findings that suggest deliberate decision-making in vocative use. Some terms are specific to particular gender or age groups, while others are linked to distinct identities and even sexuality. A notable pattern that quickly emerges, however, is the frequent use of masculine terms for women. In the next section, I will delve deeper into the data to explore these trends in detail and draw back the curtain, so to speak.

Discussion

My survey included a question that asked respondents to comment any salient thoughts about this topic. Below are some selected samples that point to intriguing analysis.

1. “I used to use *bro* ironically but it is definitely no longer ironic now.”
2. “I don’t have like any straight male friends—I usually call my male friends *girl*, lol.”
3. “I don’t really use sayings w gender in mind lol.”

4. “I feel like *bro* and *dude* are pretty gender neutral, and *queen* would be used as a joke (yas queen!).”

5. “I think that when I use *bro*, *dude*, and *man*, they are gender neutral. I probably use these terms more the closer I am to someone.”

The concept of formality presents an intriguing dimension to this study. Since many of these words are considered slang, their usage diminishes in more formal environments. This trend is evident in figure 2, which shows an overall decline in the use of male and female vocatives when addressing colleagues, as such terms are generally uncommon in the workplace. For many vocatives, the majority of participants reported rare usage in formal settings, though levels did vary across contexts. As Participant 5 commented, these terms tend to increase with closeness—a pattern supported by the data, as shown in figure 1. Gendered vocatives are most frequently used with siblings, followed by in-person and online friends, and lastly colleagues, reflecting a clear correlation for formality. This trend could be another basis for further research in a multitude of ways. What is the perceived formality level of each vocative, and how does that reflect usage? Does this pattern suggest gender roles being more enforced in closer relationships? Furthermore, do younger generations speak more informally compared to their elders?

Several participants highlighted an aspect I had initially overlooked: the use of these terms in an ironic or jocular manner. Participants 1 and 4, along with many others whose comments are not included, explicitly noted this phenomenon in their responses. This tendency is particularly pronounced with playful terms such as *king* and *queen*, which are less representative of the average person but still reflect an important dimension of usage. It appears that, in casual conversation, individuals often employ these terms humorously or ironically rather than as genuine markers of closeness. This dynamic is inherently subjective and varies significantly depending on the context of each social interaction.

Many individuals expressed the idea that they “don’t use sayings with gender in mind.” What is interesting, however, is the data as applied to men versus women. As seen earlier, male terms are used most often with males, but the same also holds true for females (see figure 2). While individuals claim they do not have a gender bias, the data reveals another side to the story. It suggests

that male-associated terms are perceived as more neutral or universally applicable, whereas female-associated terms remain more constrained to gendered contexts. This then raises further questions about default masculinity in gendered language use.

Feminist scholar Monique Wittig once wrote, “There are not two genders. There is only one, the feminine. For the masculine is not the masculine but the general” (1969, p. 204). While this perspective may initially seem radical to the layman, it highlights a phenomenon deeply embedded in our language. Consider the term I just used: *layman*. Across the English language, masculinity is the presumed “default” while the female is the “exception,” as Wittig describes. This pattern appears in the use of feminizing suffixes, masculine terms like *mankind*, and even in seemingly neutral constructions like *actor* with subtle masculine roots. Although I do not aim to theorize on political implications of gender in linguistics, these trends undeniably manifest across the board. Women can be “dudes” or “bros,” but men are rarely referred to as “girls” or “sis.” Studies by Hallapaju (2024) and Martin (2005) support this concept, commenting that slang terms overwhelmingly skew male, particularly online. The data from my study reinforces this “default male” principle, revealing how these linguistic habits persist even in informal contexts.

From this analysis, the big question then becomes whether or not this usage is inherently sexist. A 2015 survey found that forty-seven percent of men and eighty percent of women saw casual masculine terms as reductive to feminist goals, though the data is now somewhat outdated. In my own study, many participants sidestepped the messy politics and instead argued that these terms are simply gender neutral. While some did express discomfort, bordering on personal offense, with certain vocatives, this was often chalked up to informality rather than gendered connotations.

What is noteworthy is that the shift toward more flexible use is driven by *both* genders. Almost two-thirds of participants in this study were female, and yet these male terms still consistently topped the data. The spread of traditionally male terms such as *bro* and *dude* in female and mixed-gender contexts reflects a shift that is driven by multiple parties. Thus, it is not a problem of male bias but rather masculinity that is deeply buried within our language, unwittingly perpetuated by men and women alike. Females that choose to use these terms, therefore, may be trying

to assimilate to patriarchal culture or simply emulating casual behavior that yields positive results for others. In general, we as speakers have the responsibility to be self-aware about what may come across as offensive in specific contexts. These vocatives have the power to equalize and foster closeness, and there is not inherently anything wrong with using them, just so long as speakers are courteous and conscious when doing so.

Conclusion

Gendered vocatives serve as a linguistic tool that brings people together under shared group identities, reinforcing camaraderie and familiarity. However, the “default male” principle remains prominent, reflected in the data and overall social trends. Men and women alike perceive masculine terms such as *bro* and *dude* as gender-neutral, a viewpoint not extended to feminine terms. This study also builds off of previous work to highlight the ever-evolving linguistic landscape, particularly with the rise of *bro* as a more inclusive form of address, as well as certain terms specific to the LGBT+ community. Nonetheless, informality and slang connotations cannot be ignored, as their usage remains contentious in certain professional settings. Ultimately, I conclude that while speakers are aware of these linguistic nuances, they do not believe they are problematic enough to warrant significant change in language use. As one participant put it, “It kind of bugs me, but at the end of the day, the world keeps on spinning.”

References

- debuk. (2016, April 16). *Default: male*. language: a feminist guide. <https://debuk.wordpress.com/2016/04/16/default-male/>
- Fleisch, Marie. (2023). “Dude” and “dudette”, “bro” and “sis”: A diachronic study of four address terms in the TV corpus. *Anglica. An International Journal of English Studies*, 32(2), 23–42. <https://doi.org/10.7311/0860-5734.32.2.02>
- Hallapaju, Routa. (2024). *Gendered Language and Misinterpretations of User Gender on Reddit* [Master’s thesis, University of Helsinki]. Helsinki University Library. <http://hdl.handle.net/10138/576912>
- Martin, Katherine C. (2005). Gendered aspects of lexicographic labeling. *Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America*, 26, 160–173. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dic.2005.0005>
- Ongstad, Ronja E. (2024). “GG boys... and girls!” *A study of the use of and reactions to vocatives within the context of gaming* [Master’s thesis, University of Oslo]. DUO Research Archive. <https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/112392?locale-attribute=en>
- Pastorino, Valeria. (2022). Dude in British English: Towards a non-gendered term of address. *York Papers in Linguistics*, 2(17), 13–28. <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/192794/>
- Pauls, Marley. (2022). “Bro talk” and “girlypop”: Terms of address and subgroup identities amongst queer women. *University of Manitoba*. <https://cla-acl.ca/pdfs/resumes-2024-abstracts/Pauls.pdf>
- Qing, Millee Z. (2005). A McMaster undergraduate study of the social origins and implications of slang and gendered language. *The McMaster Journal of Communication*, 2(1), 52–74 <https://doi.org/10.15173/mjc.v2i0.230>
- Wittig, Monique. (1998). One is not born a woman. In Sandra Kemp & Judith Squires (Eds.), *Feminisms* (pp. 220–226). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192892706.003.0036>

Usage of Proscribed Word Forms in Different Written Registers

Sophia Runyan

This article investigates the usage of proscribed word forms across different written registers using corpus research. By analyzing data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the research examines how often five specific proscribed words appear in various written genres, including blogs, news, fiction, and academic writing. Findings indicate that blogs and web-based writing use proscribed forms most frequently, while news writing adheres most strictly to prescriptive norms. The study suggests that informality is increasing in certain registers—particularly academia—which raises questions about evolving language standards and the potential need for updated style guides.

In every English-speaking school, students are taught the right and wrong ways to create sentences. This practice is carried into the professional world through style and usage guides that maintain Standard English through strict prescriptive rules (e.g., using *bear* and not *bare* to mean *to carry*). However, some proscribed words—those words discouraged or deemed inappropriate in specific contexts by prescriptive rules—persist, and their usage varies depending on the written genre, according to Smith (2019). However, Smith examined only blogs and news articles, not including all the written genres (hereby referred to as written registers) of the English language in his studies. This article seeks to find the answer to whether the usage of proscribed forms differs depending on the written register and which written register uses proscribed forms the most.

Looking at all the written registers available in a specific corpus (a collection of linguistics data) will help us know the level of formality within the registers and illuminate whether prescriptive rules are still needed and if they should be applied to certain registers. I will examine this question using corpus research and draw conclusions based on the statistics performed on the data. Drawing from previous knowledge and literature on this topic, I hypothesize that the written registers will have a difference in the number of proscribed word forms and that the fiction category will have the most.

Literature Review

The topic of proscribed word forms has been widely discussed in language studies and linguistics. Research in this field explores usage guides, norms, and actual writing practices regarding these word forms across various registers. This literature review draws on insights from an empirical research paper that illuminates the views on prescriptive rules outside the academic world and from two other sources that analyze how proscribed forms are used in different written registers while shedding light on the variability in adherence to formal usage guidelines.

Straaijer (2016) discusses the role of prescriptivism in shaping language use, emphasizing that attitudes toward prescriptive norms vary significantly across social and professional groups. He observes that traditional prescriptive norms often encourage “correct” forms and discourage “incorrect” ones, but actual adherence to these norms is influenced by context, audience, and

medium. These variances reflect broader social attitudes toward language norms, and they reveal a tension between the need for formal standards and the natural evolution of language use in diverse registers. Additionally, Straaijer lists and evaluates the four groups of language users—linguists, prescriptivists, the general public, and the media—and their roles, which are influenced by prescriptive rules. In this study, Straaijer explains that the media can be both those who need to follow prescriptive rules and those who enforce them (e.g., style guides, usage guides, and dictionaries). If the media can be prescriptivists and the general public students to the rules, the question arises: Do the written registers follow their style guides?

As mentioned earlier, in his doctoral dissertation, Smith (2019) investigates proscribed usage in formal and informal registers, comparing blog writing and news articles. His study centers on prescriptive norms that discourage specific grammatical forms, tracking how these are followed or disregarded across registers with different levels of formality. His findings show that some prescriptive rules, like avoiding sentence-final prepositions, hold more weight in formal news writing than in the relatively informal blog genre, but other rules tested exhibit minimal variation across registers, revealing a shift toward more widely known norms in writing conventions. What I plan to do is test more written genres to see if Smith's conclusion is true for all written genres.

Dixon's (2022) corpus analysis of proscribed informality in academic writing expands on the variability in adherence to prescriptive norms, focusing on the frequency and distribution of informal forms. Dixon finds that these features vary widely across disciplines, with humanities fields, for instance, showing higher tolerance for informality than hard sciences. This variability points to a shift in the academic register, where certain proscribed forms are becoming less stigmatized and may even aid in effective communication with readers (Dixon, 2022). Like Smith's study in the previous paragraph, this research shows a shift in the use of proscribed forms in academic writing. Future studies should explore proscribed word forms instead of sentence structure to see if that would produce the same result.

The studies reviewed here collectively illustrate that while prescriptive norms influence language usage across registers, actual

practices often diverge from strict adherence to prescribed rules depending on context and audience. While it is important to look at registers individually, it is also important to look at all registers in the written format to see if the prescriptive rule-adherence trends and attitudes that Straaijer noted translate to writing as well as speech.

Methods

The method used to collect data and answer this research question was a corpus research approach where case-sensitive string commands are used in a linguistic collection to locate words acting as different parts of speech. This methodology was utilized because a corpus is a single place to collect the most information about written data with built-in features to help sift through prevalent data and non-prevalent data. The specific corpus used was the Corpus of Contemporary American English, or COCA (Davies, 2008). COCA is a collection of American English texts gathered for language research. This specific corpus focuses on texts within the last fifty years. Recent data is essential to this study, as I am only looking at recent trends, since the usage guides are recent as well.

The usage guides used in this study were *Garner's Modern English Usage* (2022) and the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2018). These were selected because a panel of reputable authors recommended their use of grammar books on their website fivebooks.com (2023). The list on the website was then looked over and each usage guide was scanned to see if it would give a fair and extensive entry for any prescriptive rule.

After the corpus and usage guides were selected, five prescriptive rules were chosen. A rule was chosen in one usage guide and then compared to the other usage guide to see if both guides came to the same conclusion about whether this rule was indeed a general rule or whether it was a personal opinion of the author. If the rule did not appear in one of the usage guides, then it was not selected. To decide if a prescriptive rule in both guides was a general rule, I looked at the Language Change Index in *Garner's Modern English Usage* (2022).

The Language Change Index is a measuring tool that Garner uses to determine if a prescriptive rule is being used more in common speech, and is thus being adopted into Standard English usage, or

whether it is still being avoided and only occasionally used. The index goes from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating that the proscribed form is becoming more standard and a 1 indicating the alienness of the usage. These index numbers are based on the word's frequency of use collected from the Google Ngram Viewer. All of the rules selected were a 2 on the Language Change Index, which means (in Garner's words) it is "widely shunned" (Garner, 2022, xxv). A lower number on the index is preferred in this study because it insinuates that the rules are being followed; however, there is still a chance of one using the proscribed version of the prescriptive rule.

The words that followed all of the criteria are listed here:

*alot (a lot)

*'til (till)

*irregardless (regardless)

*heighth (height)

*could/should/would of (could/should/would have)

The five word forms selected have both a prescribed version and a proscribed version as seen above. The proscribed word forms were searched in COCA with a specific look at the chart function, where all the written genres were displayed with the frequency of use of the searched word. All of the data was collected from the uses per million row to help standardize the data. After inputting all the word search strings into COCA, the values from COCA were collected and analyzed (see the appendix for all tables and figures). My sample size was 520 million—all the words available in COCA. Within that 520 million, the sample sizes of the registers remained constant throughout the query tests, as seen in table 1. The biggest register was blog and the smallest was academia.

Table 1

Written Registers of COCA Broken Down

English Written Register	Words (Million) / Percentage
Blog	128.6 / 24.73%
Web	124.3 / 23.90%
TV/M	128.1 / 24.63%
Fiction	118.3 / 22.75%
Magazine	126.1 / 24.25%
News	121.7 / 23.40%
Academia	119.8 / 23.03%

I looked specifically at the words per million (wpm) category after collecting the frequency charts from COCA (labeled “PER MIL” on tables 2–8). The reason for examining this feature is that it is already a normalized frequency. Then, I took all the frequencies of the proscribed forms and combined them under their registers, as seen below in figure 1, to look at the frequency of proscribed forms as a whole. From these combined numbers, I calculated the mean (6.38) and range (23.11) of all the registers.

Figure 1

WPM of All COCA Written English Registers



Discussion

Unlike what I hypothesized, figure 1 shows that more proscribed word forms are used in the blog and web registers. To identify outliers, I looked at the word forms chosen to test proscription usage and found *’til and *heighth, as shown in tables 2 and 3.

Therefore, the blog register uses more proscribed forms than the other registers. This suggests that the blog register does not carry prescriptive rules with as much weight as those in the news register (the register with the lowest use of proscribed forms). Notably, the academia register exhibits a greater degree of proscribed usage compared to the news register. One would think that with all the style guides surrounding academia, it would have the least amount of proscribed word forms, but Dixon’s (2022) research showed how informality is creeping into academia, especially in the social sciences department. The research done here backs up Dixon’s findings in that regard.

Table 2
*Frequency of Proscribed Form *’til Broken Up by Written English Register*

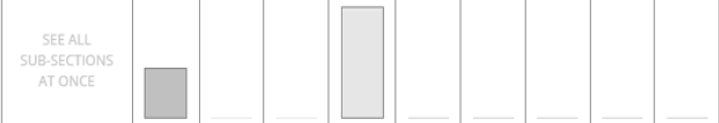
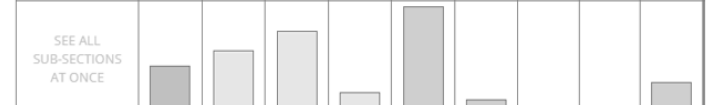
SECTION	ALL	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD
FREQ	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
WORDS (M)	993	128.6	124.3	128.1	126.1	118.3	126.1	121.7	119.8
PER MIL	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
SEE ALL SUB-SECTIONS AT ONCE									

Table 3
*Frequency of Proscribed Form *heighth Broken Up by Written English Register*

SECTION	ALL	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD
FREQ	34	7	9	2	12	1	0	0	3
WORDS (M)	993	128.6	124.3	128.1	126.1	118.3	126.1	121.7	119.8
PER MIL	0.03	0.05	0.07	0.02	0.10	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.03
SEE ALL SUB-SECTIONS AT ONCE									

Going forward, future studies should pick more proscribed forms to help expand the sample size, and depending on the amount of data gathered from each proscribed form, it should be weighted so that forms with more data will be given more priority in the statistical tests. The same should be done with the registers. There is a difference of a couple of million words between each register. Each register should be weighted according to how many words are in it, so that way they are all on equal ground. By doing these weighted tests on the registers and the proscribed word forms, future studies can account for any outliers that might occur.

Conclusion

Throughout this research, it has been clear that more words should be tested to fully understand whether there is a significant difference between the registers in their use of proscribed forms. With the data collected, I see that the blog and web registers are most likely to use proscribed forms and that the news register uses fewer proscribed forms than academia does. This conclusion reaffirms the findings of Dixon (2022) and could show evidence precedent for a new style that is emerging in the written registers. If some registers are using proscribed forms more than others, then is there a new style that needs to be documented because of its extensive use? This is an interesting question that arose while I examined the data, as the web and blog registers could be labeled as outliers or as different data and experimentation of their own. The evolution of language among the registers of English is interesting to track, to see what emerges as a standardized form or as a new style of writing.

References

- Davies, Mark. (2008). *The corpus of contemporary American English*. <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>
- Dixon, Tülay. (2022). Proscribed informality features in published research: A corpus analysis. *English for Specific Purposes*, 65, 63–78. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2021.09.003>
- Five Books. (2023, February 22). *English grammar & usage*. <https://fivebooks.com/category/language/grammar-books/>
- HarperCollins Publishers. (2018). *The American heritage dictionary of the English language* (5th ed.). HarperCollins Publishers. <https://ahdictionary.com>
- Garner, Bryan A. (2022). *Garner's modern English usage* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780197599020.001.0001>
- Smith, Tyler J. (2019). *A comparison of prescriptive usage problems in formal and informal written English* [Doctoral Dissertation, Iowa State University]. Iowa State University Digital Repository. <https://dr.lib.iastate.edu/handle/20.500.12876/31749>
- Straaijer, Robin. (2016). Attitudes to prescriptivism: An introduction. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 37(3), 233–242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2015.1068782>

Appendix

Additional Tables

Frequency of proscribed form *alot broken up by written English register									
SECTION	ALL	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD
FREQ	4361	2340	1847	97	6	26	37	7	1
WORDS (M)	993	128.6	124.3	128.1	126.1	118.3	126.1	121.7	119.8
PER MIL	4.39	18.19	14.86	0.76	0.05	0.22	0.29	0.06	0.01
SEE ALL SUB-SECTIONS AT ONCE									

Frequency of proscribed form *irregardless broken up by written English register									
SECTION	ALL	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD
FREQ	237	66	88	28	30	15	2	5	3
WORDS (M)	993	128.6	124.3	128.1	126.1	118.3	126.1	121.7	119.8
PER MIL	0.24	0.51	0.71	0.22	0.24	0.13	0.02	0.04	0.03
SEE ALL SUB-SECTIONS AT ONCE									

Frequency of proscribed form *could of broken up by written English register									
SECTION	ALL	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD
FREQ	546	153	132	39	29	128	27	9	29
WORDS (M)	993	128.6	124.3	128.1	126.1	118.3	126.1	121.7	119.8
PER MIL	0.55	1.19	1.06	0.30	0.23	1.08	0.21	0.07	0.24
SEE ALL SUB-SECTIONS AT ONCE									

Frequency of proscribed form *should of broken up by written English register									
SECTION	ALL	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD
FREQ	415	163	132	27	12	53	12	2	14
WORDS (M)	993	128.6	124.3	128.1	126.1	118.3	126.1	121.7	119.8
PER MIL	0.42	1.27	1.06	0.21	0.10	0.45	0.10	0.02	0.12
SEE ALL SUB-SECTIONS AT ONCE									

Frequency of proscribed form *would of broken up by written English register									
SECTION	ALL	BLOG	WEB	TV/M	SPOK	FIC	MAG	NEWS	ACAD
FREQ	848	274	306	26	31	124	34	0	53
WORDS (M)	993	128.6	124.3	128.1	126.1	118.3	126.1	121.7	119.8
PER MIL	0.85	2.13	2.46	0.20	0.25	1.05	0.27	0.00	0.44
SEE ALL SUB-SECTIONS AT ONCE									



Implicit Bias or Sound Preference

A Study on Judgment of Languages

Kelsey Slade

This study explores whether language judgments are more influenced by implicit bias or sound preference. American English speakers are surveyed to rate different languages based on how much they like the sound either with or without identifying labels. While statistical analysis does not show significant differences, qualitative findings suggest that both sound preference and implicit bias are involved in the decision-making process. Additionally, those familiar with a language give it higher-than-average ratings. These results reveal the complexity of linguistic bias and auditory preference interactions.

People have biases. We see the world through the lenses of our language and our culture. Do people's likes and dislikes of languages have more to do with the way the language itself sounds, or does it have more to do with people's innate bias about languages or language groups? When people judge languages, is it more about discrimination or is it more about sound preference? These questions can help us determine if the things people say about languages, like calling French romantic or German harsh, have more to do with the sounds of those languages or people's beliefs about the French and German people. The judgments people make will vary from language to language and people to people. The sound preferences and biases of people who live in different cultures and grew up speaking different languages will be different.

Background

Much of the research in this field is about language variants and their relative social standing. Sociolinguists Kühne et al. (2024) research how the language variety an AI uses affects how well it is trusted. They write, "Prejudices against dialects and their speakers cannot be ignored, as evaluations of dialects are often associated with evaluations of the corresponding population." According to this study, it is biases about the speakers, rather than the language's sounds, that affect listener preferences. To further elaborate, they say, "The standard language is typically viewed as prestigious and reliable, whereas regional accents tend to be regarded more unfavorably." This research shows that societal attitudes also shape preferences. While those varieties of a language that are not considered the standard do not have overt prestige, they often have covert prestige, meaning that nonstandard language identifies people as part of a group and makes them more popular in that group rather than in society as a whole. Kühne et al. argue that "dialect-related social classifications and the sense of being part of a group based on accent or dialect are more robust than those resulting from gender or ethnicity." This claim provides background to the strength that linguistic bias can have. For many, any nonstandard dialect "is perceived as a sign of lower intelligence and social class" (p. 5). Kühne et al.'s study investigates people's reactions to AI imitating the standard variation of the language and other language variants. Societal stereotypes can influence listener's judgments. In many

respects, the differences between these variants are far less than the difference between different languages. This study shows how hearing and language bias interact.

AI can be biased against humans for their accents in the same way people can be prejudiced against AI for an accent. Hoffman et al. (2024) found that “language models are known to perpetuate systematic racial prejudices, making their judgments biased in problematic ways about groups such as African Americans.” Often when we think of AI and computers, we think of them as objective, forgetting that they were created using data that was made by humans. No human is ever truly objective, for we must all see things with our own eyes and hear things with our own ears and touch things with our own hands. Hoffman et al. found that “language models embody covert racism in the form of dialect prejudice, exhibiting raciolinguistic stereotypes about speakers of African American English (AAE)”—these language model stereotypes are even more negative than actual human stereotypes. AI will say overtly kind things about African Americans but will still suggest that AAE speakers receive jobs that are considered lower-class and are more likely to suggest that AAE speakers be convicted for crimes. They also advocate for harsher punishments for AAE speakers than for people who speak Standard American English (p. 147). What they say about African Americans and what they covertly associate with speakers of AAE shows that even AI can have dialect prejudice and that “this discrepancy is particularly pronounced for language models trained with human feedback” (p. 149). The sounds themselves do not matter in these cases; it is what we associate with these sounds that affects us. In these examples, English speakers’ negative associations are programmed into AI, leading AI to perpetuate prejudice.

There is also evidence that values or stereotypes can be transferred while learning a new language. Pan and Patel (2024) found that “Chinese internal auditors are more likely to report wrongdoing when the ethical dilemma is presented in English than when it is presented in Chinese.” This is because there are so many things tied into language learning. There are vocabulary words and grammatical rules, some of which can be very different from a person’s native language. Beyond that, people need to learn “what to say in what context and what behavior is most socially acceptable in the language contexts” (p. 435). These cultural associations can affect our decision-making. We have some that we can learn from a second language, but the cultural

associations that come from our native language are much stronger. These can lead us to judge a language even if we do not know the language.

From all these examples we can see that dialect bias is real. We know that humans are biased against people because of their dialect and the way they speak. I wanted to know if there is an element of simply disliking certain speech sounds. Brännström et al. (2015) researched children's reactions to typical voices and dysphonic voices, ones with voice disorders (e.g., voices that are hoarse, rough, or too loud; change pitch frequently; or show the effort of speaking). They found that "dysphonic voices are perceived more negatively than typical voices" and that "the listener judges the speaker on a number of aspects, based solely on listening to the voice" (p. 624). People with dysphonic voices can speak the same dialect as someone with a typical voice, and yet children still don't like the sound of it. "The differences indicate that the dysphonic voice was perceived as more negative (in the rating of voice) but not when rated in combination with the background noise (in the rating of voice and noise)" (p. 627).

If a regular voice has background noise, it is rated the same as a dysphonic voice without background noise. But if both the dysphonic voice and the typical voice have background noise, they find that "an authentic dysphonic voice in noise receives both poorer ratings and more negative opinions than a typical voice in noise" (Brännström et al., 2015, p. 628). This suggests that there are some sounds that children just don't like. Kishon-Rabin et al. (2010) did a study on which sounds infants prefer. They found that "preference for the native language" is "shown very early in the infants' life" (p. 1275). This was the case both for children with normal hearing and for those with CI (cochlear implants). These studies show that humans have preference for certain sounds. The other studies show that humans have biases towards certain groups of people. They do not show the interaction between our preferences for certain sounds and our biases. Through my study I hope to see what's stronger: our bias against certain peoples and cultures or our preference for certain sounds.

Methods

First, I created a survey. There were nine voices included, each speaking a different language. I got the recordings from translations of Dallin H. Oaks's talk "Following Christ," found on

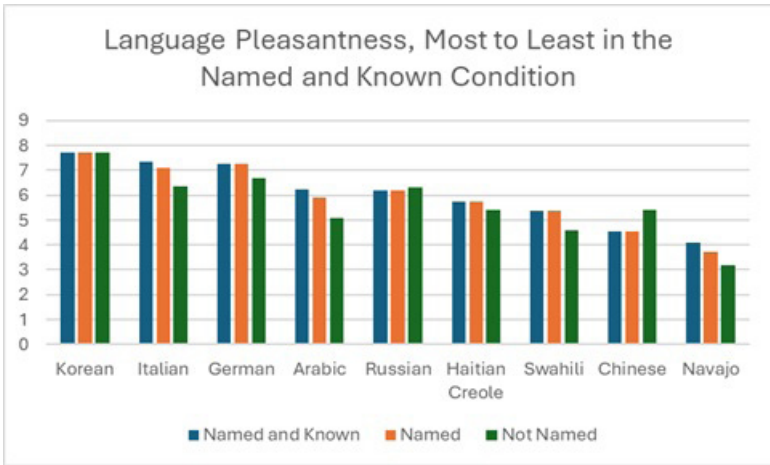
the website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for two reasons. I thought that having the same subject matter would help mitigate some of the differences between speakers. I believed that they would have a similar tone of voice and a similar amount of emotion. The talk was also translated into all the languages I wanted to use—languages that were well enough known that people would have biases about them but not well enough known that people could identify them on sound alone. I took a ten-second segment of it in Arabic, Swahili, Haitian Creole, Korean, German, Chinese, Navajo, Russian, and Italian. First, I tested monolingual speakers on how well they could identify these languages. Most could not identify any of them accurately.

After that, I made papers for the survey. People either got a page that labeled the languages by their names or one that did not. There was an equal number in both groups. Those that did not have the language names were instead labeled as voice one, voice two, and so on. I handed the participants the page and then instructed them to rate the voices on a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being please-stop-playing-this-now and 10 being I-could-listen-to-this-forever. The actual sheet of paper they were given only had the words *bad*, *neutral*, and *good* on it. I was trying to see if the ratings would be different when people knew which language it was and could apply their bias than when they only had the actual language sounds to judge. After I finished the in-person survey, I put one up online, hoping to receive more responses. I received thirteen responses to my in-person survey and seven to my online survey. Seventeen of my participants were monolingual English speakers. The other three were not. One knew English, Italian, and Spanish; one knew English, Navajo, and ASL; and the last knew English, Serbian, Bosnian, Slovene, Croatian, and Arabic. The ages ranged from seven to seventy years old. Five of them were male and fifteen were female. This study was only done on American English speakers, meaning that the data could be significantly different if the survey was given to a different group of people.

Analysis

When I averaged out the responses, the results were as shown in figure 1.

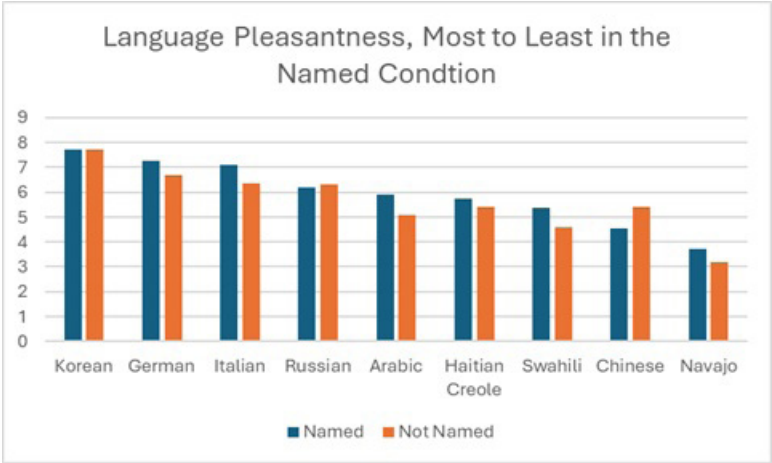
Figure 1



Because some people who took the survey knew at least one of the languages included, I put the data from languages that were known in a separate column. Three of the participants spoke one of these languages: Navajo, Italian, or Arabic. None of the other participants spoke any of the other languages. We can see here that knowing a language seems to increase how much a person likes it by a large margin. The Navajo speaker gave Navajo an 8, the Italian speaker gave Italian a 10, and the Arabic speaker gave Arabic a 10. It is interesting to me that Navajo, the language most universally disliked in this study, was given the lowest score among the multilingual speakers as well. This could indicate some sound bias.

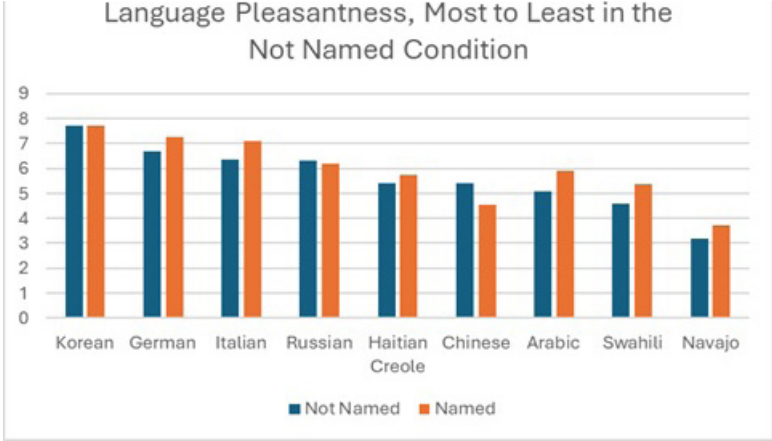
The lowest p-value (measure of statistical significance) for the difference between the named and unnamed condition for any language was 0.15, for Swahili. The p-value for the data set as a whole was 0.716, indicating that the difference between named and not named was not statistically significant (to be statistically significant, it needs to be under 0.05). I also checked the variability of the languages between the survey participants. When the languages were named, Swahili, Arabic, and Navajo had higher variability. Italian, Haitian Creole, and Russian had less variability when named. Chinese was highly variable in both named and unnamed conditions. German and Korean were consistent in both named and unnamed conditions.

Figure 2



We can see in figure 2 that for most of the languages (excluding Russian and Chinese), results are higher in the named condition. Language bias affects scores, but this effect is generally in a positive direction. Korean and Russian received the most similar ratings between the named and unnamed condition. The biggest differences between the conditions happen in Swahili, Arabic, and Chinese.

Figure 3



If we exclude the ratings the multilinguals gave the languages they knew, we see between these two graphs Korean was always rated first, German second, Italian third, Russian fourth, and

Navajo last. Haitian Creole, Chinese, Arabic, and Swahili move depending on the condition. The difference between the named and unnamed condition is not statistically significant, but the information I learned did not end with this data.

While I was giving the in-person survey, I handed out pieces of paper to the participants. As I set up the voice clips, I looked over to find that without listening to any of them, one of the participants (who had received the sheet with names on it) had already filled out his sheet. I re-explained the survey to everyone, emphasizing that we were judging based on how well we liked the voices and no other considerations. At the end of the survey, I marked which of his responses were given before hearing the clips and which were given after.

The closest of his ratings for the voices were Swahili, Arabic, and Italian; each of these was only one point off from his original guess. Korean and German were next closest, with a difference of two. Chinese went from a 1 to a 4, a three-point difference. Haitian Creole went from a 10 to a 6, a four-point difference. Russian went from a 1 to a 6, a five-point difference. Navajo showed the biggest change, going from a 9 to a 3, which was a six-point difference. From this we can see that he expected to like some languages more or less than he did. Russian, German, and Chinese showed positive changes. The rest he liked less than he expected to. This is interesting because we can see that there is a distinct difference in how he viewed the languages themselves and how he liked the sounds of the languages.

Another survey had some interesting results as well. The participant expected to like Navajo more than she did, and when she heard it, she was surprised by how much she did not like it. She said she liked German, Chinese, and Korean equally but only commented on German, saying it was “celestial.” It is interesting to me that she did not give a 10 to anything, despite her comment.

After the in-person survey, I talked to some of the participants. A seventy-year-old woman said, “I expected to really like Italian. I was surprised when I really didn’t.” Later, she said that she was surprised by how much she liked Russian. When I looked over her survey, I found that she had given both Italian and Russian a seven. After that, we were talking about German as I was putting the numbers I got from the survey into an Excel sheet. I mentioned how well German was doing. A sixteen-year-old who took

the survey said that she gave German a 3. She was among those who did not have the names of the languages. In fact, she gave German an 8. She expected to not like how German sounded, but when she listened to it, she enjoyed the actual sound of it. One twenty-seven-year-old said, "I just couldn't handle the Chinese. There's too many /sh/ sounds." She mentioned afterwards that she does like watching Chinese shows and does not mind Chinese in those circumstances. A twenty-one-year-old said, "I don't know what's up with Navajo, but maybe it's just that the guy's voice was so sad. Maybe if he wasn't so sad, I'd like it better." Afterwards I listened to several different voices with her in Navajo and we did find one she liked better, but she said she still did not love the sound of the language. Finally, a sixteen-year-old said, "They're all fine. I just would rather listen to English."

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of the survey itself were not statistically significant. However, the comments afterwards reveal that there are elements of both language bias and sound preference that influence people's judgments on how nice the voices sound. Some people really disliked the sounds of certain languages but expected to like them, suggesting that they had some positive bias associated with the language name. Some people really liked the sounds of certain languages but had expected to dislike them, indicating some negative bias towards the language names.

It is unclear how much of the ratings were affected by bias toward the language and how much was affected by sound preference. The preferred sounds varied vastly from person to person. For this reason, measuring the effect of bias against the effect of sound preference was difficult. For continued research, I would like to get more participants to take the survey. It would be best if the participants were monolingual English speakers or people who did not know any of the languages on the list so that they would not recognize the languages by sound alone. It was interesting to see how much knowing a language affected people's ratings, but that likely shows them either changing their sound preferences or their biases and therefore does not exhibit the interaction of language bias and sound preference as clearly.

With more survey results, I would also be able to determine if the results are statistically significant or not. As it currently stands, the data is not statistically significant, but the case studies

in the data show that it could be. This evidence hints at the possibility that sound preference and language bias both affect how much we hear and interpret data; further research can help us determine the strength of each effect.

References

- Brännström, K. Jonas, Lucas Holm, Viveka Lyberg-Åhlander, Magnus Haake, Tobias Kastberg, & Birgitta Sahlén. (2015). Children's subjective ratings and opinions of typical and dysphonic voice after performing a language comprehension task in background noise. *Journal of Voice*, 29(5), 624–630. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvoice.2014.11.003>
- Gaebler, Johann D., Sharad Goel, Aziz Huq, & Prasanna Tambe. (2024). Auditing the use of language models to guide hiring decisions. *arXiv*. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2404.03086>
- Hofmann, Valentin, Pratyusha R. Kalluri, Dan Jurafsky, & Sharese King. (2024). AI generates covertly racist decisions about people based on their dialect. *Nature*, 633, 147–154. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-07856-5>
- Kishon-Rabin, Liat, Tammy Harel, Minka Hildesheimer, & Osnat Segal. (2010). Listening preference for the native language compared to an unfamiliar language in hearing and hearing-impaired infants after cochlear implantation. *Otology & Neurotology*, 31(8), 1275–1280. <https://doi.org/10.1097/MAO.0b013e3181f2f45d>
- Kühne, Katharina, Erika Herbold, Oliver Bendel, Yuefang Zhou, & Martin H. Fischer. (2024). “Ick bin een Berlina”: Dialect proficiency impacts a robot's trustworthiness and competence evaluation. *Frontiers in Robotics and AI*, 10, Article 1241519. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frobt.2023.1241519>
- Pan, Peipei, & Chris Patel. (2024). Do internal auditors make consistent ethical judgments in English and Chinese in reporting wrongdoing? *Journal of Business Ethics*, 194, 433–453. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-024-05629-8>



The Usage of Modified Tone Emojis in Racial Spaces on YouTube

Amelia Holbrook-Brown

This article examines the frequency of modified skin tone emoji usage between two racial spaces in francophone YouTube comments sections: beauty and hair videos for people of Black racial backgrounds and of White racial backgrounds. Despite hypothesizing that modified emojis would appear more frequently in the Black spaces, the study found slightly less modification there than in the White spaces, and observed that one emoji was more likely to be modified than not. This suggests that the internet equalizes behavior between typical divisions of people by creating its own groups.

When texting friends, do you take the extra five seconds to choose the skin tone of your emoji? Or do you opt for the default? Since 2015, internet and phone users have been able to choose the skin tones of their emojis—but there is a noted difference in the usage of these skin tone modified emojis across racial demographics. Some studies have found that non-White users are more likely to modify their emojis than White users, raising questions of racial identity expression between majority and minority groups in internet spaces. This article will follow suit of such studies in examining the difference in the usage of modified skin tone emojis between two different racial spaces in Francophone (French-speaking) YouTube comment sections.

To begin by establishing format, I will borrow from the notation of Robertson, Magdby, and Goldwater (2018) in using TME to mark yellow, or not modified-tone emojis, TME+ for emojis that have had their tone modified, and TME(+) for all emojis. In particular, this article aims to study the frequency of TME vs. TME+ in two corpora: one that represents internet spaces for people of Black racial backgrounds and one that represents internet spaces for people of White racial backgrounds. The framing questions for this study include the following: 1) Do racially White people feel more represented by the default than other races? and 2) Is there more pressure or desire to display a racial identity if the user is considered a racial minority? Acknowledging the impossibility of conclusive answers to such questions, I hypothesize that there will be more instances of TME in the White spaces and more instances of TME+ in the Black spaces.

Theoretical Context

This study adds to existing research in internet linguistics—in particular how semi-conscious gestures can contribute to racial schemas. It has already been established that emojis are used for self-representation. Robertson, Magdy, and Goldwater (2018) have shown that emojis are representative of racial identity on Twitter. They found it was almost always the case that the color of the emoji used corresponded with the skin color of the author, based on the author's Twitter profile pictures.

If emojis are used for self-representation, it is thus necessary to understand what each emoji is associated with. Between the release of emoji in 2010 and the release of TME+ in 2015, all

available emojis were TME (Pardes, 2018). The change in 2015 reflects the reality that not all emoji users felt represented by the TME, which suggests that the prevailing yellow skin tone of the time was never truly neutral. According to Unicode's proposal for TME+ in 2014, modifiers were added because "people all over the world want to have emoji[s] that reflect more human diversity, especially for skin tone." The technical report claims that the TME were created to be racially generic, but following the precedents established by the original Japanese images, they were often used to portray a lighter, non-generic skin tone.

Close to a decade after the release of TME+, internet users still use TME. In 2021, Robertson et al. continued their research to see how readers represented their identities through TME and TME+. They found that TME were perceived as neutral while also being associated most with whiteness, revealing the subconscious positing of whiteness as a racial default. This was furthered by their findings that users with darker skin tones in their profile pictures were more likely to use TME+.

Perceiving a given race as the default and, in turn, standard of humanity, can be problematic and discriminatory, as it encourages ethnocentrism, which is linked with racial supremacy and marginalization of non-White identities. Schmitt and Bourdieu (2016) found that, linguistically, a norm can create an idea of a superior standard. Their results suggest that "normality fosters standards of correctness," and I would argue that such standards can make deviance look incorrect and therefore inferior. This study aims to discover whether Robertson et al.'s (2021) finding of the association of whiteness with neutrality is replicated on YouTube with French language data.

Methodology

To construct my corpora, I scraped the comment sections of beauty videos (hair and makeup) on YouTube from 2016 to 2022. I chose beauty videos to account for the difficulty of defining certain spaces on YouTube as "Black" or "White". Attributing certain hobbies or types of channels to any race would risk inaccurate and prejudiced categorization. For skin and hair, however, viewers interacting with videos for particular types of hair and skin would likely share those same racial traits, as the beauty advice they seek would likely be more applicable to them.

As for the selected date range, I chose 2016–2022 because TME+ was launched in 2015. All the videos are in French and were created by French or French-Canadian female creators; however, they do differ by setting (e.g., some beauty creators are traveling in Africa). YouTube was selected for its ability to create and maintain communities, as shown by Murthy and Sharma (2018) in their study about the networking of ideas in YouTube comments sections.

The corpus which represents the racially White spaces on the internet comprises 13,808 comments from forty-four videos with 779,516 tokens in total. I scraped the data for the Black space corpus specifically from “Black beauty” videos by searching for tokens such as *cheveux crépus* (kinky hair) and *maquillage peau noire* (makeup for Black skin). The Black corpus comprised 13,808 comments from twenty-four videos, with 571,682 tokens in total.

The sizes of the corpora were equal in the number of comments extracted. I decided to equalize the corpora by comment rather than by token because a given comment posted is associated with a particular emoji instance, rather than each word with an emoji. This is a phenomenon supported by how emojis seem to be more like gestures than a language of their own (Frontini and Panckhurst 2020).

I collected my data with a Python script that used the library *yt_dlp* to scrape the comment sections. Then, I analyzed the obtained corpora with the concordancer AntConc. I searched for multiple regular expressions for each tone available in emojis, as shown in table 1.

These regular expressions include all of the hand emojis currently available on iPhone, excluding those which my computer could not process and those which were launched after the videos in my corpora were created. The regular expressions that contained only TME returned TME(+), so in order to calculate the true quantities of TME, I subtracted the total TME+ from the total TME(+). Then, due to a large difference in the quantity of occurrences of emojis between the two corpora, I equalized them again by creating ratios for each tone within each corpus: $\text{tone (x) total} / \text{total of TME(+)}$. Corpora are equal by comments, but the results are equal by tokens of TME(+).

Table 1
Regular Expression and AntConc

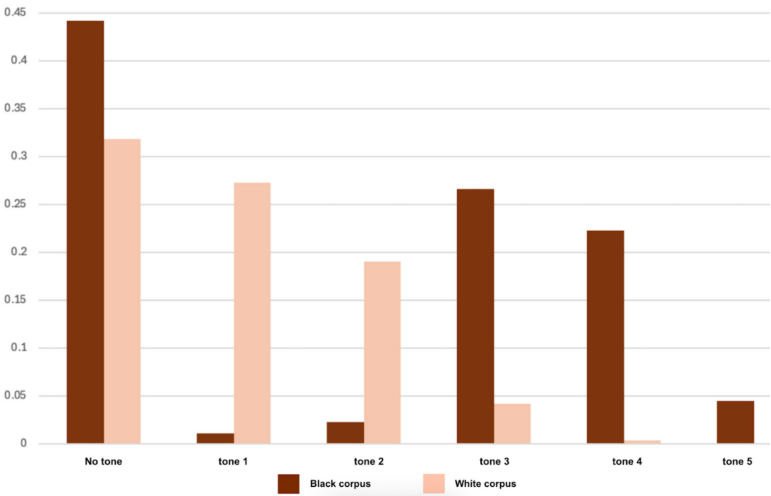
[illegible]

Results

Table 2
Ratios of Emoji Occurrences in Different Tones Compared in Each Corpus. A Higher Number = A Higher Occurrence

Tone	Occurrence Ratio (Black Corpus)	Occurrence Ratio (White Corpus)
None 👍	0.4423	0.3182
1 👍	0.0108	0.2727
2 👍	0.0225	0.1904
3 👍	0.2665	0.0418
4 👍	0.2228	0.0036
5 👍	0.0449	0

Figure 1
Ratios Represented as a Bar Chart



As shown in both figure 1 and table 2, the majority of emojis used in both corpora were not modified and the Black corpus had more instances of TME.

The greatest difference between the two corporuses is visible here between Tone 2 and Tone 3, which appear as inverses of each other. Lighter skin tones are used much more in the White corpus and darker ones in the Black corpus. What is interesting is that there is both more diversity and more TME featured in the Black corpus—the Black corpus has more instances of lighter tones than the White corpus has of darker tones.

Additionally, frequent in the Black corpus was the mixing of different TME+ with each other. This is unlikely to be a typo, as it is more effort to alternate. Many of such comments included sentiments such as “*égalité pour tous! Nous sommes tous avec vous!*” (Equality for all! We are all with you!). Others seemed random, and the rest looked like potential spam comments.

When looking through the results, I developed a new question: Are certain types of emojis more likely to be modified than others? The most common emojis used were 👍, 🙌, and 🙏, and I wanted to see if there was any variation in their usages between corpora. Between skin tones, the types of emojis varied a lot and

seemed to follow no pattern, though there seemed to be a slightly higher prevalence of less-used emojis in the Black corpus.

The one striking find was that 🙏 is the only emoji which is more likely to be modified than not. It might be that 🙏 is associated with traditions of prayer and that secularism is associated with whiteness, but a deeper analysis and future studies would be necessary to verify any conclusions.

Conclusion

There are many potential explanations for why there are more instances of TME than TME+ in both corpora. Ease is a likely contributor, as it is much quicker to type without modifying, and the internet language of francophones has been established to be less conscious than spoken. The site, YouTube, might also be a factor. The study by Robertson et al. (2021) was conducted on Twitter, where users are much more linked to their profiles in verifications, exact names, and real photos of themselves. YouTube, on the other hand, is largely anonymous and thus might be more adapted to neutral linguistic behavior. Similarly, Robertson et al. annotated profile photos and analyzed tweet histories, whereas my methodology did not account for profile photos. It might be that people with profile pictures are more likely to modify their emojis than not.

There are two results that stand out as significant. First, the White corpus had less TME than the Black corpus, a finding contrary to the hypothesis. There are many possibilities for why this might be. Perhaps it is an effect of French identity dynamics on YouTube, or perhaps non-White viewers in non-White spaces feeling less of a need to assert minority status than might be assumed. Maybe there are more White people in the Black spaces that do not want to confirm their difference. Secondly, 🙏 is unique in being more likely to be modified than not. Future studies might examine what this means in different spaces on the internet and for different ethnicities.

Most of the behavioral differences in the usage of emojis between the two corpora was arbitrary and without distinct patterns. For francophones, at least, the internet seems to equalize behavior between many different groups by creating its own groups. Perhaps identifiers such as an interest in beauty or being a francophone are more important on YouTube than those of

race. YouTube seems to create spaces where viewers can opt in by subscribing and interacting, rather than being included for their intrinsic, unchangeable traits, and perhaps this is a glimpse at the kind of future that the internet offers.

References

- Murthy, Dhraj, & Sanjay Sharma. (2018). Visualizing YouTube's comment space: Online hostility as a networked phenomenon. *New Media & Society*, 20(10), 3465–3481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818792393>
- Panckhurst, Rachel, & Francesca Frontini. (2020). Evolving interactional practices of emoji in text messages. In C. Thurlow, C. Dürscheid & F. Diémoz (Eds.), *Visualizing Digital Discourse: Interactional, Institutional and Ideological Perspectives*, (pp. 81–103). Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501510113-005>
- Pardes, Arielle. (2018) A guide to the emojis you'll use in 2018—and beyond. *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/story/guide-emoji/>
- Robertson, Alexander, Walid Magdy, & Sharon Goldwater. (2018). Self-representation on Twitter using emoji skin color modifiers. *Cornell University*. <https://arxiv.org/abs/1803.10738>
- Robertson, Alexander, Walid Magdy, & Sharon Goldwater. (2021). Black or White but never neutral: How readers perceive identity from yellow or skin-toned emoji. *Cornell University*. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2105.05887>
- Croce, Mariano, & Andrea Salvatore. (2016). Normality as social semantics: Schmitt, Bourdieu, and the politics of the normal. *ResearchGate*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315556778_Normality_as_social_semantics_Schmitt_Bourdieu_and_the_politics_of_the_normal
- Unicode Consortium. (2014). Technical report: Unicode® emoji modifiers (Version 1.0). https://www.unicode.org/reports/tr51/tr51-1-archive.html#Emoji_Modifiers



Gendered Language

The Approval of "Guys"

Elen Reed

This essay examines the perceptions of gendered language and the common usage of terms such as you guys, actors/actresses, and waiters/waitresses. Prescriptivists and descriptivists have their own views when looking at the use and opinions of gendered terms in everyday language, but this essay focuses on actual usage by drawing on corpus research and a survey. The collected data is used to analyze whether people truly care about the use of gendered language, or if most people see this type of language as gender neutral.

What do culture and language have in common? They both have the ability to continuously grow and adapt to the changes around them, especially with topics such as gender. English does not use gendered nouns like other languages do; however, the concept of gendered language is vital to the usage and understanding of the English language. Pronouns, masculine/feminine variation of words, and gender-neutral terms have become both more important and more controversial in recent years because of the societal shift to focus on gender. One of these specific issues centers around the term *guys*. Previous research shows an obvious divide in opinion on whether *guys* truly is a neutral word and if society accepts the usage of it in a time where many words are being changed because of historical gender connotations. The argument exists that since *guys* started out as a masculine word, it still leans towards glorifying men and belittling women. Others advocate that the word does not show any gender at all. How does common usage reflect this issue?

As these two opposing sides have become more visible over time, the evidence of which opinion is more common among English speakers remains to be researched and documented. Through conducting a survey over social media to gather a consensus and using both the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) to gather information, this research has been able to explore the data of the historical and current use of *guys* to better ascertain public opinion of the term. The research found helps answer this overall question: How socially acceptable is it in modern society to use the term *guys* when referring to a group of people who are not exclusively men? This question is important to previous research because English speakers should strive to use inclusive language, but inclusive language is hard to use when people may not understand the impact it has on others.

Literature Review

Although the term *guys* has become more gender-neutral over time, literary sources show that there is still a divide in opinion on the relevance and appropriateness of its usage. Merriam-Webster defines the word to be used “in plural to refer to the members of a group regardless of sex” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). This definition is presented in a decisive, absolute way that suggests that the sex of the group is not important when using *guys* or *you guys*. Other

sources focus on the ease of communication that *guys* provides and the innocence of its origin—meaning that it was not created for a sexist purpose. A literary argument by Kleinman et al. (2021) for this non-sexist idea states that “saying ‘you guys’ is an unreflective sexist practice; those who use it do not intend to make women invisible or make men the human standard,” but that intention does not always matter when it comes to the consequences of controversial language (p. 63).

While the consequences of the common phrase remain unclear without methods and data, actual usage can be better understood through Garner’s (2022) usage guide. Garner not only describes the usage of *guys* to be “often used inclusively to address a group that includes males and females, especially in the casualism *you guys*,” but even points out that using this umbrella word might be preferred by some to more offensive terminology such as “guys and gals” or “guys and dolls” used in previous decades (p. 522).

Supporters of *guys* showcase a common point of view in defense of this previously gendered word; however, the opposing side and controversy surrounding the possibility of sexism must also be addressed. In an article referenced in the academic journal article titled “Rhetorics of Resistance to the Feminist Critique of Sexist Language,” Jenee Desmond-Harris (2015) explains her deeply passionate opinion against the use of *you guys*. She explains that the word *guy* is gendered by nature whether it is used to promote sexism or not and that the sexist repercussions of repressing femininity and causing discomfort for females in male-dominated fields requires a change in society’s casual language.

Despite Garner’s (2022) belief that *guys* can be preferred in many situations, he agrees with Desmond-Harris on the actual definition of the phrase itself, explaining that “the singular form is invariably masculine, and the plural often is, too.” He goes on to explain the increase in informal frequency of the term as stated earlier (p. 522). He states no solid opinion on whether the word should be used daily but later explains in an entry about sexism that one will “almost certainly conclude that it’s best to avoid sexist language” (p. 989). Because it is seen as sexist language by some and innocent by others, some argue that the choice to use words such as *you guys* will ultimately influence the way gender roles are seen in society. Kleinman (2007) expresses how male-based words reinforce “a system in which ‘man’ in the abstract and men in the flesh are privileged over women” and that “the

words we use can also reinforce current realities when they are sexist.” The issue of male-focused language, specifically the use of *you guys*, has become a strong dispute that is evident from the literary sources available focused on the subject. The question to be asked is, How many people truly see gendered language as a societal issue that needs correction?

Methods

To find the frequency and opinions of gendered language, I decided to conduct a survey to see what the people around me believed about this topic. The survey was focused more on the public opinion of the social acceptability of using words like *you guys*, *waiter/waitress*, and *actor/actress*. For the first part of the survey, the participants were asked to choose which words they commonly use to address groups of people, with options such as *y’all*, *guys*, *friends*, *everyone*, and a fill-in-the-blank option for unlisted answers. This question was made for the purpose of getting the participants to start thinking about their own usage before the questions got more into gendered language.

Following this section was one that asked their opinion on whether using the words *waiter* and *actor* to describe both men and women was socially acceptable. The next section of the survey was presented with a slider on a scale from 1 to 10 and focused more on how socially acceptable the participants thought it was to use the word *guys* in different situations: saying *you guys* to a group of all men, a group of all women, and a group of both men and women. Another question with a slider on a scale from 1 to 10 asked how often the participants used gendered terms such as *waiter/waitress* and *actor/actress*, causing them to reflect more on their usage after they had already expressed their opinion on the acceptability of these words for either gender.

The last question on my survey used the Likert scale (a rating system used to measure opinions) to determine how strongly each participant agreed or disagreed with the following statements: “Saying ‘you guys’ has recently become more common,” “I think gender is important to language in today’s society,” and “I correct people who misuse gendered language.” These questions were asked to give a more comprehensive view on what people thought about gendered language and how aware they were of their own usage of terms associated with gender. The survey was posted on both Instagram and Facebook to reach a wide variety

of people of different ages, locations, and genders, which included college students from BYU, family members from South Carolina, and friends from various regions of the United States.

In addition to this survey research, COCA and COHA were essential in providing research and information for the frequency of gendered language. I used COHA to see how usage of the term *guys* has changed over time, since COHA is commonly used for frequency and distribution. I searched both the phrases *guys* and *you guys* to get results of the term being used in general for a group of people. It was a little hard to narrow down the usage of this as a gendered term on COHA because of the range of usage and lack of demographic information, but I was able to gather results from it. In addition to COHA, I used COCA to see what kinds of registers these same words were found in. I compared the frequency of the terms in common conversation and movies against their frequency used in more academic registers. COCA was helpful because it showed more contexts of where the actual usage of gendered language takes place and where it has become most important, as opposed to COHA, which showed more of a time difference in the language. Through these methods of distributing a survey and researching on COHA and COCA, I was able to gather information on both usage and societal opinions on whether *you guys* was acceptable to use now, and how this usage and other common gendered language usage has changed over time.

Results

After I sent out my survey over multiple social media platforms, sixty-eight people participated and submitted their responses to my research questions. In response to the first question, forty-five participants said they use the word *guys* the most when greeting a group of people, followed by the term *y'all*, which had thirty-nine votes. The overall percentage of the choice *guys* came out to be sixty-nine percent, concluding that most people do use this term in everyday conversation with others. Regarding the questions concerning the usage of the words *waiter* and *actor*, sixty-two percent of those surveyed stated that *waiter* could be used to describe both men and women, with twenty-five percent answering “sometimes” and twelve percent disagreeing, while fifty-nine percent said *actor* could be used for multiple genders, twenty-one percent said it could be used sometimes, and twenty-nine percent

said it should not be used for both men and women. The results focusing on societal opinions are shown best through tables 1, 2, and 3 below.

Table 1
Social Acceptability of You Guys

Question	Average Answer (0 represents not socially acceptable, 10 represents socially acceptable)
How socially acceptable is it to say “you guys” when addressing a group of men?	9.65
How socially acceptable is it to say “you guys” when addressing a group of women?	8.48
How socially acceptable is it to say “you guys” when addressing a group of men and women?	9.41

Table 2
Frequency of Gender-Specific Language

Question	Average Answer (0 represents never, 10 represents always)
How often do you use gender-specific language when speaking about waiters/waitresses?	5.68
How often do you use gender-specific language when speaking about actors/actresses?	6.33

Table 3

Agreement with Gendered Language Statements

How strongly do you agree/disagree with the following statements? (Numbers represent responses)	Strongly disagree	Dis-agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Saying “you guys” has recently become more common.	1	7	13	28	13
I think gender is important to language in today’s society.	3	6	22	24	7
I correct people who misuse gendered language.	20	20	19	3	0

As seen in these tables, most people seem to agree that it is socially acceptable to use *guys* when referring to any group of people, although the numbers are slightly lower for groups of just women. While most people do not focus on the gender of the term *guys*, more people pay attention to gender when using obviously gendered words, such as *waiter/waitress* and *actor/actress*. More people believe *you guys* has become more common over the years than those who do not, and more people either agree that gender is important to language or have no opinion, as opposed

to those who disagree. Although many people believe gender is important to language, only three out of sixty-eight people would correct someone who misuses gendered language.

In addition to this survey, I applied the methods mentioned previously to gather data from COHA and COCA. According to COHA, the usage of *you guys* has doubled since 1970 and just *guys* has almost tripled since 1970. Similarly, COCA showed that the phrase *you guys* has almost tripled from 1990 to 2019 in media platforms and is found most exclusively in TV shows and movies, with almost no examples in academic writings. When searching for the word *guy*, I found that it was used slightly more often than the phrase *you guys*, but the majority of usage was still found in TV, movie, and spoken registers, and the frequency had gone up slightly since 1990.

Discussion

Based on the results from the research I conducted, I conclude that it is overall socially acceptable to most people to use the phrase *guys* when referring to both men and women. Although there is pushback from some people, arguing that it is a gendered word that should not be used universally, the research shows that not only do most people find *guys* to be socially acceptable as a neutral term, but the usage has gone up in recent years and will most likely continue to go up over time. It is important to note that less people found it acceptable to use *guys* when referring to only women but not many survey participants felt that way. If actual usage of this term has seen an increase since the 1900s and has been deemed socially acceptable by most, it can be assumed from the data that while gender is important in language, many do not see this word as a controversial topic that needs to be changed or removed from conversational speech and writing.

However, there are still the few that do see *guys* as a societal and patriarchal issue that should be permanently adjusted. So, what does this research mean for the future? To try and be as inclusive as possible in a world full of people who identify in different ways, each person must decide for themselves on how they will use their own language to be nondiscriminatory towards others. Language is a powerful tool that can be used for both good and bad, and personal opinions must be made on how to best use it to encourage a welcoming and unifying society as opposed to a restrictive and divisive society. Every situation is different and

every person is different, so the reactions to the usage of words like *guys* will differ from case to case. My survey was a small sample size, mostly of young adults who live in Utah, and not a comprehensive study of the nation. This research only shows a limited perspective of the social acceptability of the word *guys* and of other gendered language, meaning that there is a need for further study and for individual decision-making on how gendered language should be used around others.

Conclusion

Gender is a part of society and a part of language. As society changes, language adapts to fill and support the needs of the people who use it, as seen in the push for gender-neutral language instead of male-based language. Although there are many different examples of this language use, one of the most prevalent gendered words being used casually in gender-neutral contexts is *guys*, which comes with the question of whether it is socially acceptable to use. Research has shown that it is becoming more common to use *guys* neutrally, and it is seen by many to be a generalized word that can describe any person or group of people, but there is still a small percentage that disagrees with these findings. This data cannot predict how the usage of *guys* will change in the future and if it will continue to be used to the extent it is now, so it is important for each English speaker to decide for themselves how they will implement the word into their language based on their own opinion. Language will always continue to change over time as the people who speak it change with the world around them, so each individual must choose how they want their language usage to influence their environment and the lives of others.

References

- Davies, Mark. (2008–2023). The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Accessed November 9, 2023. <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>.
- Davies, Mark. (2010). The Corpus of Historical American English (COHA). Accessed November 9, 2023. <https://www.english-corpora.org/coha/>.
- Desmond-Harris, Jenée. (2015). *Why I'm finally convinced it's time to stop saying "you guys."* Vox. Accessed November 9, 2023. <https://www.vox.com/2015/6/11/8761227/you-guys-sexism-language>.
- Garner, Bryan A. 2022. *Garner's modern English usage*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kleinman, Sherryl. (2007). *Why sexist language matters*. Alternet. Accessed November 9, 2023. https://www.alternet.org/2007/03/why_sexist_language_matters.
- Kleinman, Sherryl, Martha Copp, & Kalah B. Wilson. (2021). We've come a long way, guys! Rhetorics of resistance to the feminist critique of sexist language. *Gender & Society*, 35(1), 61–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243220979636>
- Merriam-Webster. (2019). *Guy*. Accessed November 8, 2023. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/guys>

An Investigation Into Editing Students' Evaluations of Quotative “Like” in Popular Fiction

Emma Todd

Editors are the traditional bastions of prescriptivist thought, upholding prestige forms and barring proscribed ones. One frequently proscribed form is quotative BE like. However, given its powerful characterization potential, editors may be accepting this form more in fiction, thus raising its status. The article confirms this behavior by observing university editing students but suggests that this tolerance may only exist when quotative BE like is used to emphasize its current casual associations. This casts doubt on whether the term will gain formal acceptance through its presence in fiction.

Change and variation are inevitable aspects of language. However, the ultimate fate of a given language innovation depends on various factors, such as how socially valuable a community finds it to be and how much status its initial users command (McMahon, 2024). Consequently, those variants which stem from lower-class communities or are considered to be less formal or necessary may struggle to gain widespread acceptance or prestige (McMahon, 2024). This seems to be especially true in written registers, which, when compared to others (i.e., spoken registers), are more beholden to the typically prescriptive or conservative dictates of editors and other such language authorities (Garner, 2022b; Owen, 2020; Safire, 2003). Thus, while it may be *gonna*, *hadda*, or *wanna* when speaking, to avoid patronizing speech or unwanted class commentary, it must be *going to*, *had to*, or *want to* when writing (Safire, 2003).

Yet this is not the whole story. As Biber and Gray (2016) show and Smith (2024) discusses, written language is not a monolith; instead, it is composed of several subgenres which all behave in unique ways, such as writing for academic purposes, writing for the news, or writing for entertainment (e.g., fiction). Because of this, despite the resistance of more traditional written registers, such as academic writing,¹ others, such as fiction, have been shown to be more accepting of more conversational and innovative features (e.g., semimodals such as the previously noted *gonna*, *hadda*, and *wanna*) (Biber & Gray, 2016). It could be argued that these subgenres (e.g., fiction) represent a unique platform through which low-prestige features are able to begin loosening prescriptive tendencies held against them and gain more frequent prominence, two behaviors which Kostadinova (2020) cited as being potentially useful in facilitating their greater overall acceptance.

With this in mind, the present study addresses and explains the status of quotative *BE like* (e.g., “And I was like, “That’s crazy!””), a relatively new construction in the English language that is often associated with “unrefined” speech, within the fictional genre (Blackwell & Fox Tree, 2012; Blyth et al., 1990; Buchstaller, 2006; Dailey-O’Cain, 2000; Garner, 2022a; Tagliamonte, 2016). Specifically, it first investigates how acceptable current editing students find quotative *BE like* to be in fictional contexts and then discusses whether any existing trends hint at a growing prestige or “colloquialization from above,” for the construction—a phenomenon observed by Hinrichs et al. (2015) with English relativizers (p.

831). Not only will this provide additional insight into the current status of quotative *BE like* as an individual construction, but it may also corroborate the register variation assertions proposed by Biber and Gray (2016) and add to ongoing conversations, such as those of Kostadinova (2020), regarding what facilitates language change and variation. Finally, because the study looks at how editors react to quotative *BE like*, it addresses Owen's (2020) and Hinrich et al.'s (2015) discussions of how editor tendencies and prescriptivism may impact language evolution.

Literature Review

A quotative is any construction, word, or term that is used to introduce reported or direct speech, whether spoken orally or thought internally (Blyth et al. 1990). Historically, some of the most popular quotatives have included terms such as *say*, *think*, or *go*, which were used to introduce speech, thought, or either option (or sound effects), respectively (Fox Tree & Tomlinson, 2007; Tagliamonte, 2016).

However, in recent decades, a new quotative has exploded onto the stage: *like*. Often paired with the auxiliary verb *BE* (which is written here in all caps in order to include all of its associated lemma forms), *like* seems to have made its first appearance in the usage of English speakers who were born in the 1970s (Dailey O'Cain, 2000; Tagliamonte, 2016). From there, it has come to dominate the speech of subsequent generations. In fact, in the 2000s, Fox Tree and Tomlinson (2007) found that nearly ninety-three percent of all introductory quotations used were *BE like*. This came in stark contrast to a mere four percent in the 1980s (Fox Tree & Tomlinson, 2007). Tagliamonte (2016) and Jones and Schieffelin (2009) reported similarly drastic changes over time.

While there are many theories as to why quotative *BE like* has become so popular, a review of the literature reveals two major ones. On one hand, some researchers, such as Blyth et al. (1990), Dailey-O'Cain (2000), Fox Tree and Tomlinson (2007), and Tagliamonte (2016), posit that speakers now hold a preference for quotative *BE like* because, unlike the aforementioned *say*, *think*, and *go*, *BE like* is much more flexible in its semantic meaning. While these three former quotatives are usually tied to one specific meaning (i.e., speech, thoughts, and sound effects), *BE like* can accomplish all of these purposes equally well (Fox Tree &

Tomlinson, 2007; Lee, 2021; Tagliamonte, 2016). Some, such as Dailey-O'Cain (2000), qualify this by saying that quotative *BE like* may be slightly more common when referring to internal dialogues.² Consider the following example sentences below, which have been sourced from Romaine and Lange (1991) and showcase quotative *BE like* performing in each condition:

1. Sound Effect: "...and you know I could just see the outline of the body, and was *like*, 'Waaaaaaa'" (p. 237).
2. Reported Speech: "...and I'm *like*, 'Nothing much,' y'know? I explained the whole...weird story" (p. 227).
3. Internal Evaluation: "I mean, I was *like*, 'OK, so she thinks they're expensive, that's fine'" (p. 251). [emphasis added]

In addition, Buchstaller (2001) and Jones and Schieffelin (2009) assert that quotative *BE like* may also be more tolerant in the amount of epistemicity it can command. For example, while *said* is usually taken to mean that the reported speech is more literal, quotative *BE like* allows for more approximations and imitations (Buchstaller, 2001; Jones & Schieffelin, 2009). As such, *BE like* may be better suited to expressing the minute features of a speaker's attitude and style than other quotatives (Romaine & Lange, 1991). However, other studies, such as Fox Tree and Tomlinson (2007), refute this shade in meaning.

Beyond semantic elasticity, Jones and Schieffelin (2009), Romaine and Lange (1991), and Tagliamonte (2016) assert that quotative *BE like* may have also become popular due to its powerful sociolinguistic marking capabilities. In the 1980s, quotative *BE like* was associated with several positive traits, such as being "young, urban, and savvy" (Tagliamonte, 2016, p. 76). This same positive evaluation was seen later on in the findings of Buchstaller (2006) and Dailey-O'Cain (2000), wherein many respondents reported associated quotative *BE like* with being "cool," "giddy," "animated," "more pleasant," "more attractive," "more successful," "more interesting" (at least when used by younger speakers), and "more friendly." As such, to use the specific words of Tagliamonte (2016), using quotative *BE like* may afford a speaker a certain level of "street cred," a fact which would make it especially attractive to a younger demographic (p. 76).

However, many researchers have noted that there also exist several significant negative attitudes held towards quotative *BE like* in recent years. For example, Blyth et al. (1990), Buchstaller (2006), and Dailey-O'Cain (2000) found that quotative *BE like*

was associated with being “less ambitious,” “less educated,” “lazy,” and “an airhead.”³ Blackwell and Fox Tree (2012) echo these findings by showing that many of their interviewees found quotative *BE like* to be “irritating, annoying, and ungrammatical” and unfit for formal, serious, or accurate situations (p. 1156). Taken in conjunction with the previous positive evaluations, it then seems that quotative *BE like* is associated with people who are generally amicable and easy-going but nonetheless somewhat clueless or ignorant. Popular usage guides reflect this sentiment, with Garner (2022a) in particular demeaning quotative *BE like* as a “low casualism,” “vogue word,” and “verbal tic” (p. 666).

This clueless and casual nature is understandably not preferred in more formal usage, a tendency that can be clearly seen in a brief search of the Corpus of Contemporary American English, the largest corpus of American English split by register. Here, one can observe dismally low occurrences of quotative *BE like* in all registers except those that are markedly less formal (e.g., film, speech, and magazine). However, more established quotatives, such as *say*, still enjoy significantly higher usage across all registers, and especially so in more edited written ones, such as fiction and academic writing (Davies, 2008–).

That being said, fictional writing nonetheless provides an interesting platform to observe a growing tolerance of quotative *BE like*. This is because, unlike other written registers, which are highly beholden to the dictates of usage guides (such as Garner 2022a), fictional works can afford to ignore these rules more often (Schneider, 2023). In fact, Schneider (2023) specifically states the following: “Don’t change something just because it’s informal or ‘wrong’ or not the word you would choose—especially in dialogue or first-person narration. Not everyone speaks the same way you do, and people don’t edit spontaneous speech to be perfect” (p. 10).⁴ This attitude likely stems from the fact that these perceived errors can provide a unique outlet through which writers can develop a specific style, tone, or characterization. Therefore, because quotative *BE like* both indexes a style of speech unique to youth and introduces a level of casualness that would otherwise be difficult to obtain, it seems to be a perfect candidate for acceptance in certain fictional contexts (Blackwell & Fox Tree, 2012; Buchstaller, 2006; Dailey-O’Cain, 2000; Jones & Schieffelin, 2009; Lee, 2021; Romaine & Lange, 1991; Tagliamonte, 2016). The idea that quotative *BE like* would be common in fictional contexts is further supported by existing

register analyses done by Biber et al. (2016), which show that several other conversational terms tend to occur at higher rates there than in other written registers.

Methodology

To investigate how tolerant editors currently are of quotative *BE like* in fiction writing contexts, I adopted a method similar to the one used by Owen (2020). As such, six short fiction excerpts were collected, two of which were sourced from the novel *Gather* (Cadow, 2023), three from *Just Another Missing Person* (McAllister, 2023), and one from *The Double Life of Benson Yu* (Chong, 2023). These particular books were published in 2023 and were categorized as popular or young adult fiction, meaning they would likely command similar registers or general styles of writing. Furthermore, because they were published recently and written for a popular or younger audience, their style may be considered more conducive or tolerant of quotative *BE like*. Several of the specific excerpts, especially those from *Gather*, were chosen because the authors had genuinely chosen to use quotative *BE like* as an introductory phrase (and not within the quotation itself) in their prose. These original instances of quotative *BE like* will be later referred to as genuine *BE like*.

Once these excerpts were copied, two instances of quotative *BE like* were artificially added into excerpts that did not previously have them. These instances of quotative *BE like* will be later referred to as artificial *BE like*. Overall, this resulted in nine total instances of quotative *BE like* across all six excerpts—two artificial and seven genuine. In addition, to serve as a distractor from quotative *BE like* in the excerpts, several other errors—such as absent commas, misspellings, random capitalizations, improper reflexives, awkward passive voice constructions, and absent or incorrect prepositions—were also introduced. Various adverbial phrases and subordinating conjunctions were also swapped around. Additionally, one instance of quotative *BE like* was replaced with *say*.

After these six excerpts were prepared, they were printed off and distributed in class to students currently enrolled in either of two editing courses at Brigham Young University. One course focused on the editing of young adult and children's fiction, and the other focused on editing novels for publication. There were eighteen students enrolled in each course, but, with a few

students absent in each section (and one student participating in both), only thirty excerpt packets were distributed. Students were then instructed to copyedit each excerpt as they saw fit and were informed that their edits would be used for research. The students were given about fifteen minutes of in-class time to work on their edits. However, given the length of the excerpts and significant presence of errors, the students were instructed to complete their edits at home and return the packets during the next class session. Ultimately, fifteen packets were returned, three of which were only partially completed. The packets were then reviewed, and each instance of quotative *BE like* was coded as being either edited, meaning it was deleted or replaced, or ignored, meaning that it was left as was.

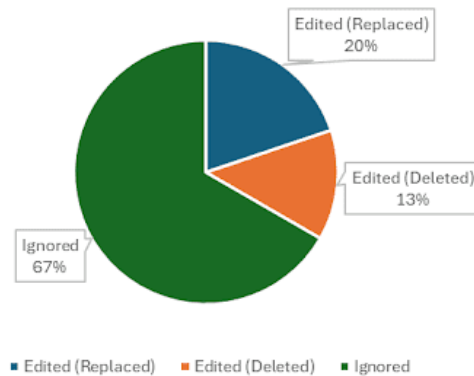
Results and Discussion

In all, 126 instances of quotative *BE like* were reviewed by the students. Of these, eighty-four (66.67%) were ignored and forty-two (33.33%) were edited. The presence of other edits immediately before or after each use, such as the addition of commas to introduce the following dialogue, suggests that many instances of quotative *BE like* were specifically looked at or considered rather than missed due to negligence. Furthermore, upon performing a chi-square goodness-of-fit test and receiving a significant p-value of <0.001 (which means this distribution was highly unlikely to occur by chance)⁵, this distribution can be considered significant, and the null hypothesis (that student editors would express no preference for either ignoring or editing out quotative *BE like*) can be rejected.

This suggests that, contrary to the cautions of style guides such as Garner (2022a) and the negative subjective evaluations of those surveyed in the studies of Blackwell and Buchstaller (2006), Blyth et al. (1990), Dailey-O’Cain (2000), and Fox Tree (2012), quotative *BE like* is not considered to be as proscribed as hypothesized. It also suggests that editors who focus on editing novels and popular fiction (such as the students in the studied classes) may be adhering to the guidance of fiction-specific style guides, such as Schneider (2023), which emphasize tolerating “incorrect” forms in order to preserve a unique style or voice. An illustration of how the student editors tended to evaluate instances of quotative *BE like* can be seen in figure 1.

Figure 1

How Student Editors Responded to Instances of Quotative BE like



The two artificial uses of *BE like* were responsible for sixteen uses, or about thirty-eight percent of all edited uses. In fact, four students chose to edit only artificial *BE like* and ignore every genuine instance. While this split between genuine and artificial *BE like* was not significant (it returned a p-value of 0.123), it may still suggest that, in line with Schneider (2023), students are somewhat aware of when quotative *BE like* is and is not conducive to the excerpt's intended tone or style. This conclusion is further emphasized by an unprompted note reading “not expected tone” left next to an instance of artificial *BE like*.

With that in mind, these results do not necessarily indicate that student editors consider quotative *BE like* in a more positive social light or find it acceptable in more refined contexts. In the excerpts pulled from the novel *Gather*, which has a rurally oriented narrator, 71.76 percent of the instances of quotative *BE like* were ignored. A similar statistic of seventy percent was observed in the excerpts from *Just Another Missing Person*, which frequently adopts a more casual style among its young, female speakers. However, in *The Double Life of Benson Yu*, where the narrator's social background is more ambiguous (and artificial *BE like* was added), the construction was only ignored twenty-five percent of the time. This difference was significant when compared (via a chi-square test of association) with *Gather* and *Just Another Missing Person*, expressing p-values of 0.001 and 0.010 respectively. Thus,

it seems that the student editors were still performing in line with the documented general opinion of *BE like*. That is, given that quotative *BE like* is associated with a lower level of education or a casual, young, and female demographic, it would be appropriate to maintain the construction in contexts where characters openly express these traits (Blackwell & Fox Tree, 2012; Blyth et al., 1990; Buchstaller, 2006; Dailey-O’Cain, 2000; Jones & Schieffelin, 2009; Lee, 2021; Romaine & Lange, 1991; Tagliamonte, 2016).

Furthermore, there were some students who were more apt to edit out quotative *BE like* than others. In fact, four students chose to edit out more than half of all instances of quotative *BE like*, with two of these four either deleting or replacing every instance. While this group only constituted 26.67 percent of the total, and the split is not statistically significant, it nonetheless represents a dissenting minority. This indicates that there still exist student editors who are strongly inclined against the acceptance of quotative *BE like* in popular fiction regardless of its potential tonal benefits, an opinion which is in line with prescriptivists such as Garner (2022a). It was also potentially interesting to note that, when students chose to replace quotative *BE like*, sixty-four percent of the time they chose to apply some version of *said* as opposed to any other quotative. However, with a calculated chi-square goodness-of-fit p-value of 0.162, this is not a particularly significant observation.

Conclusion

Results suggest that most student editors have little issue accepting *BE like* as a quotative in popular writing contexts. This trend contradicts the supposition that quotative *BE like* would be strictly proscribed due to the general negative attitudes against it observed by Blackwell and Fox Tree (2012), Blyth et al. (1990), Buchstaller (2006), and Dailey-O’Cain (2000), as well as the explicit censoring of it from editing authorities such as Garner (2022a). It also contradicts Owen’s (2020) claim that editors tend to reduce variation in favor of upholding traditional prescriptions.⁶ Yet, tantamount to this analysis is the fact that quotative *BE like* was more significantly preserved in stories that featured rural or young female narrators rather than in others which did not have such characters. Furthermore, because some student editors showed strong disfavor towards quotative *BE like*, an important

minority are still biased against the construction regardless of context.

These two realities present a conundrum regarding the question of whether quotative *BE like* in fictional genres will lead to it gaining some level of heightened prestige. In the first regard, it seems that editors in training do not typically consider using *BE like* as a quotative in young adult and popular fiction as wholly unacceptable. This fact might suggest an imminent growing level of acceptance when considered with the findings of Kostadinova (2020). That being said, when specific story settings and tone are taken into account, editors were more likely to accept quotative *BE like* in fictional contexts that matched the construction's current low-status evaluation. Thus, rather than accepting quotative *BE like* because they no longer consider it formally proscribed, editors are likely more motivated by the fact that the construction's casual associations make it a convenient set-piece. As a result, current attitudes towards quotative *BE like* may be being reinforced in fiction rather than altered.

However, there are also several limitations present in this study that are critical to keep in mind. Most glaringly, there is the significant dearth of actual instances of quotative *BE like* in the excerpt packets, especially artificial *BE like*. This raises some concern regarding the significance of the results and prevents a more granular analysis of what kinds of quotative *BE like* (e.g., before reported speech, before thoughts, before sound effects) are preferred in popular fiction.⁷ Thus, in the future, it would be best to include more instances and more varied expressions of quotative *BE like* in the targeted excerpts. In a similar vein, it would be helpful to include excerpts that express more varied tonal contexts and settings. This would help avert biases in the study that could stem from the over- or under-representation of settings more suited to accommodating quotative *BE like*, such as was seen in the case of the excerpts from *Gather* and *Just Another Missing Person*.

Another way in which this study could be expanded would be to investigate the editing tendencies of older, more experienced fiction editors, such as Owen (2020) did. Because the editors in this study were current college students, they belonged to a demographic heavily associated with using quotative *BE like* (Blyth et al., 1990; Buchstaller, 2006; Dailey-O'Cain, 2000; Garner, 2022a; Tagliamonte, 2016). As such, they may have been

biased towards accepting the widespread application of quotative *BE like* regardless of context. This potentially confounding fact could be avoided by having editors belonging to older generations, who do not use quotative *BE like* as liberally, also participate in the study. Not only would this allow one to delineate the effect of an editor's background on their editing style—something that could be useful in broader contexts—but this would also allow one to more accurately define the accepted role of quotative *BE like* in literature. This knowledge would then help guide editors who are forced to grapple with it more frequently in the future and assist researchers in understanding the evolving connection between prescriptive behavior and construction acceptability in years to come.

References

- Biber, Douglas, & Bethany Gray. (2016). The historical evolution of phrasal discourse styles in academic writing. In *Grammatical Complexity in Academic English: Linguistic Change in Writing* (pp. 125–166). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511920776.004>
- Blackwell, Natalia, & Jean E. Fox Tree. (2012). Social factors affect quotative choice. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 44(10), 1150–1162. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2012.05.001>
- Blyth, Carl, Jr., Sigrid Recktenwald, & Jenny Wang. (1990). I'm like, "Say what?!": A new quotative in American oral narrative. *American Speech*, 65(3), 215–227. <https://doi.org/10.2307/455910>
- Buchstaller, Isabelle. (2001). He goes and I'm like: The new quotatives re-visited. *New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English* (NWAVE), 30, 11–13. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237237465_He_goes_and_I'm_like_The_new_Quotatives_re-visited
- Buchstaller, Isabelle. (2006). Social stereotypes, personality traits and regional perception displaced: Attitudes towards the 'new' quotatives in the U.K. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 10(3), 362–381. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1360-6441.2006.00332.x>
- Cadow, Kenneth M. (2023). *Gather*. Candlewick Press.
- Chong, Kevin. (2023). *The double life of Benson Yu*. Atria Books.
- Dailey-O'Cain, Jennifer. (2002). The sociolinguistic distribution of and attitudes toward focuser *like* and quotative *like*. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 4(1), 60–80. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9481.00103>
- Davies, Mark. (2008–). The corpus of contemporary American English (COCA). Available online at <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>
- Fox Tree, Jean E., & John M. Tomlinson, Jr. (2008). The rise of *like* in spontaneous quotations. *Discourse Processes*, 45(1), 85–102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01638530701739280>
- Garner, Bryan A. (2022a). Like. In *Garner's modern English usage* (pp. 665–667) (5th ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780197599020.001.0001>

- Garner, Bryan A. (2022b). Semantic change. In *Garner's modern English usage* (pp. 976–978) (5th ed.). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780197599020.001.0001>
- Hinrichs, Lars, Benedikt Szmrecsanyi, & Axel Bohmann. (2015). “Which”-hunting and the standard English relative clause. *Language*, 91(4), 806–836. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2015.0062>
- Jones, Graham M., & Bambi B. Schieffelin. (2009). Enquoting voices, accomplishing talk: Uses of *be* + *like* in instant messaging. *Language & Communication*, 29(1), 77–113. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2007.09.003>
- Kostadinova, Viktorija. (2020). Examining the split infinitive: Prescriptivism as a constraint in language variation and change. In Don Chapman & Jacob Rawlins (Eds.), *Language prescription: Values, ideologies and identity* (pp. 95–120). Multilingual Matters & Channel View Publications. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.22730732>
- Lee, Seung H. (2021). A constraint-based analysis of *be like* quotative. *Studies in Linguistics*, 29(1), 109–133. <https://doi.org/10.17002/sil..59.202104.109>
- McAllister, Gillian. (2023). *Just another missing person*. HarperCollins.
- McMahon, April M. S. (1994). *Understanding language change*. Cambridge University Press.
- Owen, Jonathon. (2020). Practicing prescriptivism: How copy editors treat prescriptive rules. In Don Chapman & Jacob Rawlins (Eds.), *Language prescription: Values, ideologies and identity* (pp. 286–300). Multilingual Matters & Channel View Publications. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.22730732>
- R Core Team. (2021). R: *A Language and environment for statistical computing*. (Version 4.1) [Computer software]. Retrieved from <https://cran.r-project.org> (R packages retrieved from MRAN snapshot 2022-01-01).
- Romaine, Suzanne, & Deborah Lange. (1991). The use of *like* as a marker of reported speech and thought: A case of grammaticalization in progress. *American Speech*, 66(3), 227–279. <https://doi.org/10.2307/455799>
- Safire, William. (2003, November 16). Wanna, gonna. *The New York Times Magazine*, 32. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/>

- A110196783/LitRC?u=byuprovo&sid=googleScholar&xid=48f2b83e
- Schneider, Amy J. (2023). The fiction copyeditor's mind-set. In *The Chicago guide to copyediting fiction* (pp. 9–20). The University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226823027.003.0002>
- Smith, Jordan. (2024). Determining levels of prescriptivism in American English usage guides. *Technical Communication*, 71(2). <https://doi.org/10.55177/tc377227>
- Tagliamonte, Sali A. (2016). Quotatives: *I'm like*, “*Oh my God!*”. In *Teen talk: The language of adolescents* (pp. 65–80). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139583800.005>
- The jamovi project. (2022). jamovi. (Version 2.3) [Computer Software]. Retrieved from <https://www.jamovi.org>.

Notes

1. It should be noted that this does not mean academic registers are resistant to all change. While it is true that academic writing tends to be intolerant of colloquial terms (the focus of this article), they do incorporate their own variations over time (Biber & Gray, 2016).

2. Lee (2021) also asserts that quotative *BE like* can be used in situations which introduce hypothetical dialogue or can convey levels of willingness in internal speech.

3. Dailey-O'Cain (2000) also included instances of focuser like in addition to quotative *BE like* in their analysis.

4. Interestingly, this advice is completely contradictory to the comments found in Safire (2003). However, citing the findings of Smith (2024), variation like this is to be somewhat expected between usage guides.

5. All inferential statistics reported in this paper were calculated in jamovi, a statistics software, using a significance threshold of 0.05.

6. Though, it is also important to recognize Owen's (2020) additional finding that editors tend to apply very different methods of going about this variation reduction, which the results here may also display.

7. In fact, eight of the nine uses of quotative *BE like* in this study were related to directly reported speech. Only one, related to an internal thought or evaluation, was not.

Appendix 1

Overall Editing Data

Excerpt	Number of Reviews	Instances of Genuine <i>BE like</i>	Instances of Artificial <i>BE like</i>
1 (J)	15	15	0
2 (G)	15	60	0
3 (J)	14	0	14
4 (J)	13	0	0
5 (G)	12.5*	25	0
6 (S)	12	0	12
Totals		100	26
		126	

Excerpt	Total Edited Genuine <i>BE like</i>	Total Ignored Genuine <i>BE like</i>	Total Edited Artificial <i>BE like</i>	Total Ignored Artificial <i>BE like</i>
1 (J)	2 (2 D 0 R)	13	0 (0 D 0 R)	0
2 (G)	17 (7 D 10 R)	43	0 (0 D 0 R)	0
3 (J)	0 (0 D 0 R)	0	7 (1 D 6 R)	7
4 (J)	0 (0 D 0 R)	0	0 (0 D 0 R)	0
5 (G)	7 (3 D 4 R)	18	0 (0 D 0 R)	0
6 (S)	0 (0 D 0 R)	0	9 (4 D 5 R)	3
Totals	26 (12 D 14 R**)	74	16 (5 D 11 R**)	10
100			26	
			=126	

**This is listed as only having 0.5 of a review because one editor did not complete their analysis of Excerpt 5.*

*** Of the 25 times, quotative BE like was replaced with some version of say 16 times.*

Appendix 2

Excerpts Provided to the Student Editors

Excerpt 1

The first thought had by me is absurd—that we’re not presenting a very good impression. We’ve both been drinking Beer. Not loads—two—but enough to smell them on us. Shame washes over myself that somehow I shouldn’t be drinking with my adult child. This is what happens when you grow up poor: whenever you let you’re guard down, you get to Thinking everything is going to be taken from you by someone.

“Okay if we come in with you?” Poole says.

“Do you need statements from all of the Houses? Who gave the DNA?” I say.

“Best if we do that inside. Always better on the sofa with a cuppa,” DCI Day says as like it isn’t eleven Oh clock at night and they’re not police. The hairs on the back of my neck raise up. Now I see: the fake politeness their unhurried manner All is not as it seems.

“Okay?” you say. Oblivious. Like *go ahead*. You gesture to the front door and then unlock it. *No no no* want to say. *Do not trust these wolves in sheep’s clothing*. But *do* you trust them? Your facial expression I can’t read. Always shy practically a Politician you are. Things glossed over, seemingly forgotten, treated as unimportant, as like that might change the facts of them.

You step inside, followed by the Police and then I. As I turn and close the door, for just a few more seconds, I gaze at our street the rain flickering around the streetlights, my palm upturned to catch a drop before everything shifts. Again.

Excerpt 2

It's not like I'm as pigheaded about food like the teacher is. When Paul who happens to be Zach's cousin was complaining how oat milk should have to go by some other name because it's sneaky and Trying to come off as a dairy product., I was like, "Well Paul? What are we going to call the milkweed plant, then? Could-juice plant? What can we call the Milky Way galaxy? Fuzz galaxy? Out-of-focus galaxy?"

"That's different," He says.

I'm like "How?"

To our school, Paul doesn't go. We were playing hoops instead of catching the bus home, but he was already on vacation. So Paul's trying to get all lawyer-talk at me about this milk business.

I'm like, "Paul, have you ever even touched a cow's tit?"

He said, "What?"

"It's the thing the Milk comes out of."

"He's like, 'I know that!'"

So I ask him again, "You ever even touched one?"

"Of course not" He says. "The farm's a write-off."

It just ticks me off. Used to be thirty maybe forty Dairy Farms back when my family had cows. Paul's family owns one of the four dairy farms left in your valley. They milk fifteen hundred. Counting heifers and dry cows, they've probably got over two thousand head (easy). A tax break for rich people who don't even touch their own animals. It just ticks you off if it's what you want to do—meaning to be a farmer.

Excerpt 3

At the end, they go through to the long Victorian kitchen bathroom. One bedroom at the front, downstairs. Back door ajar, letting the spring air tumble inside. Hallmarks of the house-share life are dotted around—a chore timetable, flyers for a local club, coupons. Julia scans her eyes over them. So far, so much normal.

"I just-if you don't mind...I've seen the interviews, but I wanted to get a feel for... what you thought of her." Julia is like: "There's some stuff to me that doesn't quite add up."

"Oh yeah?" Annie says. It's nice to be treated normally. No Guv or Ma'am, no deferential behavior, sniffing around for promotions. And no suspicion either.

From a surprisingly upmarket Coffee machine, she makes Julia a Latte. “This thing...so temperamental,” she huffs. Annie jabs a few buttons and milk begins spurting out. Texts were sent in a fair among by annie and olivia after the lease was signed by her and before she moved inwards. The latest: *OMG you move in super soonest!* Julia remembering it well.

“Like what-what doesn’t add up?” annie says.

Julia considers telling her about the different-size clothes but they’d only just met. Annie wouldn’t hold the knowledge.

“A new number was gotten by her before she disappeared,” Julia says. “A new house obviously And a new job.”

Excerpt 4

You’re things were returned to us forever ago and so its easy for myself to look through them. Anything to do with Prudence jones is searched by me. I comb through your E-mails. I ransack you’re harddrive. I leaf through the pages of the things left behind by you that never meant much to us-to-do lists, items you wanted to buy, jobs you were going to apply for. But there’s...nothing. Prudence doesn’t even come up, only in obscure ways, like you have Googled *Dear Prudence move is it crap?* A year ago (LOL, as you would say).

I Google to as I’m sure DCI Day has, to see if any women called prudence Jones are missing, but none of them are, nothing high-profile anyway, the women Andrew specialized in: young, attractive, middle-class By themselves at night women walking home .

“Its funny, isn’t it?” yolanda says, arms folded next to the door next to my study. “The Police are interviewing us again.”

“It’s what we wanted,” I say: but I avoide her gaze.

Excerpt 5

As to how you say her name some of us were saying “Sharpie,” like the permanent magic marker, and others were saying just “Sharp.” So finally one day I asked her, “How do you say youre name?” Why the hell people have to talk about it in back corners I don’t know.

But what does she say? She says she doesn’t care. If its “Sharpie,” she’s happy with the notion that the things she helps us write into our Own brains won’t ever wash off. If it’s “Sharp,” she says she

doesn't mind at all if people associate that with her own brilliant mind.

So I'm like, "Okay, but which is it to you?" To which she frowned, "Sharp" is what she grew up with.

At some point I'll also get to telling you about why its "The" instead of Ms. or whatever. But for now, all you need to know is how you don't say no to her unless something's wrong with you. I said nothing at all. But I didn't wait to long either because the Sharpe, you've got to know, if she's trying to get you to do something, She might yank you're sleeve or grab your shoulder, and Albertson the principal, his office looks right out, on the parking lot.

I kind of come too when I feel a tug on my pants leg. It's the toddler and the mom's calling him "Michael" and reaching for him, but I guess it's the baby slowing her down.

"I'm sorry," she chuckles to me.

"It's okay" I cry. I push my tongue against my teeth. I guess to see if I've come back in, and there I am, but I have no more words. I notice it's still daylight. I manage to tell them id better get home.

"Did you want something?" Peter interrogates.

I shake my head no, but at the same time, I shrug, and just that little bit of moving pulls my shirt untucked it's so gosh Darn short and I'm like, "I was looking for work."

Peter nods. Something changes and he looks at myself different now. Somehow it turns into regular talk. I was told by him that the last time he saw my father, my father also asked him for work just days before he left for Tennessee for good.

Excerpt 6

The Samurai's woken up by an unfamiliar sound. A phone rings. His phone.

He pick it up. Its his Daimyo. After so long!

Protect the Boy. You must protect the boy.

He held the phone as he prostrates himself. To his Daimyo, he's like: the boy doesn't need help. He tries to take care of him. He brought him food. And what does the boy do? He shuts the door on him.

Help him. It's the honorable thing to do.

Anytimes I try to help anyone, it goes off the rails. What can I help him without hurting hiM?

You must try.

He says, Yes my lord.

Why are you're body and mind so clack? you must increase our training. How would you teach the boy to fight when you're so soft?

constantine says, I didn't have the knowledge that I was supposed to train the boy. *I didn't tell you*, his daimyo continues, *but he needs the strength for what to come. You'll be his sensei. But where is your katana?*

I don't have one. The money is not had by me yet.

Get it soon. Your orders will be came.

In the morning he took ma long shower. He works to get the grime out of his hands and fingernails and feels better afterward. He's went to refill his prescriptions. Life's easier without his daimyo guilty though that makes him on the street. No Water. He feels less odd. Better, even. He doesn't choose to insinuate himself in the affiars of a vulnerable child, unlike his real-life inspiration, C., . He became involved in the Boy's life because he has no choise, in his version of the story\



The Relationship Between Grammar and Poetic Effect

Kara Haack

In this article, the author explores the interaction between grammar and poetry, focusing on how grammatical knowledge can enhance a poet's expression and creativity. Through an examination of parallelism, brevity and verbosity, and verb tense and aspect, the author provides examples of how grammar influences poetic effect. Additionally, the author discusses how intentional deviation from prescriptivist conventions can increase perceived poeticity. This work is not intended to be large-scale nor comprehensive; rather, it explores the overlap of linguistics and literature. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that understanding grammatical principles allows poets greater control over their craft.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet begins famously: "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. / I love thee to the depth and breadth and height / My soul can reach" ("Sonnets from the Portuguese 43"). These few lines have a certain *je ne sais quois*, an almost indescribable quality that makes them sound pleasant. A straightforward, prosaic version of these same lines (e.g., "Allow me to enumerate the ways I love you. I love you as deeply, widely, and high as I can stretch") lacks the same power of expression, resulting in a dry and insipid attempt at romance. The difference between these two versions could be explained by the reality that prose and poetry are different arts; poetry is the language of daydreams, love, and imagination, while prose is the language of information. Many linguistic features, including rhythm, vocabulary, and morphology, contribute to poetic effect. This article focuses on grammar, exploring how grammatical awareness can enhance poetic expression.

One literary device associated with poetry is parallelism, which is often manifest in rhyme and meter. However, parallelism also occurs in relation to grammar, by weaving together patterns of similar parts of speech, clause structures, and syntaxes. For instance, recognizing subjects, verb phrases, direct objects, and other elements helps in crafting sentences like those found in Joanna Klink's lines: "Some feel rain. Some feel the beetle startle in its ghost-part when the bark slips. Some feel musk" ("Some Feel Rain"). In all of these sentences, Klink begins with a subject, *some*; a verb phrase, *feel*; then a direct object, even when the direct object is actually a clause acting as a direct object. Notice how Klink's lines differ from a more awkward and less poetic version: "Some feel rain. Some feel the beetle startle in its ghost-part when the bark slips. Some feel *musky*." When the final sentence is completed by an adjective instead of a noun phrase or nominal clause, it takes the reader out of the grammatical rhythm and draws attention to the irregularity. Of course, a native speaker develops a feeling for common structural patterns in speech and writing. But a deeper knowledge of grammar allows a poet to refine each phrase, clause, and sentence for flow and feeling.

Parallelism shows a mastery of language mechanics and creates a sense of familiarity and predictability, pulling the reader into a world of the poet's creation. This understanding of constructions is a driving force behind nursery rhymes like "The Itsy-Bitsy Spider." The poetry in this children's song utilizes two parallel free combinations in the second and third sentences: "Down came the

rain and washed the spider out. Out came the sun and dried up all the rain.” The verb phrases *came down* and *came out* can be used in a reversed order because they are free combination verb phrases. A multi-word verb phrase like *double down* or *wipe out* could not be reversed for the same parallel word order. A multi-word verb phrase with a reversed word order would sound wrong to the ear, and grammatical knowledge confirms this poetic choice. In short, a proper knowledge of clause and sentence structure will improve an individual’s ability to build parallelism into a poem.

Other literary devices that poets can utilize are brevity and verbosity, which are opposing devices. Brevity is the quality of being succinct, and verbosity is the quality of being wordy. These qualities affect the communication of a poetic message. Many poets have a pithy style: They pack a lot of meaning into a few words. To do this, some poets utilize constructions that link words, phrases, and sentences together without explicit use of connecting words like auxiliary verbs. Auxiliary verbs include primary verbs (*be, have, do*) and modal verbs (*can, could, should, would, may, will, etc.*). This style is full of substance but can become hard to comprehend. Postposed adjective phrases, appositive phrases, and prepositional phrases are a few methods to produce brevity. John Keats’s style showcases many of these grammatical choices. In his “Ode to a Nightingale,” he uses a postposed adjective phrase, “in faery lands forlorn,” instead of saying “in faery lands that are forlorn.” In “To Autumn,” he uses at least one appositive construction, which is when one noun phrase identifies or renames another noun phrase: “Seasons of mists and mellow fruitfulness, / Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun.” And he uses prepositional phrases in “Bright Star! Would I Were Stedfast as Thou Art,” describing “the moving waters at their priestlike task of pure ablution.” In fact, Keats’s famous fourteen-line poem “Bright Star, Would I Were Stedfast as Thou Art” has only one modal verb (*would*) and two explicit primary verbs (*were* and *art*). Other tactics that cut down on wordiness include using the possessive case and multiple modifiers for one head noun to combine multiple details into one noun phrase. The collective effect of these methods is significant, increasing the poem’s density, intensifying its mood, and enhancing its imagery.

However, brevity is not the only way to be poetic. Verbosity also plays a role in aiding understanding and comprehension. Poets who are looking to indicate ability, necessity, possibility, or permission can use more modal verbs to elevate their message.

Oftentimes, verbosity mimics our oral speech patterns, which can give a poem a more natural tone. “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou is a great example of this. It has a strong emotional effect because of her repeated use of the modal verbs *may* and *will*. She writes, “Just like hopes springing high, / Still I’ll rise” and “You may kill me with your hatefulness, / But still, like air, I’ll rise.” Unlike Keats, Angelou makes frequent use of non-lexical verbs. But these helping verbs do not impede the poem’s power. On the contrary, they ground the poem in a conversational tone and imbue it with reality. The underdog narrative—the ability to achieve and the possibility of hope—is clear and comprehensible. The same ideas can be expressed in many words or few, but it is up to the intention and skill of a poet to decide which grammatical style fits their message.

Additionally, understanding grammatical tense and aspect in poetry enhances poetic effect. The ability to blend tenses and aspects—such as perfect or progressive—enables poets to layer meanings and incorporate intricate temporal textures into their work. For instance, phrases like *I have loved* (perfect tense) or *I am loving* (progressive tense) alter the temporal perspective, influencing how readers perceive the nature of actions expressed in the poem. Perhaps, in a unique circumstance, saying *I will have been being loved* (future perfect progressive) would perfectly match a poet’s intention. Another contrast appears when verbs are changed from active to passive voice. “I have loved, but no longer” is a sad statement about past love, but “I have been loved, but no longer” forces a complete narrative shift. As Jakobson et al. (1985) explain, grammatical concepts like active and passive voice do not simply denote different states of affairs but also mark distinct nuances in how events are portrayed (p. 37). By tampering with the active and passive voices, a poet can manipulate a reader’s perception. Thus, a deep understanding of tense, aspect, and voice reinforces a poet’s storytelling capacities.

All of the previous examples have highlighted how to harness principles of grammar to enhance poetic voice, but going against the traditional grammatical grain might be one of the most useful tools of all. Although grammar describes language, it does not prescribe language, contrary to popular belief. Therefore, intentionally deviating from what some people call “proper” grammar can be a powerful statement of nonconformity and creativity. If done intentionally and knowledgeably, it becomes art—it becomes poetry. One study used acceptability judgment surveys

to show that “non-canonical grammar (but not utter grammaticality) increase[s] the perceived poeticity of verbal stimuli” (Blohm et al., 2018, p. 52). This means that general audiences subconsciously associate grammatical deviation with poetic expression. The possibilities for grammatical deviation are endless. For example, although double negation has been traditionally rejected from writing, a poet may choose to use it as a way to emphasize the weight of the negation. What we label double negation is a remnant of Old English, back when negating verb phrases with *not*-negation and noun phrases with *no*-negation was still acceptable. What we call a split infinitive is a fragment of rules created by individuals who believed that Latinate grammar is the most pure and proper of all. With the appearance of a mistake, whether intentional or unintentional, a poet draws the reader’s attention to the materiality and flexibility of language, which is a central aim of poetry. Even the great poets have been accused of making mistakes—Emily Dickinson once used *it’s* instead of *its*—but that does not obstruct the potent power of language (Shoemaker, 2023).

To achieve poetic *je ne sais quois*, poets must write with expression and creativity. This discussion barely scratches the surface of the relationship between grammar and poetry, but it is clear that knowledge of grammar opens the doors of style, individuality, and intention to aspiring poets.

References

- Angelou, Maya. (n.d.) *Still I rise*. Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise>
- Blohm, Stefan, Valentin Wagner, Matthias Schlesewsky, & Winfried Menninghaus. (2018). Sentence judgments and the grammar of poetry: Linking linguistic structure and poetic effect. *Poetics*, 69, 41–56. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2018.04.005>
- Browning, Elizabeth B. (n.d.) *Sonnets from the Portuguese 43: How do I love thee? Let me count the ways*. Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43742/sonnets-from-the-portuguese-43-how-do-i-love-thee-let-me-count-the-ways>
- Jakobson, Roman, Krystyna Pomorska, Stephen Rudy, & Brent Vine. (1985). Verbal art, verbal sign, verbal time. *University of Minnesota Press*. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/byu/detail.action?docID=316615>
- Keats, John. (n.d.) *Bright star! Would I were stedfast as thou art*. Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44468/bright-star-would-i-were-stedfast-as-thou-art>
- Keats, John. (n.d.) *Ode to a nightingale*. Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44479/ode-to-a-nightingale>
- Keats, John. (n.d.) *To autumn*. Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44484/to-autumn>
- Klink, Joanna. (n.d.) *Some feel rain*. Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56438/some-feel-rain>
- Shoemaker, Robert E. (2023). *Letter to the editor: On Emily Dickinson's "errors."* Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/1469057/on-dickinsons-errors>

The Effect of Filler Words on Perceptions of Prestige

Mia Todd

This study examines how filler words influence perceptions of speaker prestige. Often dismissed as verbal clutter, filler words shape perceptions of intelligence, confidence, and authority. Analyzing listener reactions, this research explores whether filler words diminish or enhance perceptions of prestige in different contexts. Findings indicate that filler words can either undermine credibility or create relatability, depending on audience and setting. These results have implications for public speaking, professional communication, and linguistic studies.

Language isn't just made up of, um, proscribed words and eloquent phrases. It's also, like, casual elements like filler words. Filler words play a significant role in communication, from the ubiquitous *uh*, *um*, and *like* to the more nuanced *you know* and *so*. They bring a unique side to both understanding and connotation—shaping tone, signaling hesitation, or even fostering connection between speakers. Linguistic scholars have studied the appearance of filler words, investigating their usage, function, and impact on communication. Corpus research shows that the use of filler words has increased greatly over the last thirty years (Davies, 2008). However, few studies focus specifically on the view of filler words from young adults' perspectives. With a rise in social media and higher usage of casual colloquialisms, young adults may have a different idea of how filler words should be used or have different judgments toward them. This article seeks to investigate college students' perspectives on the usage of filler words, exploring how their views either align with or diverge from traditional opinions.

Literature Review

The use of filler words such as *like* and *um* has increased dramatically in the past few decades, primarily among younger generations. Studies have found that filler words, otherwise known as discourse markers, are more common among women and younger participants (Laserna et al., 2014). There are a variety of views toward these words, ranging from shunning to encouraging. One such example of strong rejection is found in the views of American lexicographer Bryan Garner, giving his frank editorial opinion in many of his usage entries. In his entry on *like*, Garner (2016) describes the verbal tic as “irksome” and places it at Stage 2 on his Language-Change Index, which indicates that its usage is widely shunned (p. 666). Similarly, Garner calls the usage of *you know* a “linguistic virus” (p. 1184). From a prescriptivist perspective, filler words are seen as unnecessary and should be avoided in formal speech.

Besides Garner's views toward filler words, other academic sources have joined in the judgment. Studies such as Seals and Coppock's show that a greater use of filler words reduces the credibility of the speaker, as the audience sees them as unsure of themselves. There is also an impact on the comprehension of the message itself. The constant use of filler words causes the

audience to focus primarily on tracking that usage, distracting them from the speaker's real goal (Seals & Coppock, 2020). Although this usage is often subconscious, excessive abuse of filler words is seen as a problem by some academic researchers.

However, there are also studies and sources that approve the use of filler words, even going as far to encourage their usage. One study found that when a man convicted of murder used filler words in his speech—specifically *um*—his audience thought he was being more honest and thoughtful toward what he would say next (Duvall et al., 2014). Filler words also prompt the audience to listen more intently, as they are often used when approaching unfamiliar content, and therefore signal the need to pay greater attention to the speaker (Duvall et al., 2014). In a *Time* magazine article, the author found that *like* as a filler word helps the speaker to express certain attitudes and even that speech lacking filler words is thought of as “too careful, robotic or unfriendly” (Montell, 2019). Despite objections from prescriptivists, research shows that there can be positive effects and reactions toward the use of filler words in speech.

This article takes into consideration both views toward filler word usage, specifically leaning toward the perceived credibility of a speaker. Because the research in this article focuses on primarily college-aged students who grew up surrounded by linguistic stereotypes in the media such as the “Valley girl” trope, this article will provide a new take on the effect this stereotype has had on young adults’ views toward filler words.

Methods

To examine college students’ thoughts on the usage of filler words, I constructed a brief survey and sent it out to my peers. I started with a simple question of how often the participants think they use filler words in their speech, with the answer options including “never,” “occasionally,” “often,” and “always.” Participants were then asked if they limited their use of filler words depending on who they talk to. If this question was answered “yes,” the participants were taken to another question asking what situations they limit their use of filler words in. Options included “when talking to a professor,” “when talking to someone of a higher status,” and other hypotheticals of the same vein. Participants were asked to select all that applied. The next set of questions focused on judgments and perceptions toward the use of filler words. The

participants were first asked if they considered another person to have less prestige when using filler words and then if they considered themselves to have less prestige with the same usage.

The next section of questions included sentences with filler words presented in hypothetical situations of conversations with people of different statuses. The first situation involved a conversation with a professor. One question asked the acceptability of the sentences if the participant was talking to the professor, and the other asked the acceptability of the same sentences when the professor was the one speaking. The questions included sentences such as, “So, I’m, like, confused on this topic. I just like don’t really know what it’s saying, you know?” I gave the participants three different sentences with three slightly different filler word usages. The example sentence above shows *like* and *you know*, which are thought of as stereotypical filler words; however, I also presented a sentence using *um* and *uh* and a sentence using *was like* in the quotative sense to mean *said*. In this sense, *like* is used for a grammatical function rather than as a discourse marker. The purpose of these sentences was to look at how perceptions changed based on the meaning behind the filler words (whether it was based on hesitation, casualness, paraphrasing, etc.). The second hypothetical situation included similar sentences when talking to a peer rather than a professor.

The final set of questions was a Likert scale used to measure how much the participants agreed or disagreed with three statements. Likert scales are used to measure attitudes or opinions, usually by having a statement followed by a range of answer options. In this study, the statements surrounded the effects that the usage of filler words had: showing a lack of intelligence, showing that the speaker is unsure, and distracting from the conversation. The scale ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree,” with a neutral option included. The survey was distributed over GroupMe and Instagram. The GroupMe chat was for a young adult church group, so all participants were college students. For Instagram, I specifically advertised the survey to college students. Between the two distributions, a total of fifty-nine individuals participated.

Results

The first set of questions involved the participants’ actual usage of filler words, including how often and in what situations.

When asked how often they used filler words in their speech, sixty-one percent of participants answered “often,” while twenty-five percent answered “always,” and fourteen percent answered “occasionally.” None of the participants answered the question with “never,” meaning there is always some usage of filler words by the participants. In response to whether they limit their use of filler words depending on who they talk to, eighty percent of participants answered “yes” and twenty percent answered “no.” In situations where the individuals do limit their filler words, the most popular answer was “when talking to a professor,” by eighty-eight percent of the participants. Further, seventy-three percent answered “when talking to anyone of a higher status,” thirty-seven percent answered “when talking to anyone older than me,” and twenty-nine percent answered “when talking to people I’m not close to.”

The next section of questions surrounded hypothetical scenarios assessing the acceptability of filler words, measured through Likert scales. In a hypothetical conversation with a professor, participants rated the acceptability of them saying sentences with filler words as much lower than if the professor were to use them. On average, the rated acceptability of the participants themselves using filler words was at 4.31, with 1 being the least acceptable and 10 being the most. Comparatively, the rated acceptability of the professor using filler words was at 5.25 using the same scale. The other hypothetical conversation was between two peers. Participants rated the acceptability of them using filler words as slightly higher than if the peer were to use them. When the participant was using filler words, the average rating of acceptability was a 7.00. When the peer was the one using filler words, the average rated acceptability was 6.96.

The final section of questions included views toward the usage of filler words. When asked if they consider another person to have less prestige when they use filler words in their speech, forty-seven percent of participants said “no,” forty-seven percent said “yes, but it depends,” and only six percent said “yes, always.” In contrast, when asked if they consider themselves to have less prestige when they use filler words, the majority of participants answered “yes, but it depends,” at fifty-five percent, thirty-one percent answered “no,” and fourteen percent answered “yes.” Rating their views toward usage on a Likert scale, the participants were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements about their views of filler words in

conversations. In response to the statement “Using filler words in conversation shows a lack of intelligence,” the majority of participants (twenty-four individuals) said they disagreed. However, with the other two statements, “Using filler words in conversation shows that the speaker is unsure” and “Using filler words in conversation is distracting from the speaker’s message,” the majority of participants said they agreed, with twenty-four and twenty-six individual responses respectively.

Discussion

The results of the study indicate that while most individuals use filler words often in their speech, there are certain situations in which a limited usage is preferred. The audience greatly affects usage, with their status and age playing into limitations of filler words. In situations where the audience is of both a higher age and status, the individual’s use of filler words is much more limited. This finding also coincides with the results that suggest people think that they have less prestige when they themselves use filler words compared to another person’s prestige when they use them. Although a majority of participants said they limit their use of filler words when talking to a professor, they did not necessarily consider a professor to have less prestige if the professor used them. Similarly, people viewed the use of filler words as much more acceptable in a conversation with a peer rather than a professor.

Acceptability varied not just across audience but also with the specific type of filler words. With the types of filler words used in conversations (three of which were given as examples in the questions) the average acceptability rating differed greatly, showing that the connotation behind certain filler words can make them more or less acceptable. On average, using the quotative phrase *was like* to mean *said* was seen as the most acceptable. The second most acceptable was using *like* as a discourse marker, and using *uh* or *um* in pauses was seen as the least acceptable. These results show that not only does the speaker’s perception of themselves and others matter, but so does their perception of the filler word itself in deciding when to limit its usage.

With the results of the Likert scale questions, the research suggests that while people may not see filler words as a usage of the less educated, they do often correlate them with being distracting and showing hesitancy in the speaker. This finding could greatly impact the situations in which a person uses filler words; if they

want to seem sure and to the point, they would probably avoid the usage. The implications of this research are that while the usage of filler words has increased over the last thirty years, college students and young adults of similar ages still see them as acceptable only in certain situations. This research could impact how people choose to use their filler words, perhaps catering them to the age of their audience or slightly shifting their usage to a more acceptable connotation.

Conclusion

The results of the study overall seem to suggest that college-aged students view the usage of filler words differently depending on the context of their usage. When talking to a professor or person of a higher status or age, an individual's use of filler words is seen as less acceptable, despite higher perceived acceptability in the person of higher status in comparison. This and other results show that people view their own usage as less acceptable and less prestigious than the usage of others. This research also has implications for real-world scenarios such as public speaking or job interviews, where perception plays a big role. It would be useful to conduct more research about if the trend of self-judgment has changed over time and why the use of filler words in general has changed in recent decades. Despite the differing views by linguistic scholars and college students alike, it is clear that filler words are still highly used in conversations and do not appear to be going away any time soon. It is important to understand the perceptions behind filler words to utilize them best in our lives.

References

- Davies, Mark. (2008). *The corpus of contemporary American English (COCA)*. <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>.
- Duvall, Emily, Aimee Robbins, Thomas Graham, & Scott Divet. (2014). Exploring filler words and their impact. *Schwa: Language & Linguistics*, (11), 35-49. <https://schwa.byu.edu/files/2014/12/F2014-Robbins.pdf>
- Garner, Bryan. (2016). *Garner's modern English usage*. Oxford University Press.
- Laserna, Charlyn M., Yi-Tai Seih, & James W. Pennebaker. (2014). Um... who like says *you know*: Filler word use as a function of age, gender, and personality. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 33(3), 328–338. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X14526993>
- Montell, Amanda. (2019). Why saying 'like' a lot is like, actually a good thing. *Time*, <https://time.com/5592953/use-like-too-much/>.
- Seals, Douglas R. & McKinley E. Coppock. (2022). We, um, have, like, a problem: Excessive use of fillers in scientific speech. *Advances in Physiology Education*, (46), 615-620. <https://doi.org/10.1152/advan.00110.2022>.

Appendix

Survey Questions

How often do you use filler words in your own speech (*like, um, so, you know, etc.*)?

Always

Often

Occasionally

Never

Do you limit your use of filler words depending on who you're talking to?

Yes

No

In what situations do you limit your use of filler words? Select all that apply.

When talking to a professor

When talking to anyone of a higher status

When talking to people I'm not close to

When talking to anyone older than me

Other (please explain)

The following explanations were given under "Other":

- a. *Situations when I need to sound professional (presentations)*
- b. *People I am more comfortable with*

Do you consider another person to have less prestige when they use filler words in their speech?

Yes, always

Yes, but it depends

No

Do you consider yourself to have less prestige when you use filler words in your speech?

Yes, always

Yes, but it depends

No

Imagine you are talking to a professor. Rate the acceptability of you saying these sentences on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the least acceptable, 10 being the most acceptable).

So, I'm, like, confused on this topic. I just like don't really know what it's saying, you know?

I was talking to her earlier and she was like, "You should ask the professor," so here I am.

I didn't really, um, understand, but, uh, you really helped. Thanks.

Imagine you are talking to the same professor. Rate the acceptability of them saying these sentences on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the least acceptable, 10 being the most acceptable).

Yeah, it's like a hard concept, so I totally understand where you're coming from.

A student earlier was like "I need more review," so now we're going to go over it.

So, um, come talk to me if you, uh, have any questions.

Imagine you are talking to a peer. Rate the acceptability of you saying these sentences on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the least acceptable, 10 being the most acceptable).

She has, like, a million unread messages. It's like so annoying.

Well then I was like "This can't even be real." It was just insane.

We talked about, uh, what we were going to have for dinner and, um, things like that.

Imagine you are talking to the same peer. Rate the acceptability of them saying these sentences on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the least acceptable, 10 being the most acceptable).

Yeah that, like, totally sounds like it would be like so annoying.

Well I was talking to her the other day and she was like, "It was so fun," so now I want to go.

That sounds really great, um, but I don't, uh, think I can.

How strongly do you agree/disagree with the following statements?

Using filler words in conversation shows a lack of intelligence.

Using filler words in conversation shows that the speaker is unsure.

Using filler words in conversation is distracting from the speaker's message.