

# Good or bad grammar?

A practical approach to looking at  
changing attitudes

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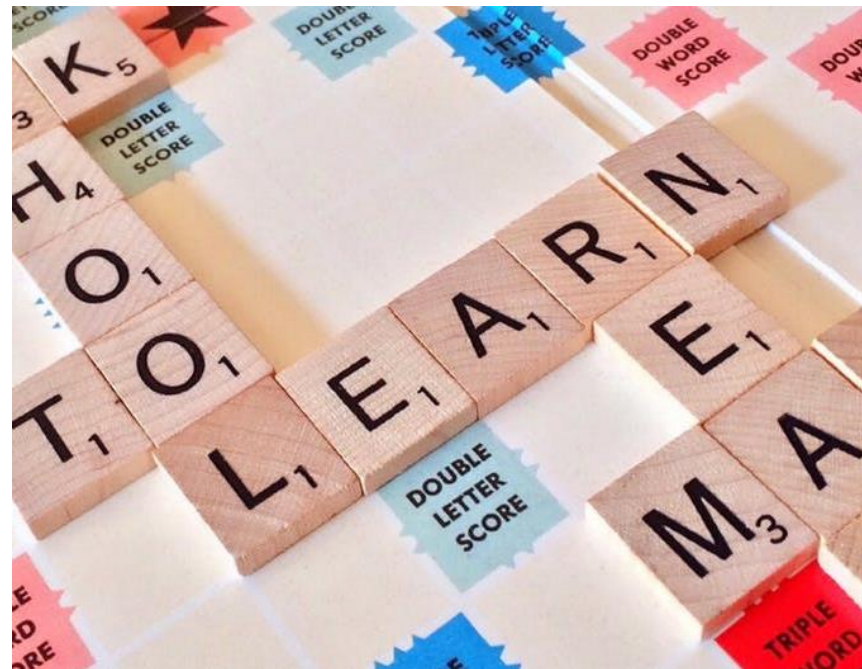


**Time for a  
test!**

**Put yourself in their  
shoes.**

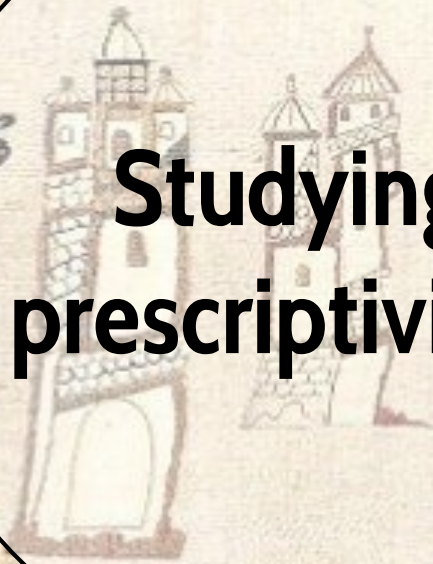
# Outline

- Test ✓
- Studying prescriptivism
  - Usage norms and authorities
  - Research so far
  - The Mittins study
- Test: Answer key
- The teaching unit
- Summary





THESE YOVNG PEOPLE  
ART RVNING·THE·LANGVAGE



**Studying  
prescriptivism**

# Usage norms and authorities

- **Two approaches to study language**

**Prescriptivism:** an approach to the study of language which looks at how language is supposed to be used.

**Descriptivism:** an approach to the study of language which looks at how language is actually used by speakers.

# Usage norms and authorities

- More than 300 year-old debate on Standard English (Beal, 2009)
- Suppression of **optional variability** (Milroy & Milroy, 2012, p. 58)
- While the success of prescriptions is often questioned, **the existence of standard language ideology is not** (cf. Milroy, 2001)



# Usage norms and authorities

- Institutional authorities (*Oxford English Dictionary*) and individual authorities (e.g. usage guide authors) (cf. Curzan, 2014)
- Below 25 year-olds barely consult printed resources, such as dictionaries and usage guides (Lukač, 2016)



# Research so far

- All in all, investigations on usage attitudes are far and few between.
- Attitudes have traditionally been elicited through questionnaires (direct method approach).
- Usage problems have frequently been **highlighted** (social desirability bias).
- Attitudes of language “experts” have been focused on, social factors influencing attitudes have been broadly neglected.
- Different attitude towards the subject (prescriptivism) in United States and Great Britain (Ebner, 2018)



# Research so far

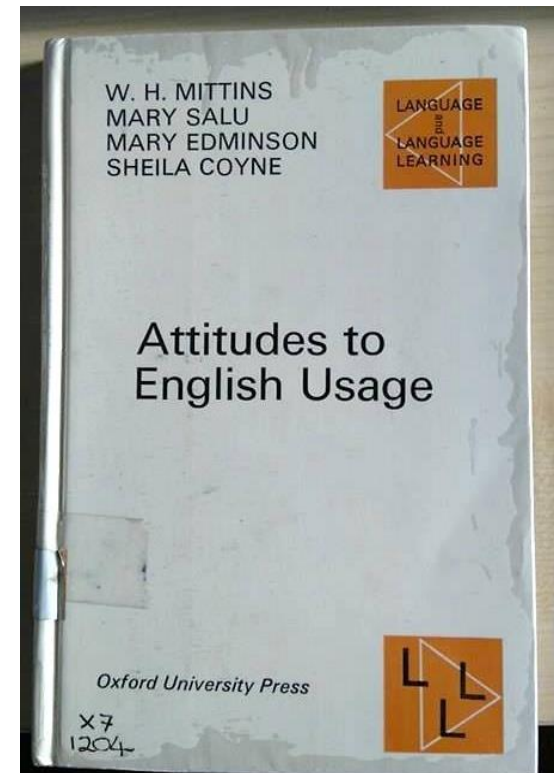
Usage study	<i>Current English Usage</i> (1932)	<i>Current American Usage</i> (1962)	<i>Attitudes to English Usage</i> (1970)	<i>Not All Errors Are Created Equal</i> (1981)	<i>Good or Bad Scots?</i> (1983)	<i>What is Standard American English</i> (1998)	<i>Big Stuff, Little Stuff</i> (2001)	<i>I think your going to like me</i> (2015)
Language variety	American English	American English	British English	American English	Scots	American English	American English	American English
Number of usage problems studied*	230	some 240	55	about 27	27	12	44	not provided
Attitude elicitation method	Direct Approach	Societal Treatment	Direct Approach	Direct Approach	Direct Approach	Direct Approach	Direct Approach	Indirect Approach
Participants	language experts, teachers, authors, editors	not applicable	language experts, teachers, students, general public	professionals (general public)	general public	students	business executives, academics	students
Sample size	229	not applicable	457	84	40	4,459	194	30/20
Sociolinguistic analysis & (variable)	no	no	yes (age)	no	yes (age, gender & social class)	yes (gender)	yes (gender & age)	no

(Ebner, 2018)

# The Mittins study

*Attitudes to English Usage* (1970)

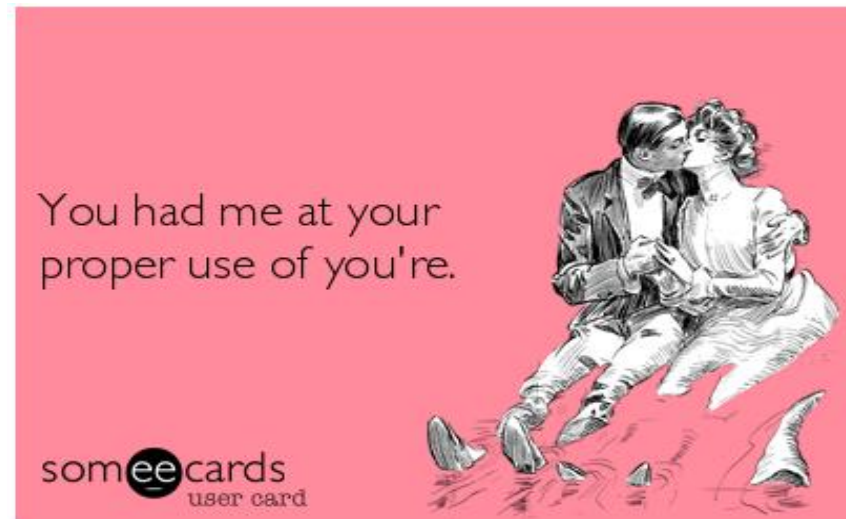
- Part of wider research initiative (Burgess, 1996)
  - Questionnaire completed by 457 respondents (mainly language experts)
  - Average acceptability
- Provide teachers with a **current insight** into validity of language advice



# Some repercussions

- (1) [I] [t]hink bad language use shows poor education and intelligence and yes I do judge people on their use of English. However, I also think it's a good indicator of people I do or do not want to be friends with, so I don't want it taught for the sake [o]f it, if [y]ou see what I mean!

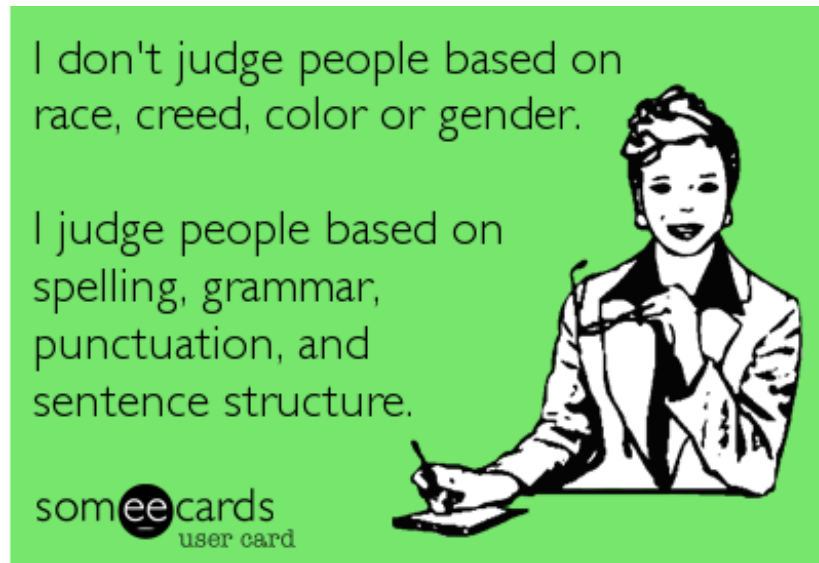
(Digital marketing consultant, 31-40 years old, female)



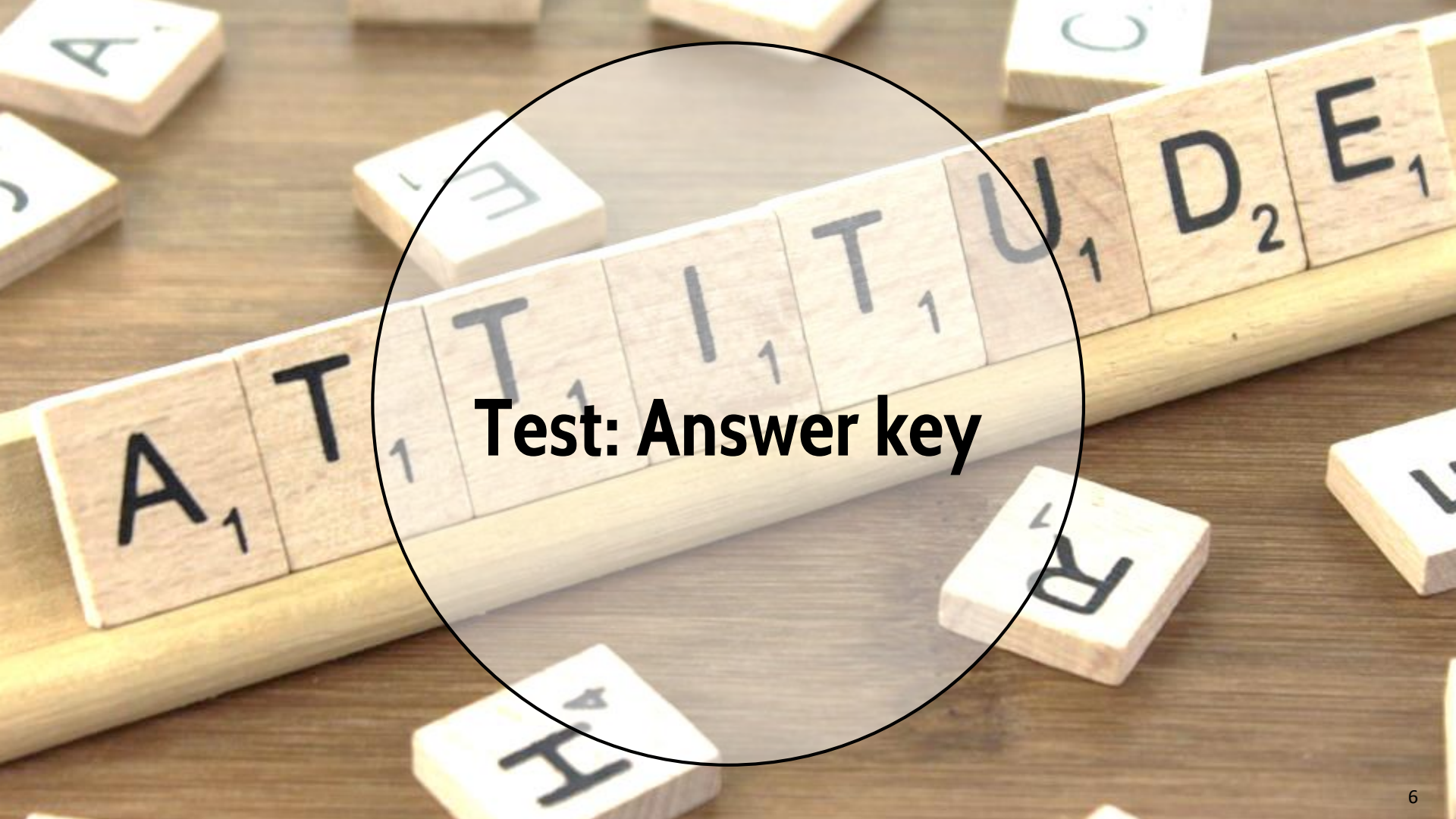
# Some repercussions

(2) Grammar and spelling are certainly in decline. Personally I never employed anybody who wrote a cv/application letter with spelling mistakes ...

(Retired arts consultant, over 60 years old, female)







**Test: Answer key**

- **Indirect method approach**
- **9 usage problems**
  - 2 dangling participles
  - 2 flat adverbs
  - 2 sentence initial *And*
  - 1 split infinitive
  - 1 *very unique*
  - 1 *impact as a verb*
- **63 participants**
- Social variables: age and gender

I am writing to apply for the IT manager position advertised in *The Times*. As requested, I am enclosing my job application including all required certificates. Having worked as an IT administrator, the job seems to be the perfect match for my skills and experience.

My responsibilities included maintaining appliances and documentation, planning new acquisitions as well as helping and educating users. I worked close with IT management which allowed me to gain insights and experience in the field of IT management. Having worked in my previous company for four years, my aspiration after a new challenge has taken over and made me seek a job in IT management.

With my Master's degree in Computational Sciences I have obtained a solid understanding of programming and IT networks. Moreover, I am fully aware of the importance of keeping up-to-date with new technological developments. I know how to effectively set goals and achieve them. And furthermore, I have the ability to grow with a job and handle tasks responsible.

Working as an IT manager in your company is a very unique opportunity. And I believe that my previous work experience as well as my educational background will make me a suitable candidate for this position. I am confident that this job will impact my future career considerably.

Thank you for your consideration.

Dear Mr Darcy,

I am writing to apply for the IT manager position advertised in *The Times*. As requested, I am enclosing my job application including all required certificates. Having worked as an IT administrator, the job seems to be the perfect match for my skills and experience.

My responsibilities included maintaining appliances and documentation, planning new acquisitions as well as helping and educating users. I worked close with IT management which allowed me to gain insights and experience in the field of IT management. Having worked in my previous company for four years, my aspiration after a new challenge has taken over and made me seek a job in IT management.

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Working as an IT manager in your company is very unique opportunity. And I believe that my previous work experience as well as my educational background will make me a suitable candidate for this position. I am confident that this job will impact my future career considerably.

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours faithfully,  
Faithfully,

- ① Either 'IT-manages position' (clumsy) as 'position of IT manager'. Abbreviation 'IT' acceptable if used in job advert.
- ② 'As I have'
- ③ Not true: the job is a step up. Adapt to something more time & have personal - perhaps '... for using my skills & experience productively'
- ④ Is it your current role? If not, what is? Why did you move away from IT?
- ⑤ What appliances? Be specific! Ditto documentation & acquisitions. Give examples.
- ⑥ On what?

- ⑦ Too informal. Perhaps 'prompted me to'.
- ⑧ This is retrospective. Restrictive to make more relevant. Perhaps 'My solid understanding... is based on my Master's ...'
- ⑨ Why? / How? Are you still reading in the field?
- ⑩ Give examples of when you have done this.
- ⑪ If you don't know / say what the tasks are, you can't assert this.
- ⑫ "suitable" isn't good enough! What makes you exceptional?
- ⑬ This is a terribly self-oriented closing sentence. Think about what you can do for them, too.
- ⑭ Perhaps invite questions or look forward to the opportunity to meet them.

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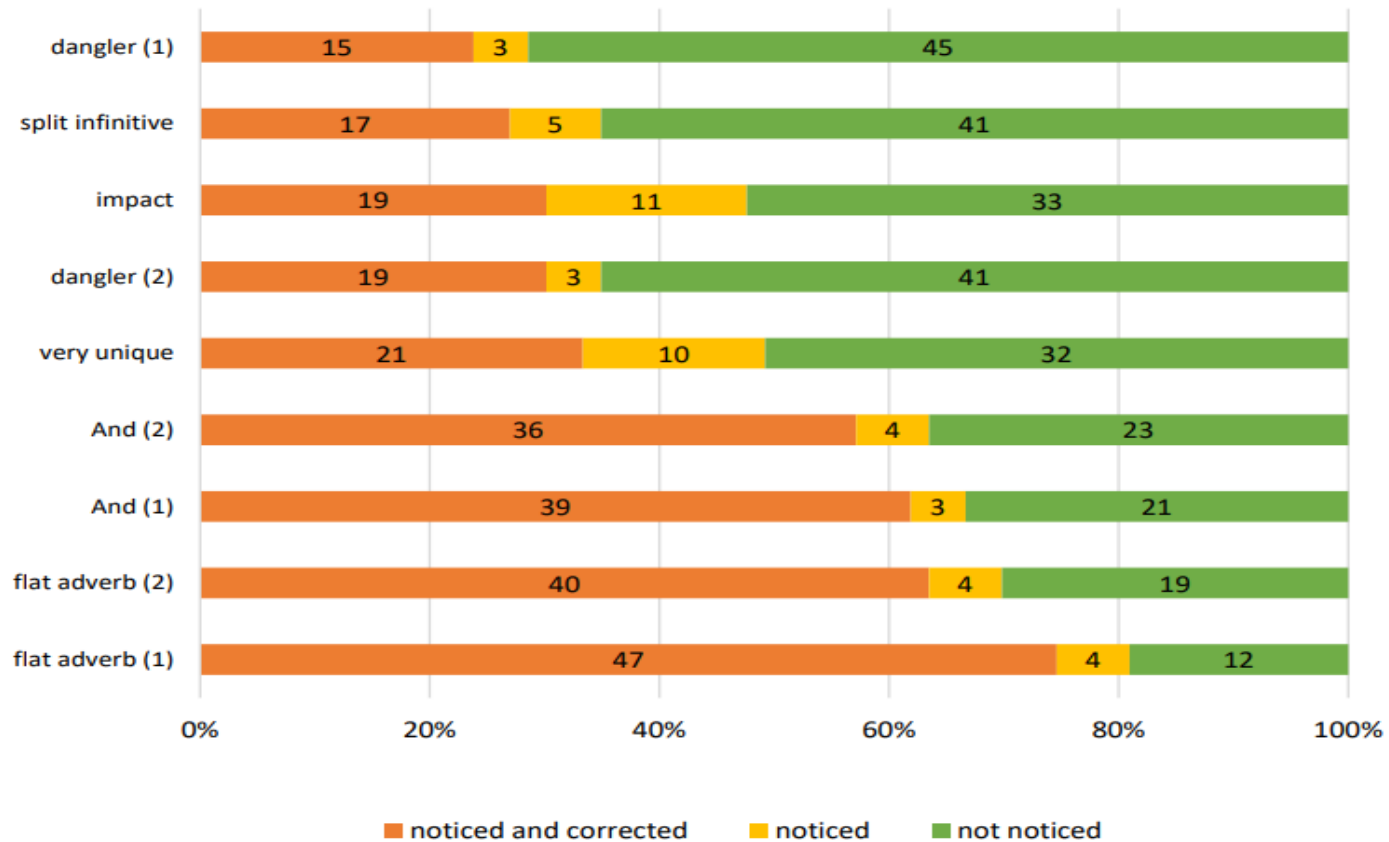
Working as an IT manager in your company is a very unique opportunity. And I believe that my previous work experience as well as my educational background will make me a suitable candidate for this position. I am confident that this job will impact my future career considerably.

Thank you for your consideration.

Faithfully,

This seems acceptable for an application letter and there is not any word or sentence I would say is in-appropriate.

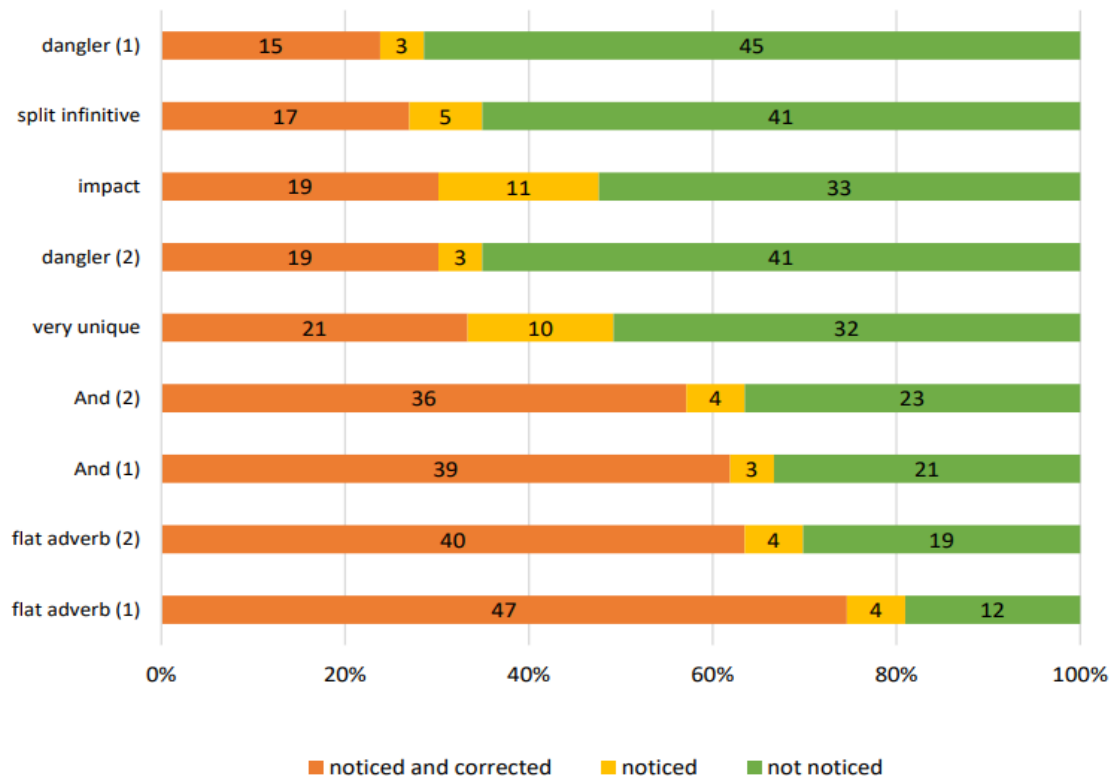




## Attitude variation: Age

**Older informants** corrected and noticed a number of usage problems **more frequently** than younger participants.

- the **split infinitive** (*to effectively set goals*) ( $\tau_b = -.269, p = .009$ )
- flat adverbs** (*work close with; responsible*;  $\tau_b = -.289, p = .005$ , and  $\tau_b = -.206, p = .046$ )
- Impact as a verb** ( $\tau_b = -.237, p = .019$ )
- Very unique** ( $\tau_b = -.329, p = .001$ )



A graphic featuring a dark blue background. In the foreground, there is a stack of books on the left, with a red book on top and a white book below it. To the right of the books, two pieces of chalk, one yellow and one blue, are lying on a wooden surface. A large, semi-transparent circle is centered over the image. Inside this circle, the letters 'ABC' are written in a light yellow, chalk-like font at the top. Below the letters, the text 'The teaching unit' is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

# **The teaching unit**

- Contains background information on prescriptivism
- Information on the usage problems included in the application letter
- Answer key
- Information on differences in attitudes between the two investigated age groups
- Suggested activities and discussion points

## Teaching unit 18: Good or bad grammar?

### Background

This unit explores how and why elements of grammar come to be judged as good or bad.

#### Dangling participle

A dangling participle, also known as a dangler, refers to a participial clause that is intended to modify a subject that is missing in the main clause. This mismatch is often said to cause ambiguity and confusion and has thus been widely proscribed (discouraged) in usage guides since the early 20th century.<sup>4</sup> Two instances of dangling participles can be found in the job application letter: see (1) and (3) in Figure 2 below.

#### Suggested activities and discussion points

- Go through letter of application highlighting and correcting anything they found inappropriate/unacceptable
- Discuss and compare their findings with each other, and with the findings of study
- Discuss what the reasons could be for different degrees of awareness among speakers
- Discuss some of the new shibboleths of bad grammar that students may have noticed (e.g. use of *literally*)
- Conduct database search for one of the usage problems included in the job application (HUGE database: <http://huge.ullet.net/>). (How many usage guides include a comment on the feature? Which was the earliest mention of it?)



The image features a central graphic design on a white background. Seven speech bubbles, each a different color (green, blue, brown, orange, yellow, purple, and pink), are arranged in a circular pattern. A thin black circle is drawn around the word 'Summary', which is centered in the middle of the speech bubbles. The word 'Summary' is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The speech bubbles are made of a textured material, possibly paper or cardstock, and cast soft shadows on the white surface.

# **Summary**

- Research has identified different degrees of awareness towards usage problems
- Usage norms are a community effort, but prescriptive attitudes still out there
- Real life repercussions: testing, job applications, higher education ...
- Foreground **appropriateness**



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