Proper English Usage : a sociolinguistic investigation of attitudes towards usage problems in British English

Ebner, C.

4. Usage Attitude Studies: a Brief Review

4.1. Introduction

The complexity of the concept 'attitude' and the manifold ways in which it is incorporated in various sciences as discussed in the preceding chapter indicate a certain degree of flexibility and versatility of the study of attitudes. In the following account, an emphasis will be put on the study of attitudes towards language use by foregrounding five specific studies: S.A. Leonard's (1932) *Current English Usage*, Margaret M. Bryant's (1962) *Current American English*, W.H. Mittins et al.'s (1970) *Attitudes to English Usage*, Karl Sandred's (1984) *Good or Bad Scots?* and Ahmed Albanyan and Dennis Preston's (1998) *What is Standard American English?*. I decided to discuss these five studies in more detail not only to illustrate the development of usage attitude studies, but also since these studies make use of different elicitation techniques discussed in the preceding chapter. As these so-called usage studies serve as a starting point and basis for my own investigation of usage attitudes in British English, a comparison is made to evaluate their methodologies and possibly improve upon them for my own study.

4.2. Five usage attitude studies

One of the categories identified by Cooper and Fishman (1974) in their investigation of language attitude studies included attitudes towards language use. Language use can be seen as something very personal. As speakers, we adapt the way we speak to our environment and to whom we are talking, be it friends, family, colleagues, or complete strangers. The way we use language differently in diverse contexts can, however, become somewhat habitual. According to Curzan (2014, p. 23), "[t]he most basic definition of *usage* is the way in which words or phrases are actually or customarily used – spoken or written – in a speech community". When addressing a family member, one

will usually adopt more informal language, whereas one would do the opposite in a job interview. Thus, language use at the individual level can turn into language usage, which describes the habitual use of language within a speech community, as depicted in Figure 4.1 below.

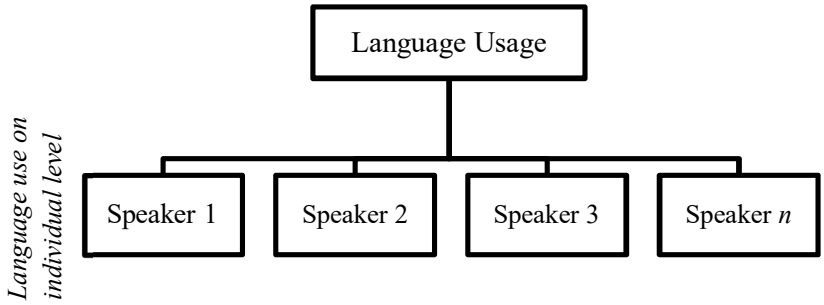

Figure 4.1 Language usage vs. language use

Although language has been widely acknowledged to vary and language variation has been studied, both variation of language use and variation in language usage have often been subject to criticism by prescriptivists. Language use, despite being personal, and language usage have been discussed broadly within societies, and correct usage, the topic of the present study, has become the subject of many books offering linguistic advice and guidance. What needs to be noted here is an apparent difference in the definition of the word 'usage' in British and American English. Peters (2006, pp. 759–760) describes the two distinct meanings of the word 'usage'. Peters (2006, p. 760) demonstrates how the meaning described by Curzan above seems to be common in the United States of America, while the second meaning of 'usage' as the correct and normal way of using a linguistic feature is predominant in Great Britain. Peters (2006, p. 760) draws attention to the descriptive nature of the American use of 'usage' and to how the prescriptive and descriptive

tendencies of the British definition are neutralised by defining usage as correct and normally used at the same time.

In order to identify speakers' attitudes to and correlate them with actual usage, several usage attitude surveys have been conducted in the past century. In this chapter, I will present five such studies which provided the basis for my own investigation. The first usage attitude study I have been able to find, entitled *Current English Usage*, was published by S. A. Leonard in 1932 in the United States of America, which was followed 30 years later by Margaret M. Bryant's *Current American Usage: How Americans Say It and Write It* in 1962. In 1970, W. H. Mittins and colleagues published another usage attitude survey, *Attitudes to English Usage*, in effect providing a British counterpart to Leonard's study. A rather more specialised survey was conducted by Karl Inge Sandred in 1983 focussing on Scots in the city of Edinburgh. This survey, *Good or Bad Scots?, Attitudes to Optional Lexical and Grammatical Usages in Edinburgh*, is of interest to this study because of its methodology. The most recent usage attitude survey included in this discussion, called *What is Standard American English?*, was conducted by Ahmed Albanyan and Dennis Preston in the late 1990s in Michigan. A comparison and classification of these surveys allows me not only to offer an illustration of the development of the field of usage attitudes surveys, but also serves as a starting point and source of information for my own study.

Besides these five usage studies, a few other attempts have been made to capture attitudes towards language usage, such as the one that resulted in the *American Heritage Dictionary*, which employs a usage panel consisting of language experts who decide on the acceptability of usage items (Picket, 2000). Another study was undertaken by Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade in order to investigate usage attitudes of speakers with varying backgrounds by applying a qualitative approach to assess attitudes and enabling participants to

comment freely on three usage problems through an online survey (2013, pp. 3–4). Pam Peters conducted a large-scale survey over the course of two years aiming to "shed some light on the language preferences of supraregional reading/writing communities, and on their affiliations in relation to the British/American divide" (2001, p. 9). By compiling and publishing six questionnaires in the journal *English Today*, Peters managed to obtain a large number of informants who commented on lexical, grammatical and punctuation issues by stating their preference between two possible variants such as *aging* or *ageing* (1998, p. 5). Apart from these studies, a number of usage attitude studies or attitude studies in general incorporated a small number of usage problems were conducted in the United States of America. Studies such as Hairston (1981), Gilsdorf and Leonard (2001), and Queen and Boland (2015) highlight an interesting phenomenon in that usage attitude studies seem to have found fruitful ground in the United States, while similar efforts are largely absent in Great Britain. Despite focussing on only five studies in the following comparison, I have considered all these previous attempts in the composition of my methodology.

4.2.1. Leonard's *Current English Usage* (1932)

The usage survey conducted by Leonard comprises two parts: one focusing on punctuation and the second on what was then current grammar usage; it is the latter part which I am particularly interested in since it relates most to my own work so I will focus on it primarily in this section. Leonard's intention was to investigate whether native speakers of English classify specific usages as "illiterate, permissible, or good" (Leonard, 1932, p. xiii). As opposed to the assessment of the acceptability of usage as provided in dictionaries and usage guides, which is usually based on literary and acknowledged sources and is characterised by a considerable lag between the adoption of new usages and

their appearance in dictionaries and usage guides, Leonard intended to provide a poll investigating actual usage by applying a direct elicitation technique (1932, p. 93).

Leonard conducted his study for the National Council for Teachers of English in the US, which positions the study in the educational field. Explaining the study's rationale, Leonard questioned the actuality and teachability of language rules (1932, p. xiii). In order to make an informed decision on this matter, he argued that actual usage had to be determined by conducting a survey before being subjected to his own evaluation. According to Leonard, usage was not just anybody's usage, but the usage of the educated world (1932, p. xiii). Thus, the 229 preselected participants of his study were divided into seven groups based on their educational and professional backgrounds. Leonard's grouping of informants is an indication of his understanding of who is part of the educated world. His seven groups were composed of language experts – lexicographers, philologists and grammarians – English teachers of the National Council, well-known authors, influential editors, prominent business men, members of the Modern Language Association, and teachers of speech (1932, p. 96). Leonard's study thus made use of a convenience sampling technique in which representativeness of the population is not considered a priority, but a specific group of people has already been identified as suitable informants (Buchstaller & Khattab, 2013, p. 76; Rasinger, 2013, pp. 51–52). The choice of technique is linked to Leonard's understanding of the superiority of educated usage.

Leonard's grammar usage survey consisted of two ballots; the first was sent to all seven groups of informants, while the second was only sent to the group of language experts and the teachers of the National Council for Teachers of English, which resulted in a lower number of responses (1932, pp. 96–98). The survey included 230 expressions of disputed language usage

which the judges were asked to rank according to four previously provided definitions ranging from "[f]ormally correct English" and "[f]ully acceptable English for informal conversation, correspondence" to "[c]ommercial, foreign, scientific, or other technical uses" and "[p]opular or illiterate speech" (1932, p. 97). The items investigated were underlined in the expressions, thus explicitly indicating where a potential problem could lie. The second ballot of 130 additional sentences with the same instruction of allocating the expressions to the established definitions was sent to a smaller group defined by their high educational qualifications (1932, p. 98). As opposed to the 229 received replies to the first ballot, the second was only completed and returned by 49 judges, which could be due to the length of the survey and the means of distribution: Leonard foregrounded the linguists among his informants due to their important role, stating that they possess the most significant expertise (1932, p. 99).

The approach taken by Leonard can thus be identified as an example of the adoption of the Direct Approach method discussed in Chapter 3 due to its explicit request for his informants' understanding of which usage features are considered acceptable and which could be potentially troublesome. As a result of this method, the participants' opinions resulted in a ranking and classification of the investigated expressions into established, disputable and illiterate usage (1932, p. 99). This list of acceptable expressions was thus supposed to establish what was considered correct usage and thus to help teachers decide on what to teach. By way of a final conclusion Leonard stated that his investigation enabled teachers to pass judgment on what needed to be taught and on what no time should be wasted (1932, p. 187).

Leonard's study proved to be an important piece of work, not only as it was one of the earliest usage attitude studies I could identify, but also because

he made and promoted a crucial observation: grammar can change. In presenting this argument, he proposed that grammar is neither static nor fixed, as is often believed to be the case by purists, but rather reflects the habits or usage of the educated world, or as he put it: "[i]f these habits change, grammar itself changes, and textbooks must follow suit" (1932, p. 188). This statement reflects the purpose of Leonard's study, which was to facilitate teachers in teaching grammar by surveying educated users of English and identifying current grammar usage. Leonard's *Current English Usage* strikes a new tune in an era which had been defined by changing ideologies with respect to the notion of grammar being defined as a fixed system of rules which many take as language laws. Leonard's study marks an important point which indicates the roots of this movement in the early twentieth century, though the question whether his views were of any influence is not easily answered.

4.2.2. Bryant's *Current American Usage* (1962)

Bryant's investigation of attitudes towards current American usage constitutes an interesting, yet somewhat deviating usage study as it applies a different approach towards identifying current usage attitudes. First initiated by the Committee on Current English Usage, which had been instituted by the National Council of Teachers of English in 1950, the investigation aimed at identifying frequent usage problems in spoken and written American English. What makes this usage study a peculiar case is the manner of data collection as well as the data selection itself. As opposed to Leonard's study, Bryant and her predecessor responsible for the data collection, Professor James B. McMillan, made use of already existing data, such as that found in the *Linguistic Atlas of New England* (1930–43) compiled at the time by Hans Kurath, as well as data obtained from "various scholarly dictionaries, … the treaties of linguists, and … articles in magazines featuring English usage" (1962, p.

xiv). However, Bryant stated that additionally about 900 new investigations were made for their undertaking, which consisted of an analysis of selected scholarly literature as well as an investigation of the interview data collected in the *Linguistic Atlas Survey*. Looking at the frequencies of the specific items investigated, the researchers deduced attitudes towards the items by stating which variant was found more frequently in which contexts. That is why Bryant's investigation can be seen as an early corpus analysis making use of the Societal Treatment Approach (see §3.4.3). However, the data collection prompts various questions concerning the consistency of the method used, and primarily the question as to whose attitudes are indeed investigated. When using written data in a Societal Treatment Approach, one needs to bear in mind that the data could have been proofread and edited, and hence that they do not reflect the attitudes of the speaker, but those of the editor responsible for revising the text.

As the title of Bryant's book suggests, both spoken and written data were used to identify current usage, which, however, poses a problem due to the lack of recordings of "educated speech" which could have served as a basis for comparison (1962, p. xx). The distinction between spoken and written language is crucial, as the supremacy of or rather the emphasis on written language is often highlighted in education and society (Milroy & Milroy, 2012, pp. 52–55). Nevertheless, the author emphasised the fact that the majority of data included in this investigation originated from written data (1962, p. xxi). In the introduction to her book, Bryant provided a discussion of what formal, informal and colloquial English is and in which contexts these varieties of English could be expected to be found, as well as a description of three types of speakers distinguished by their educational and social backgrounds (1962, p. xxiii–xxiv). Hence, a Type I speaker would neither have received formal education, be well-read, nor have an extensive network

reaching beyond his social background (1962, p. xxiv). A Type III speaker would be the complete opposite of a Type I speaker, while a Type II speaker would take an intermediate position regarding his or her educational and social background.

Some 240 usage entries are listed in *Current American Usage*, including old chestnuts such as the split infinitive, the placement of *only*, and *try and*, as well as regional variants such as *might could*, which Bryant identified as "*a colloquialism, confined principally to the South, where it is often used by Type II speakers (with some secondary school education*) [italics in original]" (1962, pp. 138–139). In her discussion of *might could*, Bryant referred to a study conducted by a certain G. Thomas, who stated that it is a feature most frequently found in the speech of Type I and Type II speakers in the South of America (1962, p. 139). While the details of five studies are included in the appendix to Bryant's book, no information can be found on G. Thomas's study. The lack of information on the studies Bryant and her colleagues conducted represents the main drawback of her *Current American Usage*. Despite the large number of usage issues discussed in this study, the little information on the data used to elicit attitudes and sampling technique applied, as well as lack of consistency in whose attitudes were investigated, cannot be neglected in discussing the acceptability of such usage items.

4.2.3. Mittins et al.'s *Attitudes to English Usage* (1970)

In the United Kingdom, a usage study similar to Leonard's was conducted by William Henry Mittins, Mary Salu, Mary Edminson and Sheila Coyne in the late 1960s. Just like Leonard's *Current English Usage*, the survey was situated within an educational context and it included 55 usage items which were analysed concerning their acceptability for the purpose of identifying current usage attitudes in British English. The number of usage problems investigated

by Mittins and his colleagues was considerable lower than in Leonard's study. The questionnaire was sent to more than 500 people and was returned by 457 respondents. Similar to Leonard, the educational context played a crucial role in the selection of survey participants in this study. Despite refraining from not mentioning any further details on how the participants were selected, Mittins and his colleagues state that the questionnaire was delivered to students personally, which suggests that they probably applied what is known as a convenience sampling technique. According to Buchstaller and Khattab (2013, p. 76), students are frequently used in convenience sampling. Given the context in which the survey was conducted, it does not come as a surprise that the 457 participants of the study were mainly situated within educational professions (Mittins et al., 1970, p. 2). In fact, Mittins et al.'s study was part of a wider initiative of the Schools Council for Curriculum and Education in 1966 in which four research areas, oral and written fluency, literacy and usage, were investigated in depth at different universities in the United Kingdom (Burgess, 1996, pp. 55–56).

More than 30 years after Leonard's study, new insights into the study of language had been obtained and this is reflected in the methodological approach taken by Mittins and his colleagues. Prescriptivism had been losing its influence under the prominent descriptive approach which had come to characterise the modern study of language. Linguistics being described as a descriptive and not prescriptive discipline had become a fundamental, yet also challenged, concept entrenched in linguists' minds (Cameron, 1995, pp. 5–6). Mittins et al. (1970, p. 2) herald the sentiments of the early second half of the twentieth century and state that the then current notion of linguistic correctness has been misleading and should give way to acceptability and appropriateness instead. The native speaker gained in importance and came to serve as a means of assessing what was considered linguistically correct. As Hall

(1964, pp. 9–10) put it, "[t]he only time we can call any usage totally incorrect is when it would never be used by any native speaker of the language, no matter what his social and intellectual standing". Such new insights distinguish Mittins et al.'s study from Leonard's *Current English Usage* (1932), who stressed the importance of the educated world when determining correct usage. Nevertheless, Mittins et al. drew considerably on Leonard's study by using some of his stimuli expressions in their test. Moreover, a similar questionnaire structure was used, in which respondents were asked to classify the expressions, all of which contained an underlined usage problem, according to a four-situation framework (Mittins et al., 1970, p. 4). Was a specific usage accepted in formal writing or speaking, or in informal writing or speaking? For five of the 55 usage problems, the researchers had made a pre-selection of contexts, as they argued that some of these expressions could clearly be attributed to one or two situations only (1970, p. 4). The use of *go slow* in the expression *There's a dangerous curve; you'd better go slow,* for instance, was restricted to the contexts of informal speech and writing as the researchers believed it to be impossible in formal contexts due to the informal style of the expression (1970, p. 4). They later came to regret this, however, and mentioned that the decision to restrict these stimuli in terms of context choice was made too hastily (1970, p.4).

The questionnaire was sent to respondents and handed out to students when possible. The participants were asked to indicate their opinions by ticking the appropriate boxes when they felt the expression was acceptable, inserting crosses when it was rejected, and question marks when they were in doubt (1970, p. 2). Thus, the researchers obtained a list of usage items that could be ranked according to their general acceptability (1970, pp. 13–14). In the discussion of the results, the researchers included a historical overview and discussion of the usage problems for which they drew on British and

American usage guides such as Gowers' *Plain Words* (1948) and Krapp's *A Comprehensive Guide to Good English* (1927) respectively. One of the criticisms that could be levelled at Mittins et al.'s approach is that their respondents had a rather focussed background and were mainly situated within the educational field. It is, moreover, not surprising to see that Mittins et al. (1970, p. 3) mention the same purpose for their enquiry as Leonard did. This highlights that the descriptivism and prescriptivism debate in teaching English had been ongoing for decades and had by that time, despite all previous efforts, not been resolved. Helping teachers to strike a balance between a prescriptive approach towards language and the allegedly 'anything-goes-attitude' of descriptivists was the main aim of the study (1970, p. 3). Unlike Leonard, Mittins et al. identified further variables, other than education, which could influence respondents' usage and judgments. Con-textual information and age were amongst these and were partially incorporated in the questionnaire. Unfortunately, Mittins et al. could not include a full analysis according to age due to a lack of time, but they did manage to investigate 11 usage items according to variation of acceptability across age groups (1970, pp. 21–23). Other social variables, such as gender, were not investigated by Mittins et al., which could be due to the fact that the kind of sociolinguistic approach adopted in the study was as yet in its early days (Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2013, p. 3).

Mittins et al. (1970, pp. 112–115) conclude that the results of their study showed that many of the usage problems they investigated were still considered disputable, such as the use of *very unique*. They stress the role of the teacher in educating future generations and appeal to the requirement of teachers to acknowledge the changing nature of language and teach students the notion of different registers (1970, pp. 113–114). Providing students with a set of different language contexts and making them understand differences

in formality may help, they suggest, to improve their language awareness. Furthermore, teachers are recommended to keep eyes and ears open to current usage and discussions to be able to make informed judgments about appropriate usage (1970, p. 113).

Mittins et al.'s *Attitudes to English Usage* shows considerable similarities to Leonard's *Current English Usage*, not only in the use of several identical expressions as stimuli and in their participants' educational background, but also in the methodologies they applied. Both used a Direct Approach in their attitude studies, both studies made use of a questionnaire which was sent to a selected group of respondents and both explicitly highlighted the investigated items. However, a clear evolution from Leonard's to Mittins et al.'s attitude study can nevertheless be identified in the fact that new insights into linguistic investigations, such as a discussion of a possible correlation between acceptability and age, were incorporated. The 1960s saw the emergence of sociolinguistics as a new linguistic discipline, which was formed by seminal studies such as Labov's (1966/2006) *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Such sociolinguistic studies take social factors such as gender, age and regional background into account. Mittins et al.'s investigation already made use of social factors, even if in a very limited way. Karl Inge Sandred's *Good or Bad Scots?* (1983), on the other hand, which was based on the survey by Mittins et al., shows a fuller incorporation of social factors, and as such is a distinct improvement on his predecessors.

4.2.4. Sandred's *Good or Bad Scots?* (1983)

Karl Inge Sandred investigated attitudes towards grammatical and lexical items in Edinburgh. Scotland's capital is situated in a linguistically interesting, yet complex environment. Scots, which developed from Old Northumbrian, has been in direct opposition with English, which historically goes back to

dialects spoken in the East Midlands (Sandred, 1983, p. 13). The unification of the crowns and integration of Scotland into Great Britain took a toll on Scots, as its speakers were actively discouraged from using the language. This discouragement was at the same time accompanied by a process of Anglicisation, which, despite a short romantic period in the early nineteenth century during which there was increasing interest in Scotland, has continued ever since (1983, pp. 15–16).

Sandred's main interest lies in assessing the attitudes of Lowland Scots towards the regional variety Scots and Scottish Standard English (1983, p. 11). The bipartite distinction between urban and rural varieties in Scots is central to his investigation. Scots can be seen as representing two distinct varieties: Doric Scots, which is associated with the variety spoken by the elite and by urban speakers, and Demotic Scots, which is associated with rural and "vulgar" speakers (1983, pp. 18−19). This distinction between good and bad Scots, as well as the existence of a third language variety, i.e. Scottish Standard English, makes Sandred's investigation a valuable contribution to the study of language attitudes.

Sandred selected his informants on the basis of the Voters' Roll, which is a list of registered voters, which therefore implies that only those who are eligible to vote and are registered as local inhabitants were among his sample. Furthermore, Sandred selected four areas in so-called wards, which can be characterised according to social factors such as class and economic well-being (1983, p. 28). Thus, Carmond, "a well-to-do area" in Murrayfield, a poor, working-class area of a local authority housing estate in Craigmillar, a middle-class area in Morningside, and a working-class area of skilled workers and professionals in Colinton were selected for Sandred's investigation (1983, p. 28). Applying a random sampling technique, Sandred selected ten participants from each ward from the Voter's Roll which resulted in a total of 40

participants – not, in fact, a very large sample (1983, p. 29). After selecting the informants, he sent out information letters and called his informants up to arrange appointments for the interview.

Sandred's questionnaire consisted of 27 sentences which contained highlighted grammatical or lexical usage problems, so that the presentation of stimuli is the same as in the two previously discussed attitude studies conducted by Leonard and Mittins et al., which he used as a reference. During the interviews, Sandred asked his informants to complete the questionnaire and to classify the items into either good or bad English, good or bad Scots, or any other suitable description (1983, p. 125). Additionally, the informants were asked to identify possible users of these items, their income, age, gender, social class, and residential area. This illustrates that Sandred's study is a rather more overtly sociolinguistic study than Mittins et al.'s study, as it takes into account these social factors. What is also different from the studies previously discussed is that Sandred asked directly whether the informants used these items themselves. This is also the only instance in which Sandred brings in contextual factors by asking whether the informants used these items in public or in private conversations (1983, p. 125). The selection of items was based on avoiding an interference between the spoken and written media, which would have meant taking pronunciation into account for example, which he wanted to avoid (1983, p. 44).

Sandred's argument for highlighting the item of investigation for the first time brought the issue of language awareness into attitude surveys. He argued that by explicitly highlighting an item, informants' reactions could be assessed, which would lead to the creation of overt and covert scores for each of the 27 grammatical and lexical items investigated (1983, p. 44). If an informant knew about the item, he argued, it achieved an overt score reflecting the respondent's awareness. By calculating the scores of all responses of the

informants, Sandred also obtained a ranking of items. Nevertheless, his methodology differs considerably from Leonard's and Mittins et al.'s studies as a focus is put on social variables, social class, age and sex, rather than on merely contextual differences in acceptability. Sandred's study showed, for example, that attitudes towards the use of the preposition *on* instead of *for* in the stimulus sentence *Wait* on *me here* can be analysed sociolinguistically by correlating the acceptability ratings with the social variables. In this particular case, Sandred identified lower acceptability ratings with older informants, higher acceptability ratings of *wait on* in the lower working class (LWC) as well as with male informants (1983, pp. 74–77).

In general, Sandred's methodology differs from previously conducted usage surveys as his informants were not exclusively situated within the educational field, but were more carefully selected in terms of their social background. Unlike Leonard's and Mittins et al.'s studies, Sandred's *Good or Bad Scots?* shows a clear sociolinguistics background in that for example he correlates his findings with social factors such as age and gender. Additionally, Sandred included a direct question concerning the informants' own use of these items, whereas Leonard asked his informants to state their observations of acceptability in actual language use, rather than their own preferences (Leonard, 1932, p. 97). Similarly, Mittins et al. (1970, pp. 4–5) had stated that the informants should not record their own linguistic practice, but that they should indicate what they thought was acceptable usage in specific contexts. Sandred applied a rather direct approach towards the study of attitudes towards Scots usage problems and hence follows both Leonard and Mittins et al. in this respect.

4.2.5. Albanyan and Preston's *What is Standard American English?* (1998)

Albanyan and Preston conducted a usage experiment at Michigan State University in the late 1990s in which they asked undergraduate students taking a class on language in society to survey local participants as part of a fieldwork exercise (1998, p. 32). The lack of information on the sampling procedure makes it difficult to identify the applied sampling technique. Since, however, only the results of European-American undergraduate students from Michigan, aged between 17 and 30, were reported in Albanyan and Preston's study, it is very likely that the sampling technique was convenience sampling (see § 4.2.1). The survey sample consists of 4,459 participants who were presented with twelve stimuli sentences in the experiment. These sentences include different types of usage problems which were considered part of nonstandard American English by the authors, such as the use of nominative subject pronouns in conjunctions as in *The award was given to Bill and I*, the use of *try and* and number agreement as in *There's two men from Detroit at the door*. (1998, pp. 30–31). Albanyan and Preston drew on a number of sources to discuss the historical development and the contemporary usage of these structures in American English.

Similar to Mittins et al.'s study, the participants were asked to indicate the contexts in which they would use the stimuli sentences. Five contexts were provided, including an informal context describing the use of a sentence with close family members and friends, a general context for the use in conversations with less familiar people, a formal context for very formal situations, as well as the options 'all contexts' and 'never' (1998, pp. 32–33). Furthermore, the participants were asked to provide an alternative or an improvement of the word or construction for the contexts for which they considered the usage not appropriate (1998, p. 33). Unlike the previously discussed usage attitude surveys, Albanyan and Preston did not highlight the problematical usage in the

stimuli sentences and therefore the participants were not influenced on their judgments. Despite the advantage of obtaining unbiased judgments, Albanyan and Preston also had to deal with participants identifying and correcting other parts of the stimuli sentences, as for example in the sentence *Everybody should watch their coat* (1998, p. 30). Some participants identified *everybody* in this sentence to be incorrect and replaced it with *everyone*, while others simply changed *coat* to *coats* (1998, pp. 39–40). Their approach to studying attitudes towards nonstandard usage is very similar to the previously discussed studies in that the Direct Approach was applied.

In the analysis, Albanyan and Preston made a diachronic comparison between the acceptability of usage problems in their study and Mittins et al.'s study, which also enabled them to make a comparison between the usage of American and British English native speakers. Although this comparison was only possible for the usage problems investigated in both studies, Albanyan and Preston were nevertheless able to identify trends and changes in the acceptability of specific usages, such as the use of the subjunctive in the sentence *If I was you, I would quit*, on which the researchers reported a lower rate of acceptability in American usage than in British usage 20 years before (1998, p. 37). The nature of the study seems to have had implications for the minimal sociolinguistic analysis which aimed at identifying a correlation of the acceptability of standard forms with the social factor gender, the only social variable collected by the undergraduate students conducting the experiment (1998, p. 45). The results showed that women stated more frequently than men never to use the nonstandard usage in eleven of the twelve sentences (1998, p. 45), which coincides with Trudgill's Norwich study and his findings of overt prestige (1974).

This most recent attitude usage survey in the list highlights an interesting, yet well-known phenomenon. What Albanyan and Preston (1998, p. 45)

call "conservative usage shibboleths" are also known as old chestnuts (Weiner, 1988, p. 173). While some usage problems seem to be short-lived, others are more persistent and are handed down from one generation to the next. The question whether old chestnuts have become acceptable is not so easy to answer, as is also illustrated in Albanyan and Preston's study: "we were frankly somewhat surprised to find that some old usage shibboleths (*whom*, subjunctives) have as much sway for these young respondents as they did" (Albanyan & Preston, 1998, p. 45). The reason for this is assumed to lie in the schooling the participants received, which ultimately connects the purpose of these usage attitude studies to teaching (1998, p. 45). In order to identify attitudes towards actual usage, one therefore has to be aware of the status as well as the historical development of usage problems.

Albanyan and Preston's study contributes to our understanding of the field of usage studies in that a clear difference to earlier studies can be detected by including a diachronic comparison. Yet, the comparison of attitude studies needs to be done cautiously since the replication of such studies is very difficult. This is due to attitudes and language use being very personal (see § 4.2) and thus the nature of the study sample can heavily influence the possible outcomes of a comparison. In the case of Albanyan and Preston's comparison with Mittins et al.'s study, two very different samples were used. While Albanyan and Preston surveyed American undergraduate students, Mittins et al.'s sample consisted mainly of language professionals and teachers rather than students only. Furthermore, consciously highlighting the investigated items no longer seems to fit the contemporary research undertaking as awareness is becoming an increasingly important factor as is the sociolinguistic aspect of usage attitude studies. In addition, the participants were asked to pronounce on their own language usage and not the usage of other speakers. These factors together with the immense difference in sample size of the two

studies show that comparisons between usage attitude studies are very complex and restrained by limitations.

4.3. Why Usage Attitude Surveys Are Important

By comparing the methodology and tools applied by Leonard (1932), Bryant (1962), Mittins et al. (1970), Sandred (1983) and Albanyan and Preston (1998), the specific characteristics of attitude surveys towards usage can be identified, as shown in Table 4.1 below. As opposed to language attitude studies, such as Giles's verbal guise test on accents (1970), usage studies heavily depend on the participants' awareness. Usage attitudes are not simply a matter of likeability of accents or the obvious choice between two different languages or dialects which the informant is asked to rate, rank or elaborate on. Since usage studies also involve a kind of dichotomy of actual usage and prescribed usage, language awareness plays a crucial role in the investigation of attitudes towards usage. Whether informants consider an item to be acceptable and appropriate or not largely depends on whether they know about the possible options which could be considered more suitable or "correct". Thus, particular attention has to be paid to language awareness when compiling a usage study. This is also demonstrated by Albanyan and Preston's study and the researchers' choice not to highlight the investigated usage item.

What makes usage attitude surveys furthermore important is that it is often explicitly stated that informants should voice their opinion either about the particular usage of others or their own. Table 4.1 illustrates that the focus on reporting on the usage of others has gradually shifted towards participants being asked to report their own usage.

Table 4.1 Comparison of five usage studies

Usage study	*Current English Usage* (1932)	*Current American Usage* (1962)	*Attitudes towards English Usage* (1970)	*Good or Bad Scots?* (1983)	*What is Standard American English* (1998)
Language variety	American English	American English	British English	Scots	American English
Approach	Direct Approach	Societal Treatment	Direct Approach	Direct Approach	Direct Approach
Participants	language experts, teachers, authors, editors	not applicable	language experts, teachers, students, general public	general public	students
Sample	convenience sampling	not applicable	convenience sampling	random sampling	convenience sampling
Sample size	229	not applicable	457	40	4,459
Usage problems investigated	230	some 240	55	27	12
Usage feature highlighted	Yes	not applicable	Yes	yes	no
Sociolinguist-ic analysis & (variable)	No	no	yes (age)	yes (age, gender & social class)	yes (gender)
Report on usage	usage of others	not applicable	own usage	both	own usage

The reason for this shift could lie in the long tradition of associating "correct" English with the language use of the educated and the aim to identify "proper" English through these studies. It is often believed that prescriptivism and the notion of correctness has caused and contributed to linguistic insecurity, a notion which Baldaquí Escandella (2011) argues goes back to Labov (1972), who described linguistic insecurity as a "measurement of the speaker's perception of the prestige of certain linguistic forms, compared to the ones the speaker remembers he or she normally uses" (2011, p. 325). This insecurity has also been mentioned by Lynch (2009, p. 39), who describes the anxieties a social climber faced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This increased concern about linguistic correctness triggered a growth in the publication of guide books on how to use language properly.

In general, it can be said that not enough research has been done on the subject of usage attitudes, while attitudes towards languages, dialects and accents have been thoroughly investigated. Despite the general lack of research carried out in the field, especially for British English, the original affiliation of usage studies with the field of educational science is another interesting phenomenon, yet the study of usage attitudes needs to be moved further to the field of sociolinguistics, as has been done by Sandred (1983) – and only partially by Mittins et al. (1970) before him – and Albanyan and Preston (1998). Nevertheless, a connection can be made to the educational sciences as linguistic insecurity has been linked with (perceived) lack of schooling (Albanyan & Preston, 1998; Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2013: 10). It has been argued that schooling increases the awareness of prestigious forms and of commonly used forms and that it consequently causes linguistic insecurity to occur (Baldaquí Escandella, 2011, p. 326).

Investigating previously conducted usage attitude studies highlights the researchers' different approaches and survey sample. Whereas Leonard's,

Mittins et al.'s and Albanyan and Preston's samples were focused on teachers, students and language professionals, Sandred's sample was random with the intention to be representative of the speech community he studied. Bryant's study provides a useful insight into how attitudes can be deduced through a corpus study. What lies at the heart of each study discussed in this chapter is the population selected for the study, which used to consist of the educated world only (Leonard, 1932, p. xiii). The reason for this might lie in the researchers' ambition to identify good or correct usage, which was believed to be used by educated speakers, and thus bring an end to the ongoing debate about usage. Despite all past efforts, the need for a more current and improved usage attitude survey is obvious. Instead of exclusively identifying the attitudes of the educated, it has to be made sure that surveys target the general public and allow for a sociolinguistic analysis of usage attitudes. Gere (1985, p. 75) indicates the need to identify what the general public thinks about language to identify actual usage attitudes:

> Where language is concerned, then, public opinion, the response of men and women representing all areas of society, has not been given attention. Ours is a culture which seeks public opinion on issues ranging from whether a woman should be nominated to the Supreme Court to whether liquid soap is preferable to bars of soap, but does not want to know what people think about their language. (Gere, 1985, p. 74)

As my own study aims to be a sociolinguistic investigation of attitudes towards usage problems in British English, the most suitable study population is the general public and therefore it forms the main target of my analysis.

4.4. Concluding Remarks

Since Leonard's attempt to record acceptable usage in the early 1930s, new techniques and insights into language and attitudes studies have been developed. Thus, it is no surprise that the methods applied in the studies discussed

here need to be revised and possibly improved. This does not, however, mean that previous methods or studies have thus become useless. Assessing what has been done before, what has worked and what has not, and which method brought what kind of results, while adopting newly developed methods to meet new insights, are essential steps in trying to guarantee a solid research methodology. Thus, the combination of methods, such as the Direct, Indirect and the Societal Treatment Approaches discussed in the previous chapter, as well as the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, should cover the multiple facets of attitudes to usage. In the following chapter, I will discuss in detail how I have made use of this comparison of previously conducted usage studies in composing my methodology. Furthermore, the nature of the study's population and its sample will be dealt with when I describe the speech community investigated.