Language prescriptivism : attitudes to usage vs. actual language use in American English

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CHAPTER 7

Speakers' attitudes to usage in American English

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis of speakers' attitudes to the use of the six linguistic features selected for the present study: *ain't*, the discourse particle *like*, *literally*, negative concord, object *I*/subject *me*, and the split infinitive. I explained in Chapter 1 that the inclusion of a study of speakers' attitudes is crucial to understanding the influence of prescriptivism. The most important point in this respect is that when talking about prescriptive influence we need to consider both its influence on the language and its influence on speakers, because it is possible for prescriptivism to have no measurable influence on language use, while nevertheless influencing speakers. In addition, speakers' prescriptivism-related attitudes may not always necessarily result in changes in language use, but may be influential in terms of how they evaluating both themselves and other speakers.

Ideally, prescriptive influence would be investigated by studying the language practice of specific speakers, with a focus on the way in which prescriptively targeted features are used. Such a study could, for instance, involve a very precise definition of language attitudes, an experimental investigation of such attitudes, and the collection of actual language use data produced by the same speakers whose attitudes are studied.

In addition, since the majority of the usage problems are grammatical variables, the language output collected from each speaker would have to be relatively substantial in order to obtain enough instances of each case of a specific usage problem. Given the highly complicated nature of conducting a study of that kind, a more straightforward approach was adopted in the investigation of speakers' attitudes separately from language use data, which in this case was based on the corpus study presented in Chapter 6. While it should be borne in mind that speakers' attitudes are merely reports on speakers' ideas about language, rather than their actual attitudes (which are notoriously hard to tap into), reported attitudes can nevertheless reveal something about what speakers think about the use of specific features. In other words, it may be difficult to find out what speakers' actual attitudes are, but it is less problematic to find out the attitudes speakers think they are expected to have. In the context of attitudes influenced by prescriptive language ideology, this is important to keep in mind.

These attitudes will be analysed and then discussed, in order to arrive at answers to a number of questions. The first question is concerned with the differences in attitudes to the use of the different language features analysed here. By exploring these differences, I hope to provide insights into how attitudes to usage may differ, depending on the usage problem itself. The hypothesis here, in broad terms, is that the usage features which are fairly limited in frequency, such as non-standard *ain't* and negative concord, would be rated more negatively than usage features which are of a stylistic nature (cf. Curzan's "stylistic prescriptivism"), such as the split infinitive. The second question this chapter will address is that of the difference in the ratings across the different levels of language use. These levels, as discussed in Section 4.5, are: CORRECTNESS, ACCEPTABILITY, GOODNESS, and EDUCATEDNESS. Analysing them will serve to explore the different types of attitudes speakers might have when it comes to judging usage problems. In addition, these levels were meant to explore an alternative kind of approach to rating usage problems to the ones which have been used in previous studies of attitudes to usage, such as Leonard (1932), Mittins et al. (1970), and Ebner (2017). By including these four levels, I attempt to show that they reveal a more complex picture of the attitudes to usage among speakers than would be apparent by simply using the notion of "acceptability". The third question related to the difference in attitudes to the usage features is: how does register, understood as context of use, affect the ratings by the respondents? The final question explored here is related to the respondents' social backgrounds, and the way these may have affected the ratings. Here I discuss specifically what the potential influence of these social factors might indicate about the attitudes of speakers, as well as prescriptivism

in general.

The chapter is divided into seven sections; the first six sections cover the six features analysed. The final section discusses the results of a comparison among the linguistic features. For each of the features, I discuss the results of speakers' attitudes on the basis of the data obtained with the survey discussed in Section 4.5. As mentioned there, after each respondent completed the survey, an unstructured post-survey interview followed. Three of the features investigated here were a frequent topic in the post-survey interviews; as a result, for these three features (*ain't*, the discourse particle *like*, and non-literal *literally*) I also discuss some interesting topics which came up in the post-survey interviews. The rest of the features were not discussed in the interviews to the same extent as *ain't*, the discourse particle *like*, and non-literal *literally*, so these data have not been included here.

7.2 *Ain't*

The three sentences containing *ain't* included in the survey are given in Table 7.1 below; as explained in Section 4.5, the sentences were taken from COCA, and slightly modified where necessary to avoid overly complex stimuli sentences. Given that *ain't* is a feature more characteristic of spoken language, two of the stimuli presented were spoken, and the third one was presented in an informal context. These spoken stimuli were recordings of sentences spoken by a male speaker of American English. The context of use for each stimulus was given in the survey as part of the description of what the respondents were about to hear or see; both spoken sentences were spoken by the same male speaker.

Context	**Stimulus sentence**
Spoken informal	I ain't going to see them next month.
Spoken formal	In school they ain't pushing me, they are encouraging me.
Written formal	You won't move forward in your career if you ain't brave enough.

Table 7.1: Stimuli sentences for *ain't*

I already mentioned in the explanation of the survey procedure in Section 4.5 that respondents rated each sentence across the four different levels, i.e. ACCEPTABILITY, CORRECTNESS, GOODNESS, and EDUCATEDNESS, on a five-point semantic differential scale. Having rated each sentence along the four different levels, respondents were then asked whether their ratings were affected by specific words,

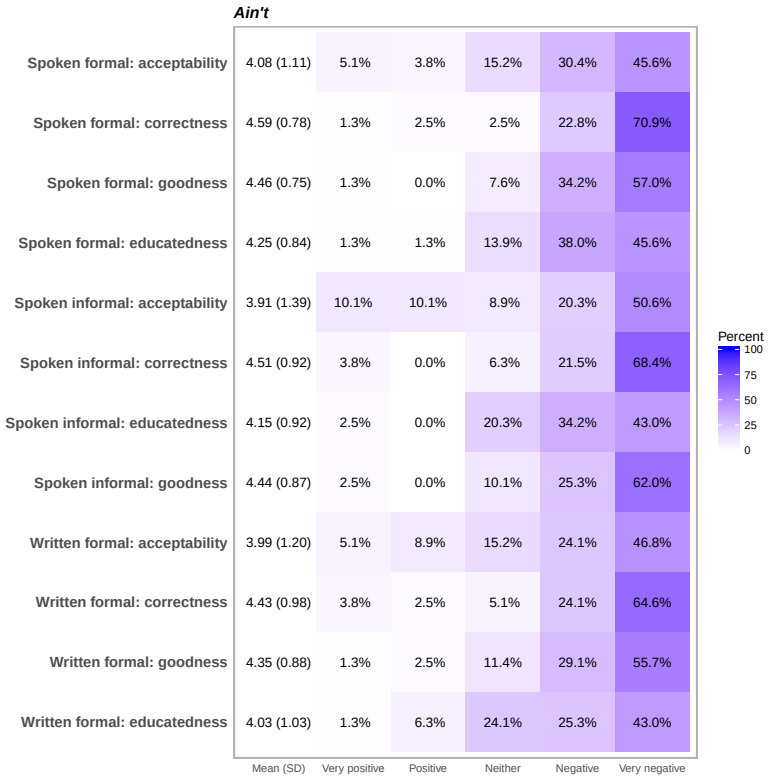

Figure 7.1: Distribution of ratings for *ain't*, n = 79

and, if so, which words. On the basis of these responses, the RECOGNITION LEVEL for each feature was calculated by counting the number of respondents who stated that their ratings were affected by the use of *ain't*. In the context of *ain't*, the RECOGNITION LEVEL differed across the three sentences, but it was fairly high for all three: between 83% and 91% of the respondents explicitly mentioned the use of *ain't* as the reason for the way they rated each of the sentences.

The distribution of the ratings of the three sentences with *ain't* across the four semantic differential scales is presented with the graph in Figure 7.1.[1] The horizontal axis shows the percentage of respondents who selected that particular point on the five-point scale; the vertical axis gives the description for the context of use of each

[1]The graphs were produced using the `Likert` package (Bryer and Speerschneider 2017) in R (R Core Team 2013).

sentence with *ain't*, and the four different levels.[2] The figure shows that the majority of the ratings belong to the 'very negative' end of the scale, across the four levels, i.e. ACCEPTABILITY, CORRECTNESS, GOODNESS, and EDUCATEDNESS, and this is true for each of the three sentences. For CORRECTNESS, more than 60% of the people considered the sentences incorrect. ACCEPTABILITY was rated the most evenly of all the levels, and the ACCEPTABILITY ratings for the 'very positive' and 'positive' points on the scale are highest for the spoken informal sentence.

To investigate these differences more robustly, multiple comparison tests for significance were carried out, in order to (a) identify differences in the ratings across the four levels and (b) identify differences in the ratings for the different contexts. For the first part, pairwise comparisons for all the levels were conducted. The data were tested for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk normality test (Baayen 2008: 73), which confirmed that the data are not normally distributed. For this reason, and because the comparisons are between paired samples, the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test was used to compare the differences in ratings between various groupings in the data. All the tests were done with the `wilcox.test()` function in R. Since multiple comparisons were conducted, the conventional level of 0.05 was adjusted with a Bonferroni correction by dividing the significance level of 0.05 by the number of tests done for each feature (Baayen 2008: 106). The actual level at which a result was considered significant is given for each feature separately, because the number of tests done per feature differed.

For *ain't* the only significant difference was found between the ratings for CORRECTNESS and those for ACCEPTABILITY for the spoken formal stimulus ($W = 4013$, $Z = -3.505$, $p = 0.0004$, effect size = 0.394[3]). In this context, the sentence was found to be more acceptable than correct. For all other comparisons, there was no statistically significant difference between the ratings. This suggests that *ain't* is not seen as unacceptable, but as incorrect.

The effects of context of use were tested with two pairwise comparison tests: one comparing the ratings for the spoken informal sentence and those for the spoken formal one for the four different levels, and another comparing the ratings for the

[2] I have chosen to represent the five points on the scale in the graphs with 'very negative', 'negative', 'neither', 'positive', and 'very positive' for practical reasons; the actual scales used in the survey were based on the four levels, ACCEPTABILITY, CORRECTNESS, GOODNESS, and EDUCATEDNESS, as can be seen in Figure 4.2

[3] There is no consensus on the most appropriate effect size measure for the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test; I have taken the standardised measure from Cohen (1988) as cited in Corder and Foreman (2009: 40). The conventions for the effect size, which ranges from 0 to 1, are: 0.10 as small, 0.30 as medium, and 0.50 as large.

spoken formal sentence and those for the written formal sentence, again, for the four different levels separately. In this way, the first type of comparison tests for differences in ratings between formal and informal spoken contexts, while the second tests for differences in ratings between spoken and written informal contexts. These kinds of comparisons did not result in any statistically significant differences in the ratings for the different contexts of use, which provides further evidence that the attitudes to *ain't* are fairly negative regardless of context of use.

Finally, testing for differences between the ratings of the two different age groups, gender groups, and ethnicity groups produced no statistically significant differences (see Table 4.10 for an overview of respondents' age and gender). This means that *ain't* is rated equally negatively by all respondents.

I now turn to discussing the insights provided by the post-survey interviews, as *ain't* is one of the features which was explicitly discussed in many of these interviews. The interviews revealed additional information about the attitudes speakers report to have towards this feature.[4] On the more negative end of the spectrum of attitudes, *ain't* is seen as characterising "broken English", as "not proper English" (58) or as "completely unacceptable" (59). The idea that *ain't* is not a word was expressed a few times (60, 61), and some informants also reacted quite viscerally to the word (62).

(58) The ones I rated as lower in education or correctness were the ones where they used *ain't*, because *ain't*, you know, it's not proper English. You understand what the person is saying, but just in terms of the basic structure of English it's not English. So, if I say 'this is a good film' then that's proper English. But if I say 'This ain't a good film' then that's generally not considered proper English. (A, m, 25)[5]

(59) I think I reacted a little bit more strongly to the ... more to *ain't* instead of *aren't*. I don't know why it just sounded completely unacceptable to me. (J, m, 32)

(60) I was not allowed to speak like that growing up. If I tried to say *ain't*, my parents would be like 'No, that's not a word!' (E, f, 19)

(61) Come on, you know *ain't* isn't a word, it just sounds silly when you say it. (R, m, 30)

(62) *Ain't*, um, *ain't* just, it hits me in my solar plexus ... it should not be used at all.

[4]The rest of this section is based on an analysis of attitudes towards *ain't* expressed in the interviews I conducted, published in Kostadinova (2018b).

[5]For each quote, I include the respondent's first-name initial, their gender, and their age.

(J, m, 29)

Milder reactions referred to the ACCEPTABILITY of the word depending on the context of use (63, 64), as well as its ACCEPTABILITY in particular regions of the United States, or with particular groups of people (65, 66). It was generally recognised that as long as it is used for effect in a situation in which there is a basis to do so, *ain't* is not a problematic usage, and does not leave a negative impression.

(63) *Ain't* is one of those things that it's like – as long as the context is informal, then it's fine. (D, m, 37)

(64) Well, it depends in what context, I mean… it could be understood as slang, you know in certain contexts, especially if someone is meaning to sound very casual, very colloquial. (A, f, 23)

(65) It's more acceptable for certain cultures. It doesn't mean that it's incorrect, but it's just different. (M, f, 27)

(66) *Ain't* usually people don't say unless it's in conversation or just if you're in a certain region or somewhere where that's acceptable (C, f, 28)

A number of informants associated the word with lower-class speakers (67) and lower levels of education (68). Some also associated the word with African American or Hispanic speakers (69, 70), and associations with the South were also common (70). The majority of the informants saw no clear or straightforward relationship between the race or ethnic background of the speakers and their use of *ain't*. The region and the economic status of the speakers seemed more of a determinant than race or ethnicity. It is also important to point out that the use of *ain't* does not seem to be perceived as a marker of a particular social class if the person displays the right context-sensitivity about when to use the form (see Section 5.2.1). In other words, *ain't* as a variant may occur in any social variety of American English, but is not believed to do so with high frequency. When it does, it becomes a marker of a specific stigmatised dialect (cf. Wolfram 2004: 65). It is important to note here that this observation agrees with a similar line of argumentation found in a number of usage guides discussing *ain't*. In these guides, it is argued that *ain't* is acceptable in the language of speakers whose status as "educated speakers" is established, and when they use *ain't*, it is evident from the context that they do so for specific reasons (e.g. to be funny, to make a point, etc.). However, the argument goes, speakers who

use *ain't* all the time are likely to be seen as uneducated.

(67) It's a real kind of style thing. It shows where somebody is from or it might show somebody's class; probably like a lesser tier class. Higher-tiered people do not touch that word! (A, m, 33)

(68) I feel like, I have friends who'd say like 'I ain't got time for that' but they're joking cause they're being ridiculous. But if someone actually said that non-ironically, like if someone said that seriously like I would think they were an idiot or like not educated. (A, f, 32)

(69) [. . .] both African American and Hispanic [use *ain't*] because they pattern off of what they hear. If you hear it you use it. (L, f, 33)

(70) Those things that are aberrant to standard English are I feel like dialects that come from rural areas, like – and that seems really obvious, but words like *ain't* or the double negative tend to come from – or like, I think people associate them with places like the South which also tend to have – and also get associated with I guess African American population as well and that's such a – that is so fraught with the potential for judgements in a way that I don't think needs to be sometimes. (E, f, 34)

A number of speakers also commented on their own use of the word. Some of them gave a more positive account of using the word as something that makes them feel casual and colloquial and in line with the speech norms of their community, and as something about which they have a sense of when to use it and when not to (71, 72). Others commented on avoiding the word *ain't* (73, 74). What is interesting to note here is that all of the examples here come from African American speakers. These attitudes are a clear indication of the covert prestige of this feature.

(71) I'll be honest with you I use ain't sometimes, yeah. I know it's not grammatically correct but sometimes like, you know 'I ain't going there', you know, it's like casual. I wouldn't use it in like a classroom setting, but I use it with like most of my friends. A lot of African Americans you know black people say it so. . . Me, I say it all the time, I hear it at my job, well I work in a mostly cultural area in LA, so I hear it all the time. (K, m, 22)

(72) Ain't was definitely something that I had to figure out. If I'm in a professional setting those are not words I would use. I hear it a lot, now a lot more, and I find myself as well correcting the children when they say it. (L, f, 40)

(73) I wouldn't really use *ain't* anymore because I was corrected as a kid. . . . It

doesn't bother me, so I've come to know what it means. (T, m, 21)

(74) I say it every now and then, but not as consistently as I used to. (P, f, 19)

As a final note with reference to the responses to *ain't* given in the interviews, it may be said that some of them reflect the observation of Bloomfield (1944) about secondary and tertiary responses to language. The first interesting case in this respect is a couple of exchanges I had with speakers on the issue of *ain't* not being a word. The statement that *ain't* is not a word was usually made after I had asked these respondents about their thoughts on *ain't*. The observation that *ain't* is not a real word is thus a secondary response, and it is usually made in an authoritative, confident fashion. A tertiary response is usually a response to the interviewer pointing out that *ain't* actually is a word. Bloomfield notes that "the tertiary response is hostile; the speaker grows contemptuous or angry" (Bloomfield 1944: 49). Although this was not always the case in the interviews I conducted (with the exception of one respondent who said that "if you use *ain't* you are a moron"), the informants did become passionate about proving their point of view about the use or status of a particular form in the language.

7.3 The discourse particle *like*

Attitudes to the discourse particle *like* were investigated on the basis of two sentences included in the survey. Because the discourse particle *like* is almost exclusively used in informal spoken language, the two stimuli were presented as spoken segments from a conversation between friends. The sentences and their contexts are given in Table 7.2. As mentioned in Section 3.4, the discourse particle *like* is often associated with female speakers, hence the decision to include two spoken stimuli which differ in the gender of the speaker.[6]

context	**stimulus sentence**
Spoken informal, M	Didn't you, like, all like go to, erm..., like a boot camp?
Spoken informal, F	I've like done a couple of like summer camps in like languages and accounting.

Table 7.2: Stimuli sentences used for the discourse particle *like*

[6]It should be noted that although a case can be made for the increasing use of the discourse particle *like* in informal online communication, the survey did not include a sentence in this context (but cf. Ebner 2017).

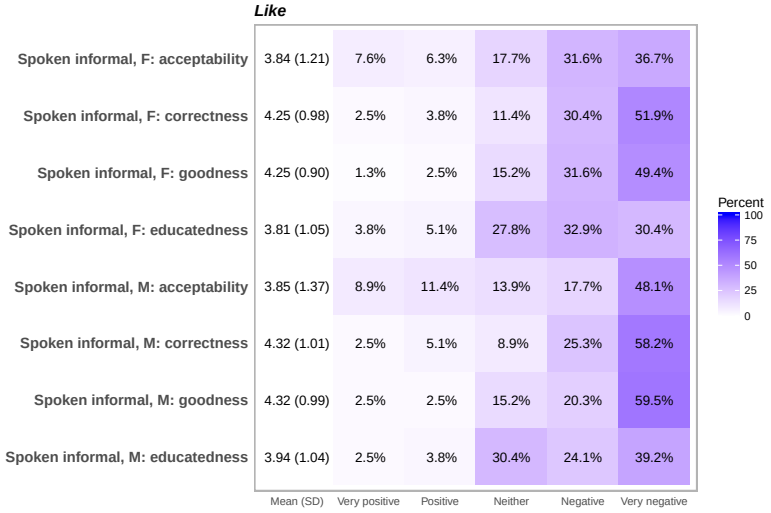

Figure 7.2: Distribution of ratings for *like*, n = 79

The RECOGNITION LEVEL for *like* was relatively high: 77% of the respondents said that their rating of the sentence spoken by the male speaker was affected by the use of the word *like*. In the case of the sentence spoken by a female speaker, the RECOGNITION LEVEL was 93%. The distribution of the ratings for the two sentences, on the basis of the entire set of responses, is given in the heat graph in Figure 7.2. The graph shows that the sentences with *like* are very negatively evaluated. The ratings for ACCEPTABILITY seem to be somewhat more evenly distributed than those for CORRECTNESS and GOODNESS. What is important to note here is that EDUCATEDNESS is rated most neutrally, with about 30% of the respondents rating both stimuli as 'neither educated nor uneducated'.

The Wilcoxon test was used to conduct similar pairwise comparisons to those carried out for *ain't*. The conventional level of significance, 0.05, was Bonferroni corrected by dividing 0.05 by the number of comparisons done for the discourse particle *like*, i.e. 56. None of the pairwise comparisons between different levels was statistically significant.

Testing for the effects of context was not technically possible in this case, because both sentences were presented in the same context, i.e. spoken informal. The only difference tested here was between the ratings for the sentence spoken by a male speaker and those for the sentence spoken by a female speaker. Four such comparisons were done, for each of the four levels: ACCEPTABILITY, CORRECTNESS, GOODNESS,

and EDUCATEDNESS. These comparisons also resulted in no statistically significant differences between the two stimuli.

Finally, with respect to the social variables of the respondents, i.e. age, gender, and ethnicity (see Section 4.5 and Table 4.10), the most significant result for the discourse particle *like*, both statistically and in general, was the difference in ratings between the two age groups, 29 OR BELOW and 30 OR ABOVE. The first group of respondents rated the sentence containing *like* spoken by the male speaker less negatively for CORRECTNESS than the second group (W = 300, Z = −3.512, $p < 0.001$, effect size = 0.611). A similar statistically significant difference was identified between the two age groups for the CORRECTNESS ratings of the sentence with the discourse particle *like* spoken by the female speaker (W = 283, Z = −3.626, $p < 0.001$, effect size = 0.631).

I now turn to the discussion of the discourse particle *like* in the post-survey interviews. The discourse particle *like* was most unequivocally noted as being very frequent, especially in the region where the interviews took place (75). Although respondents stated that they know that *like* may be frowned upon, and were aware of the stereotypes associated with its use, they still noted its high frequency of use and the fact that the word would probably not be affected by the commonly encountered negative attitudes about its use (76, 77, 78).

(75) *Like* is becoming pretty widespread that we add everywhere. (A, f, 23)

(76) *Like* is never going anywhere. Yep. *Like* is here to stay. Especially in California. (J, m, 29)

(77) *Like* is definitely a huge word, we say it all the time, we don't even really think about it until you see it or hear someone else saying it. (A, f, 24)

(78) It's common. I use it sometimes. Historically it's considered like Valley speak, like LA, kind of like ditsy, like you know, so it's – I think it's sort of widespread now. (D, m, 37)

On the more negative side, the typical attitudes expressed towards the use of *like* were that it signals weak language and the inability to speak grammatically correct English (79). However, one informant also noted that among the younger generations of speakers, with whom *like* is most readily associated by the majority of informants, not using *like* may sometimes come across as old-fashioned, and that *like* is becoming acceptable in informal or professional spoken communication (80). This may be

indicative of a growing covert prestige of *like* among the group of speakers that seem to use it most, and with whom it is most often associated.

(79) Coming from the Valley, the people who invented *like* and whatever and *oh my god*, again that falls into weak language – you are trying to delay your point and I don't like it... I just don't like it. It's weak language. (J, m, 19)

(80) I believe it's a little more old-school to not use the word *like*, because professors over 30 would question it, but younger professors I've had, for example my debate professor, he would always denounce the use of *like* during speech, like when it was professional, but throughout regular conversation he would use it, we would all use it and it wasn't stigmatised in that sense. (A, f, 22)

Discourse particle *like* is clearly associated with a set of personal qualities related to absent-mindedness and low intelligence (81), which is probably in turn related to the stereotype that the people who use *like* are "Valley girls", i.e. rich young women who have too much money and time on their hands (82). However, some informants also recognised that such stereotypes do not really hold if they think about their own experience with the word *like*. Thus, the two main associations of the use of *like* were with the region of Los Angeles, or the West Coast more generally (76, 78), and with younger speakers (83), regardless of race or ethnicity. In some cases, however, the discourse particle *like* was associated with white people more than any other ethnicity. A possibly positive association with the word *like* can be found in the observation that *like* represents a fashionable way of speaking, popularised by celebrities (84). Finally, *like* is seen as becoming so widespread that it crosses the boundaries of age and it is becoming ever more prevalent across all age groups (85).

(81) I think for me it conjures up an association with empty-headedness essentially. (E, f, 34)

(82) For example girls who use *like* a lot, most people's stereotype is that they're very air-headed or dumb girls, 'like I don't know like' ... like, the idea you get is that it must be some really dumb-headed girl. (A, m, 25)

(83) *Like*? Um, younger – I don't know why younger. It just makes me think younger, or someone that doesn't have that much to say even though I just said *like*. It's *like* really hard to erase it. (A, f, 24)

(84) I feel like *like* is a fad. Celebrities and people will be like 'like, you know' and they do it on purpose – and it just became a thing and I say it a lot. (B, f, 20)

(85) I think that it's just infiltrated every – almost every age, every community, both genders that, it's become so accepted to the point where anyone says Valley girl anymore anyway . . . it is something you hear in every group of people. (A, f, 32)

There is a clear tendency to stigmatise *like* and to associate it with a set of negative personal characteristics, as well as with a particular social status of white middle class (female) speakers. It is interesting to note in this context that, while Wolfram (2004: 59) observes that "the speech of low-status groups in American society tends to be much more socially marked than that of high-status groups", this is certainly not what we can observe in the context of the attitudes expressed towards *like*. The most interesting finding that came out of the interviews is that *like* may be developing some degree of covert prestige among certain groups of speakers, as evidenced by more positive comments on its use (e.g. 80).

7.4 Non-literal *literally*

Attitudes to non-literal *literally* were explored using three different sentences. Given that non-literal *literally* would be expected to be found more often in spoken language or informal contexts, two of the sentences were spoken informal, and one was written informal. The three sentences used in the survey are given in Table 7.3. Two of the sentences were presented in a spoken informal context, one spoken by a male speaker and the other spoken by a female speaker. I was also interested in exploring the extent to which non-literal *literally* would be rated differently when used by men than when used by women.

context	**stimulus sentence**
Spoken informal, M	I literally died from boredom on my date last night!
Spoken informal, F	There is a story in this book that literally blew my mind!
Written informal	This book literally blew my mind.

Table 7.3: Stimuli sentences for *literally*

The RECOGNITION LEVEL for *literally* was fairly high, at about 70%, but lower than that for both *ain't*, which was between 83% and 91%, and the discourse particle *like*, which was between 77% and 93%, which might suggest that fewer respondents considered *literally* problematic in this context. Further evidence for this observation comes from an analysis of the distribution patterns of the ratings for the sentences with

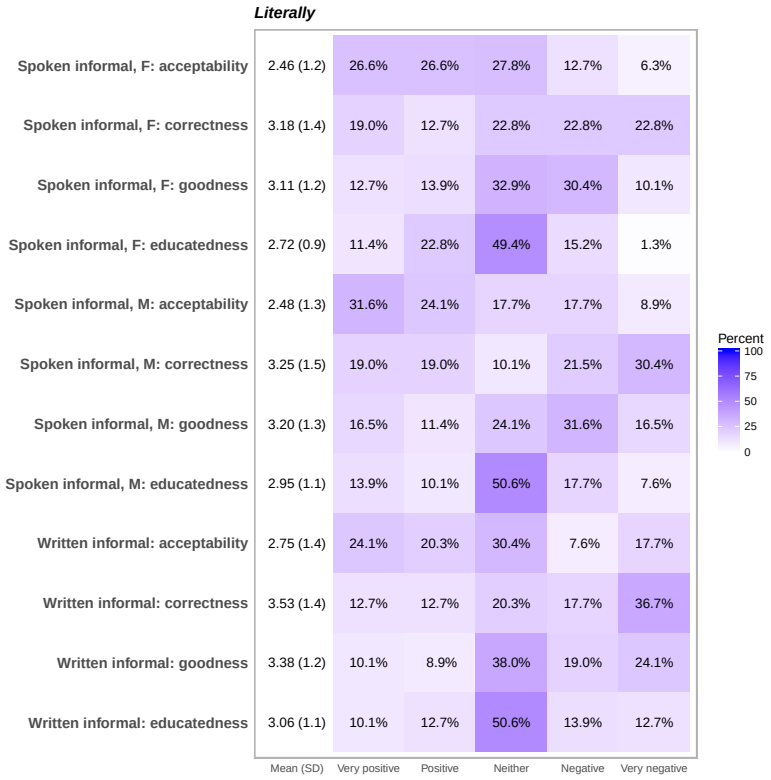

Figure 7.3: Distribution of ratings for *literally*, n = 79

literally. The distribution of the ratings for the four different levels for these sentences is plotted in Figure 7.3. The plot shows that the ratings are not predominantly negative, but are rather differently distributed across the four levels. The ratings for ACCEPTABILITY seem to be predominantly on the positive side of the scale, while those for CORRECTNESS tend to be more on the negative side. GOODNESS and EDUCATEDNESS are predominantly neutrally rated. These patterns for the ratings clearly point to a difference between these ratings and the ratings for *ain't* and *like*, which were more uniformly negative; I will discuss this question in more detail in the final section of this chapter, where I will compare between the ratings for the different language features included in this study.

Looking at the results from the statistical significance testing, I found that only one statistically significant result was obtained, and that was in the difference between the ratings for ACCEPTABILITY and those for GOODNESS for the spoken informal

sentence uttered by a female speaker (W = 2143.5, Z = −3.492, $p < 0.0005$, effect size = 0.392). This difference shows that while non-literal *literally* tends to be rated more positively for ACCEPTABILITY, it is at the same time rated more negatively for GOODNESS. The rest of the ratings were not significantly different. There were no differences between the ratings for the four different levels for the sentence spoken by a male speaker, nor for the written informal sentence.

To determine if differences in the ratings influenced by context of use, two sets of pairwise comparisons were carried out. The first set consisted of a comparison between the ratings for the sentence spoken by a male speaker and the one spoken by a female speaker, for each of the four levels separately. The second set of comparisons was carried out between one of the spoken informal sentences and the written informal sentence. These two were compared across each of the four different levels. There were no significant differences between the different stimuli across the four levels.

Finally, in terms of social variables, differences in the ratings across age, gender, and ethnicity groups were tested. These resulted in no statistically significant differences, which suggests that the social background of informants may not play a role in how non-literal *literally* is rated (see Section 7.9 for further discussion of this issue).

Literally was often mentioned in interviews. The attitudes expressed towards the non-literal use of *literally* range from stronger and more negative reactions to reactions that display a more moderate account of the use. What is striking in almost all of the opinions expressed, however, is the observation that this use of *literally* is quite prevalent, and tends to be associated with a younger generation of speakers, as well as with white Americans. In terms of meaning, people seem to be predominantly aware of its INCORRECTNESS, but at the same time quite attuned to the frequent use of the word as an intensifier. This use is folk-linguistically explained in terms of someone trying to be dramatic or funny when using it. The negative reactions came from people who stated that they are personally bothered by the word, as exemplified in (86, 87) below, and often tend to associate this usage with stupidity (87), immaturity (88), or lack of knowledge about what the word means (89).

(86) Yeah, there it kept saying *literally* – 'it literally blew my mind'. *Blew my mind* didn't bother me. It was the word *literally* that bothered me because if you say 'it literally blew my mind' it means it actually blew your mind and your mind exploded. (M, m, 42)

(87) I hate the misuse of the word *literally* – that just, to me – but I was trying to

think why I hate it and I can't come up with an argument, 'cause I do think it just sounds stupid to use it so incorrectly and it's so prevalent. That is a pet peeve of mine. (E, f, 34)

(88) I think at an unconscious level it just means that they are less of an adult. Because my mother would not say that. There are just certain people who wouldn't say literally. Yeah, it just seems immature. (A, f, 32)

(89) *Literally* is used a lot; I associate it with not knowing what the word means. (K, m, 60)

Most informants, however, gave a more moderate account of the non-literal use of *literally*, and the main argument for why they thought the feature was accepted was that they noticed it was becoming prevalent and more acceptable (90). A number of respondents even said that, despite their awareness of non-literal *literally* being "technically incorrect", they would still use it because the word is so often used, and that generally they are not bothered by it (91, 92).

(90) You know, I don't use that one myself very much and I think people use *literally* so much that I'm probably deaf to it unless it's, once again, egregious misuse. I mean, I remember reading an article not too long ago on the law blog that it's invaded legal script too. But everyone does it now so I think that may be one that's getting more accepted and more normalised. (R, f, 32)

(91) I used to use that all the time but then I felt like it was putting a big emphasis on something. (L, f, 40)

(92) I do that. I know it's not correct English, but I would say *literally* – 'literally this, literally that' – even though it's not technically always correct. (E, f, 19)

Finally, in terms of associations with particular groups of speakers, the majority of the informants stated that the strongest association of non-literal *literally* is with younger educated speakers (93). A number of people also related it to white American speakers (94). Finally, one informant, belonging, interestingly, to the category of young, highly educated white American speakers interviewed, identified this use of *literally* as something that is part of how they talk and as something that shows knowledge of language and ability to use language creatively (95).

(93) *Literally* has been totally abused lately and I don't think people who use it sound as uneducated as people who use *like* just because it's more current, I guess, and

it's a more complicated word than *like*. . . . It's definitely I younger person thing. Yeah, like, like, pre-teens to twenty-four. (C, f, 21)

(94) There were clearly, like, white people mistakes, grammatically, like *literally* and *like* and this and that, and then there were African American mistakes of *ain't* and *got* and. . . To break it out of race, maybe it's more socioeconomic, and what sort of neighborhood you're from, but yeah. (E, m, 28)

(95) The use of the word *literally*, I think of it as somewhat acceptable. 'Cause it's more hyperbole in what you're saying, so I think of it as more of a descriptive term. Yes, it's being used incorrectly, but it's being used in almost a funny way, and to use *literally* is not so erroneous that it's a problem, but it's definitely wrong. Sometimes I think the use of the word *literally* is just funny. I have done it before. A lot of us have. 'I literally wanted to kill myself!' The majority people that I know, especially those I interact with, they use *literally*; they use it a lot. It's almost funny when they use it and it shows more breadth of languages because *literally* is, I mean, to know what *literally* means – It's actually a word that I don't think a lot of the general population, especially people who do not have interesting grammar, would actually know what it means. (J, m, 26)

In summary, the accounts of and opinions about non-literal *literally* which the informants give show a high degree of complexity and awareness of the usage of *literally*, as well as its sociolinguistic variation. Strong opinions are present in some speakers, but generally, despite those strong opinions, speakers seem to be aware of its increasing use. This awareness seems to be the reason for the ACCEPTABILITY of the word, especially in context of its emphatic, dramatic, or humorous use. Its main association is with the language of younger speakers, and among this age group the use of non-literal *literally* does not seem to be related to education or social class as much as with a particular type of mainstream youth culture. Although it is too early to predict future trends for certain, it can be hypothesised that the positive interpretation of intensifier *literally* as exemplified in (95) above, may signal a tendency towards greater general acceptance of the word, as well as towards a potential change in the norms of usage. What this shows seems to be in line with the findings of Ebner (2017) on the attitudes to *literally* among British English speakers, where it is also associated with younger speakers.

7.5 Negative concord

The attitudes towards negative concord were investigated on the basis of the collection of ratings data for three sentences. These sentences were presented in both spoken and written, as well as formal and informal contexts. The sentences containing negative concord, and their contexts, are given in Table 7.4 below.

Context	**Sentence**
Spoken formal	I'm strong minded and I'm not going to let nobody lead me off in the wrong direction.
Written informal	I'm sorry. But I'm not going to argue with nobody.
Written formal	I thanked the good lord that I had not killed nobody.

Table 7.4: Stimuli sentences for negative concord

The RECOGNITION LEVEL of negative concord was about 75%, suggesting that the majority of the ratings for these three sentences were influenced by the presence of negative concord. The distribution of the ratings for each of the three sentences, as well as the four different levels, is given in Figure 7.4.

As can be seen from the graph, negative concord is in the same category as *ain't* and the discourse particle *like*. The ratings are all predominantly negative for each sentence, across the four different levels. The distribution patterns show that CORRECTNESS is most strongly negatively rated, with more than 60% of the respondents rating all sentences as 'very incorrect'. Ratings seem to be somewhat less negative for ACCEPTABILITY and EDUCATEDNESS, but they still remain on the negative side of the scale.

Looking at statistically significant differences between the four different levels for each of the sentences separately produced only one significant result. A statistically significant difference was identified between the ratings for ACCEPTABILITY and those for CORRECTNESS for the written informal sentence ($W = 4100.5, Z = -3.680, p < 0.0004$, effect size = 0.414). The rest of the pairwise comparisons between different levels did not result in any statistically significant differences.

Context of use and the social variables included in the survey were found not to result in statistically significant differences in ratings either. In other words, sentences with negative concord were rated negatively across the four different scales, and these ratings were not affected by context of use or the social background of the respondents.

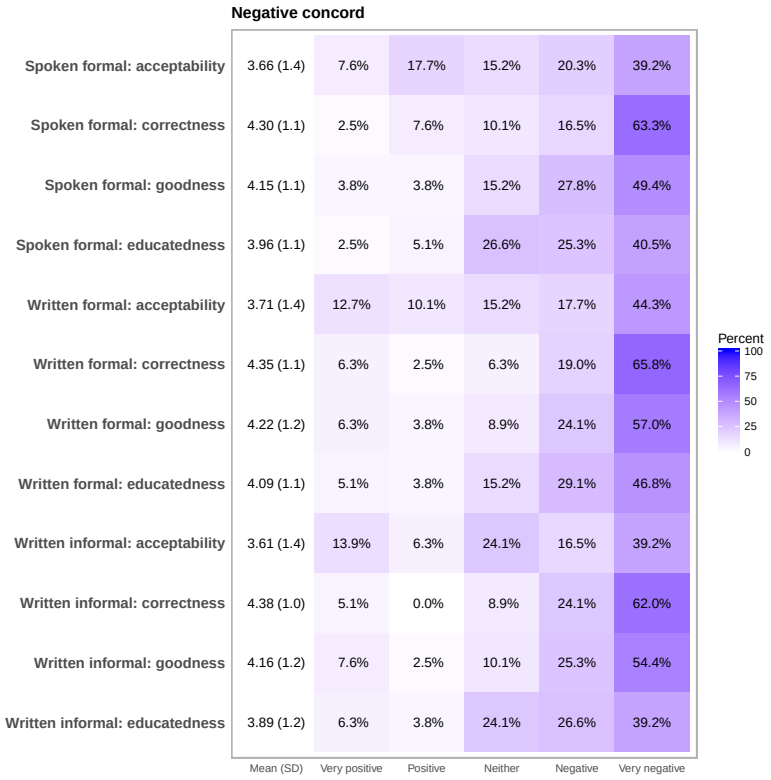

Figure 7.4: Distribution of ratings for negative concord, n = 79

7.6 Pronouns in coordinated phrases

The attitudes to pronouns in coordinated phrases were tested with more sentences than those included for the other features. On the assumption that object *I* and subject *me* are more commonly used in informal language in standard English, for each of these features an additional sentence was included in the survey in which the 'correct' variant is used (see Section 4.5). In this way, an additional analysis was done to test for any potential differences in the ratings between object *I*/subject *me* and their respective 'correct' variants. The sentences for object *I* and subject *me* are given in Table 7.5, where the sentence with the 'correct' variant is marked with 'C'.

The RECOGNITION LEVEL for sentences with object *I* was lower than for the features discussed so far, with a little over 50% of the respondents explicitly stating that their ratings of the sentences containing object *I* were affected by the use of this

Context	Sentence
Object *I*	
Spoken informal	I think this has been the trouble between you and I.
Written informal	This trip has been a great adventure for my parents and I.
Written formal	The collaboration with your company has been a great pleasure for my workers and I.
Written formal, C	These findings have been very important for my colleagues and me.
Subject *me*	
Spoken informal	Me and my husband went to a party with several other young couples.
Written informal	Me and dad are on our way home!
Written formal	My team and me are working to resolve your problem as soon as possible.
Written formal, C	My colleagues and I will look into this and get back to you as soon as possible.

Table 7.5: Stimuli sentences for object *I* and subject *me*

variant. The distribution of ratings for the four sentences with object *I*, across the four different levels, is shown in Figure 7.5. The figure shows that there is a fairly positive to neutral distribution of the ratings. This is also the first feature among those discussed so far for which some of the ratings are on the 'very positive' side of the scale. Some variation is nevertheless noticeable. First of all, the sentence which contained the 'correct' variant, object *me*, is decidedly positively rated. The rest of the sentences are more varied in their ratings. The spoken informal sentence, as well as the written informal one, are positively rated for ACCEPTABILITY. The ratings for CORRECTNESS are more evenly distributed between the two extremes, and this is especially the case for the written informal sentence. For EDUCATEDNESS, the three sentences with object *I* were all rated neutrally, while the rest of the ratings were distributed evenly across the two extremes of the scale.

Pairwise comparison tests were applied to explore differences between the ratings for the four levels for each of the sentences separately. No significant differences were found in the ratings across the four different levels, which may suggest that ACCEPTABILITY, CORRECTNESS, GOODNESS, and EDUCATEDNESS were not seen as different dimensions by the respondents.

In terms of differences in ratings affected by the opposition between spoken and written contexts of use, Wilcoxon tests were used to compare the ratings for the

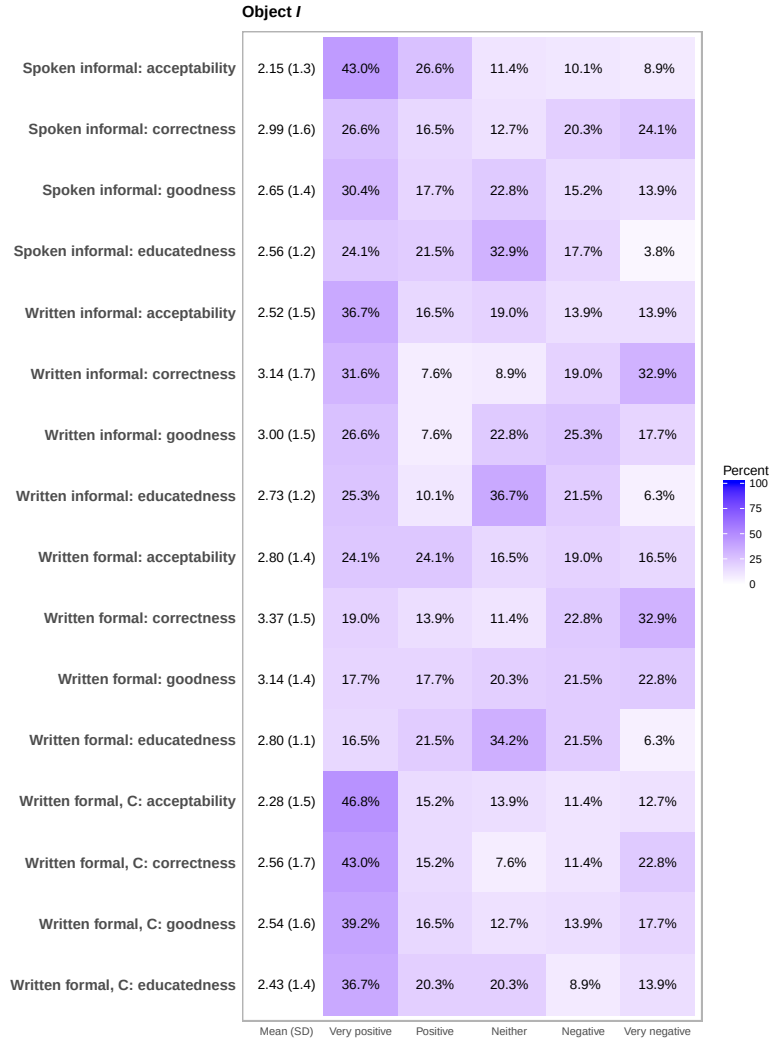

Figure 7.5: Distribution of ratings for object *I*, n = 79

spoken informal sentence with those for the written informal one. The ratings were compared for each of the four levels separately. These tests did not result in statistically significant differences between these two sentences. A similar comparison was done between the ratings for the written informal sentence and those for the written formal one, for each level separately. Here too, no statistically significant differences were identified at the Bonferroni corrected significance level. Finally, a comparison between

the written formal sentence with object *I* and the written formal sentence with object *me* also showed that there are no significant differences in the ratings for these two sentences. No statistically significant differences were identified in relation to the social factors included in the analysis.

The ratings for subject *me* are distributed rather differently than those for object *I*. The first difference was identified in the RECOGNITION LEVEL for the two features. While for object *I* only about 50% of the respondents pointed to the use of this variant as the factor affecting their ratings, in the case of subject *me* the recognition level was between 85% and 90%. This indicates that subject *me* is more salient as a problematic usage than object *I*. The ratings for the sentences with subject *me* are plotted in in Figure 7.6. The plot shows that the majority of the sentences with subject *me* are rated negatively, with a few being rated neutrally. This is especially the case with the ratings for CORRECTNESS: almost 50% of the respondents rated the spoken informal sentence as 'very incorrect', with the figures reaching 54% for the written informal sentence and 67% for the written formal one. The ratings for ACCEPTABILITY were distributed fairly evenly across the five points on the scale, which suggests that CORRECTNESS and ACCEPTABILITY may be perceived differently in the case of subject *me*; I return to this question in the next paragraph, where I discuss the results from the statistical tests. Before considering this, two more observations should be made on the basis of Figure 7.6. First, in terms of EDUCATEDNESS, the ratings tend to be predominantly neutral for the spoken informal and the written informal sentences. In the case of the written formal sentence, the EDUCATEDNESS ratings are somewhat more negative. Finally, the sentence with subject *I* is very positively rated across all four levels.

In order to obtain more robust evidence for these differences, pairwise tests were done to compare the ratings for the four different levels for each of the sentences. These tests showed that subject *me* in spoken informal contexts is rated more positively for ACCEPTABILITY than for CORRECTNESS; the difference is statistically significant ($W = 4400$, $Z = -4.581$, $p < 0.0004$, effect size = 0.515). The same sentence was rated more negatively for CORRECTNESS than for EDUCATEDNESS; for the latter level, the ratings are neutral ($W = 4263.5$, $Z = -4.110$, $p < 0.0004$, effect size = 0.462). In written informal contexts, ACCEPTABILITY and CORRECTNESS are rated differently ($W = 4455$, $Z = -4.810$, $p < 0.0004$, effect size = 0.541): while the use of subject *me* is considered incorrect, it is also considered acceptable. CORRECTNESS and EDUCATEDNESS were also rated differently ($W = 4294$, $Z = -4.254$, $p < 0.0004$, effect size = 0.478). In the written formal context, CORRECTNESS and ACCEPTABILITY are not rated differently; however, there is a statistically significant

difference between the ratings for CORRECTNESS, which are negative, and those for EDUCATEDNESS, which are neutral (W = 4205, Z = −4.107, $p < 0.0004$, effect size = 0.462). Finally, for the control stimulus, which contained the subject *I* variant, all ratings were positive, and there is no statistically significant difference between the four levels.

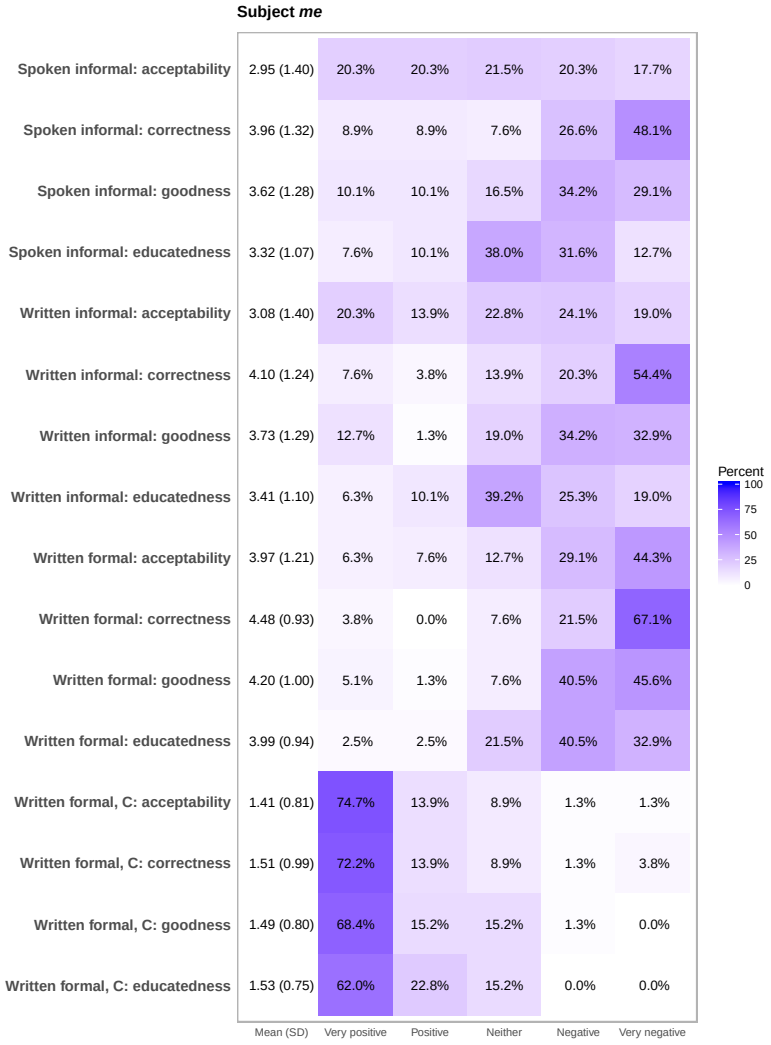

Figure 7.6: Distribution of ratings for subject *me*, n = 79

Comparing the ratings for the spoken informal and the written informal sentences

resulted in no statistically significant differences for any of the four levels. Statistically significant differences were identified between the ratings for ACCEPTABILITY for the written informal and the written formal sentence, with the latter being rated more negatively than the former (W = 4285, Z = −4.174, $p < 0.0004$, effect size = 0.469). The ratings for EDUCATEDNESS were also statistically significantly different (W = 4094.5, Z = −3.532, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.397). Finally, the comparison between the written formal sentence and the control sentence containing subject *I* were significantly different for ACCEPTABILITY (W = 5799.5, Z = −9.733, $p <$ 2.2e-16, effect size = 1.095), CORRECTNESS (W = 5905.5, Z = −10.216, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 1.149), GOODNESS (W = 5956, Z = −10.236, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 1.151), and EDUCATEDNESS (W = 5988, Z = −10.253, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 1.153). The last result is especially interesting, in the light of the parallel comparison done for sentences with object *I* and object *me*, which were not rated significantly differently. Comparing the ratings by different gender, age, and ethnicity groups did not produce any statistically significant results.

7.7 The split infinitive

The final feature investigated is the split infinitive. The sentences containing a split infinitive which were included in the survey are given in Table 7.6. In the context of this feature, sentences with a split infinitive were presented in spoken formal, written

context	**stimulus sentence**
Spoken formal	So, I would encourage young men and women to seriously consider a career in law enforcement.
Written formal	This therapy has been shown to significantly reduce the risks of heart attacks and strokes.
Written informal	Trying to decide if there is anything interesting to further explore in my new town.
Written informal, C	Trying to find out if there is anything interesting to explore further in my new town.

Table 7.6: Stimuli sentences for the split infinitive

formal, and written informal contexts. In addition to these three, a sentence with a modified non-split infinitive was also included in a written informal context; this sentence is marked 'C' in Table 7.6. This sentence allows for a comparison to be done between the ratings for the sentence containing a split infinitive and the sentence with

a non-split infinitive in written informal contexts.

The split infinitive was the feature with the lowest RECOGNITION LEVEL: only about 4% of the respondents explicitly mentioned the split infinitive as the words which affected their ratings for the sentences. The rest of the respondents commented on other aspects of the sentence, but not on the split infinitive. This suggests that the split infinitive is not indexical of incorrectness. Figure 7.7 shows that, of all the features analysed, the ratings for the split infinitive are the most positive overall. The figure shows that for both the spoken formal and the written formal sentences, the majority of the ratings were on the 'very positive' side of the scale, and here the ratings are the highest for ACCEPTABILITY, followed by CORRECTNESS, GOODNESS, and EDUCATEDNESS. In the case of EDUCATEDNESS and GOODNESS for the spoken formal sentence, no respondents rated this sentence at the 'very negative' end of the scale. The peculiar thing about the ratings for the sentences with a split infinitive is that the sentence in the written informal context was not rated as positively as the other two sentences with a split infinitive. In addition, there are no noticeable differences in the ratings between the written informal sentence with a split infinitive and the one with a non-split infinitive, even though they are fairly similar, as shown in Table 7.6. The reason for this is in part the result of a limitation in the sentence presented to respondents; the sentence contained no explicitly realised subject, which resulted in most of the respondents criticising this aspect of the sentence structure. I will discuss this in further detail below, after providing an overview of the results from the statistical tests.

The four different levels were not rated significantly differently for any of the stimuli. In terms of register, the comparison between spoken formal and written formal contexts is not statistically significant across the four levels. The ratings for written informal contexts are, however, statistically significantly more negative than those for the written formal stimulus for ACCEPTABILITY ($W = 4198.5$, $Z = -4.003$, $p < 0.00055$, effect size = 0.450), CORRECTNESS ($W = 4647.5$, $Z = -5.522$, $p < 0.00055$, effect size = 0.621), GOODNESS ($W = 4791$, $Z = -6.061$, $p < 0.00055$, effect size = 0.682), and EDUCATEDNESS ($W = 4654$, $Z = -5.561$, $p < 0.00055$, effect size = 0.625).

Similar statistically significant differences were identified between the ratings for the spoken formal sentence and the written informal one. Finally, a comparison between two written informal sentences, one with a split infinitive and the other with a post-modified infinitive, shows that these two sentences were rated the same: no statistically significant differences were identified. In terms of social variables, no

statistically significant differences in the ratings were identified.

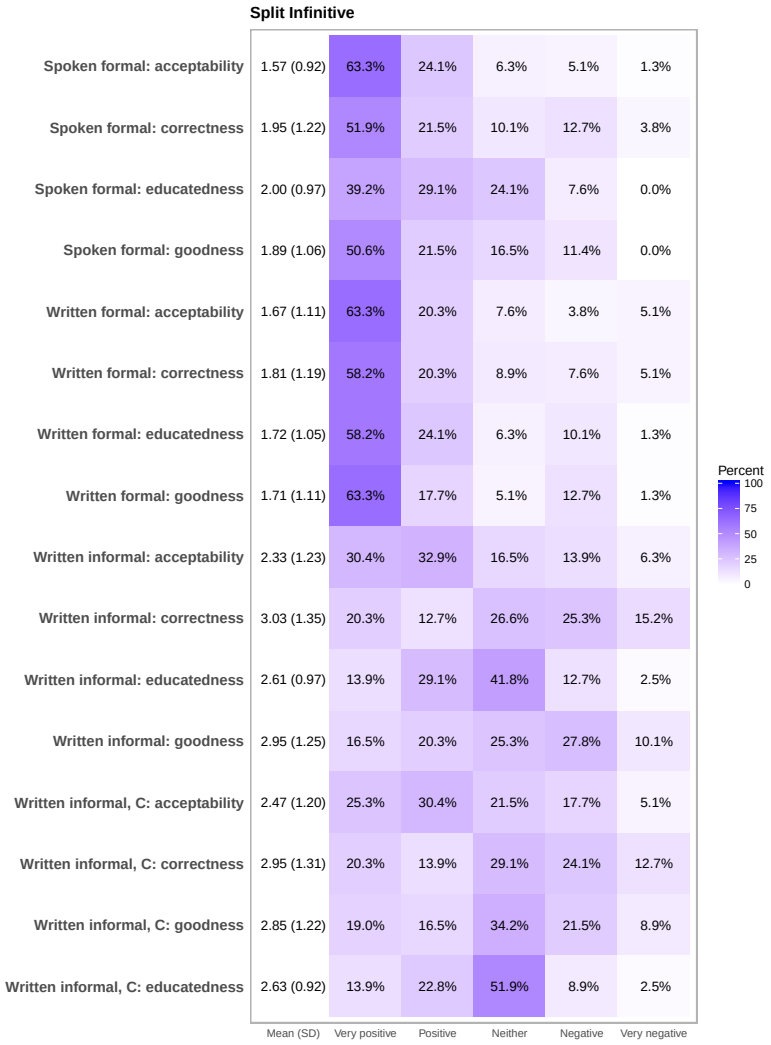

Figure 7.7: Distribution of ratings for the split infinitive, n = 79

These results show that the majority of the respondents are unaware of the split infinitive. This is shown first of all by the positive ratings for the spoken and the written formal sentences. While at first glance the negative ratings for the written informal sentence might appear to be surprising, an examination of the comments given by the respondents on the motivation for their ratings showed that the negative

ratings for this sentence are not due to the split infinitive, but rather to the fact that the sentence does not contain a subject. Even though some respondents noted that leaving out the subject is acceptable on social media (which is the context in which this sentence was provided), the overall ratings were still negative. Thus, what might seem at first a conflicting result may actually suggest that it is the lack of awareness of the split infinitive as a mistake that resulted in the ratings. Additional support for this interpretation is the comparison between the two sentences presented in written informal contexts, one of which contains a non-split infinitive ("Written informal, C" in Table 7.6 above). This sentence was rated in a similar way as the one containing a split infinitive. While this may be considered a limitation in this context, and a limitation in general when working with sentence stimuli, it also shows that the split infinitive is a fairly neutral feature.

7.8 The ratings compared

In the preceding sections I discussed each feature separately, and how the ratings differed across the four levels ACCEPTABILITY, CORRECTNESS, EDUCATEDNESS, and GOODNESS, as well as across contexts of use and the social background of the respondents to the survey I carried out. I now turn to the final set of analyses conducted, which move beyond looking at individual features, and compare the ratings between features. These comparisons across features produced more significant results than comparisons of ratings across age, gender, and ethnicity groups. The main concern here is exploring the similarities and differences among the ratings for the various sentence stimuli. In addition to examining further the connection between the stimuli, this section will discuss the hypothesis that certain usage problems, such as *ain't* and negative concord, tend to be rated similarly. These comparisons were carried out on the basis of similar contexts. For example, the ratings for *ain't* in the spoken informal context were compared with the ratings for *like* in the same context.

A comparison between the ratings for *ain't* and those for *like* showed that the sentences containing these two features are not rated differently, as was the case across the four levels. These results suggest that these two features are seen as similarly problematic by all respondents. Another feature which was rated comparably to *ain't* is negative concord. For all the other features, there were statistically significant differences, but the extent to which the ratings for *ain't* differed from those of other features varied. In the context of three other features, *ain't* is rated significantly more

negatively across the four levels compared to those three features, i.e. *literally*, object *I*, and the split infinitive. *Ain't* is rated more negatively than *literally* across all four levels, and this difference is statistically significant for ACCEPTABILITY (W = 4793, Z = −5.964, $p < 0.00058$, effect size = 0.671), CORRECTNESS (W = 4601, Z = −5.527, $p < 0.00058$, effect size = 0.621), GOODNESS (W = 4887.5, Z = −6.437, $p < 0.00058$, effect size = 0.724), and EDUCATEDNESS (W = 5001, Z = −6.811, $p < 0.00058$, effect size = 0.766). The ratings for *ain't* are significantly more negative than those for object *I*, on the basis of a comparison between the spoken informal stimuli for the two features. This difference was significant for the four levels: ACCEPTABILITY (W = 5016.5, Z = −6.783, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.763), CORRECTNESS (W = 4863.5, Z = −6.432, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.723), GOODNESS (W = 5241.5, Z = −7.657, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.861), and EDUCATEDNESS (W = 5301, Z = −7.788, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.876). Finally, *ain't* is also rated more negatively than the split infinitive in spoken formal contexts across the four levels: ACCEPTABILITY (W = 5786.5, Z = −9.571, $p < 0.00055$, effect size = 1.076), *correctness* (W = 5861.5, Z = −9.926, $p < 0.00055$, effect size = 1.116), GOODNESS (W = 5967.5, Z = −10.184, $p < 0.00055$, effect size = 1.145), and EDUCATEDNESS (W = 5880.5, Z = −9.805, $p < 0.00055$, effect size = 1.103).

The comparison between the ratings for *ain't* and for subject *me* reveals interesting insights into the sensitivity with which respondents rated these sentences. The comparison was done on the basis of the spoken informal stimuli. The sentences were not rated differently for CORRECTNESS, i.e. being both rated negatively. However, the sentences are rated differently for ACCEPTABILITY, with *ain't* being considered more unacceptable than subject *me* (W = 4331.5, Z = −4.338, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.488). The ratings for the ACCEPTABILITY of subject *me* in spoken informal usage are fairly balanced, and tend towards the positive end of the scale. There was also a difference between *ain't* and subject *me* in the ratings for GOODNESS (W = 4345.5, Z = −4.548, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.511) and EDUCATEDNESS (W = 4511.5, Z = −5.047, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.567). This shows that while subject *me* is considered acceptable, it is nevertheless viewed as incorrect and 'bad English'. On the level of EDUCATEDNESS, the ratings were predominantly neutral.

In the case of *like*, I mentioned above that there were no differences in the ratings for the discourse particle *like* and those for *ain't* for any of the four levels. The ratings for the discourse particle *like* and for negative concord were not compared, because the survey did not include sentences in which these features were used in the same context, but it might be expected that the two would not be rated differently, on the

basis of the similarity in ratings between *ain't* and *like*, on the one hand, and *ain't* and negative concord, on the other. Comparison with the rest of the features yielded the following statistically significant differences. *Like* and *literally* were rated differently in spoken cases (both male and female speakers), and the ratings were different across all four levels. The stimuli sentences with *like* and *literally* were rated more negatively for ACCEPTABILITY ($W = 1335$, $Z = -6.342$, $p < 0.00055$, effect size = 0.713), CORRECTNESS ($W = 1742$, $Z = -4.989$, $p < 0.00055$, effect size = 0.561), GOODNESS ($W = 1397$, $Z = -6.216$, $p < 0.00055$, effect size = 0.699), and EDUCATEDNESS ($W = 1376.5$, $Z = -6.316$, $p < 0.00055$, effect size = 0.710). Similar results were obtained when the tests were repeated on the stimuli spoken by a male speaker. *Like* and object *I* were rated differently across the four scales: ACCEPTABILITY ($W = 1194$, $Z = -6.852422$, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.770), CORRECTNESS ($W = 1689$, $Z = -5.179$, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.582), GOODNESS ($W = 1186.5$, $Z = -6.921$, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.778), and EDUCATEDNESS ($W = 1370.5$, $Z = -6.255$, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.703). In all these cases the sentences with *like* were rated more negatively than those with object *I*. *Like* and subject *me*, on the other hand, were rated differently only for ACCEPTABILITY ($W = 1993$, $Z = -4.021$, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.452); the differences in the ratings for CORRECTNESS, GOODNESS, and EDUCATEDNESS for *like* and subject *me* are not significant. This pattern follows the one observed between *ain't* and subject *me*, as well as between *ain't* and object *I*. Finally, sentences with *like* and the split infinitive were not compared, because they did not occur in the same context in the survey.

The difference between the ratings for *literally* and negative concord is also statistically significant. This was tested by comparing the ratings for the two features in the written informal context. The ratings were different for ACCEPTABILITY ($W = 2070.5$, $Z = -3.752$, $p < 0.00055$, effect size = 0.422), CORRECTNESS ($W = 2047.5$, $Z = -4.006$, $p < 0.00055$, effect size = 0.450), GOODNESS ($W = 1915.5$, $Z = -4.381$, $p < 0.00055$, effect size = 0.492), and EDUCATEDNESS ($W = 1832.5$, $Z = -4.665$, $p < 0.00055$, effect size = 0.524).

As already discussed in the context of comparisons between *ain't* and *literally*, and between *like* and *literally*, *literally* is rated less negatively than the other two features. A comparison between the ratings of sentences with *literally* and sentences with object *I* did not result in any statistically significant differences. When compared to subject *me*, *literally* was rated differently for CORRECTNESS ($W = 4148.5$, $Z = -3.699$, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.416) and EDUCATEDNESS ($W = 4151$, $Z = -3.779$, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.425), but not for ACCEPTABILITY and

GOODNESS. Finally, a comparison between the ratings for sentences with *literally* and with the split infinitive showed no statistically significant differences between the two in written informal contexts. However, given the complications which arise from the nature of the written informal stimulus for the split infinitive discussed above, I compared the ratings for *literally* in the spoken informal context with those for the split infinitive in the spoken formal one. These proved statistically significant across the four levels: ACCEPTABILITY (W = 4370, Z = −4.641, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.522), CORRECTNESS (W = 4613, Z = −5.362, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.603), GOODNESS (W = 4792.5, Z = −5.998, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.674), and EDUCATEDNESS (W = 4588.5, Z = −5.321, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.598).

Negative concord was compared with *ain't*, *literally*, object *I*, subject *me*, and the split infinitive. The comparison between the ratings for negative concord and for *ain't* showed that there are no statistically significant differences at any of the four levels. The ratings for negative concord and *literally* are different across all four levels; sentences with negative concord are rated more negatively than those with non-literal *literally*.

Negative concord and object *I* were compared on the basis of the written informal sentences. This comparison showed that the ratings differed significantly across the four levels: ACCEPTABILITY (W = 4368.5, Z = −4.450, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.500), CORRECTNESS (W = 4390, Z = −4.714, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.530), GOODNESS (W = 4595, Z = −4.714, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.530), and EDUCATEDNESS (W = 4676.5, Z = −5.573, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.627). A similar comparison between the ratings for the written informal sentence with negative concord and those for the written informal sentence with subject *me* produced no statistically significant results. Finally, comparing the ratings for negative concord and those for the split infinitive showed that in the written informal context the two sentences were rated differently for ACCEPTABILITY (W = 4652.5, Z = −5.441, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.612), CORRECTNESS (W = 4947.5, Z = −6.623, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.745), GOODNESS (W = 4818, Z = −6.090, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.685), and EDUCATEDNESS (W = 4984.5, Z = −6.675, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.751).

As for the sentences with pronouns in coordinated phrases, object *I* and subject *me* display different patterns in the ratings. In the case of object *I*, I mentioned above that this form is rated significantly more positively than *ain't* for the four levels investigated. The same holds for *like*. Object *I* and negative concord were also rated differently, with object *I* being the most positively rated feature on the basis

of the sentences used in the survey. Comparing the differences between object *I* and subject *me* in the spoken informal sentences provides further interesting differences in how the two variants are rated. In spoken informal contexts the two variants are rated differently for CORRECTNESS (W = 4233, Z = −4.006, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.450), ACCEPTABILITY (W = 4140.5, Z = −3.646, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.410), GOODNESS (W = 4319.5, Z = −4.261, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.479), and EDUCATEDNESS (W = 4247, Z = −4.055, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.456). Finally, object *I* and split infinitive are significantly different across the four levels: ACCEPTABILITY (W = 4577.5, Z = −5.334, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.600), CORRECTNESS (W = 4826.5, Z = −6.162, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.693), GOODNESS (W = 4858, Z = −6.300, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.708), and EDUCATEDNESS (W = 4715.5, Z = −5.768, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.649).

The ratings for subject *me* are different from those for *ain't* only for ACCEPTABILITY, as I mentioned above in the discussion of *ain't*. For CORRECTNESS, both features are rated negatively, and no statistically significant differences were identified. However, for ACCEPTABILITY, subject *me* was seen as more acceptable than *ain't* on the basis of the ratings. Similar results were obtained from a comparison between the ratings for the sentence with the discourse particle *like* and those for the spoken informal sentence with subject *me*. There were no differences in ACCEPTABILITY, but there were differences for the other three levels analysed. I also discussed the difference between subject *me* and *literally*; the sentences with these two features were rated differently for CORRECTNESS and EDUCATEDNESS, but not for ACCEPTABILITY and GOODNESS. Subject *me* was also rated more positively than negative concord, with statistically significant differences across all four levels. Finally, comparing the ratings for sentences with subject *me* and with a split infinitive shows that subject *me* is rated more negatively; this difference is statistically significant across the four levels: ACCEPTABILITY (W = 5548.5, Z = −8.731, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 0.982), CORRECTNESS (W = 5767, Z = −9.600, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 1.080), GOODNESS (W = 5715, Z = −9.367, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 1.053), and EDUCATEDNESS (W = 5713.5, Z = −9.270, $p < 0.00045$, effect size = 1.043).

Finally, the sentences with split infinitives are the most positively rated out of all the sentences analysed. The pairwise comparisons between the ratings for sentences with a split infinitive and those with other features showed that the sentences with a split infinitive are rated statistically significantly more positively. This is shown in a comparison with *ain't*, *literally*, negative concord, object *I*, and subject *me*, all

described above.

On the basis of the ratings obtained, we can conclude that there is variation in the perception of these features. Interesting patterns emerge which suggest the existence of levels of acceptability in relation to the different features. For instance, *ain't*, *like*, and negative concord seem to be associated with similar patterns of negative evaluation, while *literally*, object *I*, and the split infinitive seem to be more neutrally to positively evaluated. Positive evaluation is particularly associated with the split infinitive. Sentences with subject *me* are somewhere in between, and exhibit the greatest differences between the ratings across the four different levels. While this is of course hardly surprising, the important questions to address here are what this variation reveals, and how it relates to the empirical study of usage guides and patterns of actual language use. In the final section of this chapter, I turn to a discussion of the importance of the results presented in this chapter so far, in order to try to answer these questions.

7.9 Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter I have presented the results of an analysis of attitudes to the use of the six linguistic features investigated in this study. I have focused predominantly on the ratings of sentences in a survey collected from 79 speakers of American English, as explained in Section 4.5. The ratings were used to explore the attitudes of speakers to the use of the six linguistic features across different levels (ACCEPTABILITY, CORRECTNESS, GOODNESS, and EDUCATEDNESS), as well as in different contexts of use. The effects of social variables, such as age and gender, were also tested. In addition, the ratings for the different features were compared to each other, in order to ascertain the degrees of general acceptability of each of the six features.

First of all, with respect to the four different levels (ACCEPTABILITY, CORRECTNESS, GOODNESS, and EDUCATEDNESS), the predominant tendency I observed was that they were rated similarly. While this was indeed found most frequently, in the case of some features there were differences in the ratings across the four levels. First, there was a statistically significant difference between the ratings for ACCEPTABILITY and those for CORRECTNESS for the spoken formal sentence with *ain't* (see Section 7.2), with ACCEPTABILITY being rated more positively than CORRECTNESS. This result may suggest that these two levels are considered to represent two different notions, but the evidence for this is insufficient. If this were the

case, the more intuitive result would be for this kind of split to be found in informal, rather than formal contexts, because in informal contexts grammatically 'incorrect' forms may be expected to be more acceptable than in formal ones, where acceptability and correctness can be considered two sides of the same coin (i.e. what is acceptable has to be grammatically 'correct'). A difference in the ratings between two of the four levels was also found in the case of one of the sentences with *literally*. The informal sentence spoken by a female speaker was rated more positively for ACCEPTABILITY and more negatively for GOODNESS (see Section 7.4). This suggests that in the case of *literally*, the use of non-literal *literally* may be considered acceptable, even when it is not necessarily seen as 'good English'. Moreover, there was a statistically significant difference in the ratings for ACCEPTABILITY and CORRECTNESS for the written informal sentence with negative concord (see Section 7.5), with the former being more evenly distributed along the five-point scale, and the latter being predominantly rated 'very negative' (see Figure 7.4). This is similar to the difference identified in the ratings of sentences with *ain't*, and may indeed suggest that in some cases these two levels reflect different notions. The sentences with pronouns in coordinated phrases were different in this respect. While no statistically significant differences between the four levels were identified on the basis of the ratings for object *I*, subject *me* was the feature for which most differences were identified. In the case of sentences with subject *me*, ACCEPTABILITY and CORRECTNESS were rated differently in the spoken informal and written informal contexts, while they were not rated differently in the written formal context. This provides further evidence for the fact that these two levels signal different notions: in informal contexts, respondents rate subject *me* as incorrect, but also as acceptable, which shows that they are aware of both the standard norm for pronominal usage and the acceptability of non-standard pronominal forms in informal contexts. In the written formal context however, both ACCEPTABILITY and CORRECTNESS are rated equally negatively, which suggests sensitivity to contexts of use: subject *me* is considered acceptable in informal, but not necessarily in formal contexts. In addition to the difference between ACCEPTABILITY and CORRECTNESS, CORRECTNESS and EDUCATEDNESS are also rated differently, but in this context statistically significant differences were identified in the ratings for all three sentences with subject *me*. This suggests that while subject *me* tends to be considered incorrect yet acceptable in informal contexts but not in formal contexts, when it comes to EDUCATEDNESS, the respondents tend to see subject *me* as neutral. Finally, the fact that there were no statistically significant differences in the ratings for the sentence with subject *I*, which was rated predominantly positively across all four levels,

provides further confirmation that subject *me* is seen as a problematic usage feature which is seen as incorrect, but acceptable and unrelated to the education status of its users.

Secondly, in terms of contexts of use, statistically significant differences were identified only in the case of subject *me*, where evidence for the effect of formality was identified, with the written informal sentence being rated more positively on the ACCEPTABILITY scale than the written formal sentence. The written formal sentence was rated more negatively for EDUCATEDNESS, while the written informal one with subject *me* was rated more neutrally. This suggests that this feature may be considered incorrect and unacceptable in written formal contexts, and that failure to observe these norms may be perceived as uneducated.

Thirdly, in terms of social variables, there were almost no differences in the ratings between genders and age groups. The only statistically significant difference was found in the ratings for the CORRECTNESS of the discourse particle *like*, with the age group 30 OR ABOVE rating the sentence more negatively for CORRECTNESS than the age group 29 OR BELOW. This suggests that the community norms for the general acceptability of this feature are changing, but it is worth noting that while both age groups consider this sentence 'incorrect', there is a difference in the evaluation. For the other features no statistically significant differences were found on the basis of the pairwise comparison tests. These results suggest multiple possible scenarios. The first is that there are no differences in the ratings because there are no differences in the attitudes between different genders, ages, and ethnicities. This may be the result of the fact that most respondents live in a multicultural urban area, where these different groups of people are not isolated from each other. The second scenario is that the nature of the study itself may have been an influencing factor. A study investigating attitudes to usage related to prescriptivism, which is often an approach to language teaching that is part and parcel of the educational system in the United States, may result in the majority of language users expressing the same kinds of attitudes with respect to these features. Precisely because these features are very salient and overtly discussed in public, most respondents may have expressed similar attitudes because these attitudes are shared by the community and are the result of having been imposed top-down. The third scenario is that there are potential shortcomings resulting from the sample not being representative of the general population. While there was indeed a more or less equal proportion of men and women in the sample, the sample was not properly balanced for the other variables, so this may have affected the results. In addition, despite the variation in gender and age, the majority of the respondents were

highly educated, which might also explain why they express similar attitudes to the use of these features.

Finally, comparing the ratings across the six features confirms both that different prescriptively targeted features are indeed evaluated differently, and that certain prescriptively targeted features tend to cluster together in terms of how acceptable they are. The pairwise comparisons between ratings for the linguistic features shows that *ain't*, *like*, and negative concord are the most negatively evaluated features, regardless of the level of evaluation (i.e. ACCEPTABILITY, CORRECTNESS, EDUCATEDNESS, GOODNESS). In addition, context of use has very little to no effect on the evaluation of these three features. The second group of features comprises those with a less negative evaluation than that for the first group of features; *literally* and object *I*/subject *me* belong here. These features are clearly different from the first group, in that they are rated more positively in general, and a comparison between the ratings for these features and those for the features in the first group showed statistically significant differences. However, it is worth noting that even though non-literal *literally*, object *I*, and subject *me* are in this group, there are still important differences between the three. Of special significance here is the difference in ratings for sentences with object *I* and subject *me*. Sentences with object *I* were rated more positively than those with subject *me*, and apart from the results from the multiple pairwise comparison tests discussed in Section 7.6 above, this is also confirmed by the comparison between object *I* and object *me*, as opposed to subject *me* and subject *I*. The first comparison did not result in statistically significant differences in the ratings, while the second did. This suggests that object *I* is not considered to be different from object *me*, while this is definitely not the case when sentences with subject *me* are compared with sentences with subject *I*. This shows that these two features are problematic in a different way, which is an especially relevant issue to address in the context of a comparison with the results from the analysis of the features' usage guide treatment, a point I will discuss in the concluding chapter of this study. Finally, the split infinitive does not appear to be salient as a usage problem, as is evident from the fact that most respondents rated sentences with split infinitives positively across the four different levels. This puts the split infinitive into a group of its own, which represents usage problems which have become increasingly more accepted as part of the standard language usage norms.

This kind of grouping is based on the five-point scale ratings, and does not take into account RECOGNITION LEVEL, which might also be considered as an indicator of how salient and problematic a feature is. In order to arrive at a better understanding of the attitudes to the use of the six features studied, Figure 7.8 presents a visual summary

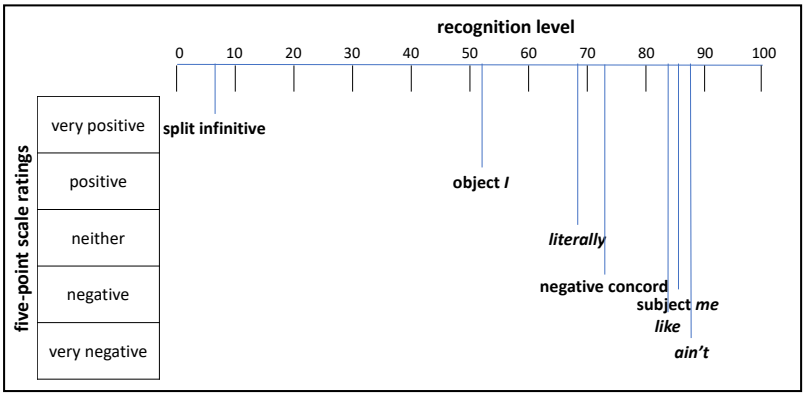

Figure 7.8: Schematic representation of the acceptability of usage problems on the basis of median ratings and average RECOGNITION LEVEL

of how the features are positioned with respect to both RECOGNITION LEVEL and the five-point scale ratings, from 'very positive' to 'very negative'. The horizontal axis represents the mean RECOGNITION LEVEL across all sentences included in the survey for each of the features: a low RECOGNITION LEVEL means that the feature in question was not stated by respondents as a reason for their ratings; a high RECOGNITION LEVEL means that the feature was generally cited as the reason for the specific ratings of the sentence containing that feature. On this scale, then, the split infinitive has a fairly low RECOGNITION LEVEL, which may indicate that most respondents do not recognise it as a problematic usage. On the other hand, subject *me*, the discourse particle *like*, and *ain't* have high RECOGNITION LEVELS, which may be indicative of their salience as problematic usages. The vertical axis represents where each feature stands on the five-point scale; the position for each feature is determined on the basis of the median ratings for all sentences and all four levels (i.e. ACCEPTABILITY, CORRECTNESS, EDUCATEDNESS, GOODNESS), for each of the features. While this is undoubtedly a rough representation, it is nevertheless effective for my purpose here, which is to provide a conceptual mapping of the attitudes to the use of the six features investigated, on the basis of the survey data. The figure thus shows that the language features display a continuum of problematicity or acceptability. This kind of visualisation allows us to compare the results from the analysis of speakers' attitudes to those from the analysis of usage guide treatment, a question discussed in the concluding chapter of this study.