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Adrian Stenton

These kind of words



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Number agreement in the species noun phrase in International Academic English

This study examines a single English language usage problem, the use of number agreement in the variant forms of the species noun phrase – e.g. *this kind of error* vs. *these kinds of errors* vs. *these kind of errors* vs. *errors of this kind* – from three different perspectives: those of linguists, prescriptivists and the general public. The study, framed by the descriptions given in modern reference grammars and theoretical analyses (the linguists), is conducted within the historical perspective of the advice given in English usage guides published between 1770 and 2010 and beyond (the prescriptivists). The general public is given a voice in the form of an online survey of attitudes to the variant forms the species noun phrase may take, and by an analysis of a corpus of un-copy-edited academic writing that was compiled specifically for this study.

The main findings of the study are (i) that there is a great deal of harmony between the views of the three groups studied, and that, on the basis of this three-pronged analysis, the popular view of ‘descriptive’ linguists in conflict with ‘prescriptive’ usage guides is not justified; and (ii) that the innovative use of multiple contextualised examples in the attitude survey contributes to the suggestion of ‘gradience’ or a ‘cline of acceptability’ on the part of the general public, rather than a simple ‘acceptable’ vs. ‘unacceptable’ stance.

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