

SOME DIVERGENCES IN AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH USAGE

Robert D. Eagleson - University of Sydney

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While usually made with respect to regional variation, constant reiteration of the widely accepted claim for homogeneity in Australian English tends to cover over the fact that divergence may exist or may be developing, and to discourage extensive investigation. It may turn out that such divergences may be discovered on a different level of analysis from the regional one, but, as this article will demonstrate, there is evidence to indicate that we should look more closely at linguistic variation in an Australian context. Certainly, insufficient research has been pursued at the social level.

There are difficulties, however, in pursuing this type of research, especially in obtaining data. One immediately runs into the barrier of attitudes. The problem is that one form may be regarded as prestigious or safe, especially in areas where change is taking place. In these circumstances informants tend to fall back on what they think should be said. There is little to be gained as a result in asking informants what they say or what they think of a particular linguistic item. The judgement test on its own is all too liable to produce misleading information. On the other hand, undirected collection of data through interviews and free conversation may fail to gain instances of a structure which might be of particular interest. Even if one is successful, this last mentioned method can be extremely cumbersome.

In recent years, however, there has been considerable fruitful experimentation with elicitation techniques by Quirk and Svartvik (1966) and Greenbaum and Quirk (1970). The object of the emerging methods is primarily to distract the informant's attention from the point at issue while allowing simultaneously the gathering of information on his own usage. The first part of this approach is a new type of procedure to which is given the largely self-explanatory title of operation test. In this type of test the informant is asked to perform a series of different grammatical tasks which have been previously explained, such as turning a sentence from statement to question, negative to positive, past to present, etc. The sentences on which these tasks are performed may be deviant as they stand and continue so through the strict performance of the operation.

It can be seen immediately how the test shifts the focus of attention to the operation and away from the real object of investigation. It is argued that "readiness to accept a sentence (is) indirectly measured by an informant's ability to replicate its form" (Quirk and Svartvik 1966:97) in the process of performing an operation on it. Complete acceptance would be unlikely to lead to any unnecessary or gratuitous amendment. Any changes, other than those required by the operation, would both imply a reaction of unacceptability towards the sentence and give some indication of the nature of the deviance in the informant's eyes, thus circumventing the difficulty of asking untrained speakers to explain the reason for their responses. Equally as important, it is possible to classify and grade the amendments and to determine whether or not there is a common or preferred rectification.

A variation on the operation test is the selection test. Except for the nature of the test sentences, the procedure is the same, and only the objective is different. Here rather than exploring putative deviance, the investigator seeks to elicit forms in free variation. The technique involves presenting an informant with a sentence in which there is no problem, such as Neither I nor he felt a thing, and asking him to perform on it an operation which immediately raises a critical issue (in this case conversion to the present tense involves the issue of concord). Again through use of the operation device, the informant does not have his attention drawn specifically to the issue in question, though he cannot avoid it in performing the operation. As is fairly obvious, such a test provides a highly objective method of obtaining information on variant forms.

Such techniques were employed in a pilot investigation of linguistic divergence in Australian English which I conducted at the University of Sydney during 1971. The experiment involved three groups, groups A and B containing twenty informants each, and Group C ten. Group A was drawn from students in the third year of an undergraduate course in Science at the University, while Group B constituted a marked contrast being drawn from third year students in the Arts Faculty taking a course in English Language. Group C was composed of ten postgraduate and junior members of staff in the English Department. All informants were thus to a certain extent removed from the influence of formal lessons received in English at school. All were native-born Australians who had spent most, if not all, of their lives in Australia.

Once the operation and selection tests had been administered, the informants were asked to respond to a judgement test along the lines of the one used by Quirk and Svartvik. It was found that the narrow form of this test, however, was not entirely satisfactory, and a number of informants expressed uneasiness with it. Speakers vary their mode of language according to a number of non-linguistic factors, such as the formality or informality of the situation. Consequently to ask a speaker whether a form is acceptable or not without specifying the context is often to pose an unanswerable question. To specify only one context, on the other hand, is to limit seriously the value of the responses: it is possible for an item to be rejected in one context and yet acceptable in another. As a result it was decided to administer as well a wider type of judgement test in which informants were required to record their assessments over four functional varieties: formal speech and writing, and informal speech and writing(1). To reduce the impact of memory, this wider judgement test was administered some six weeks later. Through an unforeseen circumstance, Group A was not available, and consequently this paper can report only the results for Groups B and C.

The use of these judgement tests does not constitute a contradiction to what was said earlier. Being administered last, they occupy a subsidiary and corroborative role. While the informants are more likely to be expressing their attitudes rather than commenting on their actual usage, nevertheless their reactions in these judgement tests provide useful ancillary information especially in those operation tests in which informants resist the temptation to make emendations during the performance of the operation.

To survey the practical side of the experiment first, on the efficacy of the operation and/or selection test one can record success. Informants found no difficulty in functioning under the requirements of the test and achieved almost perfect results with the control sentences, the very occasional failure here being insignificant and unconnected with the operation itself. On the critical exercises, as the following discussion will explicate in some detail and as was both hoped for and expected, a number of informants introduced changes at the points of issue. Certainly sufficient evidence was obtained to indicate that the practice at a given point of usage was far from clear cut, and also to give a clue to the existence of variants and the possibility of division in the community. For example, in a test investigating the use of loan as a verb, 24% of the informants substituted lend for loan (test sentence 19).

What is all the more illuminating is that frequently the modification to the test structure involved replacement with a form actively decried in certain quarters (e.g. who for whom). In effect, then, no inhibitions were operating on at least some of the informants and we were receiving unequivocal insights into their practice. Even the consideration that they were in the somewhat artificial situation of a test did not seem to influence them, a fact which speaks highly for the effectiveness of the operation test in inducing sufficient distraction.

This paper reports some of the findings emerging from this investigation (2). It concentrates on items in which there is a clear divergence in practice amongst the informants. It illustrates both the efficacy of the procedures and the way in which the results coming from the operation/selection tests on the one hand and the judgement tests on the other may be usefully combined.

Neither...nor, Either...or

The issue of interest with these correlatives is the form chosen in those circumstances in which the verb can reflect number and person distinctively. Current practice was investigated over three tests, 8, 28 and 40, two involving neither...nor and one either... or:

(8) Neither he nor I knew the answer.

(28) Neither I nor he felt a thing.

(40) Either he or I was correct.

On each occasion the procedure of the selection test was employed, the instruction "convert from past to present" compelling the informant automatically to make a decision while performing the operation. Test 28 is the reverse counterpart of 8, while 40 introduces be.

In analysing the results one is struck immediately by the considerable degree of division which exists. Nor are the informants individually consistent but display some confusion, responding one way in one test, and another in a parallel test.

A summary of the results of the selection tests yields the following table:

Table 1 - Neither...nor, either...or : Selection Test

<u>Test</u>	<u>Response</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>C</u>	<u>Total</u>	
8	know	13	12	4	29	(53)
	knows	6	7	6	19	(22)
	other	1	1	-	2	(1)
28	feel	12	8	5	25	(36)
	feels	3	9	5	17	(20)
	other	5	3	-	8	(20)
40	is	14	12	8	34	
	am	3	6	2	11	
	other	3	2	-	5	

Test 8 is perhaps not so immediately informative as the other tests. In it the cause of the occurrence of know, the unmarked form of the verb, is complicated by the proximity to the verb of I, which normally colligates with the unmarked form. Test 28, then, is more powerful in suggesting that informants tend to disregard the disjunctive nature of the structure and feel that both subjects jointly control the verb, thereby ignoring any claim which the subject after nor might have. As we see the preference on both occasions for the unmarked form runs something like 3:2. A comparison with the results of the Quirk and Svartvik experiment using the same test sentences - the figures in brackets in the last column of Table 1 summarise these results - reveals that the Australian preference for the unmarked form is not as strong as the English. (Moreover it needs to be borne in mind that the marked form can still muster 36% of the total vote, with other variants commanding minor support. All this indicates that while the marked form is more popular it is by no means undisputed. What is also worthy of note here is the considerable number who used the marked form knows in test 8, particularly in Groups B and C where one might have least expected it to occur. One wonders whether in their minds neither dominates and is treated as the subject.

As for test 40 it would appear that informants were uneasy about using am so close to be despite the presence of I. This perhaps more than anything suggests that they tend

to have a regard for the two noun phrases in a correlative structure when they come to select a form for the verb. Seemingly they strive for a form which is relatively neutral, it being possibly, for instance, to regard know as encompassing knows etc. With be the matter is less straightforward, but on the results of this test it would look as if most choose is when in doubt. Notice, too, that this choice countermands the traditional school rule on concord in the environment of either . . . or.

Some of the informants appear to have been conscious of their own uncertainty in this area of usage. One informant from Group B in both 8 and 28 sought escape in a rephrasing to Neither of us knows. Three in Group A and one in Group B were unhappy with the "impoliteness" of the ordering of subjects in 28, reversing the order to give Neither he nor I. Two then went on to give feel for the verb form, one gave feels, and the fourth forgot to perform the operation of tense conversion. Yet another from Group B gave a continuous or expanded form of the verb but used the plural form, his full response reading: Neither I nor he are feeling a thing. One Group A informant tried to evade the issue in test 40 by writing Either he is or I am correct; another sought a briefer subterfuge in Either is correct. Two gave are as the verb form. All by their actions indicate insecurity about concord.

The wider judgement test in many ways corroborates the findings based on the performance in the selection test and, in fact, would seem to underscore the uncertainty of informants. At the formal level informants in both Groups B and C are almost evenly divided on the acceptability of the sentences when presented according to the conventional rules. More seem prepared to grant acceptance to the same sentences at the informal level. This is certainly true of both groups with sentence 8, and of Group C with sentence 28, where the figures are on each occasion at least 2:1 in favour. Whether informants feel that the verb should somehow pay more attention at the formal level to both subjects is difficult to say. We have here a puzzling reaction which calls for further investigation.

As for sentence 40 the acceptability of Either he or I am correct rises with Group B as the formality of the context increases. This shift is more in line with what might be expected since such a judgement conforms to what has been taught in schools. What is more surprising is that this trend is not paralleled in Group C, though it must be

observed that there is a high degree of consistency in performance in the selection and judgement test here.

Table 2 Neither....nor / Eitheror : Judgement Test

<u>Test 8</u>	Informal						Formal					
	Speech			Writing			Speech			Writing		
	+	?	-	+	?	-	+	?	-	+	?	-
B	13	1	6	13	1	6	12	0	8	10	0	10
C	8	0	2	6	0	4	5	1	4	5	1	4

Test 28

B	10	1	9	10	2	8	12	1	7	10	1	9
C	7	0	3	6	0	4	6	1	3	5	1	4

Test 40

B	6	1	13	12	0	8	10	2	8	9	2	9
C	4	1	5	3	1	6	3	2	5	3	2	5

While there is evidence that when language users are pushed they will more frequently choose the unmarked form, it is also clear that there is considerable confusion over subject-verb concord in the environment of these correlatives neither....nor and either.... or. One can hardly claim that one principle is generally in use with only occasional aberrations. Equally it is clear that the matter could benefit from further and wider investigation. One thinks of the interrogative, of occasions in which other forms of be are involved, or in which the subjects consist of nouns rather than pronouns. It would be interesting to see what effect these variations have on our finding.

Like as Conjunction

Currently a large poster on railway stations in Sydney proclaims that "The Sun tells it like it is." Here we have an advertiser espousing the cause of like as a conjunction. Just how acceptable has the practice become in the community?

As far as our informants are concerned, only one - from Group B - changed the structure at the point like in the operation tests, substituting in its place as though.

The remaining 49 informants retained it in their answers. The test sentence was:

(11) It looked like it would rain

with the instruction to convert from past to present.

In the narrow judgement test, however, an interesting divergence in opinion comes to light. The informants with an Arts background are far less ready to grant acceptance than those with a Science background. Only 50% in Group B and 30% in Group C are prepared to give a clearcut judgement in favour while 90% will do so from Group A. Can we recognise a sociological factor reflected in this?

Groups B and C are more ready, however, to pass the structure in more informal contexts especially in speech. As formality increases so approval decreases until it almost disappears. This Australian support at the informal level is stronger than the support registered in England where approval was granted only by 50%.

Table 3 Like : Operation and Judgement Tests

<u>Operation Success</u>														
			A				B				C			
			17				16				9			
<u>Narrow Judgement Test</u>														
A									B			C		
+	?	-	+	?	-	+	?	-	+	?	-			
18	0	2	10	7	3	3	2	5						
<u>Wider Judgement Test</u>														
Informal Speech Writing						Formal Speech Writing								
+	-	?	+	-	?	+	-	?	+	-	?			
B	17	0	3	14	0	6	11	0	9	3	1	16		
C	7	0	3	6	0	4	2	0	8	1	0	9		

There is a marked contrast between the tests on obligational get and those on like

(3). With get a high degree of rejection is matched by a low level of success in performing the operations mainly as a result of efforts to avoid using get. With like, however, as we have seen for 49 of the 50 informants there are no such difficulties in completing the operation test. This makes one wonder whether the judgements given are not rather reflexes of previous teaching than precise indications of actual usage, or, to put it another way, whether most informants are so accustomed to using and hearing like as a conjunction, that they are oblivious to it when their attention is not specifically directed to it.

Different from

What advance are to and than making as accompaniments to different?

Three test sentences were used to survey the situation, subjecting the three forms from, than and to to investigation and equal treatment:

- 25. They behaved differently at school than at home.
- 35. Is his answer different to mine?
- 39. Pam isn't very different from her sister.

The results of the tests give the impression that to is gaining ground, especially amongst the students and hence younger informants. While four of them changed to to from in performing the appointed operation on sentence 35, six changed from to to in operating on 39. Again 65% of Group B approved of to in formal writing while only 35% approved of from. Amongst Group C, however, we find universal support: for from at all levels and one emendation of to to from in test sentence 35 but no counterbalancing alteration in 39.

Here, as elsewhere, the informants are prepared to be more tolerant at the informal levels to variants which they might reject at the formal level.

Australian informants appear to be more lenient towards both than and to than their English counterparts. This seems to be particularly true with different to and suggests that this item could repay more extensive investigation.

Table 4

Different from/to/than

	<u>Operation Test : Success</u>		
	A	B	C
25	13	17	9
35	17	18	9
39	15	17	10

Narrow Judgement Test

	A			B			C		
	+	?	-	+	?	-	+	?	-
25	13	3	4	11	2	7	2	3	5
35	15	2	3	14	2	4	4	1	5
39	15	2	3	13	1	6	8	2	0

Wider Judgement Test

		<u>Informal Speech Writing</u>						<u>Formal Speech Writing</u>					
		+	?	-	+	?	-	+	?	-	+	?	-
25	B	18	0	2	14	1	5	11	0	9	8	0	12
	C	7	1	2	7	0	3	4	1	5	2	1	7
35	B	18	0	2	17	0	3	14	0	6	13	0	7
	C	8	0	2	5	0	5	4	1	5	3	1	6
39	B	19	0	1	18	0	2	11	0	9	7	0	13
	C	10	0	0	10	0	0	10	0	0	10	0	0

All right

The selection test may be used to investigate not only matters of grammatical usage but also spelling. An example is test sentence 24 which sought to establish current attitudes to the spelling of all right. Informants were asked to convert Everything was all right from statement to question. Because both the instruction and the sentence were given orally, and since the purpose of the exercise was concealed, the informants were

left to their own devices when they came to spell the last part of the sentence.

With the exception of one occurrence of allright - and this could well have been a result of fast writing - the choice was usually between a two-word form, all right, and a single word form alright. The actual preferences fell out as:

Table 5 : All right

	A	B	C
all right	10	13	10
alright	10	6	0
allright	0	1	0

That Group C should universally select the two-word form is largely to be expected considering their occupation. More interesting is the preference for the single form shown by half the informants in Group A and a third in Group B. One can scarcely argue for an agreed community position on the item in question.

Mittins et al (1970: 108-109) also investigated alright in their survey, restricting themselves in this instance for obvious reasons to writing alone. They found that half their informants accepted the one-word form in informal writing, but less than a third in formal writing.

I, too, subjected alright to the wider judgement test and found a slightly higher proportion, about two-thirds, voting it acceptable in informal situations, and about a quarter in formal contexts. I have some doubts however about these figures. From comments made by some informants, Mittins et al have evidence that at least some were concentrating on the spelling in making their evaluation. But we cannot be certain that this is true of all and certainly I have no evidence either way for my figures. It is quite reasonable to consider all right as more suitable for less formal spoken situations, and in passing judgement on such a sentence as Everything was alright informants could have been responding to this aspect in the usage of the item rather than to its spelling. Here we come upon another possible area of weakness in the judgement test.

Without labouring the obvious, one can conclude that there is evidence for divergence in Australian English usage, that at least at some levels of analysis our linguistic behaviour is far from homogeneous. But there are other observations that need to be made

as well. There is a divergence between practice as revealed by the operation/selection test and attitudes as reflected in the judgement tests. Perhaps this is not altogether novel news, but it does seem to me that we should be looking more closely at the invidious effects outmoded attitudes of teachers, parents and users themselves might have on the fluency of speakers. Moreover there are the sociolinguistic implications of the results: there are some interesting differences between the Arts and Science students, despite their comparable intellectual and educational standards (4). Perhaps the greatest success of the experiment has been its proof that so much more needs to be learnt, that we should be less dogmatic in our statements on the characteristics of Australian English: it would not seem to be what we have complacently accepted it to be.

Notes

1. These are the categories used by Mittins et al (1971).
2. Other findings and other aspects of the experiment have been reported elsewhere in Eagleson (1972a) and (1972b).
3. A discussion of the tests with obligational get is given in Eagleson (1972a).
4. See Eagleson (1972b) for a more extensive comment on these sociolinguistic implications.

References

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