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RULES AND EXCEPTIONS

USING EXCEPTIONS FOR EMPIRICAL
RESEARCH IN THEORETICAL LINGUISTICS

Christopher Beedham, Warwick Danks
and Ether Soselia (eds)

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Preface

The papers in this volume are revised and updated versions of papers delivered at the Summer School and Conference on the Method of Lexical Exceptions held from 2 to 8 September 2007 at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, organized by myself and Warwick Danks.¹ From the publication of this volume the above mentioned method is now called the method of exceptions and their correlations, for reasons which are given in my paper. Appended to each paper is an extract from the discussion which followed the paper, as transcribed at the time, with updates where necessary.

I am especially grateful to Prof. Thomas V. Gramkrelidze, University of Tbilisi, Georgia, for recommending the Summer School and Conference to his colleagues and students and facilitating their attendance, and for giving permission to publish here slightly revised versions of two papers first published in the *Bulletin of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences*. The contribution of the Georgian participants was invaluable, both quantitatively and qualitatively. I am grateful to all those who attended and gave papers at the Summer School and Conference, making it such an interesting and fruitful event. Thanks also to my colleagues, students and the secretarial staff in the School of Modern Languages and in SAILLS (St Andrews Institute of Language and Linguistic Studies) for their help, advice and support. I am grateful also to the Russell Trust and to the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland for their financial support.

Christopher Beedham
St Andrews
21 November 2013

1 See <<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/modlangs/research/conferences/pastevents/>>, accessed 21 November 2013.

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CHRISTOPHER BEEDHAM

I Exceptions and their Correlations: A Methodology for Research in Grammar

ABSTRACT

A method of empirical research is described in which unexplained exceptions to a rule and their correlations are used in a systematic way to lead the researcher to a revised version of the rule which explains and removes the rule's anomalies, especially the exceptions which one started out with. Two rules and their exceptions in English, German, and Russian are presented as case studies in the method: the passive and non-passivizable transitive verbs; tense formation and irregular verbs. It is hoped that other linguists will try out the method on their own chosen constructions in their own languages.

Introduction

In this paper we will look at how unexplained exceptions to a rule and their correlations can be used in a systematic way to lead the researcher to a revised version of the rule which explains and removes the rule's anomalies, especially the exceptions which one started out with.¹ We will examine two constructions and their exceptions as case studies in the method – the

I This paper was written in 2013 and is an updated summary of the summer school part of the Summer School and Conference on the Method of Lexical Exceptions held at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, from 2 to 8 September 2007. Hitherto I have referred to the method as 'the method of lexical exceptions'. I now – i.e. from this volume – refer to it as the method of exceptions and their correlations. It is the same method, but called by a name which goes more to the heart of how the method works.

rule of passive and non-passivizable transitive verbs, tense formation and irregular verbs – in English, German and Russian. The examination of these two areas will be brief, because the paper is about method, not about the passive or irregular verbs, but references will be given to enable the reader to follow up the analyses presented. Because the reason for writing the paper is to encourage other linguists to try out the method on their own chosen constructions in their own languages some detail of the history of the method, how it developed over time, how long it took to carry out the data collection, is included in order to give the reader an idea of the timescale involved if he or she decides to try it out. For the same reason some further practical details about using reference works, native speaker informants, and research assistants are also included. (For further details on all these matters – the method, the passive, and irregular verbs – see Beedham 2005b; Danks 2011, this volume. On exceptions in general see Simon and Wiese (eds) 2011, Corbin and Dessaux-Berthonneau 1985.)²

Theoretical background

The approach taken by the method of exceptions and their correlations is descriptive (as opposed to generative) and based on Saussurean structuralism (Saussure 1983). The term ‘descriptive’ is used here despite the fact that it is misleading in that some linguists claim that descriptive linguistics merely describes, without explaining. However, in our view ‘descriptive’ linguistics is indeed analytical – it produces analyses – and explanatory, i.e.

2 On the approach of the *Junggrammatiker* to exceptions see Bassac, this volume. Helbig (1973: 34) says that understanding and recognition of Saussure’s work was impeded by the dominance of the *Junggrammatiker*, especially in Germany, during Saussure’s lifetime. In the approach suggested here to exceptions the opposite is the case, in that the suggested way of dealing with exceptions is part and parcel of the Saussurean approach. On the relationship between Saussure and the *Junggrammatiker* see Joseph 2012.

theoretical (in the pre-Chomskyan sense of 'theoretical'): the explanation is in the description. There is a link with pedagogical grammars and language teaching: the areas of grammar and lexis which descriptive grammarians choose to examine are usually the ones which foreign learners of a language find difficult. And for descriptivists the ultimate test of a new theoretical analysis is whether it is taken up in pedagogical grammars.

It is useful though not essential when using the method of exceptions and their correlations to investigate the same formal construction in two or more languages, because it gives you two or more different angles on the same construction. It is also helpful if one of your languages is a foreign language, i.e. not your native language, because you then automatically have the psychic distance necessary to carry out an objective, scientific analysis. It is all too easy when analysing one's native language to fall into the trap of thinking that the categories and rules one sees there are natural and logical and based on the way the world is, rather than the language-specific, idiosyncratic and arbitrary (in the Saussurean sense) categories and rules which they, in fact, are. You should be an advanced learner of the foreign language in question and hence speak it reasonably fluently: this is necessary to enable you to adjudicate the grammaticality judgements of your native-speaker informants. On the other hand, if one of your languages is your native language that is also handy because of the greater intuitive insights you have for that language. For both foreign language and native language the researcher is actually trying to bring out his or her native speaker(-like) intuitions into an explicit, scientific analysis. Having said it is best to investigate your chosen construction in two or more languages, of course the arguments in support of an analysis in a given language have to come from the structure of that language, one cannot argue across languages and say, for example, because the situation in Russian is this I want to analyse a construction of English like this. The arguments for English have to come from the structure of English.

The passive and non-passivizable transitive verbs

One of the problems we face in theoretical linguistics is how to make the discipline empirical. Some would say it does not need to be empirical, it just is a theoretical discipline, but every theory needs a practice; theory and practice go together. Others would say that linguistics is already empirical, e.g. through the use of computer corpora, and that is true, but there is another, *langue*-oriented and grammar-based way in which we can make it empirical, and that is through the use of unexplained exceptions to grammatical rules. Let us take non-passivizable transitive verbs as an example. The traditional and still widespread rule of passive says that every transitive verb can form a passive, but it is well known that there are a small number of transitive verbs in English, German and Russian which do not form a passive, despite being transitive, e.g. 1 in English, 2 in German and 3 in Russian below (on the passive in English see Quirk et al. 1985: 159–71; in German see Durrell 2002: 307–22, and Helbig and Buscha 1989: 161–88; in Russian see Borrás and Christian 1971: 165–73, and Грамматика русского языка 1960: 504–15):

- (1) a. James knows Fiona.
b. ?Fiona is known by James.
- (2) a. *Er mag Käse.*
‘he likes cheese’
b. ?*Käse wird von ihm gemocht*
cheese is by him liked
‘cheese is liked by him’
- (3) a. *Predsdatel’ poblagodaryl Ivana*
the-chairman thanked Ivan
‘the chairman thanked Ivan’
b. **Ivan byl poblagodaren predsdatelem*
Ivan was thanked by-the-chairman
‘Ivan was thanked by the chairman’

Identifying the exceptions

A common approach in descriptive grammars and theoretical-descriptive accounts is to view these unexplained exceptions, the non-passivizable transitive verbs, as part of the sometimes wilful nature of language and simply to list them, without even attempting an explanation; or else to give a separate semantic reason almost for each sentence, e.g. the agent is not sufficiently agentive, the patient is not sufficiently patient-like, the verb is stative, relational, psychological, etc., such that so many different reasons are given, and all of them semantic, that one realizes that no genuine explanation in terms of a significant generalization is being given at all. But firstly, there must surely be some reason for the aberrant behaviour of the exceptions – we just have to look for it and find it. Secondly, surely the first question we need to ask is exactly how many verbs like that – not able to form a passive, despite being transitive – are there in a given language, and which verbs are they? Instead of theorizing in a vacuum one needs to carry out some empirical work, some work with dictionaries and native speaker informants. That is what this author did for his PhD in the period 1976–1979 (published as Beedham 1982); he trawled through dictionaries of English, German and Russian and got sentences tested for their grammaticality by native speakers, and in the space of about 6 months³ an exhaustive and finite list of every non-passivizable transitive verb in English, German and Russian was produced. The dictionaries used were for English the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* 1974; for German, Mater 1971 and Klappenbach and Steinitz 1977; and for Russian, the 17 vol. *Словарь современного русского языка* 1951–1965. The most useful dictionaries were those which give plenty of example sentences showing

3 As stated in the first section, some practical details of the method such as the time-scale involved will be provided in this paper to help those who wish to try out the method for themselves. The practical details are intended to give substance to the point that an exhaustive investigation of lexical exceptions is manageable within a reasonable time frame.

how a word is used.⁴ Of course, there are always grey areas, in this case to do with what exactly is a transitive verb, what do you do with verbs which passivize in one meaning but not another, some verbs form a passive in one sentence but not another, etc. But in essence it was possible to extract an exhaustive and finite list of more or less non-passivizable transitive verbs in the three languages within a reasonable space of time, some examples of which are given in 4 for English and 5 for German below:

(4) some English non-passivizable transitive verbs:⁵

become	dread	involve	marry	remind
boast	dream	know	near	resemble
contain	exceed	lack	need	stall
cost	get	live	possess	walk
cross	have	love	regret	want

(5) some German non-passivizable transitive verbs:

anheimeln	freuen	schmerzen	übersteigen
'make feel at home'	'please'	'hurt'	'exceed'
anwidern	haben	spüren	verdienen
'nauseate'	'have'	'feel, sense'	'deserve'
bekommen	kennen	tragen	verdrießen
'receive'	'know'	'bear (fruit)'	'annoy'
besitzen	kosten	träumen	wiegen

4 The best online dictionary available today that I know of which gives example sentences is Linguee: <<http://www.linguee.com/>>, accessed 21 November 2013.

5 That is, transitive verbs with a tendency not easily to form a passive in at least one of their main meanings. Note that even the most recalcitrant non-passivizable transitive verb can be made to passivize with sufficient ingenuity, because the passive is an aspect and aspect is compositional (see below). In fact, the blunt truth of the matter is that there is no such thing as a non-passivizable transitive verb, only non-passivizable transitive sentences (again, because aspect is compositional). Nevertheless, we speak about non-passivizable transitive verbs because it is a useful abstraction and generalization of the kind which all grammarians and scientists make. The examples given here are taken from Beedham 1982: 59–81, which contains a list of non-passivizable transitive sentences, each one with a different transitive verb.