COMMENT

Corpora and grammar—how much 'Well, it depends' can we take?

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Recently, a student of mine wrote in a leaving exam 'I says to my mother'. Surely, the combination of the third-person form 'says' with the first-person subject 'I' is a clear case of subject-verb discord and, hence, a crass mistake? This 'Comment' argues that the answer is: Well, it depends.

If we adhere to the view that Standard English is *the* model in ELT we can easily identify a language form as either standard-conformant or standard-nonconformant: if it conforms to the standards, it is correct; if it doesn't, it isn't correct. This has been the received view in ELT for many decades and maybe centuries—not surprisingly since it makes life easier: all we have to do is consistently to apply the correct/incorrect dichotomy. Now corpora have come along presenting an altogether different picture of language as used by native speakers. Instead of adhering to clearly defined standards they can be observed to use all sorts of language that would have to be considered 'bad' if evaluated against the yardstick of Standard English. The form 'I says' is a case in point. How frequent is it and how is it used?

To judge by the British National Corpus (BNC), the form is frequent in British English: it occurs 1,165 times in the corpus as a whole, and 911 times in the conversational subcorpus of the BNC. 'I says' is thus typical of everyday British English. So what, many will say. Frequent or not—why bother with this form, particularly in an EFL context, when there is a clear standard-conformant alternative, namely 'I say'? Well, is there? In order to test our intuition, it is helpful to compare the two forms in context. Analysis of large numbers of contexts (Rühlemann 2007) reveals that 'I says' invariably introduces direct speech reports of extended stretches of anterior conversation Consider:

(1)   Cos **he says**, **Steve says** to me, is he in?**I says**, no.**He says**, he's not in?**I says**, no.And a bit later on **I says** to him ... I think he's at Cadets.**He says**, he's not, he's in.**I says**, eh?**He says**, he's in.

How is 'I say' used? Unlike 'I says', which is confined to reports of extended exchanges, 'I say' displays a broad range of uses in conversation. What appears to be the most typical use is illustrated in (2): here, 'I say' serves to lend the proposition emphatic support.

(2)   PS03W >: I wonder how much it would cost the town, like?I know it sounds silly, but **I say**, the silly things like that are the ones that sometimes ... are the

       PS000 >: Mm.

       PS03W >: ones that are took seriously.(…).

So, corpus evidence disproves our intuition: 'I say' may not really mean the same thing in discourse and may hence not really be the better choice in conversation than 'I says'. Rather the two forms fulfil different functions. Choice of 'I says' or 'I say' depends on a number of variables. First, it depends on register: 'I says', it seems, is virtually restricted to conversation, while 'I say' is frequent both in writing and informal speech. Second, it depends on what you want to 'do': if you want to emphasize that this is your stance 'I say' may give your proposition weight; if you want to report a lively conversation in which utterances succeeded each other in rapid succession, then 'I says' would be an appropriate choice.

The case of 'I says' is by no means an isolated one. The *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber *et al.* 1999) and the recently published *Cambridge Grammar of English* (Carter and McCarthy 2006) abound with evidence of variation across registers and contextual variables. Given this growing body of insights into variation, Conrad (2000) predicts that in grammar teaching in the 21st century emphasis will shift from 'accuracy' to 'appropriateness'. The issues arising are numerous. Can we live with the amount of differentiation this shift in emphasis necessarily involves? Can we work, as teachers, with it? Do we have the time to teach how a feature is used differently in different context types? Are we willing to rethink dearly-held convictions about the kind of English that we (should)

teach? Are we ready to take the trouble to familiarize ourselves with insights gained from corpus research? And, finally, can our students live and work with it? Are they willing and capable to grasp that one and the same form maybe 'wrong' here but 'right' there? Is native-speaker usage such as 'I says' the appropriate model for them? What methodologies might be suited to help students come to terms with the inherent context-dependence of language use? These are open questions which, it seems, we are still far from being able to answer satisfactorily (though first beginnings have been made; cf., for example, Timmis 2005). But given the evidence recent corpus analyses have uncovered there is little doubt that we have at least to ask these questions.

To return to the above cited student: I eventually decided not to mark 'I says to my mother' wrong because the clause was part of an informal email to a friend and emails seem to be among the written text types closest to conversation (cf., Crystal 2001) and because not only one utterance was reported but a sequence of utterances. So, the student had used the form— well, appropriately.

References

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