**Grammaticality judgment task**

In a grammaticality judgment task, participants are presented with a sentence, phrase or individual word (most often in spoken form, but sometimes written) and asked to rate its grammatical acceptability. Adults can be asked directly to make a judgment regarding acceptability (although “grammaticality” and related terms are usually avoided, because the aim is to tap into speakers’ intuitions about what “sounds right”, rather than their knowledge of explicit grammatical rules of the type that are sometimes taught in schools). Children are typically asked to judge whether a particular speaker (generally a puppet or toy, as children may be reluctant to “correct” an adult) “said it right” or whether her speech sounded “a bit silly”.

Children may be asked to provide either binary or graded judgments. In the former case, children have only two possible responses. A number of different scenarios are commonly used. For example, children might be asked to classify the utterances of a single character as either “right” or “wrong”/“a bit silly”, generally by either (a) selecting a card showing a tick or a cross, or (b) rewarding or punishing the character (e.g., by feeding him a cookie or a rag). Alternatively, children might be asked to listen to two characters producing different forms of the same utterance – e.g., one correct, one ungrammatical – and to choose the one who “said it better” (e.g., by pointing to or rewarding this character). In the case of graded judgments, children are given three or more options. In perhaps the most commonly used method, children place a counter on a color-coded smiley-face scale with five faces ranging from saddest to happiest, corresponding to “wrong”, “wrong, but not terrible”, “a little bit wrong and a little bit right, or somewhere in between”, “good, but not perfect”, “right”.

The main advantage of binary judgments is that they can be obtained from children as young as 2;4 (as compared with 4;0 for graded judgments). The main advantage of graded judgments is that they provide a within-subject measure of the relative acceptability of different forms (including, for example, two forms that would both be rated as “wrong” in a binary judgment task). However, the choice of a binary versus graded task is not simply a question of methodology. Some theoretical accounts view the adult grammar as classifying each potential utterance as either possible or impossible (in which case only a binary judgment can ever be meaningful), whilst others argue that grammatical knowledge is inherently probabilistic.

As an example of a domain in which grammaticality judgment tasks are often used, consider ***Over-generalizations of grammatical constructions*** (see this entry for more details), which occur when a child uses a verb in a construction in which it is not permitted in the adult grammar (e.g., *\*The clown laughed the boy*). Suppose that the goal is to test the prediction of one particular theoretical account that such errors will be rated as less unacceptable when they occur with lower frequency verbs (e.g., *\*The clown giggled the boy*). No comprehension measure (e.g., act-out, preferential-looking or pointing) would allow for an appropriate test of this prediction, as there is no reason to believe that a correlation exists between interpretability and acceptability (indeed, both sentences are readily interpretable). A production task would be more suitable, assuming that it were somehow possible to place the child in a suitably constraining discourse scenario. However, this task would still provide only a rather indirect measure of acceptability. For example, a child might produce an utterance that she knows to be less than fully acceptable (e.g., \**The clown giggled the boy*), if no suitable alternative comes to mind (e.g., if she has not yet learned an alternative formulation such as *\*The clown made the boy giggle*). Thus in scenarios where the dependent measure of interest is the relative acceptability of particular forms, a grammaticality judgment task would seem to constitute the most appropriate paradigm.

As the examples above suggest, grammaticality judgment tasks are used mostly to obtain measure of the relative acceptability of errors (or alternatively, of novel forms; e.g., novel past-tense forms such as *spling/splung vs spling/splinged*). In such cases, it is important to also obtain a measure of equivalent grammatical forms (e.g., *The clown made the boy giggle*). This allows ungrammaticality to be quantified as a score reflecting participants’ dispreference for ungrammatical uses (i.e., a difference score), which controls for factors such as word frequency, imageability, social desirability of the event described, and so on.

Grammaticality judgment tasks have been used with children to investigate errors in many domains of language acquisition, including – in addition to those outlined above - the following (references for all of these studies can be found in the Further Readings):

* Word order errors (e.g., \**Teeth you brush*), semantically-anomalous sentences (e.g., ?*Throw the sky*) and telegraphic speech (e.g., \**Bring ball*).
* Mass/count noun errors (e.g., *\*Much chairs; \*Every chairs*).
* Sentences with novel verbs (e.g., *\*The funny clown meeked* [=laughed] *Bart*) and even (with adults) entire novel languages (*Glim blergen tombat-ka* [Hits lion-PATIENT giraffe-AGENT]).
* Overgeneralizations involving the dative and locative constructions (e.g., *\*John suggested Sue the trip; \*Lisa poured the cup with water*).
* Errors of incorrect or omitted tense/agreement (e.g., \**I likes toast; \*The bear want a drink*), including amongst children with SLI.
* Morphological over-extension errors of the reversative prefix *un-* (e.g., *\*unclose, \*unsqueeze*)

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See Also: Argument structure (acquisition of); Meta-linguistic awareness (development of); Morphological Development; Over-generalization of grammatical constructions; Syntactic development (Construction grammar perspective); Syntactic development (Generative grammar perspective).

Further Reading

Ambridge, Ben and Rowland, Caroline F. (2013), “Experimental methods in studying child language acquisition”. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews Cognitive Science*, v.4 (2013)

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McKercher, David A. and Jaswal, Vikram K. “Using judgment tasks to study language knowledge” in E. Hoff (ed.) *Guide to Research Methods in Child Language*. London: Blackwell-Wiley, 2011.