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Linguist List Summary

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Brief analysis of responses

Background

Between 14-18 July 2008, I sent out a query asking for introspective judgements on the function of two sentences (no context or co-text was given). The query was sent to a number of lists; respondents were predominantly professionals in (applied) linguistics and language education.

The two sentences were:

- (1) If they want others to do it, I'll advise against their having children.
- (2) If they want others to do it, I'd advise against their having children.

Respondents were asked to choose one of the following options:

- A. Both sentences function as advice
- B. Only sentence (1) functions as advice
- C. Only sentence (2) functions as advice
- D. Neither sentence functions as advice
- E. I cannot tell out of context

I also asked respondents whether they considered themselves to be native speakers (NS) or non-native speakers (NNS) of English.

Reason for the query

I wanted to have 'second opinions' on the interpretation of these sentences given in Athanasiadou & Dirven (1996: 641-642). Sentence (2) is an attested example from the Bank of English corpus; sentence (1) is constructed by the authors to be contrasted with (2). No co-text or contextual information is provided in the paper. The authors argue that in (2) "the speaker pronounces his or her conditional negative advice", whereas in (1) "no act of advising is performed, but only a prediction that such an act will take place" (p. 642). As both authors are, strictly speaking, non-native speakers of English, and as it not improbable that they would have consulted native speakers, I decided to also check for any similarities/differences between NS and NNS respondents. I need to clarify that my interest does not directly lie in the function of the sentences; rather, I'm interested in the implications of their perceived function for the typology presented by the authors.

Breakdown of responses, and some observations

In total, I received 172 responses (122 NS and 50 NNS). Some respondents (5) thought that the sentences made no sense or were ill-formed. Although these responses could be conflated with 'E', I decided to treat them separately (for consistency, they're listed as response 'F'). As the NS-NNS distinction is not universally accepted, table 1 below also presents the breakdown in terms of all respondents.

Table 1. Breakdown of responses

Response	All	All-%	NS	NS-%	NNS	NNS-%
A [both]	28	16.3%	19	15.6%	9	18.0%
B [only (1)]	8	4.7%	3	2.5%	5	10.0%
C [only (2)]	70	40.7%	49	40.2%	21	42.0%
D [neither]	37	21.5%	26	21.3%	11	22.0%
E [cannot tell]	24	13.9%	21	17.2%	3	6.0%
F [do not make sense]	5	2.9%	4	3.3%	1	2.0%
TOTAL	172		122		50	

Although option C (only sentence (2) functions as advice) was the top choice (40.7% overall, 40.2% of NS, 42% of NNS), no clear consensus seems to emerge from the responses. However, except for options E and B, NS and NNS responses are very similar (although, for B, the number of responses are too low for any comparisons to be made).

We can also examine which of the two sentences (if either) was perceived by the respondents as functioning as advice, irrespective of the perceived function of the other sentence, by collating responses 'A' with responses 'B' and 'C' respectively (table 2). Overall, from those who chose options A-D, about one in five think sentence (1) functions as advice, slightly above half think sentence (2) functions as advice, and about one in five think neither does. Again, there is no clear consensus.

Table 2. Breakdown of responses A-D in terms of the function of advice

	All	All-%	NS	NS-%	NNS	NNS-%
(1) is advice [A+B]	36	21.1%	22	19.0%	14	25.5%
(2) is advice [A+C]	98	57.3%	68	58.6%	30	54.5%
None is advice [D]	37	21.6%	26	22.4%	11	20.0%
	171		116		55	

It is also interesting to look at each sentence individually in a binary fashion; i.e. in terms of whether or not it was perceived as performing the function of advice (tables 3 and 4). In terms of sentence (1), the clear majority (three-quarters) of respondents did not perceive it as performing the function of advice; however, a significant proportion (one-quarter) did think that it functions as advice. In terms of sentence (2), slightly more than two-thirds perceived as expressing advice, whereas almost one-third do not.

Table 3. Breakdown of responses A-D in terms of the function of sentence (1) as advice

	All	All-%	NS	NS-%	NNS	NNS-%
(1) is advice [A+B]	36	25.2%	22	22.7%	14	30.4%
(1) is not advice [C+D]	107	74.8%	75	77.3%	32	69.6%
TOTAL	143		97		46	

Table 4. Breakdown of responses A-D in terms of the function of sentence (2) as advice

	All	All-%	NS	NS-%	NNS	NNS-%
(2) is advice [A+C]	98	68.5%	68	70.1%	30	65.2%
(2) is not advice [B+D]	45	31.5%	29	29.9%	16	34.8%
TOTAL	143		97		46	

Finally, in addition to those who responded 'E', the majority of those who chose A-D also commented on the difficulty of deciding on the function of the sentences out of context.

Reference

Athanasiadou, A. & Dirven, R. (1996). Typology of *if*-clauses. In E.H. Casad (ed.) *Cognitive Linguistics in the Redwoods: The expansion of a new paradigm in linguistics*. Cognitive Linguistics Research 6 (pp. 609-654). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.