

Logical relations. If *often* corresponds to probability 0.65, should *not often* correspond to $1 - 0.65 = 0.35$? In a certain logical sense, yes; we might doubt it psychologically, and indeed the two empirical average probabilities do not add to one. There may be other such plausible equalities that are or are not realized; logical inequalities seem to go in the right directions. I would welcome comment from the authors on this corner of the topic. They might wish to consider the trio *even chance, better than even chance, less than an even chance*.

Behavioral responses. Would it be possible to parallel this interesting study by one in which the responses were more concrete than naming probabilities? Perhaps statements about bets, or even actual bets, might be used, following one psychological tradition in which Mosteller has been active. There is again a possible confounding problem.

Codification. I worry about the hope that this line of research will lead to useful codification in our semantic lives. In an important sense, to be sure, semantic codification is essential; without it, languages would not exist as a social creation. Yet we see and hear every day how language structures and conventions have lives of their own and rarely respond to expert, specialized pleadings. Consider the recent fates of words like “disinterested” and “gratuitous.” Consider the general confusion over “significant,” “representative,” and other words that arise in statistical discourse. Consider the inability of the French Acad-

emy to keep the French language pure. . . whatever that means.

I do not doubt that there are cases in which codification or standardization of languages have been effective—possibly Norwegian is an example; but my hunch is that they are rather rare. (By that I mean a relative frequency of roughly 9%.)

There must be a literature about all this, I said to myself as I trotted to the library and used its electronic search system. In almost no time (5 minutes, excluding travel) I had two examples: Milroy and Milroy (1985) and Woods (1985). Both are interesting books with rather different emphases.

Codifications in other domains abound: railroad tracks, lumber, clothing sizes, nuts and bolts, typewriter keyboards, side of the road, even good manners, etc. There must be fascinating similarities and differences. When and how do these codifications get made and get changed?

The doers of any such study will be grateful to Mosteller and Youtz for their present contribution, for their past papers on related topics, and for future insights that they are bound to find.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

- MILROY, J. and MILROY, L. (1985). *Authority in Language. Investigating Language Prescription and Standardization*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- WOODS, J. D., ed. (1985). *Language Standards and their Codification: Process and Application. Exeter Linguistic Studies 9*. Univ. Exeter.

Comment: On the Possible Dangers of Isolation

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The Mosteller and Youtz paper makes fascinating reading. The authors have done us a great service by pulling together the results of so many studies on verbal quantifiers and in carrying out what seems to be the most comprehensive study yet in terms of the number of these quantifiers considered. They will do us a further great service if they can succeed in the proposed quantification.

But I have some serious doubts about the enterprise. I believe Mosteller and Youtz give too little weight to

the effects of the context in which words are used on the meaning of probabilistic expressions.

In understanding what another says or writes, we bring into play not only our knowledge of language, but also our understanding of the situation in which the words were produced and that to which they apply. In the case of a conversation with a friend or acquaintance, we also use our knowledge of that individual and of the relationship we share to interpret what is said. Similarly, in speaking with or writing for colleagues, we use specialized jargons. Thus conversations (or scientific papers) that are perfectly intelligible to the participants can sound like pure gibberish to an observer who misreads or is ignorant of the situation or not privy to the common stock of knowledge of the

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