Syntactic Categorization of ‘Side-eye’:
Noun, Verb, and Adjective

ABSTRACT

As new words are created, they must be categorized into syntactic groups. A single word may be capable of occupying multiple syntactic positions in different contexts by undergoing a process of conversion (Teddiman 2008, 1). The present study investigates which syntactic categories the novel word ‘side-eye’ can occupy in English. A group of first-language English-speaking students were selected for participation in this study (n=12). Participants were subjected to a forced-choice task in which they determined the grammaticality of the word ‘side-eye’ when it occupied the position of a noun (N), verb (V), or adjective (Adj). The Now Corpus online database was consulted to further explore the syntactic distribution of ‘side-eye’. Results from this study conclude that ‘side-eye’ can occur as a count noun, dynamic verb, or an adjective depending on the surrounding sentence frame. Thus, ‘side-eye’ is a categorically ambiguous word.

INTRODUCTION

Languages evolve with time. As new words are created, they must be categorized into designated syntactic groups. Groups that are able to accept new members are known as open class categories, whereas groups that will not allow for additional words are known as closed class categories (Bliss 2019, 6). Through a process known as conversion, a word that acts as a noun in one sentence may also act as a verb in another. As it transitions from one category to another there are no overt marking changes to the word itself (Teddiman 2008, 1). Thus, a single word may be capable of occupying multiple syntactic positions depending on the sentence context.
In recent years the word ‘side-eye’ has surfaced among youth social groups. Based on my own knowledge, the word refers to the action of peering at another person through your peripheries. It is generally associated with feelings of disdain or contempt for another individual, but it can also be used as a non-verbal signal between friends. The present study investigates which syntactic category or categories the word ‘side-eye’ occupies in English. Based on previous exposure to the word, I hypothesize that ‘side-eye’ can act as a verb or a noun depending on the sentence context, but it will not act as an adjective in English. I predict ‘side-eye’ will fit into the syntactic distribution of a mass noun or dynamic verb in a given sentence. However, if ‘side-eye’ is placed in the position of an adjective, the sentence will be ungrammatical.

METHODS
Experimental Methods

A group of students, aged ten through eighteen, were selected for participation in this study (n=12). All individuals are first-language English speakers who use the word ‘side-eye’ in social situations and are regularly exposed to social groups where ‘side-eye’ is used. The students were interviewed on November 16, 2019 at a private residence in Burnaby, B.C. around 11:00 am. Each participant was given a sheet of paper containing a set of sentences where ‘side-eye’ was assigned to various syntactic distributions. In a forced-choice task, participants were asked to determine if the sentences containing the word ‘side-eye’ were grammatical or ungrammatical. Grammaticality was judged based on whether the students believed the sentence was acceptable with respect to the use of the word in each context. For each example containing the word ‘side-eye’, two additional sentences were provided as indicators of grammatical sentences (Example 1a-5a) and ungrammatical sentences (Example 1c-5c). ‘Side-eye’ was positioned as a noun (N), verb (V), or
adjective (Adj) for each sentence (Examples 1b-5b). Sentences were also created in order to specify the sub-category of the noun as mass or count, or the verb as dynamic or stative (Examples 2 and 4). Each student read the sentences, individually, without any external sources of input from myself or other students. During the experiment, students marked a ‘✔️’ by sentences they deemed grammatical and a ‘❌’ by sentences they deemed ungrammatical.

EXPERIMENT EXAMPLE SENTENCES:

1. Morphological Distribution Test for ‘side-eye’ as a verb.

   Past tense morphological marker ‘-ed’ (and allomorphs) always attaches to V’s.

   (a) I just got **played**. (V ‘play’)
   (b) ?I just got **side-eyed**. (Target word ‘side-eye’)
   (c) *I just got **greened**. (Adj ‘green’ in the position of a V)

2. Distribution Test for ‘side-eye’ as a dynamic or stative verb (V_d or V_s, respectively).

   The use of ‘-ing’ to express the progressive form of a verb can only be used on dynamic verbs. Stative verbs will not pass this test.

   (a) She is **pushing** him. (V_d ‘push’)
   (b) ?She is **side-eying** him. (Target word ‘side-eye’)
   (c) *She is **disliking** him. (V_s ‘dislike’ in the position of a V_d)

D’s introduce or precede N’s in a sentence.

(a) She was caught giving her the bottle. (N ‘bottle’)
(b) ?She was caught giving her the side-eye. (Target word ‘side-eye’)
(c) *She was caught giving her the green. (Adj ‘green’ in the position of a V)

4. Distribution Test for ‘side-eye’ as a mass or count noun (Nₘ or Nₙ, respectively).

Only count nouns pass the pluralization test in a straightforward manner. (i.e. the use of a ‘s’ following the word to indicate the plural of the noun)

Mass nouns will not pass this test.

(a) He sold her the necklaces for ten bucks. (Nₙ ‘necklace’)
(b) ?He gave her the side-eyes for 20 minutes straight. (Target word ‘side-eye’)
(c) *He sold her the rice for ten bucks. (Nₘ ‘rice’ in position of a Nₙ)

5. Morphological Distribution Test for ‘side-eye’ as an adjective.

The morphological marker ‘-er’ often occurs with Adj’s.

(a) He was bigger than the other kid. (Adj ‘big’)
(b) He was side-eyeer than the other kid. (Target word ‘side-eye’)
(c) *He was bottler than the other kid. (N ‘bottle’ in the position of an Adj)

Example 1-5. Above are a series of distribution tests containing the word ‘side-eye’ as a N, V, or Adj. (a) is a grammatical sentence with a word that is known to occupy the syntactic position being tested. (b) is marked with a ‘?’
because it is the sentence being tested which contains the target word ‘side-eye’. (c) is an example of an ungrammatical sentence with a word that is unable to occupy the syntactic position being tested (marked with a ‘*’).

Data Collection Methods

The Now Corpus online database was used to further investigate the syntactic positions occupied by ‘side-eye’. The Now Corpus searches for words used by various online news outlets with a data collection range from 2010 to 2019. The corpus serves as a secondary source to compare and verify whether the participant’s responses were reliable indicators of the possible syntactic distributions of ‘side-eye’. I used the specific distribution criteria seen in Example 1-5 to search for desired sentences containing the word of interest. Depending on the position being tested, I searched for ‘side-eye’ along with the word preceding and/or following the target word in Examples 1-5. For instance, to verify the claim that Example 3(b) is grammatical, I searched the database for “the side-eye” to determine if ‘side-eye’ had been used by others in this context before. I searched for the target word in all the tested syntactic positions in this manner.

The general use of ‘side-eye’ as a noun, verb, or adjective was investigated through a broader corpus search. Specific search or distribution criteria were not used in this case. Instead, I searched for ‘side-eye’ while specifying its general position as a noun, verb, or adjective in the corpus.

FINDINGS

Experimental Findings

The participant’s responses to Examples 1 through 5 are summarized in Table 1. The particular tests used did not control for semantic or pragmatic factors that could have influenced the student’s responses.
Table 1. Student responses to the example sentences containing the target word ‘side-eye’. The syntactic category being tested is labeled in red.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Responses</th>
<th>Example Sentences <em>Category being tested</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 (b) V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical ✔</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ungrammatical ❌</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The responses for Example 1(b) show the greatest level of uncertainty. Regardless, the results for Example 1(b) coupled with Example 2(b) show that the students believe ‘side-eye’ can function as a verb. The results for Example 2(b) indicate that ‘side-eye’ can occur as a dynamic verb because it can adopt an ‘-ing’ progressive form (Table 1).

Responses to Example 3(b) and 4(b) show that ‘side-eye’ can also function as a noun. According to the majority of responses in Table 1, 4(b), ‘side-eye’ does not function as a count noun. It is possible that since ‘side-eye’ failed the pluralization test in Example 4(b) it may function as a mass noun.

The responses to the specific distribution test used in Example 5 indicate that ‘side-eye’ cannot be considered an adjective (Table 1). Nevertheless, a single morphological distribution test does not provide sufficient evidence to definitively claim that ‘side-eye’ can never exist as an adjective. Many known adjectives fail this distribution test. Thus, it is inconclusive whether ‘side-eye’ can function as an adjective in other contexts.

It is also important to note that an age-associated response pattern is not observed for any of the findings. That is, younger participants did not have significantly different patterns of response to sentences when compared to older participants. Differences in age were not factors that influenced participant response in this study.
Corpus Findings

Examples 6 to 10 below show the results from the corpus search when specific search criteria were used. The purpose of this search was to provide a secondary source of information which could verify that the responses in Table 1 are reliable indicators that ‘side-eye’ can exist in these syntactic positions. If other individuals had used ‘side-eye’ in the same surrounding environment as in the example sentences, then it would further validate our experimental results. ‘Side-eye’ along with the word preceding and/or following it in Examples 1-5 were used for the search criteria.

CORPUS DATA EXAMPLES


Search criteria based on Example 1: “got side-eyed”

Corpus Findings: No Results

7. Search for ‘side-eye’ as a dynamic verb.

Search criteria based on Example 2: “is side-eying him”

Corpus Findings: No Results

8. Search for ‘side-eye’ as a noun.

Search criteria based on Example 3: “the side-eye”

Corpus Findings: 107 results

E.g. In the 2019 article by The News-Gazette, titled “SHARE-ing her love for helping hurt horses”, Wood states, “Get too close and Captain gives you the side-eye.” (qtd. in Now Corpus)


Search criteria based on Example 4: “the side-eyes”

Corpus Findings: 2 results
E.g. In the 2018 article by *Stuff* titled “Oscar Kightley: Who cares where the fans have been, the Warriors have brought them back”, Kightley states, “the die-hards who passionately stayed true through the darkest days are entitled for a moment to give this multitude of new faces **the side-eyes**” (qtd. in Now Corpus)

10. Search for ‘side-eye’ as an adjective.

Search criteria based on Example 5: “was side-eye*er* than”

Corpus Findings: No Results

The *Now Corpus* did not return results for the occurrence of ‘side-eye’ as a verb ending with ‘-ed’ or ‘-ing’ (Example 6 and 7). This does not mean ‘side-eye’ can never be used as a verb with such morphological markers, but it does not provide further verification of the experimental results in Table 1, 1(b) and 2(b).

Example 8 serves to verify the results seen in Table 1, 3(b). ‘Side-eye’ can occur as a singular noun following the word ‘the’. Example 9 provides evidence that contradicts our results in Table 1, 4(b). According to the corpus search, ‘side-eye’ can exist with an ‘s’ to signify the pluralized form of ‘side-eye’. Thus, ‘side-eye’ can be a count noun depending on the sentence context.

Example 10 verifies that ‘side-eye’ does not occur as an adjective with the morphological degree marker ‘-er’ attached to the end. This finding is consistent with the results presented in Table 1 for Example 5(b).

Upon a broader corpus search for the occurrence of ‘side-eye’ as a noun, verb, or adjective, results were attained for ‘side-eye’ for each syntactic category. There are 469 results where ‘side-
eye’ occurs as a noun, 1 result where ‘side-eye’ occurs as a verb, and 93 results where ‘side-eye’ occurs as an adjective. Thus, side-eye can occupy the position of a noun, verb, or adjective.

The results conclude that ‘side eye’ is a categorically ambiguous word. The use of it in a particular syntactic position may be grammatical in one context and ungrammatical in another. A single distribution test does not provide sufficient evidence to say ‘side-eye’ never can function in a particular syntactic position. Table 1 provides evidence that ‘side-eye’ can function as a noun or a dynamic verb, but it cannot function as an adjective with the degree marking ‘-er’. Corpus analysis determined that ‘side-eye’ can function as a verb, count noun, and an adjective depending on the surrounding sentence frame. Collectively, the corpus findings and the experimental results conclude that ‘side-eye’ can function as a count noun, dynamic verb, and an adjective.

**DISCUSSION**

**Verbs**

Responses to Example 1(b) show the greatest amount of variability. However, all participants agree that ‘side-eye’ can occur as a verb because they all marked sentence 2(b) as ‘grammatical’. This suggests that the reason for the inconsistency seen in Table 1, 1(b), is due to possible semantic or pragmatic factors with regards to that particular sentence. The students may have never used ‘side-eye’ with a past-tense morphological marker. They may feel that ‘side-eye’ is not used in that particular context often, and for this reason marked the sentence ‘ungrammatical’. The students did agree that ‘side-eye’ could be used in the progressive form with an ‘-ing’ morphological marker.
For both Example 1(b) and 2(b), results were not found in the corpus search. I could not verify whether the use of ‘side-eye’ in the past-tense or in the progressive form are common occurrences. This does not mean Examples 1(b) and 2(b) are ungrammatical though.

A broader corpus search showed that ‘side-eye’ does function as a verb, but it is quite rare compared to other syntactic distributions. Looking at other corpora may provide more results for the syntactic distribution of ‘side-eye’ as a verb, thus, further data collection is required. These results support my original hypothesis. ‘Side-eye’ can function as a verb and can occur in the progressive form depending on the sentence context.

Nouns

According to the experimental results (Table 1, 3(b) and 4(b)) and the corpus findings, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that ‘side-eye’ can function as a noun in a given context. The noun sub-category for ‘side-eye’ show conflicting results. The experimental evidence suggests that ‘side-eye’ is not a count noun and therefore is a mass noun. However, corpus data shows ‘side-eye’ acting as a count noun on two occasions. It is possible that the participants in my study were using semantic and pragmatic cues to inform their decisions. They may have marked sentence 4(b) ‘ungrammatical’ because they have never used ‘side-eye’ in the plural form. This does not necessarily mean the sentence is ungrammatical. Thus, contrary to my original hypothesis, ‘side-eye’ can be considered a count noun based on the corpus findings. According to the majority of participant responses in Table 1, 4(b), pluralization of ‘side-eye’ using an ‘s’ seems unnecessary and possibly ungrammatical. It is possible that an ‘s’ to signify pluralization of ‘side-eye’ may not always be necessary depending on the sentence context.
Adjectives

A single morphological distribution test was performed to determine if ‘side-eye’ could occur as an adjective. This single test does not provide enough evidence to conclusively determine whether ‘side-eye’ can be considered an adjective in any other context. Table 1 shows that all 12 participants agreed that ‘side-eye’ cannot adopt the morphological degree marker ‘-er’. Many known adjectives are also unable to adopt this morphological marker. Thus, it does not mean ‘side-eye’ can never occur as an adjective. Upon a broader corpus-wide search, ‘side-eye’ was found to occur as an adjective on numerous occasions. Contrary to my original hypothesis, ‘side-eye’ can occur as an adjective, but it cannot use the morphological marker ‘-er’.

Sources of Error

Unfortunately, my lack of expertise in syntax did not allow for the creation of a large enough experimental data set. A larger data set could have provided a greater degree of information regarding the syntactic distribution of ‘side-eye’. The study required an expansion of the current set of distribution tests, as a single test does not provide sufficient evidence to determine that a word does not ever occur in a particular syntactic distribution. Furthermore, using multiple corpora may have provided a greater range of word usage. Another study could use social media sites as a database to determine the syntactic distribution of the word ‘side-eye’. Although there were many deficiencies within this study, I was able to conclude that ‘side-eye’ can function as a count noun, a dynamic verb, and an adjective in a particular sentence context.

CONCLUSION

This study served as a preliminary investigation into the syntactic distribution of ‘side-eye’. The cumulative results of the distribution tests and online corpus analysis indicate that ‘side-
eye’ can function as a noun, verb, or adjective depending on the sentence frame. Specifically, ‘side-eye’ can function as a count noun, a dynamic verb, or an adjective. Research is required to determine why ‘side-eye’ can function as an adjective in some contexts, but cannot take on the morphological degree marker ‘-er’. Future studies could also determine whether ‘side-eye’ preferentially occurs as a noun, verb, or adjective by determining its frequency of occurrence using a modified calculation for nominal weight (Teddiman 2008, 4).
Works Cited


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