

Kibbitzer 2

Among or Between?

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The "Simple" Rule

Among and *between* are both prepositions that take plural objects (*Harbrace*, 214). According to the *Harbrace College Handbook*, *among* and *between* are used in the following complimentary distribution: "use *among* with objects denoting three or more (a group), and use *between* with those denoting only two (or twos)" (214). The *Concise English Handbook* confirms this "simple" rule: "*among* refers to a relationship involving three or more, whereas *between* refers to a relationship of two" (374-375).

More Complex Rules

Some grammars and manuals also offer more complex, semantically based rules governing the use of *between* or *among*, which are designed to cover exceptions to the "simple" rule. For example, according to *A Practical English Grammar*, the simple rule is generally observed, but *between* can be used to relate more than two objects if the speaker has a specific number of objects in mind (79). *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage* also confirms the simple rule but adds that *between* can be used with more than two objects if they are related "individually as well as severally" (20). Finally, *Write For College*, a popular student handbook, states: "*among* is usually used when emphasizing distribution throughout a body or group; *between* is used when emphasizing distribution to individuals" (680). Note in all the above cases, the exceptions are based on semantic distinctions; further, these grammars and manuals are primarily based on written English. One exception to this is the *Grammar Book*, which advocates "a multi-level strategy" (415) involving semantics, collocational evidence and the discourse context.

The Data

Now let us consider how *between* is used in the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE). There are 1240 instances of *between* in MICASE, but in some cases, it is not possible to tell whether the speaker was referring to two or more entities. Of the 1025 classifiable instances of *between*, 106 compared more than two objects (10.3%) and 919 compared two objects (89.7%).

The "Wrong" Ones

As the above figures suggest, a large majority of tokens of *between* confirm the simple rule of "*between* with two objects and *among* with more than two". Even so, there is a ten percent occurrence of "anomalous" cases, where speakers use *between* where the simple rule predicts they will use *among*. For example:

1. ...let's look at the difference between model one model two model three and model four.
2. ...the interface between universities and external research groups and the sponsoring industry...
3. ...choose between several alternative methods for teaching reading to, elementary school children.

While these examples from the MICASE do not obey the simple rule "*between* with two objects and *among* with more than two objects", the first two utterances could be explained by some of the more complex rules. It seems likely, for example, that the speakers of utterances one and two are following the more complex usage rule stating that *between* can be used with more than two objects if they are related "individually as well as severally" (New York,). In the first, the speaker clearly intends to make a series of individual comparisons. In the second, the speaker refers to an interface between the university and external research groups and between external research groups and the sponsoring industry, but under at least one interpretation the speaker could be seen to imply an interface between universities and the sponsoring industry. The third example isn't governed by any of the rules examined thus far, yet it is not an atypical native speaker utterance. Are there features in the context that might throw light on such cases?

Patterns in the Data

As it turns out, not all of the "anomalous" or "incorrect" uses of *between* are random and inexplicable. In fact, an examination of these uses uncovers several interesting trends:

- 1) there seem to be some words (such as *relationship* and *differences*) that tend to collocate with *between*, even when reference is made to more than two entities (a point also made by Celcia-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman);
- 2) there are a couple of idiomatic phrases with *between* that involve more than two objects, and these would seem to have transfer effects;
- 3) some verbs may "trigger" the use of *between* regardless of how many objects are involved.

1) Collocation

Among the examples of "incorrect" uses of *between*, there were several "word stems" that frequently occurred to the immediate left or very near to the immediate left of the word *between*. The word-stems most frequently collocating with *between* were "diff-" words (*differ*, *difference*, *differences*, *differential*, *differentiating*), "relation-" words (*relations*, *relationship*, *relationships*), and "distin-" words (*distinct*, *distinction*, *distinguish*). Collocation with diff- words accounted for 18 of the 106 incorrect entries (17.0%); collocation with relation- words accounted for 11 of 106 (10.4%); and distin- words accounted for 8 of 106 (7.5%).

Collocation with diff-, relation-, and distin- words was fairly frequent among the entries of *between* at large (diff- words = 169/1240 = 13.6%, relation- words = 47/1240 = 3.8%, distin- words = 52/1240 = 4.2%), but relatively low within the entries for *among/ st* (diff- words = 5/165 = 3.0%, relation- words = 5/165 = 3.0%, distin- words = 2/165 = 1.2%) perhaps suggesting that use of these words immediately prompts a speaker to use *between* rather than *among* regardless of the number of objects about to be compared.

2) Idiomatic Phrases

There are some idiomatic expressions in English that use *between* with more than two objects:

1. *Between you, me, and the fence post...*
2. *Between this, that, and the other thing...*

At least one example of "incorrect" usage from MICASE seems to follow the pattern of example one above:

...between you and me and the T-As you can use these equations all you want...

One example seems to follow pattern two exactly:

...between the lecture, the lab, and your discussions for Chem one-twenty-five, that should be, be sufficient for you to do well...

and two other examples seem to be variations on pattern two:

...but between all those things you should be (directing) (xx) (this course) yourself, to, uh, to do well on those examinations.

...so between all of this, the Masai are having a difficult time...

Note that *all* in these last two examples seems to imply a list of things, that must be larger than two; otherwise *both* would have been used. This may suggest that the idiomatic pattern *between this, that, and the other thing* is being condensed or merged into *between all that*.

3) "Trigger" Verbs

In at least two examples from the MICASE, the verb used in the utterance seemed to influence the choice of preposition:

so you're trapped between a text that has authority over a particular community or had authority over particular communities, that you wanna read and you wanna understand, a society that denies the value of that text at certain levels on other levels it doesn't, and then your own values whatever they are...

are you, sort of mediating between all these different things...

Even though the speakers are comparing more than two items, most speakers of English, according to our informal tests, find it "odd" or "difficult" to use *among* in these linguistic contexts. Other verbs

that show something of this effect are *caught (between)*, *stuck (between)*, and *transitioning (between)*.

Conclusion

These patterns and observations from the data are interesting, but even so they will not predict when *between* or *among* will occur with complete accuracy. What they do show, however, is that a corpus-based approach searching for *linguistic* patterns in the data can produce insights not available to armchair grammarians.

References

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