

Metavariation: Variation in advice on variation

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September 2006

The advice literature on English grammar, usage, and style mostly labels determiner *lot* (*a lot of*, *lots of*) as too colloquial for formal writing; for mass nouns, the quantity determiner *much* is prescribed. A general principle:

1. **Priority of the older variant.** *Ceteris paribus*, the historically older variant is the neutral one, with innovations judged unsuitable for formal writing (or proscribed entirely).

The quantity modifier *much* dates from early English. The noun *lot* didn't develop clearly determiner uses until the early 19th century. Within a hundred years, U.S. usagists (Bierce and Ayres) were castigating it. From that point:

2. **Perseverance of stylistic judgments over time.** Stylistic prescriptions persevere; critics develop their tastes from earlier critics. Actual usage changes, but advice reflects much earlier judgments.

Lot has been pushing into formal contexts, relegating *much* to stylistic and syntactic/semantic islands. From expository writing in *The New Yorker*: "Everyone remembers when something that now costs a lot of money could be had for two dollars..." (*Much* is terrible.) In a *New Yorker* sample, the *lot/much* ratio in exposition is roughly 5 to 1.

OED2 labeled determiner *lot* as colloquial, but some recent college handbooks (Lunsford & Connors, Hacker) don't condemn *a lot of*, and Garner doesn't mention it. Nevertheless, Trask maintains that determiner *lot* is "still" too colloquial for formal writing.

Two underlying assumptions here:

3a. **Variants are sometimes in complementary distribution, but mostly they're in free variation.** The advice literature occasionally advocates distributing variants by syntactic context and often attempts to discern lexical meaning differences, but generally treats variation in grammatical markers and syntactic constructions as governed by formality.

3b. **Advice is about formal style:** The purpose of advice is recommending variants appropriate in formal style.

This disregard for meaning differences runs against:

4. **Bolinger's dictum** (hedged): Lexical and syntactic variation is unfree; variants usually have (subtly) different meanings or discourse functions.

Indeed, sometimes (especially in questions) *lot* suggests a larger or more significant quantity than *much*.

As for syntax: modified mass determiners cannot vary; *much/many* are “neg-polaroid” (but not NPIs), with an affinity for negative/interrogative clauses; in positive declaratives, syntactic function and head noun are relevant. A century’s advice literature has missed all of this. Nor has it explored determiner choice as a matter of taste – of personal style or rhetorical effect.

5. **The ESL literature gets it mostly right.** In contrast, the ESL literature, with a very different audience, scarcely mentions formality, but focuses on neg-polaroid behavior. Typical advice recommends distributing *much/many* vs. *lot* complementarily, in negatives/interrogatives vs. positive declaratives.

Usage in informal writing trends that way, but not categorically; a Google Groups search showed *much* associated with negative contexts and *a lot of* strongly associated with positive contexts:

	positive	negative
<i>much</i>	7	13
<i>lot</i>	55	7

In the new *Cambridge Grammar of English*, descriptive linguistics meets ESL, in a nuanced, accurate account of determiner choice, including a formality constraint on *much*. On the style front, usage has essentially reversed in a century, out of sight of most usagists.

(499 words)