

Metavariation: Variation in advice on variation

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1. advice literature on English grammar, usage, and style
 - 1.1. “authoritative” advice to the educated general public: Fowler to Garner
 - 1.2. the complaint literature: Ayres and Bierce to Fiske and Cochrane
 - 1.3. college handbooks
2. determiner *lot* (*a lot of*, *lots of*) labeled as colloquial in style, too colloquial for use in formal writing; for mass nouns, the quantity determiner *much* was recommended as the all-purpose variant.
3. **Priority of the older variant.** *Ceteris paribus*, the historically older variant is seen as the all-purpose variant, with innovations judged to be unsuitable for formal writing (degree *pretty*), or proscribed entirely (speaker-oriented *hopefully*).
 - 3.1. quantity modifier *much* in English from its beginnings
 - 3.2. noun *lot* didn’t develop clearly determiner uses until early in the 19th century
4. the standard history:
 - 4.1. an innovation “from below” hangs around with low frequency
 - 4.2. but can, eventually, spread
 - 4.3. even to “better writers”
 - 4.4. where usagists will notice it and deplore it
5. determiner *lot*
 - 5.1. begins appearing in serious writers within about fifty years
 - 5.2. within a hundred years, usagists (at least in the U.S.) were castigating it:

Bierce’s (1909:42) “little blacklist of literary faults”:
Lots, or *a Lot*, for *Much*, or *Many*. "Lots of things." "A lot of talk."

Ayres (1909:166):
Lot--Lots. Very inelegantly used for "a great many," "a great deal"; as, "They have *lots* of enemies," "We have *lots* of apples," "He had a *lot*, or *lots*, of trouble," "She gave us a *lot* of trouble," etc.
6. **Perseverance of stylistic judgments over time.** Once stylistic prescriptions are out there in the advice literature, they persevere, taking on a life of their own, undoubtedly because the writers tend to develop their tastes in variants from earlier critics (usually with no attempt at verification). Actual usage, including the variants chosen in formal writing, can change through time, while the advice literature remains conservative, reflecting stylistic judgments of a hundred or more years before.

- 6.1. *lot* not proscribed in Fowler 1926
- 6.2. MWDEU (1989) notes that Gowers' Fowler 1965 says "the Concise Oxford English Dictionary labels *a lot* colloquial [ditto OED2 (1989)] but that modern writers do not hesitate to use it in serious prose."
- 6.3. about 3/4 of MWDEU's sources labeled it colloquial
- 6.4. Shaw 1970: *Lots of, a lot of, a whole lot*. These terms are colloquial for "many," "much," "a great deal." The chief objection is that each is a vague, general expression.
- 6.5. Guth 1959:461, in the section on "Colloquial words":

Commonly used words with a colloquial flavor are nouns like *boss, buddy, folks, and job*; verbs like *faze, flunk, sass, and snoop*; adjectives like *brainy, mean, skimpy, and sloppy*...

Colloquial language uses conversational tags like "well,...", "now,...", "yes,...", "why,..."; qualifiers like *kind of, sort of, a lot, lots*; abbreviated forms like *ad, bike, exam, gym, phone*. It uses many "phrasal verbs," verbs that combine a short basic verb with one or more prepositions; *check up on, chip in, come up with, cut out* (noise), *get across* (a point), *take in* (a show), *take up with* (a person).

Colloquial English usually contains a liberal sprinkling of catch-all words like *nice, cute, awful, wonderful, or terrible*. It is fond of figurative expressions like *play ball, polish the apple, have a brainstorm*.

- 6.6. Guth 25 years later: Guth 1985:236-8 expands on the earlier stuff, with little change (though *phone, ad, and exam* "are now commonly used in serious writing"). p. 238:

Do without informal tags. Informal language uses many tags like *kind of, sort of, a lot, lots*.

- 6.7. MWDEU's conclusion: "These expressions have been used in serious but not overformal writing for a long time, and they still are."
- 6.8. Trask (2005:171), bold-facing ours:

Normal in spoken English, these expressions **still** look rather strange in formal writing. Quite a few people are **now** happy to use these things in formal writing, and write *Lots of research has been done*, but many readers will still find this objectionable. You are advised to write *A great deal of research has been done*, or, in very formal writing, *Much research has been done*.

- 6.9. Lunsford & Connors (1999:731): no warning on A LOT (OF), warning on LOTS (OF)
- 6.10. Hacker (2004:540): ok for A LOT, not LOTS
- 6.11. Garner (2003) doesn't mention either

6.12. nevertheless, Burchfield (1998): “the main contexts in which one finds them are in plain workaday sentences or conversations... The informal nature of both *a lot of* and *lots of* is underlined by the presence in many 20c. works of the contracted forms *lotta* and *lotsa*...”

7. From the very beginning, *lot* has been encroaching on *much*, pushing into formal speaking and writing and consequently tending to relegate *much* to hyper-formal occurrences and to specific syntactic and semantic contexts; ceteris paribus, *a lot of* is now the neutral variant, usable everywhere, with *much* a more specialized alternative. The mass determiner *a lot of* is not at all uncommon, for instance, in expository writing in *The New Yorker*:

Everyone remembers when something that now costs a lot of money could be had for two dollars...

Or, rather, she was a huge star until she took a lot of time off and released the “MTV Unplugged” album...

Pilot research on the *New Yorker* materials looked at comparable samples of pages with *much* and with *a lot of*, extracted relevant determiner uses (by removing modified items, non-determiner uses, predeterminer uses, and uses of *a lot of* with count nouns), and then extracted uses that were not in quoted speech. The estimated ratio of *a lot of* to *much* in this corpus is a stunning 5 to 1 (and for the quoted material, 9 to 1).

8.1. Variants are sometimes in complementary distribution, but mostly they’re in free variation: The choice between meaningful expressions either is (in a few cases) entirely determined by syntactic context or by meaning differences, or (in most cases) is a matter of style – “style” in the sense of the formality of the contexts associated with those expressions. Variation is seen as largely “free”, not conditioned by semantic content or discourse function or syntactic context.

So though the advice literature occasionally advocates distributing variants rigidly according to syntactic context (as for the relative markers *that* and *which*) and fairly often attempts to adjudicate semantic differences between similar content words (like *seasonable* and *seasonal*), variation in grammatical markers and syntactic constructions is for the most part treated as governed entirely by stylistic considerations.

8.2. Advice is about formal style: The primary purpose of advice is to recommend variants appropriate in formal style – excluding both non-standard and colloquial variants.

The consequent disregard for possible differences in meaning in the advice literature (including college handbooks) runs directly counter to:

9. **Bolinger's dictum** (hedged version): Lexical and syntactic variation is unfree; when two or more choices are available to someone, they rarely differ merely in style, but have different meanings or discourse functions, at least in some contexts.

10. For *lot* vs. *much*, in some contexts *lot* suggests a larger quantity than *much*, or at least that the quantity is not only large but significantly large. This is especially clear, as the *Cambridge Grammar of English* (372) notes, in interrogatives, where *much* doesn't necessarily imply a large quantity; cf.

Were they making much noise?
Were they making a lot of noise?

Such a difference would arise naturally (and iconically) from the greater phonological substance of *a lot of* (three syllables, one always bearing some accent) vs. *much* (one syllable, usually unaccented), a difference that also makes *a lot of* more emphatic, *ceteris paribus*, than *much*.

11. The advice literature also disregards syntactic differences, though in the case of *lot* vs. *much* these are often substantial.

11.1. Some differences are absolute: the degree modifiers that can occur with the two determiners don't overlap at all (*quite a lot*, **quite much*, *very much*, **very a lot*), so no choice is possible for modified *lot/much*.

11.2. Other differences are tendencies: *much* (and *many*) have an affinity for negative and interrogative clauses – they are “neg-polaroid”, not actually negative polarity items, but happier in these environments:

They didn't see much shrubbery.
Did they see much shrubbery?
? They saw much shrubbery.

11.3. syntactic function: some observers report that determiner *much* seems to be happier in subjects and in the predicatives of existential clauses than in objects

11.4. nature of the head noun, with some types of nouns disfavoring *much* and a few favoring it.

12. A century of advice literature on *lot/much* has missed all of these effects, though descriptive linguists have picked up on some of them, in particular the neg-polaroid character of *much* (and *many*). The advice literature has not even considered the further possibility that the choice between determiners might be a matter of taste, functioning either as a aspect of an individual's style or as a resource that can be deployed for rhetorical effect – though it seems clear that people do differ in their preferences, and that everybody sometimes uses one of the variants, sometimes the other, in otherwise parallel contexts.

13. **The ESL literature gets it mostly right.** In contrast to this advice literature, intended for adult native speakers, the ESL advice literature, which aims to help

non-native speakers choose between alternatives so as to convey their intended meaning, and so looks for possible semantic and syntactic differences, scarcely ever mentions formality of style, and instead concentrates on the (much firmer) neg-polaroid behavior of *much/many*. Typical on-line advice recommends distributing *much/many* and *a lot of* (almost) complementarily:

Much and *many* are generally used in questions and negatives...

A lot of is used in positive sentences...

We generally use *many* and *much* in questions and negative statements but we use *a lot of* in positive statements.

14. No doubt this press towards complementarity reflects a desire on the part of the ESL advisers to offer one clearly acceptable variant in every context; don't confuse the student. The trend of usage in informal writing is certainly in that direction, but is not absolute; a Google Groups search within a restricted date range showed an affinity of *much* for negative contexts and a much stronger affinity of *a lot of* for positive contexts (with relatively small numbers for *much* overall):

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

15. When descriptive linguistics meets ESL, as in the new *Cambridge Grammar of English*, we see a nuanced and accurate account of the choices, mentioning almost all of the relevant factors – even the contribution of formality of style, where it's *much* that's the more restricted variant: “*Much* and *many* do occur in affirmative declarative sentences, but only in more formal styles” (372). On the style front, usage has essentially reversed in a hundred years or so, out of sight of most of the usagists.

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