
Trying Times

This is a study done using the Internet as a corpus, looking at the relative frequencies of 'try and ...' and 'try to ...'. It forms part of the evidence for language as an individuated, non-universal structure. The research work was done January through May 2001.

Try and do: a prescriptive approach to language would label this as wrong; many linguists would label it as at best a non-standard form, and at worst a non-acceptable form. A Canadian site on the internet¹ lists the *try and* construct as *hendiadys*, as follows:

Hendiadys: The substitution of conjunction for subordination in expressing a compound notion; *try and do better* instead of *try to do better*.

However, *try and do* is out there and doing fine, moving increasingly from spoken to written usage. Anyone who reads London Underground notices will recognise their request that we *try and avoid Holborn* while they repair the escalators again, or that we *try and find an alternative route* whenever they want us to get out and walk (this is a marginally more hopeful euphemism than their other standard, *please continue your journey at street level*). *Try and* appears on London Transport printed posters, and presumably these have been edited and checked many times - the use of this construct is not aberrant, it is institutional.

A check of the Collins CoBuild online dictionary² shows that the construct is used as a controversial form (that is, as hendiadys) both in America and Britain, and it is used by the BBC and by The Times. On searching the Internet using Alta Vista, a total of 786,452 pages were listed as using *try and*, but these included uncontroversial usages like *try and buy*; semantically separate usages such as *give it a try and surprise a friend*; and organisations like "Today Reunites Yesterday". Other searches showed that 69,653 pages used *try and get*, 22,131 used *try and keep*, 17,124 used *try and do*, 12,208 used *try and see*, and 154 used *try and know*. However, these still included uncontroversial usages, such as *you can give it a try and see whether you like it*. These figures must be compared to the 7,987,722 internet pages where *try to* was used.

To assess the balance of controversial to uncontroversial usage, the first 40 occurrences listed by an Alta Vista search for *try and* were inspected to determine the usage. Duplicate sites were excluded, leaving the following examples:

Uncontroversial usages

Try and buy (2)

Give it a try and surprise a friend

Just give it a try and you'll be surprised

To retrieve sites with all the terms you have entered, try AND or +

You can give it a try and see whether you like it

Controversial usages

Try and bookmark

Try and buy (do not forget to try and buy the best hot sauces)

Try and choose

Try and connect

Try and find (2)

Try and get (7)

Try and halt

Try and have

Try and help

Try and imagine

Try and keep (2)

Try and learn

Try and meet

Try and obtain

Try and organize

Try and overturn

Try and pick up

Try and play

Try and release
Try and remember
Try and see
Try and solve
Try and sort
Try and trade
Try and work
Try and write

From this small sample it would appear that about 85% of usages on the Internet are controversial. So, of the 786,452 occurrences about 670,000 are controversial, which is about 8% of the sum of the controversial usages added to the *try to* usages.

In order to determine international spread, sites from various English-speaking countries were checked. Where possible, reputable sources were used (newscasts, official sites, government sites, etc). Instances were found in Britain, USA, Canada, India, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. A sample of usages is given below:

Britain:

The best way to appreciate what's ahead is to try and do the following two puzzles i've prepared for you...³

What else you can do to try and find accommodation.⁴

USA:

Employees of one store could be seen using sandbags to try and keep water from flooding the store.⁵

This site was created primarily for the benefit of Rice University students attending English 318. Those areas that pertain to the class will generally be inaccessible to those outside of Rice. The reason for this is to try and keep the discussion focused on what is being taught in the classroom.⁶

Canada:

Parks Canada has mounted a strong program of working with various jurisdictions and organizations to try and coordinate public education and land use activities within the greater St. Lawrence Islands national park ecosystem.⁷

India:

So let's try and know more about our city.⁸

Australia:

State and Territory Governments have joined forces to look at the possibility of uniform laws across Australia to try and regulate the emerging phenomenon of interactive home gambling, with proposed bans on credit gambling and under-age gambling.⁹

In Rome, diplomats are meeting to try and establish a permanent court to prosecute genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.¹⁰

New Zealand:

Sometimes the tribunal will recommend instead of the claim being heard by the Waitangi Tribunal, the claimants should settle the problem directly with the government. Members of the government will hold meetings and negotiate with the claimants to try and solve the problem.¹¹

South Africa:

Welcome to Sunny South Africa , for our foreign visitors I have included a little map of the country . I will not get into the demographics and poletics on the republic , instead I will try and concentrate on Carp Angling in South Africa.¹²

Certainly on the Internet, the use of *try and* is widespread and unexceptional.

To follow up on this search a survey was conducted to find the level of acceptability of the *try and* form. The question was part of a general survey and was composed as a "fill in the blank". The question was "I will try — do it today". Respondents to the survey were sought by placing messages on various Internet bulletin boards to ensure a relatively unbiased sample, although the

respondents turned out to be mainly educated to degree level. 102 responses were received, tabulated as follows:

To	83
And	18
Not	1
NONE	0

The response for *try and do* was lower than for *try to do*, but the structure of the survey emphasised the missing word as a significant item. If there is an informal convention of *try and* and an formal convention of *try to*, then it would be odd to see any cases of the informal convention in the survey responses. As nearly 1 in 5 chose *try and* it must be considered a minority formal convention. This compares to the 1 in 12 who chose it in the more consciously edited medium of the Internet. Informal interviews after the survey indicate that many of the respondents who chose *try to* will use *try and* in speech, but they see it as invalid in writing.

An analysis of the 34 controversial uses of *try and* found with the Alta Vista search shows it to be used in four grammatical structures, as follows:

- As an imperative – *try* becomes the first word in the construct, e.g. *Try and keep it organized* (7/34 cases)
- As an infinitive – *try* is preceded by *to*, e.g. *I want to try and solve your problem* (21/34 cases)
- As an active verb – *try* is preceded by a subject, e.g. *we will try and help* (3/34 cases)
- As an active verb connected to a previous verb by *and*, e.g. *you just shrug them off and try and remember the good* (3/34 cases)

As an imperative, *try to/and do* actually means *do*; the *try to/and* is used as an attenuator. It is a pragmatically polite way of converting *we want you to do this* into *doing this will help us both*. It recognises that the message sender is asking for an effort on the part of the receiver, and it makes the receiver's action a voluntary choice.

In an effort to identify trends of usage the relative frequencies of *try to* and *try and* were looked at. The first 34 occurrences of *try to* were assessed to give a comparable base. The results are tabulated as follows:

Structure	To count	And count	To frequency *	And frequency *	Relative ratios **
Imperative	7	7	19%	2%	90 / 10
Infinitive	4	21	11%	5%	69 / 31
Active verb	22	3	59%	1%	98 / 2
Connected active verb	1	3	2%	1%	67 / 33

* Count / 34 x Occurrence ratio (8% for *and*, 92% for *to*)

** Frequency of *and* or *to* / total frequency

The ratios show that there is always a preference to use *try to*, but the grammatical construction has a marked effect on the size of this preference. The infinitive *to try and do* is chosen in 31% of cases, but *try and* is chosen in only 2% of the active verb cases. The imperative at 10% shows a ratio close to the total occurrence ratio of 8%. It seems likely that grammatical form affects choice.

It is possible that the high preference for *to try and* is caused by a dislike of repeated words, as in *to try to*. Because the connected active verbs were insufficient to provide a useful comparative sample, searches were done for *and try to*, *and try and*, *to try to* and *to try and*. The results are tabulated below:

	<i>... To</i>	<i>... And</i>	Total	Relative ratios *
<i>And try ...</i>	474,313	27,804	502,117	94 / 6
<i>To try ...</i>	900,028	416,429	1,316,457	69 / 31
Pages using <i>Try ...</i>	7,987,722	670,000 (est)	8,657,722	92 / 8

*** Frequency of *and* or *to* / total**

This indicates that there is a marked tendency for non-repetition of *to*, but the tendency for non-repetition of *and* is marginal, although present. The difference could be caused by the different phonetic values of *to* and *and*, or it may mean that the tendency in *to try and* is caused by grammar function and not repetition.

As well as grammar it was decided to look at some of the verbs following the *try* construct to see whether any marked tendencies could be found. A check was also made for cases where the *and/to* had been left out – an unusual but stylistically recognisable form. The results for five following verbs are tabulated below:

	<i>To</i>	<i>And</i>	Nothing	Total	Relative ratios
<i>Try ... do</i>	149,307	17,124	4,416	170,847	87 / 10 / 3
<i>Try ... get</i>	362,868	69,653	4,057	436,578	83 / 16 / 1
<i>Try ... know</i>	2,659	154	98	2,911	91 / 5 / 4
<i>Try ... keep</i>	199,076	22,131	2,292	223,499	89 / 10 / 1
<i>Try ... see</i>	41,438	12,208	1,914	55,560	75 / 22 / 3
Totals	755,348	121,270	12,777	889,395	85 / 14 / 1

All of these common verbs, except *know*, show a higher than average tendency to be used with *and*, but only *get* and *see* show marked tendencies above the average of 8%. Nonetheless it seems likely that the verb used does affect the choice of *to* or *and*.

What factors are likely to be causing this use of *try and* instead of *try to*? It is a specific choice of the present simple tense, and does not transfer to other tenses: the people who *try and do* still *tried to do* and *are trying to do*, not *tried and did* or *are trying and doing*. It is therefore a fracturing change of the *go / went* type, introducing a discontinuity between different tenses of the same verb phrase.

The first cause of change has to be the phonetic form of the phrase in speech. There is a tendency in Estuary English to reduce the linking sound between *try* and *do* to a voiced nasal (*try'n'do*), while American accents tend to use a half-voiced palatal stop (*try'd'do*). In some cases of Estuary English the middle syllable virtually disappears, creating a *trine do* sound. But, where not deliberately pronounced, the linking sound is perceivable as a shortened form of *and*, and therefore could be represented in the minds of speaker and listener by the word *and*.

The trawl of the Internet given above shows that the written *try and do* phenomenon is not limited to Estuarists and Americans, we appear to be looking at a larger phenomenon. Has the new construct reached a larger audience by transfer, or are the Estuarist and American pronunciations just instances of a trend being repeated in many forms of English? One cause of the change seems clear: despite the best efforts of Pronunciation Units, TV and radio broadcasters are unselfconsciously slipping into the *try'n'do* or *try'd'do* forms, and their usage is being broadcast Worldwide.

Another factor permitting the *try and* construct is the existence of non-controversial forms, such as *try and buy* and *try and see*. This is caused by two types of *try*, one which creates new meanings with *and*, and one which does not. *Try and do* has the same meaning as *try to do*, because *try* has a semi-

modal form; but while *try to buy* is semi-modal, it has a different meaning to *try and buy*, where *try* has a serial coordination with *buy*. However, as we have seen, this does not prevent *try and buy* being used in a semi-modal form.

Try and also follows the same format as existing forms, such as *come and*, *go and* and *wait and*. They have the semantic structure of two actions linked temporally (one following the other). These constructs are mostly used in the imperative form, or with the permitter *let's* prefixed. It is not common to see them used in the present simple tense outside of the imperative, although they are often used in future simple (*We will wait and see*). It is uncommon to see the *and* in these constructs replaced by *to*, and this further weakens the choice of *to* with *try*. It is arguable that the use of *to* in place of *and* in these constructs changes the meaning from two serial actions to a second action dependent upon the first.

When looking at this usage historically we have somewhat of a dilemma. The dominance of prescriptive stylistics over all but the last 20 years means that both written and broadcast forms were edited consciously to match the prescriptive *try to* form. Our current permissive view of language usage was not always the case, and other considerations such as valued forms dictated high levels of both internal and external censorship. The usage in everyday speech has not been preserved. However, the fact that early grammars felt the need to proscribe a language construct indicates that the construct was common enough to generate comment.

In 1954 Partridge¹³ wrote:

Try and do (something) is incorrect for *try to do* (something). [This usage is approved by some grammarians as a comfortable English idiom; it is labelled *colloquial* by *Webster's*.]

The text in square brackets was one of several "valuable additions made by Professor W. Cabell Greet to *Usage and Abuse* in order to render it suitable for use in the United States of America." Thus even back in the 1950s there was not agreement on a correct form. This does not prevent a prescriptive approach from being espoused even today, as the following from a reputable Internet site demonstrates:

Try And or Try To?

The expression **try and** followed by a verb is nonstandard. Use **try to** instead.

Incorrect: Try and do it again. Correct: Try to do it again.¹⁴

It therefore seems that while *try and* is not a new grammaticalization in the language, it is a form moving from established but generally unaccepted use to a wider acceptance. It is an interesting change because it introduces a discontinuity to the language, in that the tense forms differ. The suffixed tenses (*tried*, *trying*) see no application of *and*, probably because it requires the suffixing to be repeated in the second verb where *to* does not. This carries over to the third person singular in the present simple, giving us a tense structure of:

(Imperative)	try to do	try and do
I/you/we/they	try to do	try and do
he/she/it	tries to do	---
		(although I have heard <i>he tries'n'does his best</i>)
... am/is/are	trying to do	---
... have/has	tried to do	---

Of course, processes of grammaticalization can sometimes sweep in like tides, and just as quickly sweep out again. However, *try and* appears to have established itself in perceived spoken form, and is gaining ground in written form. When organisations like the BBC and CNN are willing to allow *try and* into their web literature then it is time to reconsider the legitimacy of the form.

Martin Edwardes, May 2001

Footnotes:

- 1 <http://www.csi.uottawa.ca/~kbarker/ling-devices.html> [back]
 - 2 <http://titania.cobuild.collins.co.uk/index.html> [back]
 - 3 <http://www.maxwellian.demon.co.uk/art/ipd/concept.html> [back]
 - 4 <http://www.bioch.ox.ac.uk/~awatts/house.html> [back]
 - 5 <http://www.cnn.com/US/9812/25/watermain/> [back]
 - 6 <http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~jchance/tolkien.html> [back]
 - 7 http://www.cnf.ca/wild_dec13.html [back]
 - 8 <http://www.expressindia.com/ie/daily/19970604/15550743.html> [back]
 - 9 http://www.treasury.sa.gov.au/taxation/media/baker_gambling.html [back]
 - 10 http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/transcripts/min_fa-abc_rn_16june98.html [back]
 - 11 <http://www.knowledge-basket.co.nz/waitangi/info1.htm> [back]
 - 12 <http://marina.fortunecity.com/thunder/303/> [back]
 - 13 [Eric Partridge](#): The Wordsworth book of Usage and Abusage, 1954, Wordsworth Editions Ltd, Herts.
 - 14 <http://englishplus.com/grammar/00000245.htm> [back]
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