Usage and Variation Survey

Prescriptive English grammar (as reflected, for instance, in most dictionaries) has it that *lie* in the sense of ‘rest, be in a prone position’ is an intransitive verb (i.e., it does not take a noun as a direct object right after it), as in *I will lie on the couch for a few minutes*, and *lay* is a transitive verb (i.e., it does take a direct object), as in *I will lay the book on the couch*.

For many English speakers today, however, *lay* is used intransitively, as in *I will lay on the couch for a few minutes*.

Your task is to conduct a mini-survey to (begin to) determine some facts about actual usage of these verbs. Write up a brief report (2-page maximum) on your findings from the following questions. Did you find any variation from speaker to speaker (including yourself)? Did you find any variation between your speakers and the prescriptive norms of the dictionary?

1. Select two people you know (roommates, friends, relatives, co-workers, etc.) and ask them first about their background (where they are from, what language they spoke in their home, how long they have lived in Columbus, how old they are, how far they went or have gone in their education, and their occupation); include also their sex and your assessment of their socio-economic class (upper class, middle class, working class). Do the same for yourself (so that you have three speaker-consultants in all).

2. Find their reactions to the following sentences (i.e., do the sentences sound natural to them? How would they say the same idea — with the same word or with a different form of the verb? Record your own reactions as well.

   a. *I will lie on the couch for a few minutes*
   b. *I will lay the book on the couch.*
   c. *I will lay on the couch for a few minutes.*
   d. *Yesterday, I lay on the couch all day.*
   e. *Yesterday, I laid on the couch all day.*
   f. *I remember now that I laid the book on the couch before dinner.*
   g. *I remember now that I lay the book on the couch before dinner.*
   h. *There have been some days where I have just lain on the couch all day.*
   i. *There have been some days where I have just laid on the couch all day.*
   j. *There have been many times when I have laid my book aside in order to watch TV.*
3. Ask your consultants to complete the following sentences with a form of *lie* or *lay*: Record your own reactions as well.

a. I thought I would _____ out in the sun today.
b. I feel sick; I want to _____ down.
c. I will _____ in wait here in the bushes and ambush John.
d. I need to _____ the baby in the crib.
e. Did you see that dog just ________ there?