

Defectiveness as a product of prescriptivism: a behavioural study

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Background

Defectiveness manifests as speakers' rejection of any form of a lexeme that could fill a given paradigmatic cell (Sims, 2015). Work on the causes of defectiveness has so far focused on system-internal factors (uncertainty, homophony, etc). While a number of conditions that correlate with being defective have been established, it has proven challenging to make deterministic predictions about where defectiveness is to be found in a system: for example, uncertainty about the correct form will sometimes lead to defectiveness while at other times to overabundance (Sims, 2006). Similarly, attempts to empirically identify defective forms by seeking words of unexpected low frequency in a corpus have not proven fruitful, since defective forms and lexemes don't seem to have a unique frequency profile (Copot & Bonami, 2020). One underexplored facet of defectiveness and its causes is the impact of extralinguistic factors, such as normative pressures: a societal incentive to "speak correctly" (or even a more explicit knowledge that certain word forms are to be prescriptively avoided in normatively correct speech) can be expected to play a filtering role in deciding which of the words with the necessary prerequisites will be treated as defectives.

To explore this question, we borrow insight and methodology from Vogel (2019). Vogel notes that taboo constructions are the object of a paradox: in order for a construction to be taboo, it must nevertheless exist in language use - speakers will profess that the construction is wrong and does not exist in the language, conflating a belief that it shouldn't exist with an assertion that it doesn't. It should follow from this that in an acceptability judgement task, speakers should rate taboo constructions more variably than ungrammatical controls because 1) an individual's degree of prescriptiveness will determine the extent to which they find the construction unacceptable, 2) more saliently taboo examples of the constructions (those cited as bad by grammar books) will receive worse ratings than less salient ones. Assuming said variability in judgement successfully distinguishes grammatical taboos from ungrammaticality, it provides a sound starting point for investigating whether linguistic prescriptiveness plays a role in inducing defective behaviour.

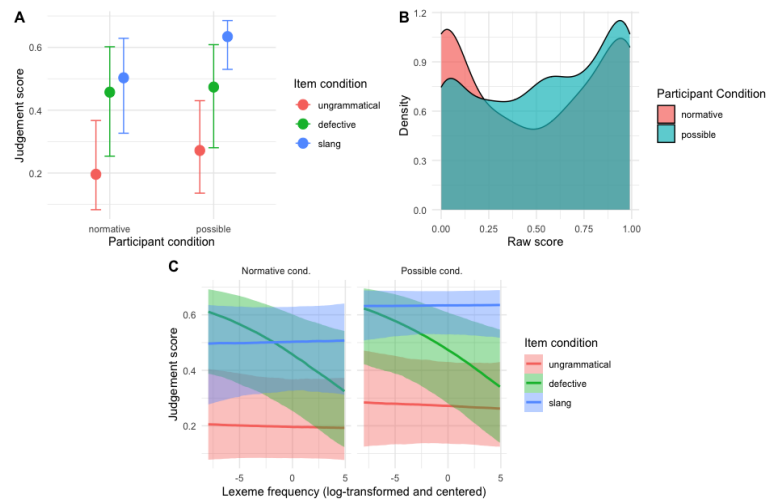
Methodology

The French language has a well-established list of known defective word forms, as well as a strong prescriptive tradition. French speakers were given the task of judging the acceptability of an underlined word in a sentence on an unmarked slider. 60 participants, recruited from Prolific.co, were split in two conditions: one set was asked to give a normative acceptability judgement ("Would this word be marked wrong by a teacher? Could it be found in the dictionary?"), while the other set was asked to give a possibility judgement ("Could you hear someone say this word in casual conversation? Could you catch yourself saying it, even if you might end up correcting yourself?"). The underlined words were all verbs, falling in three categories: 1) known defectives, 2) slang, 3) ungrammatical (agreement errors). The defective verb forms chosen were listed as defective in at least one major French dictionary, and were selected to maximise the likelihood that a speaker would be familiar with the lexeme (so archaic or very infrequent lexemes were excluded). Before the experiment, participants were asked to rate their agreement with statements about linguistic norms and language change, in order to gauge the extent of their prescriptive tendencies. After the judgement task, participants were presented with a list of lexemes in their citation form (the list included all lexemes seen in the judgement task, as well as French pseudoverbs), and they were asked to select all the ones they were not familiar with. Data pertaining to lexemes selected by the participant was excluded from analysis.

A zero- and one-inflated bayesian beta regression with by-participant and by-item random effects was fitted to the scores assigned by participants. Along with the variables characterising the experimental design (participant condition, item condition), and indexical information for each participant, the model includes a prescriptiveness score for the participant, and lexeme frequency for each item.

Results

For both participant conditions, scores for defectives had higher variance than scores for the other two conditions (fig. A, conditional effects plot). Based on Vogel (2019), we had originally predicted that defectives would have higher variance in the normative condition only. Upon closer inspection, the distribution of scores for defectives is in fact bimodal for both participant conditions, though more extremely so in the normative condition (fig. B). This suggests



that items that are labeled as defective in grammars underlyingly belong to two categories which are treated differently by speakers - the difference between the two underlying categories is exacerbated when speakers are asked to think in normative terms.

The effect of lexeme frequency sheds light on the matter (fig. C, conditional effects plot): while it has no effect on slang or ungrammatical items, it has a strong negative effect on defective items: if a lexeme is infrequent, speakers are unlikely to treat its supposedly defective word form as problematic. Defectiveness is meant to manifest as the refusal of all candidate forms that could fill a given cell, but the low ratings that would be expected for defective items on the basis of this are much more likely to be found for high-frequency lexemes. Such a state of affairs is consistent with the proposal that prescriptive pressures play a filtering role in deciding which syntactic words meeting the structural condition for defectiveness get treated as defective: language planning institutions will focus on the most frequently encountered examples of potential defectives, and issue recommendations that they not be used. Assuming that lower-frequency lexemes featuring a syntactic word with the prerequisites to be treated as defective are mentioned less frequently in guidelines from language planning institutions and grammar books, speakers are less likely to be aware that these lower-frequency words are to be avoided.

The current study opens a discussion on the role of extralinguistic factors as causes of defectiveness, and proposes empirical evidence to corroborate the proposal that prescriptiveness has a key filtering role in establishing defective behaviour.

References

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