

The linguistic prescriptivism filter on word form uncertainty

A cross-linguistic study

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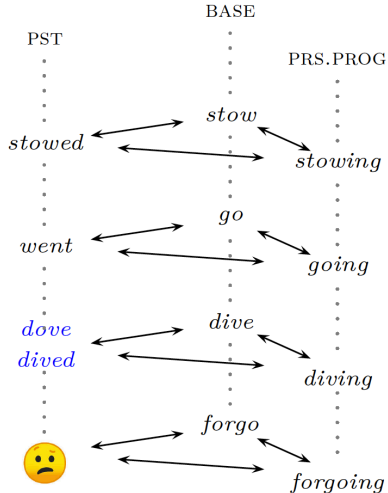
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Introduction

Defectiveness and overabundance

Two **paradigmatic** phenomena with **opposite** manifestations, associated with word form **uncertainty**.



- **Overabundance** is often caused by a lexeme's ability to follow multiple morphological patterns (Thornton, 2011; Thornton, 2012)

indeterminacy → multiple forms

- **Defectiveness** may be caused by a lexeme's ability to follow multiple patterns, or ill-suitedness to follow any pattern, with speakers avoiding all options (Albright, 2003; Sims, 2006, 2015)

indeterminacy → no form

The big question

If both **overabundance** and (certain types of) **defectiveness** are linked to **indeterminacy** of the correct word form...

what determines whether we'll get one or the other,
conditional on indeterminacy?

An important factor in determining whether word form indeterminacy will yield defectiveness or overabundance is **prescriptivist attitudes towards variation** in the language.

indeterminacy + low variation tolerance → defectiveness

indeterminacy + high variation tolerance → overabundance

Why pitch this?

Copot & Sims (2022): experimental study on **defectiveness in French**.

Core findings

- Speakers **vary widely** in their acceptance of prescriptively defective forms
- Defective forms of more **frequent** lexemes were judged **worse**

Interpretation

- Speakers have to **know and care** that a word is prescriptively defective to have a **negative opinion** of its usage
- For at least some cases of defectiveness, it doesn't "fall out of the grammar" but rather is **externally conditioned**.

The role of uncertainty

- Many of the defective items in C&S are defective because of word form **indeterminacy**.
- **Same conditions** lead to many documented cases of **overabundance** (Italian, Estonian, Czech, etc). Why are these conditions associated with defectiveness in French?
- The hypothesis: a **standardising attitude** towards one's language. Fear of choosing wrong word under uncertainty, and codification of "absence of form".

Testing the hypothesis

- An experiment testing speakers' judgements of
 - **normatively defective and overabundant** words
 - **morphologically indeterminate** words that have not been identified as either of the above
- in **French and Estonian**, languages with different approaches to standardisation.

Background

Prescriptivism - and more generally speakers' **metalinguistic awareness** - should be taken into account when looking at **patterns of usage**, like any other sociolinguistic factor.

- High **metalinguistic awareness** of language
 - Tradition of *remarqueurs*, columns about language in popular media (Ayres-Bennett, 1994, 2006).
 - Lots of schooling in grammar and literature.
 - Académie française - French language planning institute.
- **Language planning**
 - Low tolerance for local languages and varieties.
 - Attempts to exclude all foreign borrowings and loanwords.

- High **metalinguistic awareness** of language
 - Language considered key to national identity and much discussed in popular media (Raag 2008).
 - Language authority appealed to for “correct” language.
- **Language planning** allows for variation
 - Since late 20th century, Standard Estonian norms allow for abundance of parallel morphological forms (Erelt 2002).
 - Much talk of excessive English influence in vocabulary
 - But high tolerance for variation in morphology.

Methodology

The experiment

- Compare **French and Estonian speakers** on responses to
 - morphologically indeterminate lexemes
 - normatively overabundant lexemes
 - normatively defective lexemes

Both languages have...

- **Strong prescriptive cultures** with different approach to variation.
- Dictionaries specifying **normatively defective and overabundant** forms

“Aujourd’hui j’ai raton laveur mes amis. Raton laveur.”

Est-ce que cet usage du mot est correct ?

Pas du tout correct  Parfaitement correct

Task Conditions

Normative Judgement Could you find this usage in a dictionary?
Would a teacher mark it as correct?

+*normative*, +*formal*

Est-ce que cet usage du mot est correct ?

Pas du tout correct  Parfaitement correct

Possibility Judgement Could you hear this usage from friends
hanging out at a bar, or students after school?

–*normative*, –*formal*

Est-ce que cet usage du mot serait déplacé dans la conversation de tous les jours?

Totalement déplacé  Pas du tout déplacé

What words to compare

- Normatively **defective (French)** vs **overabundant (Estonian)** verbs
 - Similar structural properties
 - Differences in treatment by language/task condition would indicate an **effect of prescriptive orientation**.
- Morphologically **indeterminate** verbs.
 - Indeterminacy = local entropy from Qumin (Beniamine, 2018), uncertainty about realisation of the cell for lexeme.
 - Verb forms with structural uncertainty, but not normatively targeted as D/OA.

All lexemes were matched for frequency. All verbs shown were present indicative forms, very frequent in both languages.

- **Defective/overabundant:** verb forms marked as defective or overabundant in French and Estonian.
- **Indeterminate word form:** lexemes with paradigmatic uncertainty about the verb form.
- **Anglicisms:** grammatical taboos - only acceptable in informal language. Control for task effect.
- **Subject agreement errors:** ungrammatical - the verb featured an incorrect agreement marker. Check for attention, baseline for "not generated by the grammar".

- The experiment is meant to test for the effect of **type of prescriptive** culture conditional on **word form uncertainty**.
- In both languages we expect:
 - Subject agreement errors to always be rated at floor
 - Anglicisms to be rated worse in the normativity task compared to the possibility task

- **Indeterminate** items should always be rated at ceiling
 - Estonian prescriptive culture does not negatively target the use of multiple forms.
- **Overabundant** items should in principle also be rated at ceiling
 - The less frequent overabundant form was used, we might also expect a split cell frequency effect.

- **Indeterminate** items should always be rated at ceiling
 - French prescriptive culture does not negatively target the use of multiple forms.
- For **defective** items, we expect to replicate Copot & Sims (2022).
 - high **variability**: score dependent on participant's attunement to prescriptivist discourse, since there is nothing grammatically wrong with the form.
 - **negative frequency effect**: more frequent lexemes: explicitly known to be defective/more backlash for using the wrong form.

Procedure

160 participants from Prolific.co
(80 for each language)



Administered a **prescriptiveness questionnaire** and collected
demographic info



Assigned to a **task condition**, given instructions for the kind of
judgement required



9 items for each of the four item conditions in a randomised
order, no distractors



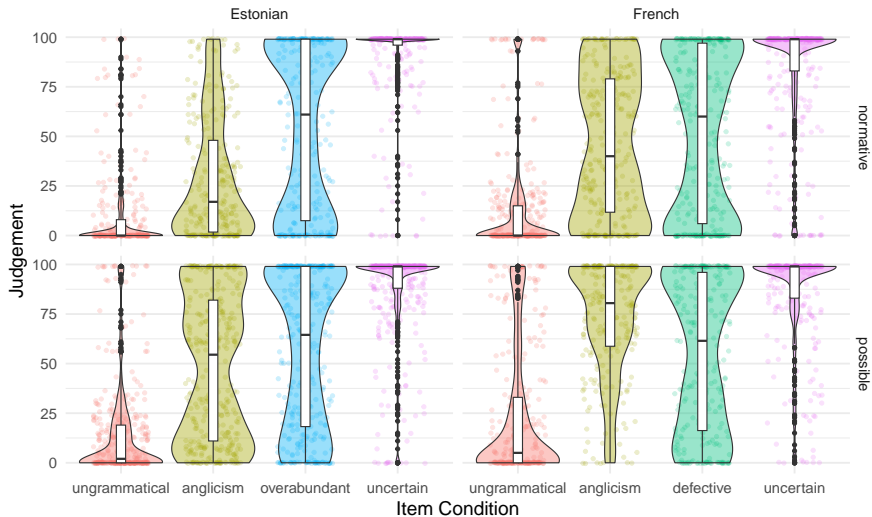
Verification of **lexeme knowledge**

The participant judgements for each language were fitted separately with a Bayesian **zero-and-one-inflated beta regression**.

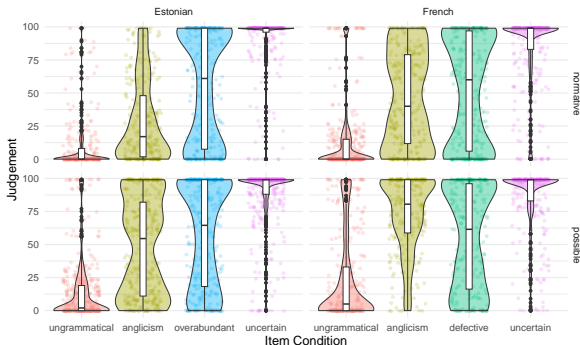
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judgement ~  
item_condition * task_condition * frequency * prescriptivism +  
(1 | participant) +  
(1 | item)
```

Results

Raw Results

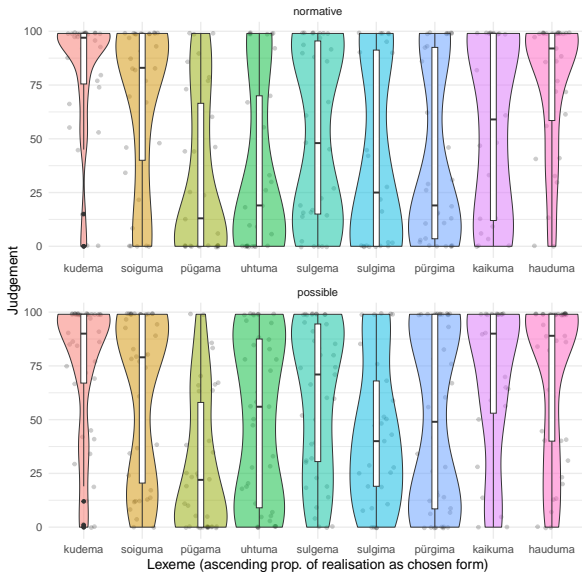


Raw Results - deviations from expectations

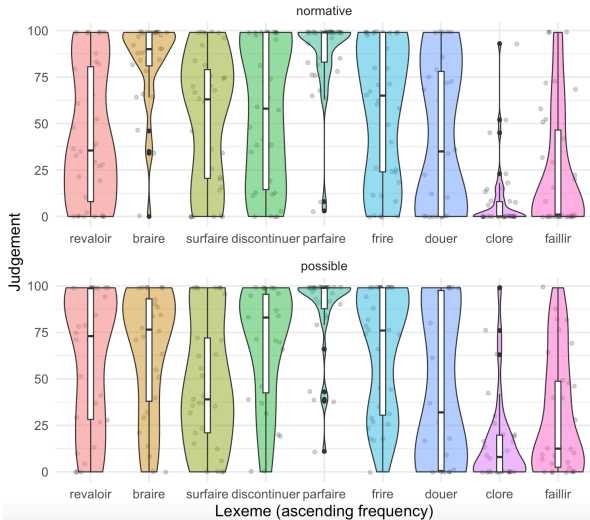


- **Defective**: as predicted, much variability, but no difference between normative and possible
- **Overabundant**: lower scores and more variability than anticipated - patterning similarly to defective lexemes?

Overabundant lexemes - frequency U-curve



Defective lexemes - frequency negative effect



Summary of findings

- **Indeterminate** items at ceiling - no penalisation without prescriptivist filter
- **Defective** items: replicated C&S - high variability, negative effect of frequency
- **Overabundant** items: lower than expected, more variability, U-shaped frequency curve
- Similar pattern for defective and overabundant items

- **Overabundant** items were presented in the **lower-frequency** form, might explain unexpected pattern
 - **Follow-up**: Estonian study with higher-frequency form
- **Defective** items showed no task effect, possibly because of their **formal** register
 - **Follow-up**: French study teasing apart effects of formality and normativity

- The study provides additional evidence for treating defectiveness and overabundance within the **same framework**.
- Structural **indeterminacy** and **metalinguistic attitudes** both play a role in the outcome of speaker uncertainty.

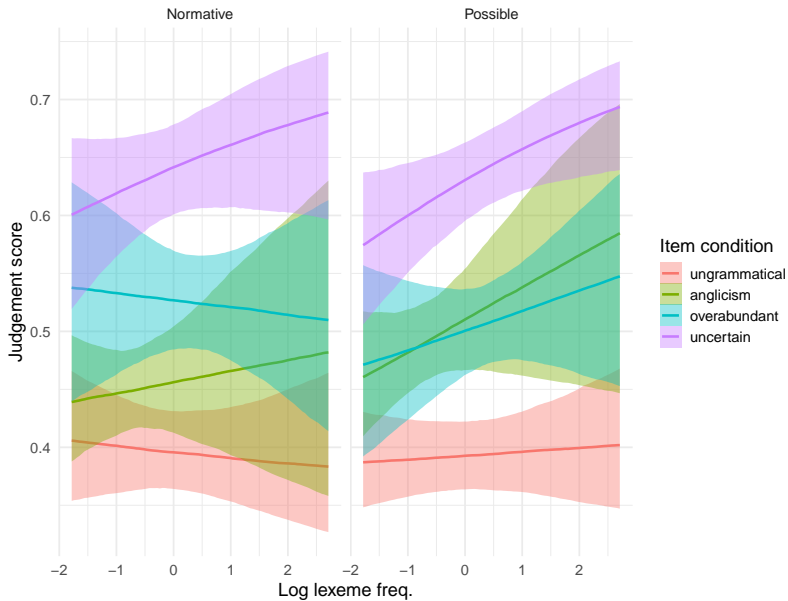
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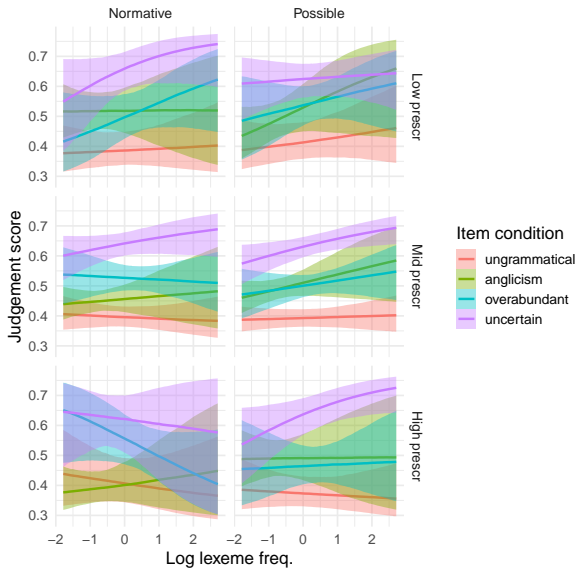
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Appendix

Model results - Estonian



Model results - Estonian



Model results - French

