

Testing the reliability of acceptability judgments for subjunctive obviation in French

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In this paper, we revisit a study by Ruwet (1991), in which he presents informal acceptability judgments concerning obviation weakening in (European) French (see sections *Obviation* and *Obviation weakening* below). We do so by conducting a formal method of gathering acceptability judgments of Ruwet's data (see section *Experimental study*). Our results show that we cannot entirely replicate Ruwet's observations. The conclusions we draw from this are as follows:

- (a) The results clearly indicate that replicating so-called informal class 3 judgments (see section *Background*) by a formal method is necessary in French. Our study thus corroborates the statement by Linzen & Oseki (2018) that class 3 judgments in languages other than English are less reliable (see also section *Background*).
- (b) Even though we hardly found evidence for obviation weakening, our results do not call obviation weakening per se into question – rather, our data show that obviation weakening in the specific conditions as presented here, cannot be taken for granted.
- (c) Additional data must be considered, and additional experimental methods must be carried out in order to get a better overall picture of possible obviation weakening (in French).

Obviation: French subjunctive structures with a volitive such as (1) are characterized by a disjoint reference between the embedded subject (here *tu* 'you') and the matrix subject (here *je* 'I'). The embedded subject cannot have the same reference as the matrix subject, (2a). Coreference must be expressed via the infinitive, (2b). The examples below are from Ruwet (1991).

- (1) *Je veux que tu partes.*
'lit. I want that you leave.'
- (2) a. **Je veux que je parte.*
'I want that I leave'
b. *Je veux partir.*
'I want to leave.'

Obviation weakening: Ruwet (1991) was one of the first discussing that obviation can be weakened so that the coreferential reading in sentences such as (2a) becomes more acceptable. He argues that the coreferential reading gets better under specific circumstances, namely by (i) reducing the agentivity of the subject (Ruwet 1991: 20), and (ii) creating a distance between an expression of desire and the fulfillment of an action (Ruwet 1991: 21). He discusses a variety of factors such as the use of passives (3) and coordination (4) that lead to a weakening of the subjunctive disjoint reference effect – indicated by ? (data from Ruwet 1991: 20 & 23).

- (3) ?*Je veux que je sois autorisé à partir demain.* (passive)
'I want for me to be allowed to leave tomorrow.'
- (4) ?*Je veux que tu partes et que je reste.* (je – tu & je)
'I want to you to go and for me to stay.'

Background: As Linzen & Oseki (2018: 1) and others point out, one of the main sources of data in linguistics are acceptability judgments. Acceptability judgments can be gathered by different methods. In Sprouse et al. (2013), they are classified into informal and formal methods. Informal methods are characterized by the involvement of relatively few (expert) participants (most often, the author of a given paper), by relatively few tokens per condition – if at all –, and by relatively little explicit instruction. Formal methods are characterized the other way around: many non-expert, naive participants, several tokens per condition, explicit instruction, most often a statistical analysis, and much more response options (see Sprouse et al. 2013: 224). There is

an ongoing discussion on whether informal methods are reliable as such, and whether the results of e.g. introspection can and shall be replicated by formal acceptability judgment tasks or not (e.g. Phillips & Lasnik 2003; Featherston 2009; Phillips 2010, Sprouse et al. 2013 vs. Langendoen et al. 1973; Schütze 1996; Gibson & Fedorenko 2010; Gibson et al. 2013; Linzen & Oseki 2018).

Whereas Sprouse et al. (2013), for example, obtained a convergence rate of 95% between the tested informal and formal methods in their study on English, Linzen & Oseki (2018) obtained only around 50% in their study on Hebrew and Japanese. Linzen & Oseki (2018) do not deny the reliability of informal judgment tasks, but they argue that the tested cases as well as the language under scrutiny play a crucial role for the results. Linzen & Oseki (2018: 3) organize syntactic judgments in three classes, with the first two allocating uncontroversial cases (such as **The children is leaving*) and the third one allocating more subtle and thus controversial cases. They argue that class 1 and class 2 judgments typically show a high reliability (like in the study by Sprouse et al. 2013), class 3 judgments do less so. However, languages such as English undergo several kinds of peer review processes (see Linzen & Oseki 2018: 18ff.) and for this reason, the class 3 judgments are informally vetted by the large community of linguists being native speakers of English (p. 21). According to the authors, one of the reasons for the lower convergence rate for Hebrew and Japanese results from less broad and extensive peer review processes – there are simply less linguists with Hebrew or Japanese as a native language. The data of the present paper suggest that French seems to be part of those languages that also undergo a less broad and extensive peer review process with respect to class 3 judgments.

Experimental study: A total of 88 French native speakers (21 males, 64 females, and 3 not specified) completed our online survey (run on the online survey engine *LimeSurvey*). The participants ranged from 18–76 years. They were either enrolled at university, employed or pensioned. Only four participants held a degree below A levels at the time of the study. The participants' command of language was validated during a short testing period before entering the official experiment. We tested six factors mentioned by Ruwet (1991): (i) *passive*, (ii) *perfective/periphrastic past*, (iii) *negation*, (iv) *modal verbs*, (v) *psych verbs* and (vi) *coordination*. Our survey was comprised of 96 items: 48 filler clauses and 48 test items (six factors x eight lexicalizations of each factor; 4.224 test sentences in total = 48 test items x 88 participants). The test items consisted of the original sentences from Ruwet (1991) and newly created lexicalizations. The items were pseudo-randomized (sentences of the same factor never appeared immediately after one another). Each item was displayed separately, followed by a Likert-type-7 scale (Schütze & Sprouse 2013). The scale ranged from grammatical (value 6) to ungrammatical (value 0). The analysis of the data reveals a clear result (see Figure 1): Only the factor *coordination*, see (4), where the matrix subject *je* 'I' and the embedded subject *je* 'I' are separated from each other by *tu* 'you' of the first conjunct, leads to a clear weakening of the subjunctive disjoint reference effect, while the remaining factors show a clear tendency towards ungrammaticality (Nota bene: To support our interpretation of the values of the six factors, we compared these values against the mean values of some grammatical and ungrammatical sentences of our filler sentences).

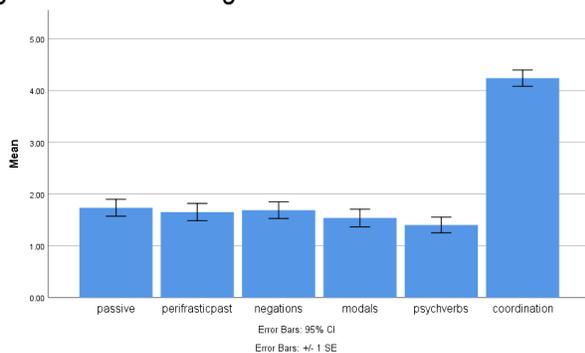


Figure 1: Results of the acceptability judgments for the six factors leading to obviation weakening according to Ruwet (1991). Factors are listed on the x-axis, the values of the scale are listed on the y-axis (0= ungrammatical; 6=grammatical).

Selected references:

Linzen, T. & Y. Oseki (2018). The reliability of acceptability judgments across languages. *Glossa* 3(1): 100. 1–25.

Ruwet, N. (1991). Je veux partir / *Je veux que je parte: on the distribution of finite complements and infinitival complements in French. In: Goldsmith, J. & N. Ruwet (eds.). *Syntax and Human Experience*. The University of Chicago Press.

Sprouse, J., C. Schütze & D. Almeida (2013). A comparison of informal and formal acceptability judgments using a random sample from Linguistic Inquiry 2001-2010. *Lingua* 134:219-248.