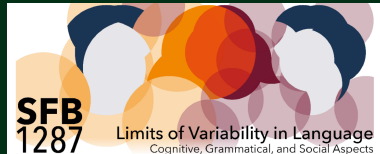


**All that glitters is not syntax
On the deceptive comfort of the armchair**

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The armchair

A caricature of the armchair linguist is something like this. He sits in a deep soft comfortable chair, with his eyes closed and his hands clasped behind his head. Once in a while he opens his eyes, sits up abruptly shouting, "Wow, what a neat fact!", grabs his pencil, and writes something down. Then he paces around for a few hours in the excitement of having come still closer to knowing what language really is like.

Filmore (1992)

- the armchair as a symbol for **introspective** data collection: the **researcher** investigating the respective phenomenon **is simultaneously the source of data**
- compare: fieldwork, elicitation, corpus studies, experiments

The glitter

- theoretical linguistics has used introspection as a primary source of data with remarkable success
 - but: introspection can lead to **competing theories due to conflicting judgments**
 - syntax is viewed as a **rigid system with no leeway for inter-individual variability**, so we should ensure that there is none before making claims about syntactic structures
- **problem:** we may end up mistaking certain properties for syntax when they are in fact subject to variability!

The syntax

- focus on two constructions for which conflicting judgments have been reported: **Turkish Relative Clauses (RCs)** and **German Parasitic Gaps (PGs)**
- Turkish RCs have special agreement (on the verb of the relative clause), but reports thereof are vague and contradictory
- German PGs' existence is disputed altogether, some arguing that the construction requires a special syntactic derivation due to its marginality

Two studies to clear the air

When in doubt, run an experiment!

- acceptability rating experiments are an easy and accessible tool to assess how constructions are perceived by a larger group of speakers
 - requires little effort, suitable for well-studied, highly accessible languages where basic concepts are uncontroversial
- participants have to rate sentences on a scale (usually 1–5 or 1–7) based on how acceptable they find them

Turkish RC Study

- two distinct types of agreement supposedly associated with Turkish RCs targeting subjects vs. nonsubjects
- the lack of agreement in subject RCs is uncontroversial

(1) a. *Subject RC*

[[geçen yaz ada-da ben-i gör-en] kişi-ler]
last summer island-LOC I-ACC see-AN person-PL
'the people who saw me on the island last summer'

b. *Direct object RC*

[[geçen yaz ada-da gör-düğ-üm] kişi-ler]
last summer island-LOC see-DIK-1SG person-PL
'the people whom I saw on the island last summer'

(Kornfilt 2000, p. 123)

Turkish RC Study

- all non-subject RCs require agreement (Ouhalla 1993); agreement based on specificity of embedded subject (Kornfilt 1997, 2000); agreement based additionally on unaccusativity (Cagri 2005, 2009)
- unification of all non-subjects, yet overwhelming use of locative expressions in evidence, hardly any minimal pairs, incomplete reports
- **expectation:** direct object relativization only with agreement, locative relativization with/without agreement based on specificity of the subject

Turkish RC Study

- 82 native speaker participants
- 24 items
- 2x2x2 design
- 8 experimental conditions
- more details: Sarvas (2021)

Cond.	ToR	Agreement	Context
a	DO	+Agr	+spec
b	DO	+Agr	-spec
c	DO	-Agr	+spec
d	DO	-Agr	-spec
e	Loc	+Agr	+spec
f	Loc	+Agr	-spec
g	Loc	-Agr	+spec
h	Loc	-Agr	-spec

Turkish RC Study

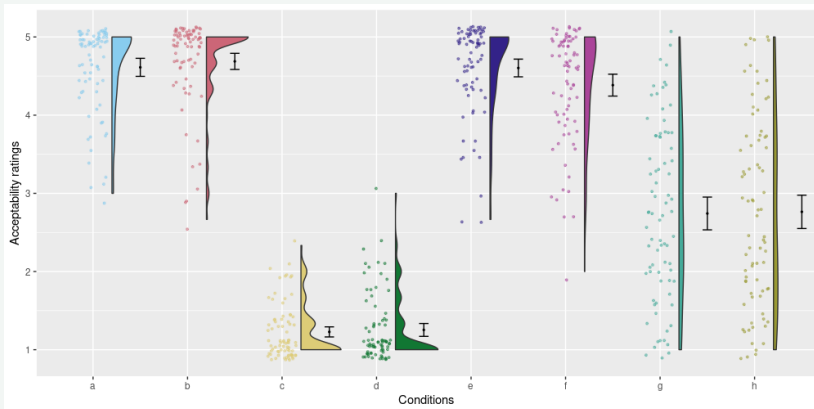


Figure: Mean ratings and inter-speaker variability sorted by conditions. Coloured points indicate mean ratings of individual participants; coloured violin plots indicate the density of mean ratings given by individual participants. Error bars indicate standard error, point in the middle of each bar indicates mean rating for respective condition.

Turkish RC Study

- obligatory agreement in direct object RCs confirmed
 - no clear evidence for nuanced claims in literature → specificity of subject does not seem to be a syntactically relevant feature
- variability is likely a result of more complex interactions between linguistic modules not captured in experiment, or a depiction of systematic non-linguistic factors
- **messy judgments are a good starting point to revive the discussion on this topic!**

German PG Study

- PGs are parasitic on 'real' gaps arising through \bar{A} -movement: their occurrence is conditional on an extraction dependency
- PGs are optional, i.e. there could also stand a pronoun in their place

- (2) a. *[Which document] did you destroy the book without reading ___?
b. [Which document] did you destroy ___ without reading ___/it?

- most of the literature concerns English PGs, they are much more constrained in other languages

German PG Study

- (3) Welches Dokument hast du zerstört ohne ___ zu lesen?
which document have you destroyed without pg to read?
'Which document did you destroy without reading?'
- acceptable (Felix 1985); only mention of non-extraposed type (Fanselow 2001); less than marginally acceptable, thus 'true' PGs non-existent (Kathol 2001)
- **problem:** the marginal acceptability of PGs, despite only based on introspection, is often a central argument for or against their similarity to other sharing constructions, their underlying structure involving coordination/subordination, etc.

German PG Study

- 80 participants, 12 items, 2x2
- 4 experimental conditions varying the position of the PG relative to the licensing gap (extraposed vs. non-extraposed), and the presence of the PG (pg vs. pronoun)

- (4) Condition NON-EXTRAPOSED, PG/PRN
Marie hat erzählt [welches Buch_i] Clara ohne *pg_i/es_i* zu lesen
verschenkt hat ____i.
'Marie told (us) which book_i Clara gave away ____i without reading
pg_i/it_i.'
- (5) Condition EXTRAPOSED, PG/PRN
Marie hat erzählt [welches Buch_i] Clara verschenkt hat ____i
ohne *pg_i/es_i* zu lesen.
'Marie told (us) which book_i Clara gave away ____i without reading
pg_i/it_i.'

German PG Study

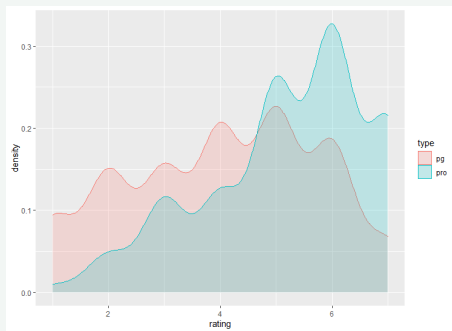


Figure: Density of ratings sorted by presence/absence of PG.

- 16.3% of participants reject PGs (mean rating 2.5 and below)
 - 42.5% of participants find them mediocre (mean rating 2.6–4.5)
 - 41.3% of participants find them acceptable (mean rating 4.6 and above)
- 71.3% of participants find the same sentences involving a pronoun instead of a PG acceptable (mean rating 4.6 and above)

German PG Study

- no evidence for generally mediocre judgments!
- **inter-speaker variability seems to reflect the variable judgments from the literature**
- likely some non-linguistic factors at play: cognitive, pragmatic, regional, ...
- likely nothing syntactically special about PGs!
- significant ME of extraposition: extraposed PGs are less acceptable than non-extraposed PGs → could be due to processing; or see Fanselow (2001) and Kathol (2001)

Closing words

There are, of course, many cases of theoretically important judgments that are disputed. But these are typically the topic of open and lively debates, which themselves frequently lead to important new insights. [...] So these are not cases of questionable generalizations that have been accepted prematurely; rather, they are cases where the facts are being actively investigated, a very healthy state of affairs.

(Phillips 2009)

Closing words

- the linguists whose claims my experiments failed to confirm are not wrong in their judgments, their reports are simply incomplete: **each of them shows one piece of the puzzle**
- experiments are there to nudge us in the right direction when we are stuck
- crucial to identify inter-speaker variability and distinguish syntactic properties from non-syntactic ones
- help us determine whether we need to dig deeper or dig elsewhere

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