Experimental Syntax: Making Sense of Variability in Linguistic Judgments

Jana Häussler & Thomas Weskott

Abstract

In this course, we want to discuss how data from controlled experiments allow us to gain insights into syntactic phenomena. Through hands-on analysis of datasets, the course introduces participants to the idea that variance in linguistic data (e.g., acceptability judgments) is more than noise and demonstrates ways to uncover meaningful structure in variation.

We will start out with a data set representing a typical case of investigating a syntactic phenomenon with acceptability judgments as the dependent variable. In line with common practice, we will analyze this data set by an inferential statistic procedure to test a specific hypothesis. We won't stop there, however, but call into question the focus on hypothesis testing and the concomitant limitation on the significance of effects. We aim to draw attention to sources of information about syntactic phenomena in aspects of the data that are typically dismissed as "error variance": individual properties of participants and/or of stimuli. We will exemplify this perspective by using the paper by Sprouse, Wagers, and Phillips (2011) as a showcase for the use of covariates that contain information about how participants differ in terms of their reaction to different types of stimuli. More succinctly, we will discuss the role of dialect, register, literacy and other participant- and item-related factors in explaining the variance buried in AJT data. Our ultimate goal is to provide students of experimental syntax with the conceptual, methodological and statistical tools to represent the multi-factorial nature of acceptability both in terms of experiment design and data modelling.

As a preparation for the course, participants should read the paper by Sprouse et al. (2011) and familiarize themselves with the methodological approach taken there, as well as the statistical tools chosen by the authors. Moreover, we will assume that participants are acquainted with the statistical software environment R, and are familiar with the basic notions of descriptive statistics (distributions and their parameters). In addition, students are encouraged to bring their own data to the course provided they are pertinent to the problems discussed.

Readings

Sprouse, Jon, Matt Wagers, and Colin Phillips (2011). A test of the relation between working-memory capacity and syntactic island effects. 88.1, 82-123.