
Beyond means: Complex interplays in two acceptability studies

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Acceptability judgment studies have long served as an interface between theoretical linguistics and experimental methodology. Yet, standard practice often reduces this rich data source to a single outcome: whether a hypothesized effect is statistically significant or not. Such “effect checking” obscures the complexity and multifactorial nature of linguistic acceptability as a cognitive (and social) phenomenon. In this talk, I argue that the variance traditionally dismissed as noise—stemming from, e.g., participants, items and context—is in fact a source of linguistic insight.

Drawing on two recent experimental studies, I illustrate how embracing this complexity changes both our theoretical and methodological perspectives. In Nyvad, Müller & Christensen (2022), we demonstrated that adjunct island effects are far from categorical. Relativization out of *if*-, *when*-, and *because*-clauses yields strikingly non-uniform acceptability distributions: *if*-clauses pattern with non-island *that*-clauses, while *when*- and *because*-clauses elicit graded and bimodal ratings. The results point to a dynamic interplay between grammatical constraints, processing difficulty, and discourse coherence—dimensions that standard mean-based analyses cannot capture. Likewise in Christensen & Nyvad (2024), we showed that structural complexity and frequency jointly shape acceptability in Danish, but not uniformly across speakers. Individual response profiles reveal distinct sensitivity patterns to syntactic complexity and usage frequency, suggesting that what mixed-effects models treat as random variance actually reflects systematic differences in linguistic experience and processing.

Together, these studies advocate a shift from testing isolated effects toward modeling the structure of variation itself: how participant- and item-level factors, contextual facilitation, and trial effects interact in shaping judgments. I will discuss how acceptability judgment research can move beyond identifying whether an effect “exists,” towards understanding why and how linguistic acceptability varies—transforming noise into evidence.

References: • Nyvad, A. M., Christensen, K.R. & C. Müller (2022). *Islands with bridges? Extraction from adjunct clauses in Danish*. Talk presented at "Linguistic Evidence 2022", Paris, France. • Christensen, K.R. & A.M. Nyvad (2024). Complexity, frequency, and acceptability. *Glossa* 9(1).