
Standardized fillers for gradient benchmarking in acceptability judgment

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Acceptability judgment tasks (AJTs) are a central empirical method for investigating linguistic patterns, particularly in syntax. Their validity rests on the growingly recognized view that both grammar and acceptability are gradient (Fanselow et al. 2006, Francis 2022, among others). AJTs typically employ rating scales, allowing for gradience in data. However, researchers lack standardized practices for interpreting where on the gradient a given rating falls: some studies use relative differences between experimental conditions (Merchant et al. 2013), others rely on positive/negative z-scores (Pañeda et al. 2025), or on comparison with grammatical and ungrammatical fillers (Schoenmakers & Stoica 2024). These inconsistencies hinder cross-experimental comparability and limit the interpretability of results.

Standardized fillers (SFills), i.e., filler items that are pre-normed to span the full range of acceptability, have been introduced as response to these problems, but so far only for English (Gerbrich et al. 2019). In this talk, I present a new set of German SFills, developed through extensive norming across multiple experiments, and illustrate how integrating SFills into AJTs offers several methodological advantages: (i) critical items can be assessed by directly comparing them to SFills, yielding a clear position on the gradient scale, (ii) ratings to SFills can be used to calculate z-scores for each participant, (iii) results from different experiments and/or participants can be evaluated by referencing the same SFills, (iv) responses to SFills reveal individual variation, allowing researchers to identify outliers or systematic confounding factors such as dialect or proficiency, and (v) using SFills across languages enables controlled cross-linguistic comparisons of acceptability patterns.

In this talk, I will present SFills for German and English and illustrate how SFills improve the reliability and interpretability of AJTs in English and German, offering a step toward methodologies that fully leverage the gradient nature of grammar. By moving beyond schematic mean comparisons, SFills treat variance in AJTs as a source of insight rather than noise, aligning with the workshop's aim of refining empirical methods to better capture subtle patterns in language.

Selected References: Fanselow, G., Féry, C., Vogel, R. & M. Schlesewsky (2006). *Gradience in Grammar: Generative Perspectives*. Oxford: OUP. • Francis, E. J. (2022). *Gradient Acceptability and Linguistic Theory*. Oxford: OUP. • Gerbrich, H., Schreier, V. & S. Featherston (2019). Standard items for English judgment studies: Syntax and semantics. In S. Featherston et al. (eds.). *Experiments in Focus*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1–16.