
Response style in Likert scales and populations in linguistic fieldwork

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Studies in psychology and the social sciences have shown that populations differ in their use of Likert scales – some displaying an overall agreement bias ('Acquiescent Response Style', ARS), others showing a preference for the endpoints of the scale ('Extreme Response Style', ERS), etc.; see van Herk et al. (2004), van Dijk et al. (2009) among else. The present study investigates whether such response styles affect acceptability judgments in populations of linguistic fieldwork and explores statistical strategies for their treatment; contributing to earlier studies in ordinal regression for linguistic data; Divjak & Baayen (2017).

We analyze acceptability judgments from native speakers of Yucatec Maya, who evaluated the fit of quantified expressions to depicted situations (varying between "matching" and "non-matching"). The participant sample was diverse with respect to exposure to Spanish, as determined by age and place of living (urban vs. rural). The results reveal that the magnitude of the contrast is inversely correlated with language use/competence (measured by the Bilingual Language Profile, Birdsong et al. 2012). This apparently paradoxical finding suggests that factors independent of language competence shape the judgments. Importantly, response styles differ across speakers in line with their degree of exposure to Spanish: participants with a stronger Mayan background tend toward ARS, while those with greater Spanish exposure tend toward ERS. A cumulative link ordinal regression further shows that model fit improves when subsample-specific thresholds (based on the BLP index) are used.

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