The non-independence of variants in judgement data

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(joint work with Daniel Ezra Johnson)

A standard assumption in the Labovian sociolinguistics and historical syntax literature is that linguistic variants are mutually dependent in speakers’ probabilistic knowledge about variation (Cedergren & Sankoff 1974, Sankoff & Labov 1979, Kroch 1989, 2001). This is an assumption in models of production data, where, for a given context of variation with n variants, the probability of use of variant n \((v_n)\) will be \(1-(\text{Pr}(v_1) + \ldots \text{Pr}(v_{n-1}))\). Recent results suggest that that acceptability judgments for competing variants closely mirror usage frequencies (Manning 2003, Bader & Hussler 2010, Bresnan and Ford 2010, Melnick, Jaeger, & Wasow 2011). A question that arises in this light is whether acceptability of competing variants show interdependence in designs in which judges evaluate variants independently. We present evidence from three (fairly) large sample judgement experiments on passive constructions in Norwegian (N=500) and Swedish (N=100), and English particle verb constructions (N=237), showing partial interdependence of the variants. We suggest that subjects may evaluate the relative acceptability of both orders when they are exposed to either one of them, in a kind of perceptual version of competing grammars.