

Individual differences in linguistic creativity: user-related determinants in attitudes towards grammatical productivity

Anouk Van den Stock, Anne-Sophie Ghyselen & Timothy Coleman
Ghent University, firstname.surname@ugent.be

Constructions are rarely fully productive. In that sense, our linguistic creativity is “constrained in ways that can be hard to articulate” (Goldberg 2019: 1). So far, (partial) productivity has mostly been described from a corpus-based perspective, focusing on language-internal measures, such as type frequency, hapax frequency (Baayen 2009; Zeldes 2012) and semantic similarity (Suttle & Goldberg 2011). Recent studies in usage-based grammar, however, have shown the significance of individual differences in linguistic knowledge (Dąbrowska 2018; V. Verhagen 2019). Consequently, we can expect variation in the extent to which language users will (i) extend constructions creatively, and (ii) evaluate creative extensions from other speakers as acceptable. Moreover, creativity as such is likely to be influenced by individual variables, such as general intelligence and personality traits (Hofmann 2018). The present study applies a cognitive sociolinguistic approach (Geeraerts et al. 2010) in a first attempt to investigate individual differences in linguistic creativity by focusing on language users’ evaluations of productive instantiations of grammatical constructions.

More than 700 native speakers of Dutch participated in an online acceptability rating experiment in which they evaluated both conventional and unconventional/productive/creative instantiations of two selected Dutch argument structure patterns, namely the *weg*-pattern in (1) (A. Verhagen 2003) and the *krijgen*-passive in (2) (Coleman 2015), on a 7-point Likert scale. It is interesting to compare these two constructions in one study, as they differ in terms of their degree of productivity and expressivity. Additionally, the *weg*-pattern has a comparatively more productive counterpart in English while the *krijgen*-passive does not, which allows us to examine a potential effect of exposure to a construction in another language.

- (1) Hij baande/zocht/toeterde/elleboogde zich een weg door de menigte
'He made/searched/honked/elbowed his way through the crowd.'
- (2) Els kreeg een kaartje aangeboden/opgeplakt/geleverd/toevertrouwd.
'Els was presented/stuck on/delivered/entrusted a card.' (lit. 'E. got the card presented/...')

Materials were selected on the basis of corpus frequencies of the types of verbs encountered in the patterns at stake, as well as on their degree of semantic compatibility to the construction, modelled by Vector Space Semantics (see Perek 2016). The results indicate considerable individual variation in speakers’ evaluation of the less conventional instantiations of these constructions. The presentation will present and discuss the findings of mixed ordinal regression analyses that explored to what degree the ratings were affected by linguistic determinants on the one hand and extralinguistic/user-related determinants on the other hand. Our data, for instance, provides evidence for the role of token frequency as a linguistic determinant of acceptability, but also shows that judgements are irrefutably shaped by user-related determinants such as age, gender and region. Additionally, we will discuss the findings with respect to personality traits, which were measured by the BFI-2 (Soto & John 2017).

Keywords: syntactic productivity, linguistic creativity, individual differences, acceptability ratings

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