

# Socially-evaluated syntactic variation?

## A perception study of the English particle verb alternation

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Can syntactic variation be socially evaluated?

Our meta-study of *Language Variation and Change* articles finds little social evaluation of word order variables.

Our perception study of the English particle verb alternation finds no social evaluation of non-standard word order.

### TESTING PREVIOUS PROPOSALS

Many researchers suggest that syntactic variables are less likely to be socially evaluated than variables at other levels of the grammar.

(Weiner & Labov 1973, Winford 1996, Hudson 1996, Cheshire 1999, Labov 2001, Meyerhoff & Walker 2013, Levon & Buchstaller 2015)

To test this claim, we need precise definitions of **social evaluation** and **syntactic variation**.

### WHAT IS SOCIAL EVALUATION?

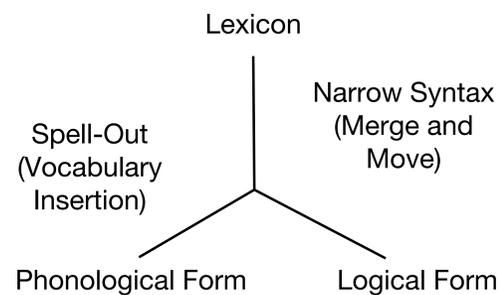
Social abilities comprise: (Campbell-Kibler 2016)

1. Speaker **production** of forms in ways that reflect the speaker's social characteristics
2. Listener **perception** of a speaker's social attributes through that speaker's choice of form
3. Social **ideologies** about forms

### WHAT IS SYNTACTIC VARIATION?

Generative morphosyntactic theory (Minimalism, Distributed Morphology) identifies **two** distinct phenomena that can fall under sociolinguists' umbrella of "syntactic variation":

1. Variation in spell-out (How morphemes are pronounced)
2. Variation in word order (Distributed deletion under Copy and Delete theory of movement)



Variation in spell-out: (Embick 2008)

*dove* grammar: T[past] ↔ -t/\_{\LEAVE, \BEND, ...}  
T[past] ↔ -Ø/\_{\HIT, \SING, \DIVE, ...}  
T[past] ↔ -ed

*dived* grammar: T[past] ↔ -t/\_{\LEAVE, \BEND, ...}  
T[past] ↔ -Ø/\_{\HIT, \SING, ...}  
T[past] ↔ -ed

Variation in word order: (West Ulster English, McCloskey 2000)

[**what** [[**all** *what*] did [he [say [[**all** *what*] that [he [wanted [all *what*] ]]]]]]]]

[**what** [[**all** *what*] did [he [say [[**all** *what*] that [he [wanted [**all** *what*] ]]]]]]]]

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### METHOD

- 401 *Language Variation and Change* articles (1989–2017)
- Linguistic variables coded as **spell-out** or **word order**
- Studies coded for:
  - whether the authors looked for
    - social effects in speaker **production**
    - social judgments in listener **perception**
  - and whether they found either.

### RESULTS

Classification of variables	Social effects in speaker <b>production</b>	Social judgments in listener <b>perception</b>
Spell-out (n=140)	Looked for: 92 Found: 71	Looked for: 32 Found: 26
Word order (n=27)	Looked for: 10 Found: 6	Looked for: 4 Found: 1

### DISCUSSION

- Social judgments in listener perception are more likely for spell-out variables than word order variables.
- **However**, very few studies have actually looked for social perception of word order variables.
- One study found social perception of the dative alternation (D'Arcy & Tagliamonte 2015):
  - Double object dative: *I gave John the book.*
  - Prepositional dative: *I gave the book to John.*
  - The prepositional dative was considered more prestigious in Late Middle English due to analogy with French.

### THE PARTICLE VERB ALTERNATION

*I took the trash out* vs. *I took out the trash*  
verb object particle      verb particle object

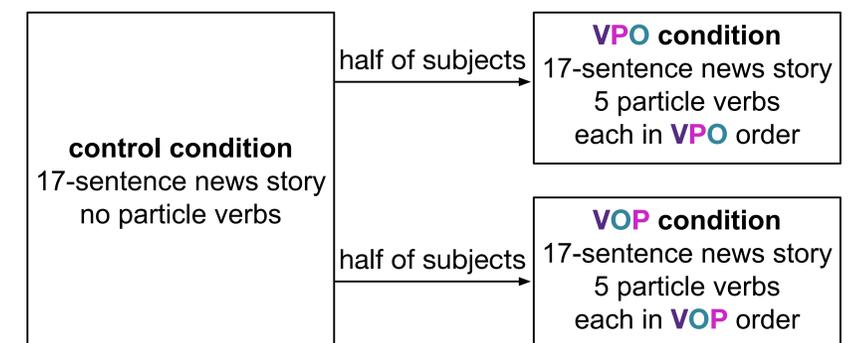
Do listeners socially evaluate this variable word order?

Kroch & Small (1978): Radio show hosts use the **VPO** order more than their guests, presumably to adhere to prescriptive norms disfavoring sentence-final prepositions.

This suggests speaker social characteristics are reflected in production of the different orders. **Is this also reflected in perception?**

### METHOD

- "Newscaster paradigm" (Labov et al. 2011)
  - Listeners hear recordings of a speaker who is said to be applying for a job as a newscaster and are asked to rate her professionalism.
- 296 native speakers of American English
- Administered over Prolific, an experimental crowdsourcing platform.



How would you rate this person's success as a broadcaster?

Try some other line of work ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Perfectly professional

### RESULTS & DISCUSSION

- Linear regression finds no significant difference in ratings between the two participant groups.
- All participants rate the second recording higher than the first, regardless of particle verb order in the second recording.
- This suggests that, despite Kroch and Small's findings, listeners do not socially evaluate this alternation in perception.