

What are the boundaries of variation in severe language endangerment? A pilot on production and perception of the subjunctive mood in Francoprovençal

Research in language obsolescence has demonstrated that formerly categorical rules can become variable as speakers shift languages (e.g. Draget et al. 2019). However, it remains unclear whether or not, to what extent, or at what point, speakers perceive the laxing of categorical rules, and how this perception is reflected in production.

This pilot study reports on the production and perception of the subjunctive mood among 36 speakers (balanced for age/gender) of obsolescent Francoprovençal in Savièse (Valais, Switzerland). Francoprovençal marks the subjunctive synthetically, and in Savièse this takes the form of /ʃ/+V, where the final vowel agrees for person and number, as in (1). Previous descriptive work (e.g. Stich 1998:116) suggests that the subjunctive is undergoing a weakening of present and imperfect paradigms (cf. (1-2)), leading to variation in the system, making the subjunctive mood a good exploratory candidate in assessing the limits of perception and control of attriting features in language endangerment. However, little empirical work exists on this under-documented language.

Production data were elicited using variationist protocols, modified for the specificities of the language context, as all participants self-report to be illiterate in their language. Participants attended sociolinguistic interviews which took place in two parts. First, an oral-translation task was administered in order to capture more monitored speech. Second, participants attended group discussions, guided by a speaker and community insider, capturing more informal speech. Both parts yielded $n=176$ subjunctive tokens across styles. In follow-up meetings, perceived-acceptability data were elicited using a novel auditory judgement task built in Gorilla.sc (Anwyl-Irvine et al. 2019). A small sub-sample ($n=9$ so far) of participants provided ratings on a 5-point scale for 21 randomised matrix+embedded-clause audio samples. Participants, who undertook the task in their homes on an iPad, did not demonstrate or report difficulty in undertaking the task.

Preliminary results from the judgement task indicate that participants do not discriminate between present- and imperfect-subjunctive forms in subordinate clauses where present-tense matrix clauses contain a subjunctive governor (Fig. 1). Limited evidence for this tense mismatching is observed in production too, in that 5% of matrix clauses governed by a present-tense subjunctive trigger contained an imperfect form (Table 1). In addition, a zero final-vowel realisation rate of 79% ($n=128$) was observed; 21% of these tokens preceded an initial consonant, indicating a tendency towards apocope. While these observations are limited, previous work has warned against ignoring evidence for embryonic change (Trudgill 1999). In terms of social factors, none emerge as statistically significant (Table 2), and no subjunctive forms emerged in casual speech.

The findings from this severely-endangered-language context, rare in experimental sociolinguistic work, augur with heritage-language research, where subjunctive forms may be more accepted under controlled conditions than they are produced in elicitation tasks (e.g. Lopez-Beltran 2021). However, in a site of rapid social and linguistic change such as this, the evidence points both to increasing optionality, and community-level decline in subjective usage. It is suggested that this loss may be symptomatic of a loosening of tense matching, combined with a breakdown in morphophonological regularity.

(1) a çate oure lo maten f^{ou} kye to chèche a mijon
 PREP seven hour.PL DET morning necessary.3 that.COMP 2_{SG} be.SUBJ.PRES PREP house
 ‘At seven o-clock in the morning it is necessary that you are at the house’ (VaMO17.1.78)

(2) a çate oure lo maten f^{ou} kye to fooueché a mijon
 PREP seven hour.PL DET morning necessary.3 that.COMP 2_{SG} be.SUBJ.IMPERF PREP house
 ‘At seven o-clock in the morning it is necessary that you are at the house’ (VaMO17.1.82)

Table 1. Distribution of subjunctive tokens

MATRIX	EMBEDDED		TOTAL
	Present	Imperfect	
Present	157 (94.6%)	9 (5.4%)	166
Imperfect	1	2	3
Conditional	7	0	7

Table 2. Output of model fit to data from 36 speakers

Fixed effects	Estimate	Std. Error	z value	PR(> z)
(Intercept)	-0.9542	0.2777	-3.436	0.0006
sex	0.6014	2.7420	2.766	0.84901
age	1.1542	2.6118	0.442	0.65856

model_1 <- glmer(EMBEDDED_CLAUSE_MOOD_CHOICE ~ SPEAKER_AGE + SPEAKER_SEX + (1|SPEAKER_ID), data=dat, family=binomial)

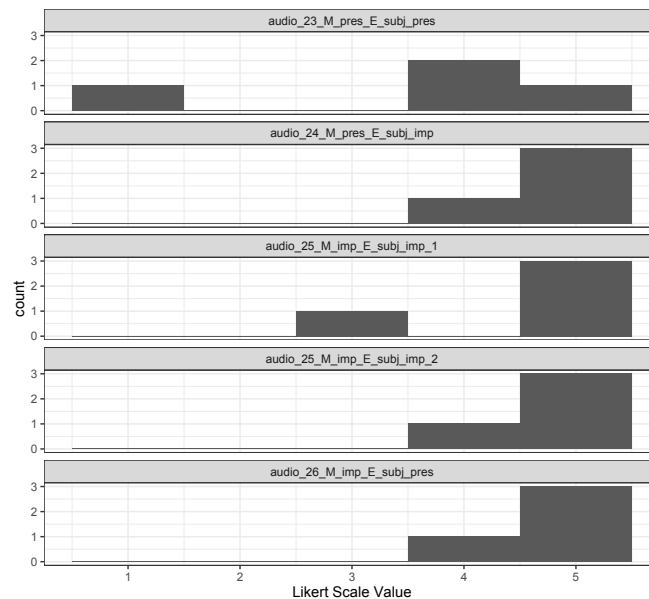


Fig 1. Likert scale values for audio samples containing present and imperfect subjunctive forms (Key: M=matrix, E=embedded, Imp=imperfect subjunctive, Subj-pres=present subjunctive)

References

- Anwyl-Irvine, A. L., Massonnié, J., Filtton, A., Kirkham, N. & J. K. Evershed. 2019. Gorilla in our midst: An online behavioural experiment builder. *Behavior Research Methods*, <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13428-019-01237-x>.
- Drager, K., Kaleialohapau‘ole Chun Comstock, B. & H. Puamohala Kneubuhl. 2017. He nui nā ala e hiki aku ai: Factors influencing phonetic variation in the Hawaiian word kēia. *Language Documentation & Conservation Special Publication*, 13: 65-93.
- Lopez-Beltran, P. 2021. Heritage speakers’ online processing of the Spanish subjunctive: A comprehensive usage-base study. Unpublished PhD Dissertation. Penn State University.
- Stich, D. 1998. *Parlons francoprovençal: Une langue méconnue*. Paris: L’Harmattan.
- Trudgill, P. 1999. New-dialect formation and dedialectalisation: Embryonic and vestigial variants. *Journal of English Linguistics* 27(4): 319-327.