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# Testing the reliability of acceptability judgments for subjunctive obviation in French

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# 1. Introduction

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1. We present a study that replicates by means of a formal method acceptability judgments formerly made by an individual linguist
2. Our test case: the informal judgments asserted in Ruwet (1984/1991) concerning the weakening of the *subjunctive disjoint reference effect*, also known as *obviation* in (European) French
3. Our results: we were unable to replicate Ruwet's observations (when averaging over multiple participants)
4. Our study relates to an ongoing discussion on the reliability of acceptability judgments made by individual linguists (Sprouse et al. 2013, Linzen & Oseki 2018 i.a.)
5. Hypotheses:
  - French seems to be a language for which formal experimentation of complex data is useful
  - Additional data and experimentation would be useful in contributing to a better overall picture of the phenomenon

# 1. Introduction

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Roadmap:

1. Introduction
2. On the subjunctive and on obviation weakening
3. Motivation of the study
4. Experimental study
  - a) Method
  - b) Results
5. Discussion
6. Conclusion

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## **2. On the subjunctive and on obviation weakening**

## 2. Subjunctive

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- The subjunctive is a verbal mood in French (Le Goffic 1993: 122ff., De Mulder 2010, Riegel et al 2014: § X.2.2, Mosegaard Hansen 2016: § 5.4., among others)
- A clear definition of the subjunctive is difficult to procure
- In general, the event or state is only imagined/desired/necessary; the speaker can also express his/her point of view

(1) fr. a. Dites-leur que Pierre **viendra** ce soir. (Indicative : fact)  
`Tell them Pierre is coming tonight.'

b. Dites à Pierre qu'il **vienne** ce soir. (Subjunctive : wish)  
`Tell Pierre to come tonight.'

## 2. Subjunctive and Obviation

- In principle, the subjunctive expresses a disjoint reference (= obviation) between the subject of the subordinate sentence and the subject of the matrix clause
- The subjects of the matrix clause and of the subordinate sentence (indicated by [...]) cannot be coreferential, (2) and (3)

(2) fr. *Pierre* veut [ que tu *'toi'* partes ].  
`Pierre wants you to go.'

(3) fr. a. \**Je* veux que *je* parte.  
`I want that I go.' (Ruwet 1991: 2)

b. \**Tu* veux que *tu* partes.  
`You want that you go.'

## 2. Subjunctive and Obviation

- Co-reference is expressed by the infinitive/control :

(4) fr.  Pierre veut [ \_\_ partir ].  
`Pierre wants to go.'

### Obviation

Disjoint reference between the subject of the embedded subjunctive clause  
and the subject of the matrix clause

(cf. Ruwet 1984/1991, Picallo 1985, Kempchinsky 1987, 2009, Farkas 1992, Luján 1999,  
Costantini 2005, 2009, 2016, Szucsich 2009, Feldhausen 2010, Romero Mérida 2013,  
Quer 2017 e.a.)

## 2. Obviation Weakening

### Obviation weakening

- Despite the clear distribution shown in (2)-(4), several authors show that obviation can be weakened so that a coreferential reading with subjunctive complements becomes available (Ruwet 1984/1991, Raposo 1985, Kempchinsky 1987, Farkas 1992, Costantini 2009, 2016 and many others)
- Ruwet (1984/1991) was one of the first to demonstrate and discuss obviation weakening, see (5b,c):

(5) fr. a. \*Je veux que je parte. (= 3a)

b. ?Je veux que je puisse partir.

‘Ich want that I can go.’

c. ? Je veux que je sois autorisé à partir tôt.

‘I want that I am authorised to go.’

# 2. Obviation Weakening

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## Obviation weakening

- Cause of the weakening of obviation (according to Ruwet 1984/1991):
  - Reduction of the agentivity (Ruwet 1991:20)
  - Expressing a certain distance between the wish and the completion of the action (Ruwet 1991:21)
- Obviation is weakened and co-referencing will be more acceptable.
- In what follows, we will present six concrete factors discussed in Ruwet (1991) that lead to a weakening of the obviation effect (according to him)

## 2. Obviation Weakening

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- **Six out of nine** factors in Ruwet (1991) :

### 1. Passive

(6) fr. ?Je veux que je **sois autorisé** à partir tôt. (=5c)

‘I want to be allowed to leave early.’ (Ruwet 1991: 20: ex.38a)

### 2. Passé Composé

(7) fr. Je veux (absolument) que je **sois parti** dans dix minutes.

‘I want (absolutely) that I will be gone in 10.’ (Ruwet 1991:23: ex.46)

### 3. Negation

(8) fr. ?Je **ne** veux **pas** que je me trompe de clé encore.

‘I do not want to mess up my keys again.’ (Ruwet 1991:29: ex.79c)

## 2. Obviation Weakening

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### 4. Modal verbs (e.g. *pouvoir*)

(9) fr. ?Je veux que je **puisse** partir dès demain.

‘I want to be able to leave tomorrow.’ (Ruwet 1991:21: ex.40)

### 5. Psych verbs (e.g. *étonner*)

(10) fr. ?Je veux que je sois **étonné**.

‘I want me to be impressed.’ (Ruwet 1991:28: ex.73)

### 6. Coordination

(11) fr. a. \***Je** veux que **je** parte **et** que **tu** restes.

b. ?**Je** veux que **tu** partes **et** que **je** reste.

‘I want you to go and I want me to stay.’ (Ruwet 1991: 23: ex.48)

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# **3. Context and motivation of our study**

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- The effects have been well known for a long time and are discussed in detail in an extensive literature (e.g. Ruwet 1984/1991, Raposo 1985, Picallo 1985, Suñer 1986, Farkas 1992, Quer 2006, 2017, Szucsich 2009, Costantini 2009, 2013, 2016)
- Different proposals for theoretical modelling of weakening effects (approaches based on government and binding theory vs. competition approaches)
- Data are based on the authors' introspection (e.g. Ruwet 1984/1991, Suñer 1986, Costantini 2009) or cited from other researchers' publications (e.g. Farkas 1992, Quer 2006, 2017)

**How robust are the claims regarding obviation weakening (made by Ruwet 1991) in the light of a formal experimental method?**

- A (larger) empirical study on the effects of weakening is needed:
  - *Acceptability judgment tasks – AJT* (← present study)
  - Corpus linguistic studies

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# 4. Experimental study

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## Methodology

- Online study on *LimeSurvey*
- Method :
  - Acceptability judgement tasks (Featherston 2006, Sprouse 2018)
  - Likert-Type-7 scale (Schütze & Sprouse 2013)
- Participants : about 150, out of which 88 have completed the study
- 4.224 grammaticality judgments (48 test sentences x 88 participants)
- Test items comprised of: 48 test sentences and 48 fillers
  - six factors
  - eight test sentences for each factor
  - pseudo-randomised (at least one filler between two test sentences)
  - pre-test with grammatical/ungrammatical sentences

# 4. Experimental study

Figure 1 : Exemplary test item, Likert-Type-7 scale

Tu veux que tu partes et que je reste.

	agrammatical 0	1	2	ni l'un ni l'autre 3	4	5	grammatical 6
	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

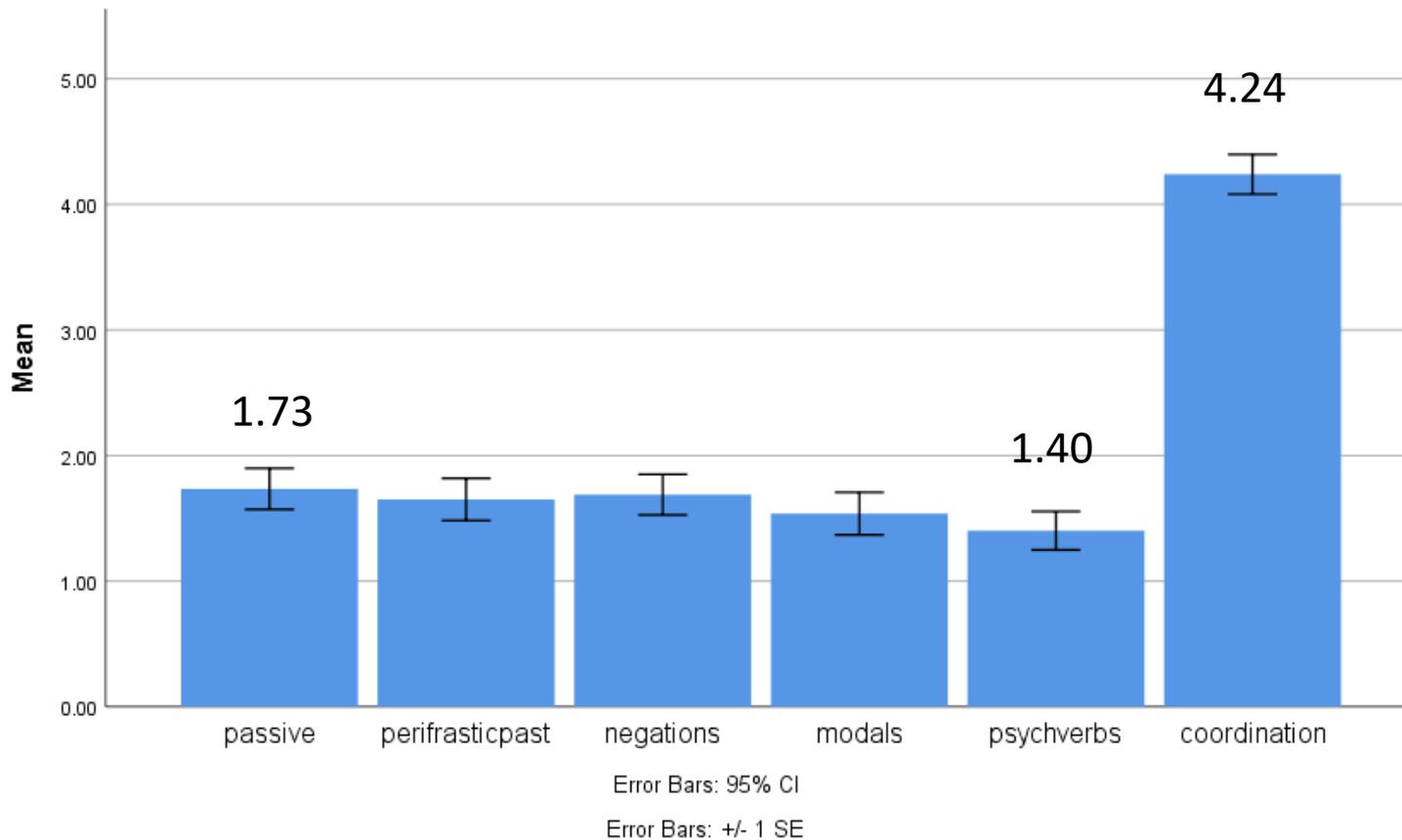
↑  
ungrammatical

↑  
*ni l'un ni l'autre*  
'neither one  
nor the other'

↑  
grammatical

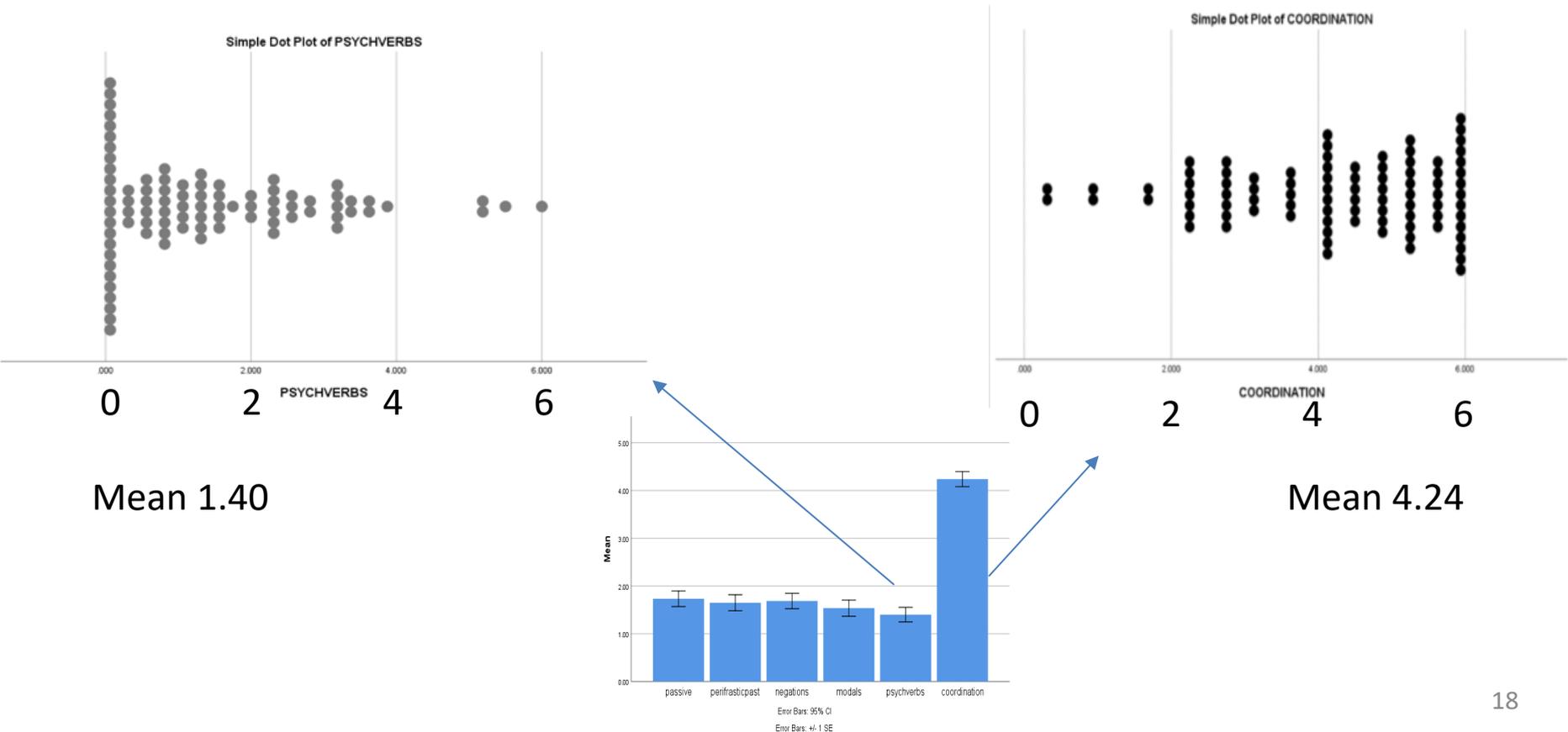
# 4. Experimental study

Figure 2: General results of the study; mean values for Ruwet's (1991) six weakening factors (0 = ungrammatical; 6 = grammatical)



# 4. Experimental study

Figure 3 : Results; highlighting the **individual evaluations** of the factors *Psych-verbs* (left) and *Coordination* (right); (0 = ungrammatical; 6 = grammatical)



# 4. Experimental study

Table 1a: Evaluation of selected filler items; (0 = ungrammatical; 6 = grammatical)

mean value	item	classification
1.26	*Tu veux que tu partes. (Filler 2)	ungrammatical
1.46	*Je trouve être génial. (Filler 42)	
5.49	Hier, je suis sorti de ma maison très vite. (Filler 13)	grammatical
5.68	Hier, tu es sorti de ta maison très vite. (Filler 21)	
1.87	*Je veux que je parte et que tu restes. (Filler 7)	counterpart Coordination (ungrammatical)
2.29	*Tu veux que tu partes et que je reste. (Filler 18)	

# 4. Experimental study

Table 1b: Evaluation of selected filler items; (0 = ungrammatical; 6 = grammatical)

mean value	item	classification
1.26	*Tu veux que tu partes. (Filler 2)	ungrammatical
1.46	*Je trouve être génial. (Filler 42)	

- Examples of ungrammatical sentences:
  - mean value is 1.36
  - This is close to that of our test sentences for the five factors other than *Coordination*.

# 4. Experimental study

Table 1c: Evaluation of selected filler items; (0 = ungrammatical; 6 = grammatical)

mean value	item	classification
5.49	Hier, je suis sorti de ma maison très vite. (Filler 13)	grammatical
5.68	Hier, tu es sorti de ta maison très vite. (Filler 21)	

- Examples of grammatical sentences:
  - mean value is 5.59
  - this is quite close to the maximum of 6 on our Likert-scale.
  - although *Coordination* (4.24) scores less highly, it is nevertheless judged as being quite grammatical by our participants.
  - This interpretation is supported by a comparison with the *je-je-tu*-counterparts (see next slide)

# 4. Experimental study

Table 1d: Evaluation of selected filler items; (0 = ungrammatical; 6 = grammatical)

mean value	item	classification
1.87	*Je veux que je parte et que tu restes. (Filler 7)	counterpart Coordination (ungrammatical)
2.29	*Tu veux que tu partes et que je reste. (Filler 18)	

- Examples of counterparts to *Coordination* test sentences:
  - mean value is 2.08
  - The interpretation that our *Coordination* test sentences are quite good (4.24) is supported by the low value of the *je-je-tu*-counterparts
  - The counterparts are judged as less acceptable than our *je-tu-je* test items (even though the *je-je-tu*-counterparts are evaluated as slightly better than the test items for the other five factors)

# 4. Experimental study

## Absence of dialectal variation

- Region:            Hauts-de-France            (27 participants)  
                         Île-de-France                (18 participants)  
                         Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes        (12 participants)  
                         Autres                            (31 participants)
  
- Factors:            Passive                    p= .412  
                         Passé Composé            p= .187  
                         Negation                   p= .068  
                         Modal verbs                p= .203  
                         Psych verbs                p= .207  
                         Coordination              p= .223

Kruskal-Wallis test (non-parametric, for more than 2 groups)

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# 5. Discussion

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- Research question:

**How robust are the claims regarding obviation weakening (made by Ruwet 1991) in the light of a formal experimental method?**

- First part of the answer (based on the obvious differences between Ruwet's (1991) judgments and the experimental results of our pilot study)
  - a) obviation weakening with respect to *vouloir* 'want' as the matrix verb does not appear to exist in the way previously suggested by Ruwet (1991)
  - b) only *je-tu-je*-coordinations tend to weaken obviation
  - c) the role of *agentivity* does not seem to be as relevant to obviation as previously assumed (see Buchczyk & Feldhausen 2020 for a syntactic analysis on obviation weakening based on this result)
  - d) dialectal variation is not attested as a contributor to obviation weakening in our data of (European) French

# 5. Discussion

- Second part of the answer: We do not conclude from our study that obviation weakening per se should be called into question
- Rather, our data indicate that obviation weakening cannot be taken for granted in the specific conditions presented here (i.e. in the context of *vouloir* ‘want’)
  - **Variation**: The results presented in Figure 2 are averaged over all evaluations, but Figure 3 indicates variation in the participants’ evaluations and reveals some outliers – evaluations that correspond to Ruwet’s observations
  - **Idiolect**: The question thus arises as to whether Ruwet (1991) reports accurate reflections of his idiolect and whether he has a different idiolect than (most of) the participants in our study
  - **Obviation weakening is a complex phenomenon**: We only considered a subset of possible cases (namely the volitional verb *vouloir* ‘want’); hence, we cannot say anything about the possibility of obviation weakening in the other contexts (such as the entire class of intensional subjunctives, including volitional and desiderative as well as epistemic and emotive-factive subjunctives; see Costantini 2009: 25)

# 5. Discussion

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- What did we do in the present study:
  - We took the introspective data of Ruwet (1991)  
Collected via an “informal method” in the sense of Sprouse et al. (2013: 224): involvement of relatively few (expert) participants (most often the author of a given paper), relatively few tokens per condition, and by relatively little explicit instruction
  - We tried to replicate his results by means of a “formal” method (i.e. many non-expert, naive participants, several tokens per condition, explicit instruction, a statistical analysis, and many more response options; cf. Sprouse et al. 2013: 224)
- This is reminiscent of an ongoing discussion on the reliability of acceptability judgments made by individual linguists (e.g. Den Dikken et al. 2007, Fanselow 2007, Featherston 2006, 2007, Grewendorf 2007, Linzen & Oseki 2018, Schütze 2016, Schütze & Sprouse 2013, Sprouse 2018, Sprouse et al. 2013)

# 5. Discussion

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- This reliability has often been called into question
- **English:** Linzen & Oseki (2018) (and others) state that: Recent large-scale replication studies conducted in response to this criticism have shown that the majority of published English acceptability judgments are robust (e.g. Sprouse et al. 2013).
- **Other languages:**
  - L&O (2018) argue that acceptability judgments in other languages (Hebrew and Japanese in their study) might be less reliable than in English (due to a smaller community of linguists who are native speaker of the given language that can informally vet the data and weed out questionable judgments)
  - *Their solution:*
    - Establishing a simple open review system (see L&O 2018 for details)
    - Formal experiments only necessary in controversial cases (so-called “class 3 judgments”, in the sense of Marantz 2005; see next slide)

# 5. Discussion

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- Following Marantz (2005), Linzen & Oseki (2018: 3) argue that it is possible to subdivide syntactic judgments into three classes:
  - Class 1 and 2 judgments represent uncontroversial cases (e.g. *\*Man the book a woman those to given has* (= word salad) and *\*The children is leaving*, respectively)
  - Class 3 judgments represent more subtle and thus controversial cases (“such as such as constraints on wh-movement or on possible coreference relations across noun phrases”, L&O 2018: 3)
- Our hypotheses:
  - Obviation weakening is controversial and thus belongs to class 3 judgments
  - French seems to be more in line with Hebrew and Japanese than English when it comes to class 3 judgments
  - Replicating controversial judgments by a formal method is necessary in French

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# 6. Conclusion

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- (a) Based on the discussion on the reliability of acceptability judgment tasks, our results speak in favor of replicating so-called informal class 3 judgments by a formal method in French
  - Our study thus corroborates the statement by Linzen & Oseki (2018) that class 3 judgments in languages other than English are less reliable
- (b) Even though we hardly found evidence for obviation weakening, our results do not call obviation weakening per se into question – rather, our data show that obviation weakening in the specific conditions as presented here, cannot be taken for granted
- (c) Additional data should be considered, and additional experimental methods should be carried out in order to get a better overall picture of possible obviation weakening (in French)

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**Merci de votre attention !**

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## 2. Subjunctive and Obviation Weakening

### Effects of obviation weakening in other Romance languages

(Costantini 2009; Quer 2006, 2017; Raposo 1985; Picallo 1985)

- (6) it. a. ? *Pro*<sub>1</sub> voglio (assolutamente) che *io*<sub>1</sub> sia partito entro dieci minuti.  
‘I definitely want to go out in ten minutes.’
- cat. b. ? *En Joan*<sub>1</sub> està sorprès que *pro*<sub>1</sub> hagi fet molts errors.  
‘Joan is surprised that he has made many mistakes.’
- sp. c. *Pro*<sub>1</sub> espero que *pro*<sub>1</sub> sea autorizado a ir.  
‘I want to be authorised to leave.’
- pt. d. *O Manel*<sub>1</sub> deseja que *pro*<sub>1</sub> seja admitido no concurso.  
‘Manel wishes to be admitted to the competition.’

# 5. Discussion

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Ongoing discussion:

- Are informal methods inherently reliable?
- Can and should the results of e.g. introspection be replicated by formal acceptability judgment tasks?
  - Pro reliability of informal methods (i.e. affirmation of the reliability of informal methods and highlighting of the importance of individual linguists' judgments): e.g. Phillips & Lasnik (2003); Den Dikken et al. (2007), Phillips (2010); Sprouse et al. (2013)
  - Denial, doubt or question of that reliability: Langendoen et al. (1973); Schütze (1996); Edelman & Christiansen (2003); Gibson & Fedorenko (2010); Gibson et al. (2013); Linzen & Oseki (2018)