

Revisiting obviation experimentally: On the weakening of the subjunctive disjoint reference effect in French

Even though the weakening of the subjunctive disjoint reference effect or obviation (Ruwet 1984/1991, Kempchinsky 1987) plays an important role in the research on subjunctives in (non-)Romance languages (cf. Picallo 1985, Kempchinsky 1987, 2009, Farkas 1992, Luján 1999, Quer 2006, 2017, Costantini 2009, 2016, Feldhausen 2010: Ch.4 among others), it has never been verified experimentally – to the best of our knowledge. The goal of this paper is to test how native speakers of French evaluate sentences displaying factors that are supposed to weaken obviation.

Obviation: Subjunctive structures like the French one in (1) are characterized by the disjoint reference between the embedded subject (here *tu* ‘you’) and the matrix subject (here *je* ‘I’). The embedded subject cannot have the same reference as the matrix subject, (2a). Coreference must be expressed by using the infinitive, (2b). The examples below are from Ruwet (1991).

- (1) *Je veux que tu partes.*
‘lit. I want that you leave.’
- (2) a. **Je veux que je parte.*
‘I want that I leave’
b. *Je veux partir.*
‘I want to leave.’

Obviation weakening: Ruwet (1984/1991) was one of the first discussing that obviation can be weakened so that the coreferential reading in sentences such as (2a) gets more acceptable. He argues that the coreferential reading gets better under specific circumstances: (i) reducing the agentivity of the subject (Ruwet 1991: 20) and (ii) creating a distance between the expression of desire and the fulfillment of the action (Ruwet 1991: 21). He discusses a variety of factors such as the use of passives (3) and coordination (4) that lead to a weakening of the subjunctive disjoint reference effect – indicated by [?] (data from Ruwet 1991: 20 & 23).

- (3) [?]*Je veux que je sois autorisé à partir demain.* (passive)
‘I want for me to be allowed to leave tomorrow.’
- (4) [?]*Je veux que tu partes et que je reste.* (je – tu & je)
‘I want to you to go and for me to stay.’

Experimental study: Up to now, the data on obviation weakening is typically either based on introspection of the corresponding authors (Ruwet 1984/1991, Suñer 1986, Costantini 2009 and others) or they are cited from previous work (Farkas 1992, Quer 2006 and many others). For this reason, the question arises as to how robust the weakening effect is. To answer this question, we experimentally collected grammaticality judgments (cf. Featherston 2006, Sprouse 2018) with a total of 300 native speakers of French, of which 88 speakers judged the entire set of sentences and answered the social background questionnaire. We tested six factors mentioned by Ruwet (1991): (i) *passive*, (ii) *perfective/periphrastic past*, (iii) *negation*, (iv) *modal verbs*, (v) *psych verbs* and (vi) *coordination*. Based on a seven-point-scale (0 = ungrammatical, 6 = grammatical) the 88 participants were asked to judge the grammaticality of 48 sentences (6 conditions x 8 lexicalizations; 4,224 sentences in total = 48 test sentences x 88 participants). The analysis of the data reveals a clear result (see Figure 1): only the factor *coordination*, see (4), where the matrix subject *je* ‘I’ and the embedded subject *je* ‘I’ are separated from each other by *tu* ‘you’ of the first conjunct, leads to a clear weakening of the subjunctive disjoint reference effect, while the remaining factors show a clear tendency towards ungrammaticality.

Theoretical implication: Obviation and its weakening are addressed in many theoretical studies and different approaches that have been established in order to account for both phenomena (see Costantini 2009 for an overview). Ruwet’s initial idea of the role of agentivity/ distance was implemented in different ways at the syntax-semantics interface (e.g. Farkas’ (1992) RESP(ONSABILITY) relation, Costantini’s (2009) *attitude bearer* or Costantini’s (2016) *introspective knowledge*). The results of our experiment suggest that such a theoretical effort for accounting for obviation weakening is not necessary at all: only the factor coordination weakens obviation (in French) and it appears that this phenomenon is rather syntactic. We thus propose a syntactic analysis for the attested pattern based on ideas of Farkas’ (1992) competition approach and on Zhang’s (2010) analysis of coordination structures.

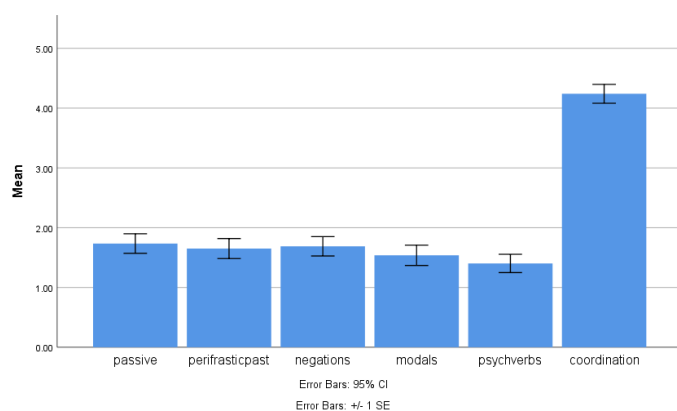


Figure 1: Results of the grammaticality judgments for the six factors leading to obviation weakening according to Ruwet (1991). Factors are listed on the x-axis, the values of the scale are listed on the y-axis (0= ungrammatical; 6=grammatical).

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