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Exploring inflectional uncertainty through responses to defective and overabundant slots

Two phenomena are often presented in the linguistic literature as contrasting ways of handling uncertainty in linguistic forms. *Overabundant slots*occur with words such as *prove,* which has two perfect participles *(I have proved/proven);* it represents unmotivated choice beyond what seems to be ‘needed’ in the grammatical system of a language*. Defective slots*represent the hesitation of users in producing e.g., the past tense or participle of verbs such as *troubleshoot* or *output.* In the [Feast and Famine project](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/feastandfamine), we explore the proposal that these two phenomena have common sources and result from common mechanisms of language production and processing, with the different project strands exploring how computational modelling, corpus research, child language studies and experiments with native-speaker informants can shed light on how different slots come to be realised or labelled as defective or overabundant.

In this talk, I will focus on results from our first round of research into Czech paradigmatic choice with adult native speakers. In a gap-filling exercise, respondents encountered prompts consisting of two sentences, each containing a form of the same lexeme. In the first sentence they saw a form from a ‘canonical’ cell of the lexeme; in the second, there was a syntactic context requiring a form from a cell likely to be defective or overabundant, and respondents were instructed to fill that gap. There was a matched number of filler or ‘non-variant’ items, using the same syntactic contexts, where no uncertainty was expected.

Respondents *collectively* displayed differences between their treatment of all three groups (defective, overabundant and non-variant). *Individual* responses show a significantly different pattern of choice for defectives only, with choice in overabundant and non-variant slots patterning similarly; this is in part because speakers were not as uniform in their treatment of non-variant items as we had supposed. While users are usually able to produce an item to fill a defective slot, it takes them longer to do so, the number of possible answers is higher, and the amount of deviation from what we call the ‘expected’ form is greater than with overabundant or non-variant slots.

It thus appears we can identify online and offline behaviours that serve as flags for overabundant and defective paradigm slots by examining both collective and individual manifestations of uncertainty in speaker choice.