Is absence of evidence evidence of unacceptability? Testing Conservatism via Entrenchment with novel derived verbs

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Why is it that when language users are presented with words that they have not seen before, some are markedly more acceptable than others? Is it simply that speakers implicitly take into account when judging familiar and novel words: a) POSITIVE ENTRANCEMNT: increased exposure to a word or phrase increases judgments of its acceptability (undo as more acceptable than unbuckle) (1-3); b) Meaning matters (unfriend makes more sense than unsneeze) (4-6). A third factor has also been proposed, namely, CONSERVATISM VIA ENTRANCEMNT (CvE). CvE predicts that speakers implicitly take into account a root word, the less acceptable it will be judged when used in any new way. That is, CvE predicts “a negative correlation between the acceptability of an un-verb and overall verb frequency (e.g., all uses of squeeze, without the prefix un-)” (5: pg 16; 6). Thus, CvE predicts that novel derived words such as unrue should be less acceptable than unfog because run is more frequent than jog. This prediction motivates the current preregistered judgment study in which we aimed to test CvE as directly as possible, by controlling for semantics and positive entrenchment. Stimuli included two types of novel word pairs: 12 pairs of novel un-prefixed verbs (sample stimuli in 1) and 12 pairs of denominal verbs (sample stimuli in 2). To control for meaning, we selected pairs of verbs that were either near synonyms (ask, inquire) or that were roughly equally appropriate in the context provided. Separate norming studies for plausibility and interpretablity were conducted and included as fixed factors. To control for positive entrenchment, we used novel derived forms (unask, uninquire): i.e., frequency 0 in 520-mil-word COCA corpus. To reveal any effect of CvE, one root of each pair was High Freq in COCA (M = 62,297), the other, Low Freq. (M = 4208).

We recruited 170 native English-speakers via TurkPrime to rate the acceptability of one member of each pair of sentences. Another 196 native speakers took part in 1 of 3 preregistered norming studies: each person rated one sentence of each pair on interpretability or plausibility, or provided paraphrases. The maximal converging model included root frequency, and the normed factors as fixed effects, and random intercepts for items and subjects. Including root frequency (β = .161) did not improve model fit (p = .295), contrary to CvE’s prediction.

This result prompted us to ask why certain previous work seemed to find an effect of CvE. A review finds that CvE was at times confounded with positive entrenchment (6, 7), as when different scores or chi-square analyses are used. Other work was unable to unconfound CvE and statistical preemption (e.g., 8). Statistical preemption (or “blocking”) predicts that familiar words or phrases only compete with novel forms if the novel form is intended to convey the same message as the familiar one. It predicts, for instance, that unraise should be less acceptable because it competes with lower (9-10) (not because unraise competes with raise, as predicted by CvE). The current study avoids both potential confounds by (1) comparing acceptability scores on novel verbs rather than difference scores or a chi-square measure; (2) including a measure of statistical preemption by determining how common it was for participants to agree on the same paraphrase of the novel sentences (paraphrase-entropy) (10). Including paraphrase-entropy (β = 0.547) significantly improved model fit (p < .0001).

We conclude that speakers do not assume that an absence of evidence leads to unacceptability. Instead, acceptability judgments are affected by the availability of an alternative means to express the intended meaning (statistical preemption), as well as positive entrenchment and meaning.
a. As firetrucks began to arrive, she wished she could \textit{<unpull/unyank>} the emergency alarm.

b. Once he brought it up, he was unable to \textit{<unask/uninquire>} about the issue.

a. With more and more customers coming into the bar, orders for drinks piled up.

The barkeeper started to \textit{<vodka/vermouth>} rows of shot glasses.

b. This book is dedicated to caffeine lovers. It tries to explain why some of us \textit{<coffee/frappuccino>} ourselves way more than is good for us.

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Figure 1: Mean acceptability ratings for pairs of sentences that included a high frequency or a low frequency root word used in a novel way (as a denominal verb [left panel]; or with the reversative un- prefix [right panel]). Error bars indicate SE.

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