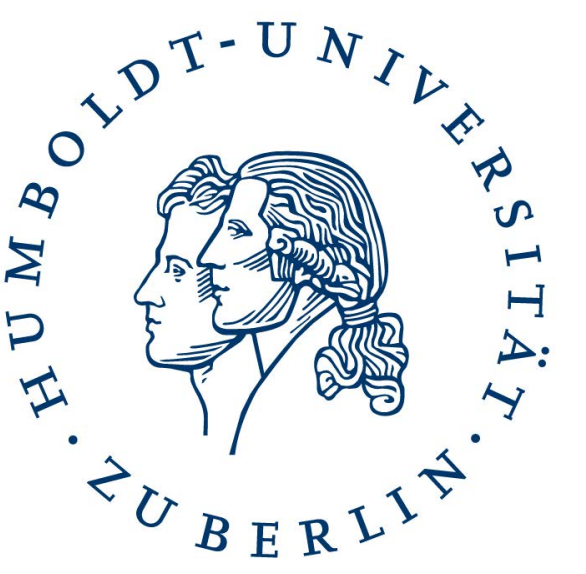# Pieces of meaning in unexpected places:
Wug-ir and *wug-er* nonce verbs receive a different default semantics in French

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CLAIM

French speakers prefer *-ir* for COS and *-er* for activity in a wug task.

INTRODUCTION

➤ To what extent does lexical semantics influence the syntax?
(Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995; Alexiadou et al. 2014)

➤ Is there a formal typology of lexical semantic features?
(Levinson 2014; Beavers and Koontz-Garboden Under review)

➤ Where can meaning come from, other than features on syntactic heads and the root?

⇒ The two main conjugation classes in French (e.g. Schwarze 2009).
1. *-er* verbs, e.g. *aim-er* 'love' (~6,000 in *Le Petit Robert*).
2. *-ir* verbs, e.g. *maigr-ir* 'become thin(ner)' (300–400)

⇒ Speakers have morphological knowledge of both in wug tasks.
(El Fenne 1994; Boyé 2000)

CONJUGATION CLASSES: SEMANTICS

➤ Most *-ir* verbs are deadjectival/denominal:

– *maigr-ir* 'become thin(ner)' < *maigre* 'thin').
– in fewer cases denominal (*at-terr-ir* 'land' < *terre* 'earth').

➤ Most word-derived *-ir* verbs have change of state (COS) semantics, but few (if any) are activities (e.g. *bonnir* 'tell good stories').

➤ The other *-ir* (root-derived) are less frequent.

– Most are COS.
– Some activities, e.g. *bondir* 'bounce'.

⇒ *-ir* verbs are more likely to be COS than activity verbs.

➤ The minority activity *-ir* verbs are root-derived.
agir 'act', *bâtir* 'build', *barrir* 'trumpet' …

⇒ No deterministic rule associating *-ir* with a COS meaning.

⇒ Do speakers associate COS with word-derived verbs of this class?

CONJUGATION CLASSES: SYNTAX

Activity ≈ unergative   COS ≈ unaccusative/transitive

Conjugation classes are agnostic with regard to syntax:

Class 1 *-er*	word-derived	root-derived
Transitive	*amocher* 'damage'	*aimer* 'love'
Unergative	*polissonner* 'act in a silly way'	*nager* 'swim'
Unaccusative	*rapetisser* 'get smaller'	*tomber* 'fall'
Class 2 *-ir*	word-derived	root-derived
Transitive	*agrandir* 'make bigger'	*convertir* 'convert'
Unergative	*bonnir* 'tell good stories'	*agir* 'act'
Unaccusative	*amochir* 'get damaged'	*sortir* 'get out'

(But *-ir* verbs do differ when embedded under *faire* and when prefixed)

THE CURRENT STUDY

Research questions

1. Do conjugation classes carry meaning?
2. Does this meaning translate to syntactic effects?
⇒ Is there an element (conjugation class) which has syntactic effects without using a standard syntactic feature?

Hypotheses and predictions

1. The morpheme *-ir* is associated with a default CoS meaning (in word-derived verbs).

⇒ Participants prefer *-ir* COS wugs and *-er* activity wugs.

2. Prefixed *-ir* verbs more easily keep an anticausative use.

⇒ Findings should be stronger for prefixed verbs than for unprefixed ones (in a intransitive frame).

METHODS

➤ Native speakers of French, recruited from personal networks.
➤ N = 28 (Exp 1, prefixed), N = 16 (Exp2, unprefixed).
Main predictors:
➤ Condition (COS/Activity) and Prefix (yes/no).
➤ Contextual cues for Condition:

(1) If you need <u>a material</u> that quickly <u>becomes</u> <u>louffe</u>, I recommend Plastazote. It <u>is a malleable foam</u> that *a-louff-e/a-louff-it* <u>under the effect of heat</u> (with a heat gun). It <u>can be easily cut when cold</u>, and it <u>remains malleable</u> for a few minutes <u>once heated</u>.

(2) Even though Gustave and Martin <u>work a lot</u>, they are very marouches. They <u>love to hang around</u> all day in pyjamas, <u>eat Italian ice-cream</u> and <u>play video games</u>. In short, they *en-marouch-ent/en-marouch-iss-ent* very willingly.

➤ Nonce words were created using Wuggy (Keuleers and Brysbaert 2010).
➤ Choice between *-ir* and *-er* form on a 7-point Likert scale.
➤ Order of presentation and order of items were randomized.
➤ 2 practice items; 8 items per condition; 8 control fillers.
➤ Presented visually via PCIbex.
➤ Results z-transformed and fed to mixed effects models.
(Baayen et al. 2008; Bates and Maechler 2009)
➤ Each context was matched with one set of wugs; no randomization.

Exploratory predictors:
➤ Task (create infinitive/singular verb/plural verb from wug noun/adj).
➤ Vowel (four possibilities for the stem).

RESULTS

Scores on the Likert scale were Z-transformed.
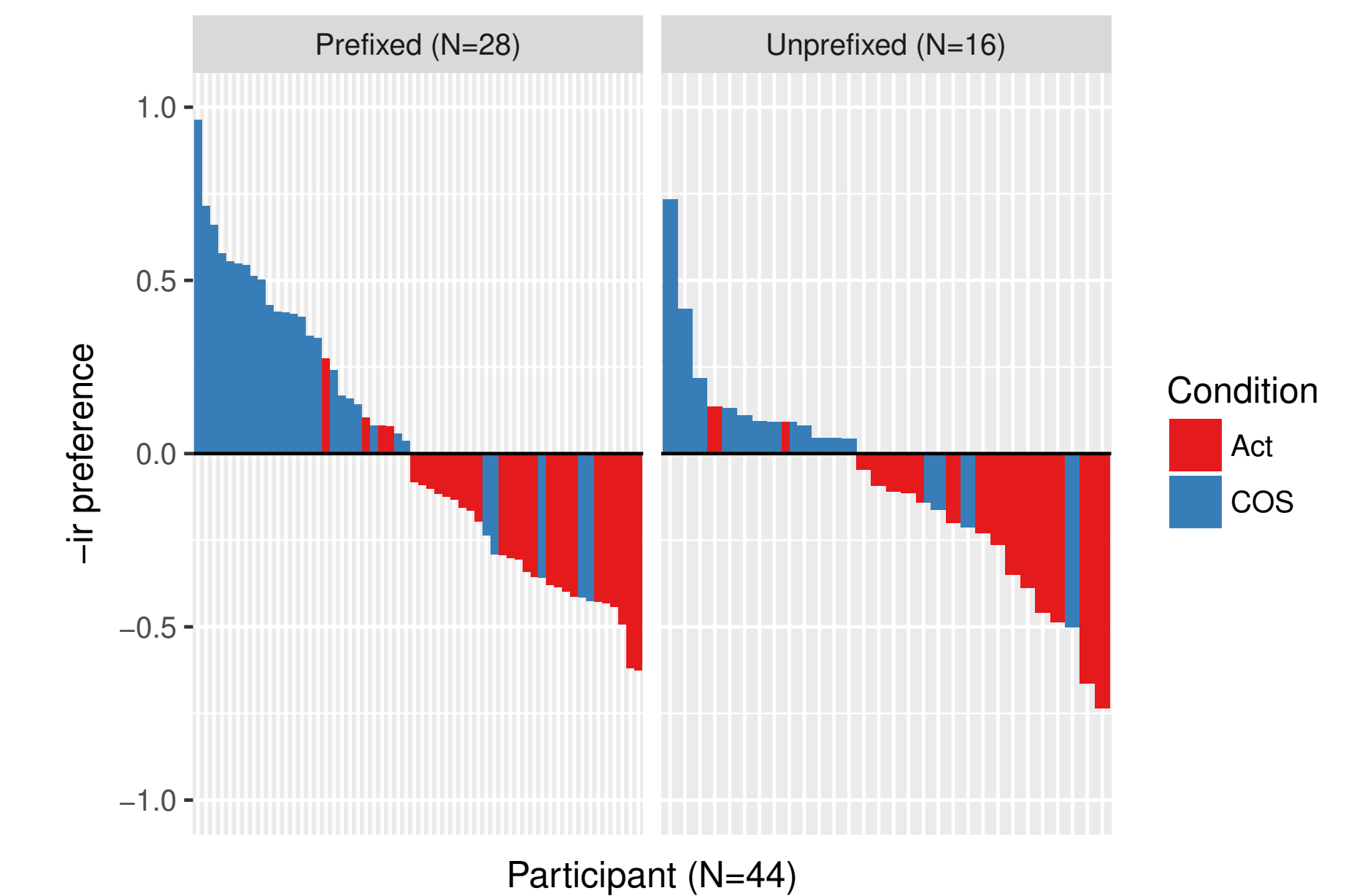
+1.0: preference for *-ir*   −1.0: preference for *-er*

Predictions:

Positive scores for CoS (*-ir*)   Negative scores for Act (*-er*)

COS	0.19±0.89
Act	−0.25±0.86

➤ Condition: $p = 0.007$
➤ Prefix: n.s.
➤ Interaction: n.s.

➤ Prediction 1 borne out, but no effect of Prefix.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE WORK

COS (*-ir*) / Activity (*-er*) predicted participants' choice, as hypothesized.

➤ No effect of Prefix: Larger sample needed?

➤ Confound of infinitives: leave out the Inf task.

➤ Compare with distribution in the lexicon.

➤ Formal analysis.

➤ Are *-ir* verbs more "naturally intransitive" than *-er* verbs?

– Create doublets for existing stems
– Rate anticausative uses of prefixed nonce verbs and passive/anticausative readings under *faire*.

➤ How productive is the *-ir* class?

– Lexicographic study.
– Give an intransitive *-ir/-er* wug, ask for a meaning.
– Give a transitive *-er* wug, ask for an intransitive form.

SELECTED REFERENCES

Boyé, Gilles (2000). *Problèmes de morpho-phonologie verbale en français, en espagnol et en italien*, PhD thesis, Université de Paris VII. **Schwarze, Christoph (2009).** The French i-Conjugation from a diachronic perspective, *Proceedings of the 6th Décembrettes*.