Using intonation to disambiguate meaning: The role of empathy and proficiency in L2 perceptual development

Joseph V. Casillas1, Juan José Garrido Pozú1, Kyle Parrish1, Laura Fernández Arroyo1, Nicole Rodríguez2, Robert Esposito3, Isabelle Chang1, Kimberly Gómez1, Gabriela Constantin-Dureci1, Jiawei Shao1, Iván Andreu1, & Katherine Taveras1

1 Rutgers University

2 Poznan

3 Duo-lingo

Author note

We express our gratitude to all the haters.

The authors made the following contributions. Joseph V. Casillas: Conceptualization, Writing - Original Draft Preparation, Writing - Review & Editing; Juan José Garrido Pozú: Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing; Kyle Parrish: Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing; Laura Fernández Arroyo: Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing; Nicole Rodríguez: Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing; Robert Esposito: Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing; Isabelle Chang: Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing; Kimberly Gómez: Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing; Gabriela Constantin-Dureci: Writing - Review & Editing; Jiawei Shao: Writing - Review & Editing; Iván Andreu: Writing - Review & Editing; Katherine Taveras: Writing - Review & Editing.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Joseph V. Casillas, Rutgers University - Department of Spanish and Portuguese, 15 Seminary place, New Brunswick, NJ 08904, USA . E-mail: [joseph.casillas@rutgers.edu](mailto:joseph.casillas@rutgers.edu)

Abstract

The present study investigates the interplay between proficiency and individual pragmatic skills in the process of learning a new language. Notably, we focus on the role of empathy in the development of second language (L2) prosody by analyzing the perception and processing of intonation in questions and statements in L2 Spanish. The construct empathy has been shown to influence native language processing in how listeners interpret intonation and meaning when words are ambiguous (Esteve-Gibert et al., 2020). We extend this research to L2 acquisition in order to determine if individual differences in pragmatic skills affect the development of intonation in L2 processing and sentence comprehension. A total of 224 adult L2 Spanish learners (L1 English) from the Northeastern United States completed a two-alternative forced choice (2AFC) task in which they listened to four utterance types and categorized them as either questions or statements. We used Bayesian multilevel regression and Drift Diffusion modeling to analyze the 2AFC data as a function of proficiency and empathy scores. The results showed that learner response accuracy and sensitivity to intonation improved as a function of proficiency. Importantly, higher empathy scores were positively correlated with higher accuracy and processing efficiency in identifying polar interrogatives. Higher empathic individuals, in comparison with lower empathic individuals, appear to be more sensitive to intonation cues in the process of forming sound-meaning associations. The results motivate the inclusion of measures of pragmatic skills, such as empathy, to better account for intonational meaning processing and sentence comprehensionas in second language acquisition.

*Keywords:* Second language acquisition, Intonation, Empathy, Prosody

*Word count:* X

Using intonation to disambiguate meaning: The role of empathy and proficiency in L2 perceptual development

A fundamental difficulty of speech comprehension is that listeners can come to understand different messages when presented with the same linguistic information (Cain, Oakhill, & Lemmon, 2004). This can be especially problematic when one begins the endeavor of learning a new language. In particular, it is common for second language (L2) learners to struggle with intonation—i.e., the melodic contour of an utterance—in the target language (Trofimovich & Baker, 2006). The difficulties associated with intonation can result in comprehension and communication mishaps because the tune is associated not only with linguistic information, e.g., utterance type or syntactic constituency, but also pragmatic information, e.g., polite discourse (Astruc, Vanrell, & Prieto, 2016), bias, or presupposition (Henriksen, Armstrong, & Garcı́a-Amaya, 2016). The present study investigates how the comprehension of intonation develops in adult L2 learners.

Recent research on monolingual populations suggests that individual differences in pragmatic skills, such as empathy, may play a role in meaning disambiguation (Bishop & Kuo, 2016; Esteve-Gibert, Portes, Schafer, Hemforth, & D’Imperio, 2016; Esteve-Gibert et al., 2020; Orrico & D’Imperio, 2020). Concretely, higher empathy individuals, in comparison with lower empathy individuals, appear to be more sensitive to the intonational cues of speech during the process of forming sound-meaning associations. Furthermore, increased attention has been given to how individual differences in learner backgrounds play a role in the process of L2 acquisition. The present study contributes to these lines of research by examining how individual differences in pragmatic skills affect the development and processing of intonation during sentence comprehension. Specifically, we investigated the interplay between language proficiency and an individual pragmatic skill (empathy) when learning an L2. We focus on the role of empathy in the development of L2 prosody by analyzing the perception and processing of intonation in questions and statements in L2 Spanish.

## Background and motivation

**L2 acquisition of prosody**. The difficulties associated with learning an additional language in adulthood are numerous. More often than not the focus falls on individual sounds, or segments, though we know that adults who learn an L2 are faced with suprasegmental challenges as well. Concretely, L2 learners often struggle with intonation, i.e., melodic variation at the utterance level. In normal discourse, speakers use intonation to indicate syntactic structure, whether an utterance is a question or a statement, to focus constituents, as well as to convey affective meaning. Notably, the manner in which intonation is mapped to meaning is often language-specific. For these reasons, the development of L2 intonation represents a facet of L2 phonological learning that often results in comprehension and communication difficulties (Trofimovich & Baker, 2006).

Intonation has a semantic function and through adequate cognitive decoding of intonation a listener can interpret the intention of a given utterance. For example, an intonational contour can indicate to a listener whether the utterance of an interlocutor is declarative or interrogative in nature. As touched upon above, a speaker can use prosody to signal numerous additional pragmatic functions as well. Given the rich variation in pragmatic uses, it is unsurprising that interpreting and decoding intonational contours in a non-native language represents a particularly challenging aspect of speech comprehension for the language learner. Moreover, the use of L1 prosodic features when speaking the target language can result in misunderstandings due to the fact that the same prosodic features may be employed to convey different linguistic and paralinguistic meaning in the target language (Chen, 2005; Cruz-Ferreira, 1987, 1987; Mennen, 2007; Pickering, 2001). As noted by Levis (2016) prosody is also “[…] critical for L2 pronunciation because it plays a major role in cementing social bonds as a key marker of social identity” (p. 154).

For learners interested obtaining native-like pronunciation, intonation is particularly relevant, as prosodic features have been found to be important cues in the perception of non-target-like accents, above and beyond other features of language Pettorino, De Meo, & Vitale (2014) Nonetheless, intonation is not traditionally taught in the L2 classroom, perhaps because it not common knowledge that proper control of prosody allows the learner not only to produce speech that is more intelligible, but also to comprehend speech in varied communicative settings (de-la-Mota, 2019). Primary focus is generally placed on syntax and morphology, with target language phonology receiving much less, if any, attention (Rao, 2019). When target language pronunciation is addressed, it often focuses on segmental elements (de-la-Mota, 2019), despite the fact that merely being intelligible at the segmental level does not necessarily imply one will be pragmatically understood. As a result, some research has found that intonation is one of the last aspects of L2 phonology that learners acquire (e.g., Kvavik & Olsen, 1974).

Research on L2 intonation has been concerned primarily with speech production. Learner difficulties tend to be ascribed to L1 transfer, and models of L2 phonology by and large focus on the speech segment, as in the Speech Learning Model revised (Flege & Bohn, 2021), or contrasts between segments, i.e., PAM-L2, L2LP (Best & Tyler, 2007; Van Leussen & Escudero, 2015, respectively). Theoretical work that specifically considers prosody in the acquisition of L2 phonology is virtually non-existent, though some researchers have considered how the aforementioned models might account for suprasegmental phenomena (See Trofimovich & Baker, 2006) Nevertheless, a dearth of knowledge remains with regard to how perception of intonation develops in L2 learning, and even less is known about how individual pragmatic differences account for learner outcomes. The purpose of the present project is to address this gap in the literature by examining the perception and processing of intonation during adult L2 phonological acquisition.

**Acquisition of Spanish prosody**. As with all phonetic phenomena, a lack of invariance in the acoustic content of prosodic realizations also increases the difficulty of the learners task. Beyond the level of the individual, howeer, dialectal differences can account for more difficulties. Spanish is extensively spoken across the world, with relatively small geolectal differences between varieties when compared with other languages, such that speakers from distinct regions can still generally understand each other. That being said, phonetic variation is abundant, as is the case with the declarative rise–fall contour of Mexican Spanish, the long fall associated with Argentinian Spanish, or the nuclear hat pattern in total interrogatives (i.e., yes–no questions) in Caribbean Spanish, to cite just a few examples (See Hualde & Prieto, 2015).

Previous research on the acquisition of Spanish prosody attests that learners gradually acquire target-language intonation as they gain proficiency in the language. Research in this area has focused on speech production. For instance, Trimble (2013a) analyzed L2 Spanish learners’ production of intonational patterns for broad focus declaratives and absolute interrogatives after a semester-long study abroad program.

Research on perception of Spanish intonation is much less common, but also supports the notion that mastery is indeed possible for adult learners. Trimble (2013b) examined the perception of intonational cues … Trimble (2013b) found that intonational cues that were absent form participants’ L1 were difficult to perceive. Unsurprisingly, the study suggests the L2 intonation system develops in tandem with proficiency in Spanish, which was positively correlated with time spent studying abroad.

In a similar vein, Brandl, González, and Bustin (2020) investigated the perceptual development of intonation in questions and statements in L2 Spanish. Specifically, Brandl et al. (2020) examined the effect of L2 proficiency on the perception of broad-focus and narrow-focus declaratives and polar and total interrogatives in adult L2 learners of Spanish. The learners completed an AX discrimination task in which they were presented audio and visual stimuli in matched and mismatched conditions. The matched condition included auditory stimuli that were prosodically congruent with written text (e.g., declarative intonation with a declarative sentence). The mismatched condition included auditory stimuli that were prosodically incongruent with the written text (e.g., interrogative intonation with a declarative sentence). The participants’ task was to determine whether the sentence presented aurally was the same as the sentence presented visually. Brandl et al. (2020) found that perception and processing of L2 intonation improved in conjunction with proficiency in Spanish, though it was conditional on the utterance type, with polar (‘yes/no’) interrogatives being more difficult to process and acquire when compared with simple statements. The authors concluded that perception of L2 intonation develops gradually in conjunction with L2 proficiency.

To summarize, the extant literature suggests that mastery of L2 perception of intonation seems feasible for adult learners, as processing speed and accuracy both improve as L2 proficiency increases. That being said, some utterances present more difficulties than others. Furthermore, familiarity with the L2 variety has a positive impact on learner outcomes, which is particularly relevant given the rich phonetic variability attested in Spanish prosody. Much less is known regarding how perceptual development is modulated by individual differences related to pragmatic skill. Studies on monolinguals suggest that individual pragmatic skills correlate with variability in semantic/pragmatic interpretation of ambiguous linguistic items, with more pragmatic individuals preferring pragmatically enriched interpretations and less pragmatic individuals preferring literal/semantic interpretations (e.g., Degen & Tanenhaus, 2016; Nieuwland, Ditman, & Kuperberg, 2010). In addition, more pragmatically skilled individuals tend to rely on different phonetic cues to parse syntactically ambiguous sentences with regard to less pragmatically skilled individuals (Bishop & Kuo, 2016). Thus, one possibility is that variability in intonation processing is also linked to individual differences in pragmatic skills.

**Empathy and pragmatic skill**. The construct empathy refers to one’s ability to infer the intentions of others. It is associated with understanding the feelings and emotions of those with whom one interacts (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). Research on empathy has associated the construct with Theory of Mind and perspective-taking (Baron-Cohen, 2011; Carruthers, 2009; Frith & Frith, 2003). Importantly, in recent years empathy has served a proxy for investigating individual pragmatic skill.

A series of studies has investigated how empathy influences language processing in monolingual populations (Esteve-Gibert et al., 2016, 2020; Orrico & D’Imperio, 2020). This work operationalizes the construct empathy as a pragmatic skill and has focused on it as a source of individual differences. For instance, Esteve-Gibert et al. (2020) examined how listeners with different levels of empathy interpreted intonation and meaning in contexts in which a temporary lexical ambiguity could only be resolved through intonation. Empathy was measured using a self-report Empathy Quotient (EQ) questionnaire (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004) and participants were partitioned into groups corresponding with low or high empathy. Esteve-Gibert et al. (2020) tested French monolinguals in a visual-world paradigm eye-tracking task that resembled a card guessing game. Target objects were homophones in French (e.g., *cane*, Eng. “female duck”; *canne*, Eng. “walking stick”). Esteve-Gibert et al. (2020) found that processing of the lexical ambiguity (the homophones *cane*/*canne*) was modulated by empathy level when intonation was the only cue available. Specifically, highly empathic individuals varied their looking behavior as a function of intonational cues while less empathic individuals did not. That is, higher empathy individuals, in comparison with lower empathy individuals, were found to be more sensitive to intonation cues in the process of forming sound-meaning associations.

In short, individuals with more pragmatic skill (higher empathy) appear to be able to use intonation to resolve temporary lexical ambiguity that can lead to confirmatory vs. contrasting interpretations. This research underscores the importance of considering individual pragmatic differences when examining intonational meaning processing and sentence comprehension. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have explored the construct empathy as it pertains to L2 perceptual development. Thus, we extend this research to the SLA context in order to determine if individual differences in this pragmatic skill affect the development of intonation in L2 processing and sentence comprehension.

## The present study

We investigate how proficiency and empathy are related to the development of L2 prosody by analyzing the perception of intonation in questions and statements in L2 Spanish. This study was pre-registered on the Open Science Framework[[1]](#footnote-22) and designed to address the following research questions:

1. Is perceptional development in L2 Spanish modulated by proficiency and intonation type (i.e., Brandl et al., 2020)?
2. Do pragmatic skills—specifically, empathy—modulate the rate of development in L2 prosody?
3. Does speaker variety affect perception accuracy and processing speed?

Regarding RQ1, we hypothesize that accuracy will increase and processing time will decrease as a function of proficiency and intonation type. As shown in previous studies, total interrogatives (i.e., yes-no questions) will present the most difficulty for L2 learners of Spanish, followed by partial interrogatives (i.e., wh-questions) and declarative broad focus and narrow focus statements. Based on the findings of Esteve-Gibert et al. (2020), we posit that prosodic development will occur sooner and at a faster rate in higher empathy individuals (RQ2). In this operationalization, ‘sooner’ refers to lower proficiency levels in a cross-sectional design, that is, at an earlier developmental stage when compared with lower empathy individuals. Finally, with regard to RQ3, based on tentative findings from native speaker pilot data, we hypothesize that, overall, L2 learners will have the most difficulty (lower accuracy, slower response time) with the Cuban variety.

This project presents a conceptual replication of Brandl et al. (2020) in that we employ a similar experimental paradigm using similar stimuli in order to analyze the relationship between proficiency and L2 perception of intonation. We extend this research by taking into account pragmatic skill, specifically empathy, in L2 sentence processing. Importantly, this research builds on recent studies looking at the role of individual pragmatic skills in language processing and extends them to the field of SLA.

# Method

## Participants

Two hundred twenty-five individuals completed a two-alternative forced choice (2AFC) task in which auditory stimuli were identified as being questions or statements. Participants were recruited using the Prolific.ac online experimental platform and were compensated at a rate of $9.52 per hour for their time. We estimated the task would take approximately 15 minutes to complete, thus each participant was paid $2.70 for completing all three tasks. The mean time to completion was approximately 13 minutes. The pool of participants was filtered using criteria set in Prolific.ac to insure participants self-reported as being L1 English speakers born, raised, and currently living in the US with no knowledge of any languages other than English or Spanish. They reported no hearing difficulties and were required to use headphones on a desktop computer. Upon beginning the experiment, all participants responded to the following screening questions: 1) What part of the US are you from? 2) At what age did you begin learning Spanish? 3) Are you proficient in any languages other than English/Spanish?. Additionally, participants responded to the prompt “I am most familiar with Spanish from…” and using a pull-down window they selected a variety of Spanish or “I am not familiar with any variety of Spanish”. We excluded data from any participant that responded that they were not from the US Northeast, that they began learning Spanish before the age of 13, or that they were proficient in a language other than English/Spanish. Participants responding categorically across all trials were also excluded. In sum, participants were adult native speakers of American English with varied levels of proficiency in Spanish, ranging from functionally monolingual to highly proficient. All participants with knowledge of Spanish were adult L2 learners, operationally defined as having begun the endeavor of learning Spanish after the age of 13.

## Tasks

The study consisted of three tasks: a two-alternative forced choice task (2AFC), a lexical decision vocabulary assessment, and a lykert-type questionnaire to assess empathy. The tasks were programmed in Python using Pyschopy3 (Peirce et al., 2019) and presented online via Pavlovia. All code and materials used to generate the tasks are freely available on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/dh4zp/?view_only=162d6d13e5814417bcb9de349f18cb62>).

**2AFC**. In the 2AFC task participants were presented with an audio file containing a statement (declarative: broad focus or narrow focus) or a question (yes-no or wh-). Their task was to determine, as quickly and as accurately as possible, if the utterance they heard was a question or a statement. Specifically, they responded to an on-screen prompt asking “Is this a question?” using the keyboard. To respond participants typed ‘1’ for “yes” (i.e., “yes, this is a question”) and ‘0’ for ‘no’ (i.e., “no, this is not a question”).

The auditory stimuli consisted of 64 critical items, 16 of each sentence type. To generate the stimuli, we recorded native Spanish speakers of eight different varieties (Cuban, standard Peninsular, Andalusian, Puerto Rican, Chilean, Argentinean, Mexican, and Peruvian). The eight native speakers all produced the same 64 critical items. All utterances were segmented using Praat (Boersma & Weenink, 2018) and normalized for peak intensity. The 2AFC task included 64 trials in which the stimuli presented were randomized across speaker variety. Each variety had the same probability of being selected on a given trial, such that, on average, a given participant heard each variety approximately eight times.[[2]](#footnote-26) Prior to pre-registering our research questions and hypotheses we piloted the 2AFC experiment on 100 native Spanish speakers to assure the quality of the items and assess the difficulty of the task. We did not come across any issues.

**LexTALE**. To assess Spanish proficiency we administered the Lexical Test for Advanced Learners of Spanish (LexTALE-ESP, henceforth LexTALE) (Izura, Cuetos, & Brysbaert, 2014; Lemhöfer & Broersma, 2012). The LexTALE is a lexical decision experiment used provide a standardized assessment of proficiency/vocabulary size in Spanish. In this task participants are presented words on the computer screen and must decide if it is real or not using the keyboard (‘1’ for real, ‘0’ for fake). LexTALE scores can range from −20 to 60. Monolingual Spanish speakers generally score above 50. Scores from individuals with little or no knowledge of Spanish typically fall in the range of −20 to 0. Adult learners with low to medium proficiency can range from 0 to 25, and advanced learners generally score above 25. We conceive of proficiency as a continuous variable, thus we consider a monolingual English speaker to have little to no proficiency in Spanish (i.e., a negative value on the LexTALE). In our data set participant scores ranged from −16 to 55, suggesting all proficiency levels were likely represented in the sample. The mean score was 12.95 (95% CrI: [11.18, 14.72]) with a standard deviation of 13.60 (95% CrI: [12.38, 14.9].

**Empathy Questionnaire**. The construct empathy was assessed using the Empathy Quotient (EQ, Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). The EQ is a 60-item questionnaire that presents four point likert-type items ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. Forty of the questions assess empathy and 20 are filler items. In order to avoid response bias, choices indicating empathic responses are coded to elicit “agree” responses in half the target items and “disagree” responses in the other half. The target items are scored with 2 or 1 points based on if the participant responds “strongly” or “slightly”. Finally, the EQ is scored by summing the total points to produce a single value indicating an individual’s level of empathy. Thus the minimum possible value is 0 (low empathy) and the maximum is 80 (high empathy). In our data set the average empathy quotient was 37.88 (Range: [9, 69], 95% CrI: [36.13, 39.68], SD: 13.39, 95% CrI of SD: [12.28, 14.67]).

## Procedure

Participants recruited via Prolific.ac completed the all three tasks in a single session. The 2AFC task was first, followed by the LexTALE task, and, finally, the empathy quotient questionnaire. We planed to collect data from approximately 300 individuals: 100 monolingual Spanish speakers not reported here and 200 L2 learners). Following Brandl et al. (2020), we assumed the effect size for perceptual learning was moderate in terms of the criteria set forth for L2 research by Plonsky and Oswald (2014) (Cohen’s D = 0.600, Pearson’s r = 0.287). Based on this assumption, we estimated that we would need 94 participants to have an 80% chance of capturing the proficiency effect with a type II error rate of 5%. Our hypothesis related to empathy as a possible mediator of perceptual learning is exploratory in nature and thus we did not base our sample size estimate on any parameter estimates related to this effect. That said, we believed the aforementioned exploratory effect was likely to be small, and, considering the resources necessary and available to us, planned to recruit 100 additional participants.

We excluded data from participants in the following circumstances: error during data collection, clear lack of understanding or engagement during the task (i.e., all ‘1’ responses, failed three attention checks, etc.), participants reporting having learned Spanish before the age of 13, participants with knowledge of language other and English and Spanish. Data from a total of 78 participants was discarded because the experimental session timed out and/or data was incomplete. An additional 8 participants were discarded due to low accuracy (n = 5), incomplete data (n = 2), and failed attention checks (n = 1). A total of 225 participants met the criteria for inclusion.

## Statistical analyses

We report two primary statistical analyses that were pre-registered prior to collecting the learner data. First, we analyzed response accuracy using Bayesian multilevel logistic regression. The model considered response accuracy for the population effects *utterance type* (declarative broad focus, declarative narrow focus, interrogative yes/no, interrogative -wh), *LexTALE score* (i.e., proficiency), *empathy quotient*, and the higher order interactions. The likelihood of the model was Bernoulli distributed with a logit link function. The criterion, *response*, was coded as “1” for correct responses and “0” for incorrect responses. Thus, the first analysis modeled the probability of responding correctly to the prompt “Is this a question?”. We specified group-level effects for participants, speaker variety, and items. The slope for *utterance type* varied for the participant effect, as did the *LexTALE* by *empathy quotient* interaction for the speaker variety effect. All continuous variables were standardized and ‘interrogative yes/no’ was set as the baseline for *utterance type*, thus the model intercept represented the probability of a learner with average proficiency and average empathy responding correctly to a yes/no question.

The second analysis utilized Bayesian drift diffusion modeling (DDM, Ratcliff & McKoon, 2008). This approach to analyzing behavioral data models decision-making using a random-walk decision process. DDMs can simultaneously take into account responses and response times in two-choice tasks in a single model, thus they are particularly beneficial when analyzing tasks in which speed-accuracy tradeoffs may be present. We estimate the parameters off the DDM using a Bayesian methods and subsequently do regression on the posterior samples of the resulting parameters.

A DDM estimates four parameters: boundary separation, bias, drift rate and non-decision time. Boundary separation, α, quantifies the amount of information necessary to make a decision. The boundaries represent the thresholds for the two alternatives in the task, which, in our case, implies correct and incorrect responses. Bias, β, gives an indication of a preference for one of the choices at the beginning of the decision making process. A bias positive value indicates a preference for the upper boundary, whereas a negative bias is an indicator of a preference for the lower boundary. The drift rate, δ, provides an assessment of the rate at which information is accumulated. A higher δ implies a random walk that arrives at one of the thresholds faster and is interpreted as indication that the participant finds the task to be easier. Conversely a lower drift rate is an indication of a more difficult task. The sign of the value is also relevant. Positive drift rate refers to evidence accumulation for the upper boundary and negative drift rate for the lower boundary. Finally, non-decision time, τ, models the part of the time course that is not associated with decision making (e.g., the time necessary to perceive a stimuli prior to evidence accumulation). Our analyses focus primarily on boundary separation (α) and drift rate (δ). Figure 1 provides an example of a hypothetical DDM for the 2AFC task in the present project.

![Figure 1.   A drift diffusion model of the present study. The upper and lower bounds represent correct and incorrect responses, respectively. The boundary separation (α) is the distance between the two thresholds and indicates the evidence required to make a decision. Non-decision time (τ) represents the time course before evidence accumulation begins, i.e., time used for any process except decision making. Bias (β) is the starting point for the evidence accumulation in the vertical plane (i.e., closer or further away from a given threshold), and drift rate (δ) quantifies the rate of evidence accumulation. The purple and orange lines represent examples a decision resulting in a correct (purple) and incorrect (orange) decision. The corresponding density curves represent the distribution of response times at either threshold.](data:application/pdf;base64,)

*Figure* *1.*  A drift diffusion model of the present study. The upper and lower bounds represent correct and incorrect responses, respectively. The boundary separation (α) is the distance between the two thresholds and indicates the evidence required to make a decision. Non-decision time (τ) represents the time course before evidence accumulation begins, i.e., time used for any process except decision making. Bias (β) is the starting point for the evidence accumulation in the vertical plane (i.e., closer or further away from a given threshold), and drift rate (δ) quantifies the rate of evidence accumulation. The purple and orange lines represent examples a decision resulting in a correct (purple) and incorrect (orange) decision. The corresponding density curves represent the distribution of response times at either threshold.

For all models, we included regularizing, weakly informative priors (Gelman, Simpson, & Betancourt, 2017). We sample the posterior distribution of the model for statistical inferences. To assess our pre-registered hypotheses we established a region of practical equivalence (ROPE) around a point null value of 0 (see Kruschke, 2018) using the following formula:

For all models, median posterior point estimates are reported for each parameter of interest, along with the 95% highest density interval (HDI), the percent of the region of the HDI contained within the ROPE, and the maximum probability of effect (MPE). For statistical inferences, a posterior distribution for a parameter β in which 95% of the HDI falls outside the ROPE and a high MPE (i.e., values close to 1) were taken as compelling evidence for a given effect. All exploratory analyses, explicitly described as such, include posterior point estimates, the 95% HDI and the MPE. We conducted the analyses using R and fit all models using the probabilistic programming language stan via the R package brms (Bürkner, 2017, 2018).

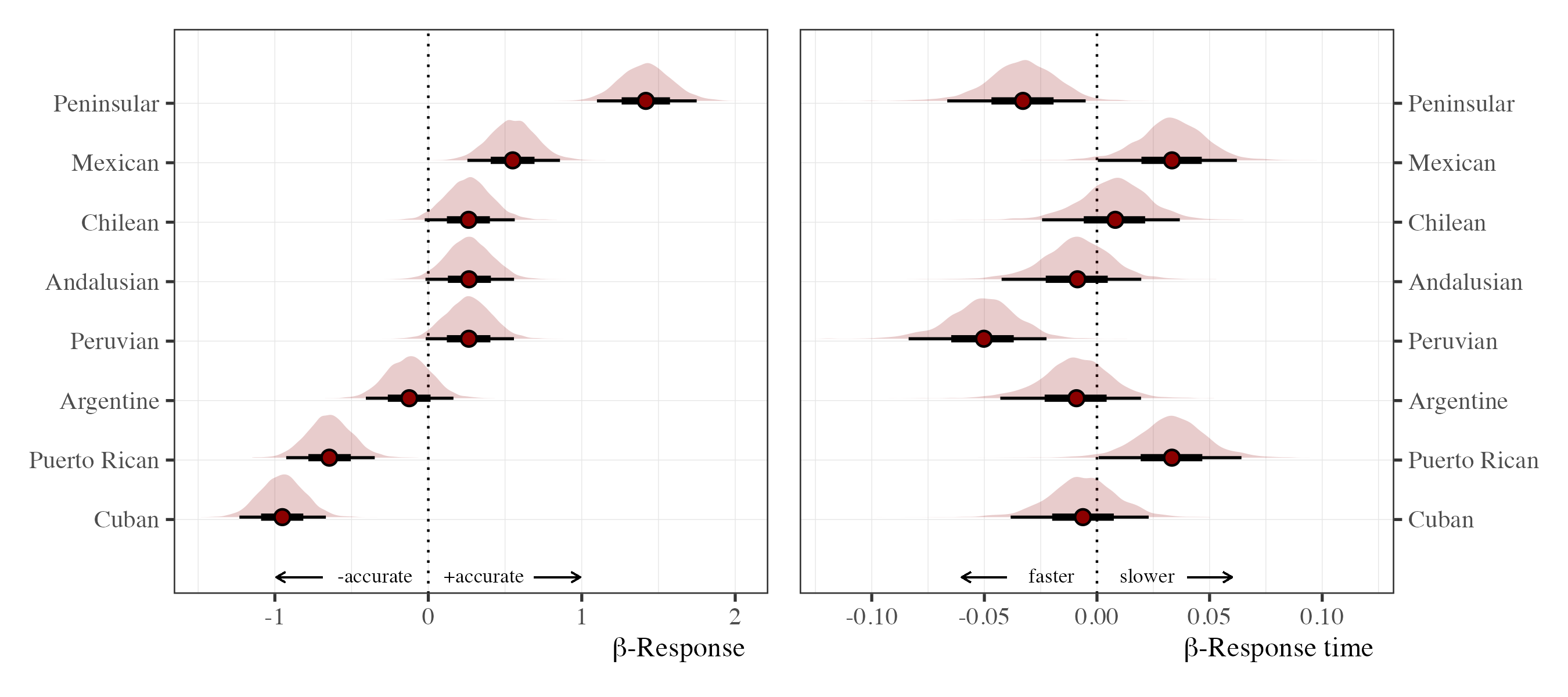
# Results

This is Figure 2

![Figure 2.   Response accuracy: Probability of a correct response for each utterance type in the logistic space.](data:application/pdf;base64,)

*Figure* *2.*  Response accuracy: Probability of a correct response for each utterance type in the logistic space.

This is Figure 3



*Figure* *3.*  Response accuracy: Partially pooled estimates for each speaker variety.

This is Figure 4

![Figure 4.   Response accuracy: Probability of a correct response in the logistic space as a function of LexTALE score (left panel) and empathy quotient (right panel) for each utterance type. Thin lines represent 300 draws from the posterior distribution for each condition.](data:application/pdf;base64,)

*Figure* *4.*  Response accuracy: Probability of a correct response in the logistic space as a function of LexTALE score (left panel) and empathy quotient (right panel) for each utterance type. Thin lines represent 300 draws from the posterior distribution for each condition.

This is Figure 5

![Figure 5.   Response accuracy: Probability of a correct response as a function of empathy quotient and LexTALE score for each question type.](data:application/pdf;base64,)

*Figure* *5.*  Response accuracy: Probability of a correct response as a function of empathy quotient and LexTALE score for each question type.

This is Figure 6

![Figure 6.   Need a caption.](data:application/pdf;base64,)

*Figure* *6.*  Need a caption.

This is Figure 7

![Figure 7.   Two-thousand simulations of the drift diffusion model for interrogative utterances as a function of empathy quotient (low/high) and LexTALE score (low/high). Low and high levels represent ±2 standard deviations above/below the mean. Dark red lines represent the average decision time course.](data:application/pdf;base64,)

*Figure* *7.*  Two-thousand simulations of the drift diffusion model for interrogative utterances as a function of empathy quotient (low/high) and LexTALE score (low/high). Low and high levels represent ±2 standard deviations above/below the mean. Dark red lines represent the average decision time course.

# Discussion

# Conclusion

# References

Astruc, L., Vanrell, M. del M., & Prieto, P. (2016). Cost of the action and social distance affect the selection of question intonation in Catalan. In M. E. Armstrong, N. Henriksen, & M. del M. Vanrell (Eds.), *Intonational grammar in Ibero-Romance: Approaches across linguistic subfields* (pp. 93–113). John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ihll.6>

Aust, F., & Barth, M. (2018). *papaja: Create APA manuscripts with R Markdown*. Retrieved from <https://github.com/crsh/papaja>

Baron-Cohen, S. (2011). *Zero degree of empathy. On empathy and the origins of cruelty*. London, England: Penguin.

Baron-Cohen, S., & Wheelwright, S. (2004). The empathy quotient: An investigation of adults with Asperger syndrome or high functioning autism, and normal sex differences. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *34*(2), 163–175. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:JADD.0000022607.19833.00>

Best, C. T., & Tyler, M. D. (2007). Nonnative and second-language speech perception: Commonalities and complementarities. In O.-S. Bohn & M. J. Munro (Eds.), *Language experience in second language speech learning: In honor of James Emil Flege* (pp. 13–34). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.

Bishop, J., & Kuo, G. (2016). Do "autistic-like"" personality traits predict prosody perception? *Talk presented at LabPhon15 satellite workshop on personality in speech perception and production, ithaca, NY.*

Boersma, P., & Weenink, D. (2018). *Praat: Doing phonetics by computer [computer program]*. Retrieved from <http://www.praat.org/>

Brandl, A., González, C., & Bustin, A. (2020). The development of intonation in L2 Spanish: A perceptual study. In A. Morales-Front, M. J. Ferreira, R. P. Leow, & C. Sanz (Eds.), *Hispanic linguistics: Current issues and new directions* (pp. 12–31). John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ihll.26>

Bürkner, P.-C. (2017). brms: An R package for Bayesian multilevel models using Stan. *Journal of Statistical Software*, *80*(1), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.18637/jss.v080.i01>

Bürkner, P.-C. (2018). Advanced Bayesian Multilevel Modeling with the R Package brms. *The R Journal*, *10*(1), 395–411. <https://doi.org/10.32614/RJ-2018-017>

Cain, K., Oakhill, J., & Lemmon, K. (2004). Individual differences in the inference of word meanings from context: The influence of reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and memory capacity. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *96*(4), 671–681. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.96.4.671>

Carruthers, P. (2009). How we know our own minds: The relationship between mindreading and metacognition. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *32*(2), 121–138. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X09000545>

Chen, A. (2005). *On the universal and language-specific perception of paralinguistic intonational meaning*. Utrecht: LOT.

Cruz-Ferreira, M. (1987). Non-native interpretive strategies for intonational meaning: An experimental study. In A. James & J. Leather (Eds.), *Sound patterns in second language acquisition* (pp. 103–120). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Degen, J., & Tanenhaus, M. K. (2016). Availability of alternatives and the processing of scalar implicatures: A visual world eye-tracking study. *Cognitive Science*, *40*(1), 172–201. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cogs.12227>

de-la-Mota, C. (2019). Improving non-native pronunciation: Teaching prosody to learners of Spanish as a second/foreign language. In R. Rao (Ed.), *Key issues in the teaching of Spanish pronunciation* (pp. 162–197). Routledge.

Esteve-Gibert, N., Portes, C., Schafer, A., Hemforth, B., & D’Imperio, M. (2016). *The role of individual empathic skills on the online processing of intonational meaning*. Bilbao, Spain: Basque Center on Cognition, Brain; Language. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.19401.13926>

Esteve-Gibert, N., Schafer, A. J., Hemforth, B., Portes, C., Pozniak, C., & D’Imperio, M. (2020). Empathy influences how listeners interpret intonation and meaning when words are ambiguous. *Memory & Cognition*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13421-019-00990-w>

Flege, J. E., & Bohn, O.-S. (2021). The revised speech learning model (SLM-r). *Second Language Speech Learning: Theoretical and Empirical Progress*, 3–83.

Frith, U., & Frith, C. D. (2003). Development and neurophysiology of mentalizing. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B: Biological Sciences*, *358*(1431), 459–473. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2002.1218>

Gelman, A., Simpson, D., & Betancourt, M. (2017). The prior can often only be understood in the context of the likelihood. *Entropy*, *19*(10), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/e19100555>

Henriksen, N., Armstrong, M. E., & Garcı́a-Amaya, L. (2016). The intonational meaning of polar questions in Manchego Spanish spontaneous speech. In M. E. Armstrong, N. Henriksen, & M. del M. Vanrell (Eds.), *Intonational grammar in Ibero-Romance: Approaches across linguistic subfields* (pp. 181–205). John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ihll.6>

Hualde, J. I., & Prieto, P. (2015). Intonational variation in Spanish: European and American varieties. In S. Frota & P. Prieto (Eds.), *Intonation in romance* (pp. 350–391). Oxford University Press.

Izura, C., Cuetos, F., & Brysbaert, M. (2014). LexTALE-Esp: A test to rapidly and efficiently assess the Spanish vocabulary size. *Psicológica*, *35*(1), 49–66. <https://doi.org/10.1037/t47086-000>

Jilka, M. (2000). Testing the contribution of prosody to the perception of foreign accent. In A. James & J. Leather (Eds.), *In proceedings of new sounds 4th international symposium on the acquisition of second language speech. Amsterdam: University of amsterdam* (Vol. 4, pp. 199–207).

Kruschke, J. K. (2018). Rejecting or accepting parameter values in bayesian estimation. *Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science*, *1*(2), 270–280.

Kvavik, K. H., & Olsen, C. L. (1974). Theories and methods in spanish intonational studies. *Phonetica*, *30*(2), 65–100. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000259481>

Lemhöfer, K., & Broersma, M. (2012). Introducing LexTALE: A quick and valid lexical test for advanced learners of English. *Behavior Research Methods*, *44*(2), 325–343. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13428-011-0146-0>

Levis, J. (2016). Accent in second language pronunciation research and teaching. *Journal of Second Language Pronunciation*, *2*(2), 153–159. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jslp.2.2.01lev>

Mennen, I. (2007). Phonological and phonetic influences in non-native intonation. In J. Trouvain & U. Gut (Eds.), *Non-native prosody. Phonetic description and teaching practice* (pp. 53–76). Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.

Munro, M. J. (1995). Nonsegmental factors in foreign accent: Ratings of filtered speech. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *17*(1), 17–34. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263100013735>

Nieuwland, M. S., Ditman, T., & Kuperberg, G. R. (2010). On the incrementality of pragmatic processing: An ERP investigation of informativeness and pragmatic abilities. *Journal of Memory and Language*, *63*(3), 324–346. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jml.2010.06.005>

Orrico, R., & D’Imperio, M. (2020). Individual empathy levels affect gradual intonation-meaning mapping: The case of biased questions in salerno italian. *Laboratory Phonology: Journal of the Association for Laboratory Phonology*, *11*(1). <https://doi.org/10.5334/labphon.238>

Peirce, J. W., Gray, J. R., Simpson, S., MacAskill, M. R., Höchenberger, R., Sogo, H., … Lindelv, J. (2019). PsychoPy2: Experiments in behavior made easy. *Behavior Research Methods*, *51*(1), 195–203.

Pettorino, M., De Meo, A., & Vitale, M. (2014). Transplanting vowels towards the acoustic correlates of foreign accent. In Y. Congosto, M. L. Montero Curiel, & A. Salvador Plans (Eds.), *Fonética experimental, educación superior e investigación: II. Adquisición y aprendizaje de lenguas/español como lengua extranjera* (pp. 93–106).

Pickering, L. (2001). The role of tone choice in improving ITA communication in the classroom. *Tesol Quarterly*, *35*(2), 233–255. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587647>

Plonsky, L., & Oswald, F. L. (2014). How big is “big”? Interpreting effect sizes in L2 research. *Language Learning*, *64*(4), 878–912. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lang.12079>

Rao, R. (2019). Introduction. In R. Rao (Ed.), *Key issues in the teaching of Spanish pronunciation* (pp. 1–13). Routledge.

Ratcliff, R., & McKoon, G. (2008). The diffusion decision model: Theory and data for two-choice decision tasks. *Neural Computation*, *20*(4), 873–922. <https://doi.org/10.1162/neco.2008.12-06-420>

Trimble, J. C. (2013a). *Acquiring variable L2 spanish intonation in a study abroad context* (PhD thesis). University of Minnesota.

Trimble, J. C. (2013b). Perceiving intonational cues in a foreign language: Perception of sentence type in two dialects of Spanish. In C. Howe (Ed.), *Selected proceedings of the 15th hispanic linguistics symposium* (pp. 78–92). Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

Trofimovich, P., & Baker, W. (2006). Learning second language suprasegmentals: Effect of L2 experience on prosody and fluency characteristics of L2 speech. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263106060013>

Van Leussen, J.-W., & Escudero, P. (2015). Learning to perceive and recognize a second language: The L2LP model revised. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *6*, 6–12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01000>

Appendix

# On-line supplementary material

## Drift diffusion models

## Supplementary analyses

This is Figure 8

![Figure 8.   Make sure each variety represented equally over course of experiment.](data:application/pdf;base64,)

*Figure* *8.*  Make sure each variety represented equally over course of experiment.

This is Figure 9

![Figure 9.   Make sure each variety represented equally over course of experiment.](data:application/pdf;base64,)

*Figure* *9.*  Make sure each variety represented equally over course of experiment.

## Reproducibility information

**About this document**

This document was written in RMarkdown using papaja (Aust & Barth, 2018).

**Session info**

setting value  
 version R version 4.1.0 (2021-05-18)  
 os macOS Big Sur 10.16  
 system x86\_64, darwin17.0  
 ui X11  
 language (EN)  
 collate en\_US.UTF-8  
 ctype en\_US.UTF-8  
 tz America/New\_York  
 date 2021-12-19  
 pandoc 2.14.2 @ /Applications/RStudio.app/Contents/MacOS/pandoc/ (via rmarkdown)

loadedversion date  
abind 1.4-5 2016-07-21  
arrayhelpers 1.1-0 2020-02-04  
assertthat 0.2.1 2019-03-21  
backports 1.4.1 2021-12-13  
base64enc 0.1-3 2015-07-28  
bayesplot 1.8.1 2021-06-14  
beeswarm 0.4.0 2021-06-01  
bit 4.0.4 2020-08-04  
bit64 4.0.5 2020-08-30  
bookdown 0.24 2021-09-02  
boot 1.3-28 2021-05-03  
bridgesampling 1.1-2 2021-04-16  
brms 2.16.3 2021-11-22  
Brobdingnag 1.2-6 2018-08-13  
cachem 1.0.6 2021-08-19  
callr 3.7.0 2021-04-20  
cellranger 1.1.0 2016-07-27  
checkmate 2.0.0 2020-02-06  
cli 3.1.0 2021-10-27  
cmdstanr 0.4.0 2021-07-22  
coda 0.19-4 2020-09-30  
codetools 0.2-18 2020-11-04  
colorspace 2.0-2 2021-06-24  
colourpicker 1.1.1 2021-10-04  
contributoR 0.3.0 2021-12-18  
crayon 1.4.2 2021-10-29  
crosstalk 1.2.0 2021-11-04  
curl 4.3.2 2021-06-23  
DBI 1.1.1 2021-01-15  
desc 1.4.0 2021-09-28  
devtools 2.4.3 2021-11-30  
digest 0.6.29 2021-12-01  
distributional 0.2.2 2021-02-02  
dplyr 1.0.7 2021-06-18  
DT 0.20 2021-11-15  
dygraphs 1.1.1.6 2018-07-11  
ellipsis 0.3.2 2021-04-29  
emmeans 1.7.1-1 2021-11-29  
estimability 1.3 2018-02-11  
evaluate 0.14 2019-05-28  
extrafont 0.17 2014-12-08  
extrafontdb 1.0 2012-06-11  
fansi 0.5.0 2021-05-25  
farver 2.1.0 2021-02-28  
fastmap 1.1.0 2021-01-25  
forcats 0.5.1 2021-01-27  
fs 1.5.2 2021-12-08  
gamm4 0.2-6 2020-04-03  
ganttrify 0.0.0.9007 2021-07-19  
generics 0.1.1 2021-10-25  
ggbeeswarm 0.6.0 2017-08-07  
ggdist 3.0.1 2021-11-30  
ggplot2 3.3.5 2021-06-25  
ggrepel 0.9.1 2021-01-15  
ggridges 0.5.3 2021-01-08  
glue 1.5.1 2021-11-30  
gridExtra 2.3 2017-09-09  
gtable 0.3.0 2019-03-25  
gtools 3.9.2 2021-06-06  
here 1.0.1 2020-12-13  
highr 0.9 2021-04-16  
hms 1.1.1 2021-09-26  
htmltools 0.5.2 2021-08-25  
htmlwidgets 1.5.4 2021-09-08  
httpuv 1.6.3 2021-09-09  
igraph 1.2.9 2021-11-23  
inline 0.3.19 2021-05-31  
jsonlite 1.7.2 2020-12-09  
knitr 1.36 2021-09-29  
later 1.3.0 2021-08-18  
lattice 0.20-45 2021-09-22  
lifecycle 1.0.1 2021-09-24  
lme4 1.1-27.1 2021-06-22  
loo 2.4.1 2020-12-09  
magrittr 2.0.1 2020-11-17  
markdown 1.1 2019-08-07  
MASS 7.3-54 2021-05-03  
Matrix 1.4-0 2021-12-08  
matrixStats 0.61.0 2021-09-17  
memoise 2.0.1 2021-11-26  
mgcv 1.8-38 2021-10-06  
mime 0.12 2021-09-28  
miniUI 0.1.1.1 2018-05-18  
minqa 1.2.4 2014-10-09  
munsell 0.5.0 2018-06-12  
mvtnorm 1.1-3 2021-10-08  
nlme 3.1-153 2021-09-07  
nloptr 1.2.2.3 2021-11-02  
papaja 0.1.0.9997 2021-12-11  
patchwork 1.1.1 2020-12-17  
pillar 1.6.4 2021-10-18  
pkgbuild 1.3.0 2021-12-09  
pkgconfig 2.0.3 2019-09-22  
pkgload 1.2.4 2021-11-30  
plyr 1.8.6 2020-03-03  
png 0.1-7 2013-12-03  
posterior 1.1.0 2021-09-09  
prettyunits 1.1.1 2020-01-24  
printy 0.0.0.9003 2021-09-26  
processx 3.5.2 2021-04-30  
projpred 2.0.2 2020-10-28  
promises 1.2.0.1 2021-02-11  
ps 1.6.0 2021-02-28  
purrr 0.3.4 2020-04-17  
R6 2.5.1 2021-08-19  
Rcpp 1.0.7 2021-07-07  
RcppParallel 5.1.4 2021-05-04  
readr 2.1.1 2021-11-30  
readxl 1.3.1 2019-03-13  
remotes 2.4.2 2021-11-30  
reshape2 1.4.4 2020-04-09  
rlang 0.4.12 2021-10-18  
rmarkdown 2.11 2021-09-14  
rprojroot 2.0.2 2020-11-15  
rsconnect 0.8.25 2021-11-19  
rstan 2.26.4 2021-10-18  
rstantools 2.1.1 2020-07-06  
rstudioapi 0.13 2020-11-12  
Rttf2pt1 1.3.9 2021-07-22  
scales 1.1.1 2020-05-11  
sessioninfo 1.2.2 2021-12-06  
shiny 1.7.1 2021-10-02  
shinyjs 2.0.0 2020-09-09  
shinystan 2.5.0 2018-05-01  
shinythemes 1.2.0 2021-01-25  
StanHeaders 2.26.4 2021-10-18  
stringi 1.7.6 2021-11-29  
stringr 1.4.0 2019-02-10  
svUnit 1.0.6 2021-04-19  
tensorA 0.36.2 2020-11-19  
testthat 3.1.1 2021-12-03  
threejs 0.3.3 2020-01-21  
tibble 3.1.6 2021-11-07  
tidybayes 3.0.1 2021-08-22  
tidyr 1.1.4 2021-09-27  
tidyselect 1.1.1 2021-04-30  
tinylabels 0.2.2 2021-12-06  
tzdb 0.2.0 2021-10-27  
usethis 2.1.5 2021-12-09  
utf8 1.2.2 2021-07-24  
V8 3.6.0 2021-11-10  
vctrs 0.3.8 2021-04-29  
vipor 0.4.5 2017-03-22  
vroom 1.5.7 2021-11-30  
withr 2.4.3 2021-11-30  
writexl 1.4.0 2021-04-20  
xfun 0.28 2021-11-04  
xtable 1.8-4 2019-04-21  
xts 0.12.1 2020-09-09  
yaml 2.2.1 2020-02-01  
zoo 1.8-9 2021-03-09

1. See <https://osf.io/dh4zp/?view_only=162d6d13e5814417bcb9de349f18cb62> [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
2. See online supplementary materials for more information. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)