Research Proposal:
Absolute versus comparative judgment

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Abstract

High level description of the research.

1 Introduction

Intelligible speech can be defined as the extent to which the elements in an speaker's acoustic signal, e.g. phonemes or words, can be correctly recovered by a listener [25, 49, 44, 17]. Because intelligible spoken language requires all core components of speech perception, cognitive processing, linguistic knowledge, and articulation to be mastered [17], its attainment carries an important societal value, as it is a milestone in children's language development, the ultimate checkpoint for the success of speech therapy, and has been qualified as the "gold standard for assessing the benefit of cochlear implantation" [12].

The literature suggest there are two perspectives from which speech intelligibility (SI) can be assessed: the speaker/message and listener's perspective [5, 6]. The first, also known as acoustic studies, center its focus on assessing separately particular characteristics of speech samples, e.g. their pitch, duration or stress (supra segmental characteristics), or the articulation of vowels and consonants (segmental characteristics) [38]. Whereas the second, also known as perceptual studies, center its focus on making holistic assessments of the speech stimuli, e.g. measure their perceived quality [5, 6]. On both instances, the stimuli/representation (children's utterances) can be generated from reading at loud, contextualized utterances, or spontaneous speech tasks[1].

Moreover, perceptual studies can use multiple approaches to measure SI. However, they can be largely grouped into two: objective and subjective ratings (OR and SR, respectively) [20]. In OR, listeners transcribe children's utterances orthographically or phonetically, and use such information to construct an index of SI. In contrast, under SR, listeners directly produce the SI index using one or a combination of the following procedures: absolute holistic (HJ), analytic (AJ), or comparative (CJ) judgments, the last, also known as the relative holistic method.

It is easy to infer from the previous description, that under perceptual studies, OR methods are more valid[2] and reliable[3] than SR methods, and therefore as their name imply, are usually used as an objective measure of SI [6, 15]. However, given the demanding process in terms of number of listeners required, time, and ultimately cost entailed by OR methods, SR methods can be regarded as an efficient alternative, as long as we can ensure they provide equally valid and reliable SI measures.

Furthermore, within the SR methods, the literature evidence indicate that while HJ procedures are less time consuming than any other alternative [6], they suffer from a lack of intra- and inter-rater reliability[4] [33, 22, 20, 6]. Additionally, the literature inform us the procedure does not allow to assess subtle differences in the representations [6], while the scales derived from them are usually coarse, where children reach the higher levels fairly quickly [36], e.g. the Speech Intelligibility Rating (SIR) [13, 31].

In this context, CJ has received a growing attention, because it directly tackles the issues with the HJ procedures: it fosters reliable [47] and valid scores [8, 28], while the judges can focus only on the relevant aspects of the compared representations, i.e. the "just noticeable difference" [28]. Moreover, depending on the task, it provides a set of additional benefits, e.g. judges feel more comfortable using comparisons, which foster more accurate judgments [18],

[1] ordered on increasing level of ecological validity [16, 14]

[2] defined as the extent to which scores are appropriate for their intended interpretation and use [28, 41].

[3] the extend to which a measure would give us the same result over and over again [41], i.e. measure something, free from error, in a consistent way.

[4] the lack of *intra-rater reliability* happens when the listener rates the same speech recording (representation) after a time lapse, and does not arrive at exactly the same score. On the other hand, the lack of *inter-rater reliability* happens if two listeners, who independently rate the same representation, does not arrive to the same score [41].

it does not require a high level of expertise [28, 5], it encourages to tackle hard to operationlize or open-ended tasks [34, 35, 28], and the measurement of competencies [46], among others.

2 Research questions

Considering the previous, this proposal seeks to investigate CJ as a SR method. First, we want to investigate if CJ can be applied to the field of speech research. More specifically, we want to know if CJ can be used to assess children's SI. Second, we seek to prove *how valid, reliable and time efficient are the CJ methods to judge SI, compared to HJ*. More specifically, we seek to compare the HJ versus the dichotomous and ordinal versions of the CJ procedure (CJ-D and CJ-O, respectively).

3 Design

3.1 Judgments and transcriptions

3.1.1 Judgement assumptions

On the one hand, HJ methods have their assumptions rooted in the Classical Test Theory (CTT), where an individual's observed score is composed of a "true score", and a random measurement error. Moreover, the true score is defined as the expected value of the score under an infinite number of independent test administrations[5].

On the other hand, CJ methods hinges on two principles: the law of comparative judgments [40], and the consensus of judges [28]. Under the former, the outcome of a comparison, i.e. a relation of preference, is determined by the perceived difference between the discriminal processes of pairs. A *discriminal process*, is the assumed physiological impact that a stimulus has on a listener. However, since this impact cannot be measured directly, we are forced to make some assumption about such process. The minimal assumption we can make is that the process' ordering on the psychological continuum, is the same as the stimulus' ordering that cause them. Moreover, as frequently observed in the field of psycho-physics, since the relationship between stimulus and its impact is not one-to-one, we are also forced to assume the impact has a dispersion/variability, called the *discriminal dispersion*[6]. Finally, the latter principle indicates the shared consensus across judges adds to the validity of the method [28]. This claim is supported by the fact that different listeners differ in the focus and broadness of their judgments [28], and that each representation is assessed by multiple judges, implying the final score is a reflection of the judges' collective expertise [35]. This only means that by combining various judgments, we come closer to the "true" rankings of SI [27].

3.1.2 Procedures

The HJ procedure consisted on two psycho-linguistic[7] stages: (1) select and mentally represent the stimulus' information, independent of other stimuli[8], and (2) rate the representation, ac-

[5] the National Council of Measurement in Education (NCME) Assessment Glossary: `https://www.ncme.org/resources/glossary`

[6] for a detailed explanation of the law, see Thurstone [40] and Verhavert [46] (p. 22-29)

[7] science concerned with human language production, comprehension, and acquisition [29].

[8] an assumption that is not usually met (see section 3.1.3).

cording to a task. Therefore, under this procedure, listeners rate the stimulus' SI in an absolute manner, with an 100-point scale going from "very unintelligible" (0) to "very intelligible" (100) [6, 15].

In contrast, CJ is composed of three interrelated psycho-linguistic stages: (1) select and mentally represent the information of the pairs, (2) compare and weigh their relevant information, and (3) rate which representation is preferred, according to a task [43]. As a result, in CJ-D, the listeners rate a pair of stimuli in a dichotomous way, i.e. if stimulus A is more intelligible than B you observe a one in the outcome variable, and zero otherwise [7]. On the other hand, under CJ-O, the listeners rate both stimuli on a 5-point ordinal scale[9] where the outcome variable maps to the following preference relationships: $A >> B$, $A > B$, $A = B$, $A < B$, $A << B$, where $>>$, $>$, $<<$, $<$, and $=$ symbols indicate the level of preference and indifference between the pairs, respectively [42, 1].

3.1.3 Experimental settings

On both procedures, the experimental settings for the **judgment task** followed the next steps [5, 6]:

1. the listener take a seat in front of a computer screen, located at his(her) home, workplace, or the experimental laboratory.
2. open Comproved[10] and select the rating task.
3. two set of instructions are presented on the computer screen:
   (a) how to perform the task, and
   (b) the aspects not to consider for the task.
4. the listener hear the stimuli through high quality headphones, set at a comfortable volume.
5. the listener rate which stimulus sounded better by selecting the appropriate button, for CJ-D and CJ-O tasks, or select a score from a slider on the computer screen, for the HJ task.

Figure 1: Slider for the HJ task. Extracted from Boonen et al. [6].

Observational evidence indicate the HJ procedure might suffer from anchoring effects[11] or issues with the default option of the slider. About the former, the anchoring seem to happen

[9] evidence on the quality, reliability, and validity benefits of a 5-point scale can be found in Revilla et al. [37].

[10] `https://comproved.com/en/a`, a software tool developed by the University of Antwerp designed to perform comparative judgments.

[11] a bias in decision that occurs when people anchor their decisions around a reference point, and adjust their choices relative to it [4, 24].

when listeners consider the previous assessment as a reference point for the next, effectively turning the task into a comparative rating, similar to CJ. About the latter, as the default setting for the slider is located on the far left for each new assessment (as seen in Figure 1), it is likely that such setting might impact the rating procedure[12]. Considering the previous, in order to minimize both issues, care is taken to randomize the display of stimuli within each listener. However, the researcher recognizes that a better approach to face the second problem would be to randomize the default setting of the slider, but this will not be applied or investigated on the current research.

Finally, for the **transcription task**, the followed steps were similar to the previous. However, at the fourth step, the listeners did not rated the stimulus but rather wrote their orthographic transcriptions, in a free text field in the Comproved environment.

3.2 Children

Thirty two (32) children were selected using a large corpus of *spontaneously spoken speech* collected by CLiPS over the last twenty years. The selection followed a two step procedure, similar to one outlined in Faes et al. [15]. First, a convenient sample of hearing impaired children is selected. Second, a sample of normal hearing children is selected based on a matching procedure.

For the first step, a random convenient sample[13] of 10 hearing impaired children with cochlear implant (HI/CI), and 10 hearing impaired children with hearing aids (HI/HA) is selected. The selection is based on the quality of their registered stimuli (utterances), as it is defined as in Section 3.3.

For the second step, 12 normal hearing children (NH) are matched on gender, age, and regional background, to the groups selected in the previous step. The matching was done through a manual or Propensity Score Matching (PSM) procedure, explain the procedure.

Two important points need to be highlighted from the children selection procedure. First, while the NH group is matched using the variable age at recording, its close counterpart in the other two groups would be the device's length of use (i.e. the "hearing age"), as both are proxies of the time a child is using language. However, as it is point out by Faes et al. [15](p. 14), the latter variable is not the only appropriate proxy of length of language use, e.g. vocabulary size ("lexical age") is also an appropriate measure. Second, due to the sample selection procedure applied in both steps, we cannot ensure the HI/CI and HI/HA, nor the NH group, are representative of their respective populations.

3.3 Stimuli

The stimuli consisted of the children's utterances (sentences of similar length) recovered from previously mentioned CLiPS corpus. More specifically, we use a portion of the corpus that consisted of 10 utterances recordings, for the 32 7-year old children selected in the previous section. The stimuli were recorded when the child was telling a story cued by the picture book "Frog, where are you" [30] to a caregiver "who does not know the story". The quality of the stimuli was ensured by selecting the utterances that did not have syntactically ill-formed

[12]compelling evidence on how default settings impact several decision process can be found in Kahneman [24] and Johnson and Goldstein [23].

[13]notice is a convenient sample as it is not designed with the proper statistical sample design.

or incomplete sentences, any background noise, cross-talk, long hesitations, revisions or non-words [6].

As a result, the data set consisted in a total of 320 utterances[14] presented to the listeners in a random order, based on the adaptive pairing algorithm [35] implemented in Comproved[15].

Similar designs were used by Boonen et al. [5] and Faes et al. [15]. However, in the former case the number of samples were low, while in the latter, the design was unbalanced and not conducive to appropriate inferences from a pairwise comparison.

3.4 Comparisons / assessments

In terms the number of comparison per representation (stimulus) required, Verhavert [46] provided compelling evidence that under CJ, between 17 and 20 comparisons were enough to achieved a Scale Separation Reliability (SSR) of 0.80. The current research uses the higher end of such values (20). On the other hand, based on [source] only 5 assessments per representation were required under the HJ method, to achieve what?. Therefore, we use the same number of assessments under HJ[16].

3.5 Judges and transcribers

The generation of the ratings required the participation of 180 judges (listeners). The judges were students from the Toegepaste Taalkunde bachelor or from the Taal- en Letterkunde master's degree. On both cases, the judges participated in the procedure as part of their course credit. We expect the CJ tasks to be 4-times more demanding, in terms of time and effort, than the HJ task, therefore, we allocate 4-times more judges in such task. Table 1 describes the judge allocation, the total number of judgments, and the number of judgments per judge. On

	Method	Number Utterances	Number (per stimuli) assessments	comparisons	Total judgments	Number judges	Judgments per judge
1	CJ-D	320	n.a.	20	6400	80	80
2	CJ-O	320	n.a.	20	6400	80	80
3	HJ	320	5	n.a.	1600	20	80

n.a.= not applicable

Table 1: Design to rate 320 stimuli per judgment method.

the other hand, for the transcription task, 100 transcribers participated in the experiment. The participants and stimuli were divided into five groups. As a consequence, each group of 20 students ($100/5$) transcribed 64 stimuli on their series ($320/5$), resulting in 20 transcriptions per utterance ($64 \times 100/320$). In total we registered 6400 transcriptions[17].

[14] under the Design of Experiments (DoE) literature, we would say we have 32 experimental units with 10 replicate runs each, making a total of 320 experimental runs. As it is defined in Lawson [26], an experimental unit is the item under study upon which something is changed, while a replicate run is the experiment conducted with the same factor settings, but using different experimental units.

[15] evidence suggest that the number of comparisons and pairing algorithm impacts the reliability, validity and efficiency of the procedure [9, 10, 28, 47].

[16] under DoE literature, this implies we will have 20 and 5 duplicates for each replicate run, under the CJ and HJ procedures, respectively. As defined in Lawson [26], duplicates are repeated measurements of the same experimental unit from one run, where it is possible the measured dependent variable vary among duplicates due to measurement error.

4 Statistical analysis

4.1 Data

4.1.1 Outcomes

On the one hand, the outcome for the **judgment task** was obtained following the procedure outlined in sections 3.1.2 and 3.1.3, with the total number of judgments per procedure detailed in Table 1.

On the other hand, the outcome from the **transcription task** was obtained following a two step procedure [6]. First, we aligned the participant's orthographic transcriptions, at the utterance level, in a column-like grid structure similar to the one presented in Table 2. This step was repeated for every one of the 6400 transcriptions[17] (see Section 3.5). Lastly, we computed the entropy measure of the aligned transcriptions as in Shannon [39]:

$$H = H(\boldsymbol{p}) = \frac{-\sum_{i=1}^{n} p_i \cdot \log_2(p_i)}{\log_2(N)} \tag{1}$$

where n denotes the number of word occurrences, p_i the probability of the word occurrence, and N the total number of aligned transcriptions per utterance.

Transcription number	Utterance 1	2	3	4	5
1	de the	jongen boy	ziet see	een a	kikker frog
2	de the	jongen boy	ziet sees	de the	[X] [X]
3	de the	jongen boy	zag saw	[B] [B]	kokkin cook
4	de the	jongen boy	zag saw	geen no	kikkers frogs
5	de the	hond dog	zoekt searches	een a	[X] [X]
Entropy	0	0.3109	0.6555	0.8277	1

[B] = blank space, [X] = unidentifiable word

Table 2: Example of five aligned transcriptions and its corresponding entropy calculations. Extracted from Boonen et al. [6], and slightly modified with illustrative purposes.

Entropy was used as an objective measure of SI, i.e. a quantification of (dis)agreement between listeners' transcriptions. Utterances yielding a high degree of agreement between transcribers were considered highly intelligible, and therefore registered a lower entropy $(H \to 0)$. Moreover, utterances yielding a low degree of agreement were considered as exhibiting low intelligibility, and therefore registered a higher entropy $(H \to 1)$ [6, 15].

[17] under DoE literature, the design corresponds to 32 experimental units with 10 replicates each, making a total of 320 experimental runs. Moreover, we register 20 duplicates (transcriptions) for each run, making a total of 6400 transcriptions.

Using Table 2, we exemplify the entropy calculation for utterances 2, 4 and 5, which represent relevant scenarios for the procedure. Notice that every calculation considers five transcriptions in total ($N = 5$).

For the second utterance, we observe that four transcriptions identify it with the word *jongen*, while the last with the word *hond*. Therefore, we registered two word occurrences ($n = 2$), with probabilities $\boldsymbol{p} = (p_1, p_2) = (4/5, 1/5)$, and the entropy measure equal to:

$$\begin{aligned} H &= \frac{-\sum_{i=1}^{2} p_i \cdot \log_2(p_i)}{\log_2(5)} \\ &= \frac{-\left[0.8 \log_2(0.8) + 0.2 \log_2(0.2)\right]}{\log_2(5)} \\ &\approx 0.3109 \end{aligned}$$

For the fourth utterance, we observe that two transcriptions identify it with the word *een*, one with *de*, one with *geen*, and one with a blank space [B]. Notice the blank space was not expected in such position, therefore, it was considered as a different word occurrence, i.e. the scenario had four word occurrences ($n = 4$), with probabilities $\boldsymbol{p} = (p_1, p_2, p_3, p_4) = (2/5, 1/5, 1/5, 1/5)$, and entropy measure equal to:

$$\begin{aligned} H &= \frac{-\sum_{i=1}^{4} p_i \cdot \log_2(p_i)}{\log_2(5)} \\ &= \frac{-\left[0.4 \log_2(0.4) + 3 \cdot 0.2 \log_2(0.2)\right]}{\log_2(5)} \\ &\approx 0.8277 \end{aligned}$$

Finally, for the fifth utterance, we observe that all of the transcriptions identify it with different words. Notice we consider the unidentifiable word [X] in the second transcription, as being different from the one in the last. This is done to avoid the artificial reduction of the entropy measure, as [X] values already indicate the lack of intelligibility of the word. Therefore, we registered five word occurrences ($n = 5$), with probabilities $\boldsymbol{p} = (p_1, \ldots, p_5) = (1/5, \ldots, 1/5)$, and entropy measure equal to:

$$\begin{aligned} H &= \frac{-\sum_{i=1}^{5} p_i \cdot \log_2(p_i)}{\log_2(5)} \\ &= \frac{-5 \cdot 0.2 \log_2(0.2)}{\log_2(5)} \\ &= 1 \end{aligned}$$

4.1.2 Covariates

Table 3 reports the characteristics of the selected children, in terms of their hearing status, gender, age at recording, length of device use at recording, and post-implant pure tone average (PTA) aided and unaided by a hearing apparatus.

From the table, describe in summaries the table. Notice ideally Table 3 would go to the appendix

Child	Hearing Status	Gender	Age (y;m)	Device use (y;m)	PTA	
					unaided	aided
1	NH	male				
2	HI/CI	female				
3	HI/HA					
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						
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28						
29						
30						
31						
32						

(y;m) = (years;months)
NH = normal hearing,
HI/CI = hearing impaired / cochlear implant,
HI/HA = hearing impaired / hearing aid

Table 3: Characteristics of selected children.

4.1.3 Pre-processing

It is important to mention that besides the exclusion of corrupted observations. e.g. no available rating, no other experimental run was eliminated before the modeling process. This decision departs from what it is observed in previous research, e.g. Boonen et al. [5] decided to eliminate observations based on misfit analysis [28], while van Daal [43] and Boonen et al. [6] did the same based on outlier analysis. For the case of misfit analysis, we argue that such procedures cannot be used without caution. The literature points out that in the context of CJ, these statistics are always relative, i.e. they depend on other stimulus and judges included in the assessment [34, 35], while they have been proven to be less sensitive, as they are calculated with a low number of judgments per representation [34]. On the other hand, for the case of outlier analysis, we argue that outlying observations cannot be identified properly outside the context of a full model [32], i.e. what can behave as an outlier based on a univariate analysis, can behave as expected under the appropriate model. Moreover, as stated by McElreath [32], outliers are interesting cases to analyze. Considering the previous, if we still manage to identify outlying observations within the context of the proposed models (see Section 4.2), the researcher would rather adjust the model, so it can be robust against the influence of such outliers.

4.2 Statistical modeling

Considering the objectives outlined in Section 2, this section describes the model selection procedures and the statistical models considered.

4.2.1 Model selection

Following the successful and comprehensive analysis in van Daal [43] and Lesterhuis [28], this research will also use the Information-Theoretic Approach (ITA) [3, 11] for the selection of competing models.

First, we will translate our working hypotheses into statistical models. In the present research, this step will be supported by the use of Directed Acyclic Graphs (DAG) and probabilistic programming [21]. A DAG is the simplest representation of a Graphical Causal Models (GCM), a heuristic model that contains information not purely statistical, but unlike a detailed statistical model, it allow us to deduce which variable relationships can provide valid causal inferences [19, 32], i.e. is a reasonable way to state our hypothesis, and make our assumption more transparent. However, abide by the ”no-free lunch” rule, the causal inferences produced under a DAG are only valid if the assumed DAG is correct. On the other hand, the probabilistic programming will serve as the algebraic formalist to specify our probabilistic models.

Second, in order to select between competing models, we need to set an appropriate measure of what makes a model a better approximation of reality. McElreath [32] goes all the way to argument that the best measure of model fit is the out-of-sample predictive accuracy. In that sense, this research will embrace the full flexibility of our bayesian implementation (see Section 4.3) and use two criteria that provide a better approximations of the out-of-sample (cross-validated) deviance[18]: (1) the Widely Applicable Information Criterion (WAIC) [48], and (2) the Pareto-smoothed importance sampling cross-validation (PSIC) [45].

Finally, considering the evidence in the previous step, we proceed to make inferences based on one or multiple models.

4.2.2 Models

We will consider two interrelated models: (1) a measurement error model for entropy, and (2) a measurement model for the CJ and HJ procedures, respectively.

[18] van Daal [43] used the Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC) [2] with similar purposes.

Measurement error model for entropy:
As it is described in Section 4.1.1, our data set is composed of 320 entropy measures, nested within 32 children with 10 replicates per child. Each entropy measure was bounded in the continuum $[0, 1]$, as expected from equation (1).

Previous research have already used the entropy measure as an outcome [6, 15]. However, on those cases, the authors decided to aggregate the measure to a mean value, in order to ease its handling in modeling process. We argue this pre-aggregating procedure could be pernicious for a proper statistical inference, as "anytime we use an average value, discarding the uncertainty around that average, we risk overconfidence and spurious inference" [32].

This claim is easier to understand using a though experiment within our research. For example, imagine we have two children with the same mean entropy, but the second child shows more variability in the measure than the first. It is clear from the example that the average entropy measure informs about the child's average SI, indicating that both children have a similar level. However, the variability around such mean entropy also informs about the child's SI, as a higher variability imply transcribers agreed less about the second child intelligibility across the 10 utterances. A similiar intuition was presented in Boonen et al. [6], but the paper only used the information in a descriptive analysis, rather than integrate it to the modeling process.

We argue that the estimation of such measurement error model is trivial under the bayesian framework, and we present it in the following lines.

First, figure 2 depicts the DAG representation of the model. The figure shows the s'th observed entropy measure H^O_{is} nested within the i'th child, where $i = 1, \dots, N_c$, $s = 1, \dots, N_s$, with $N_c = 32$ and $N_s = 10$. Additionally, the figure reveals the observed entropy represents multiple instances of a "true" entropy H^T_i for each child, but measured with error (e_i). Finally, we notice covariates are set to explain the "true" entropy.

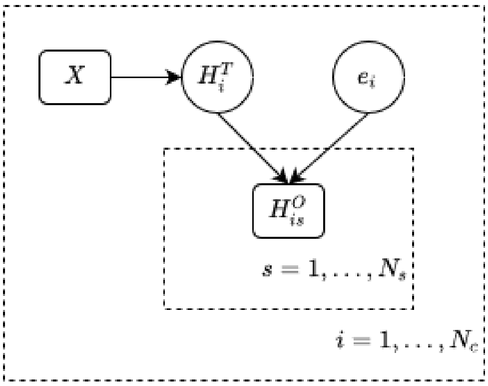

Figure 2: DAG for the measurement error model of entropy. Circles represent latent variables, squares observed values or covariates, and large squares the nesting within specific units.

(in process)

Measurement models for the CJ and HJ procedures:
(in process)

4.3 Estimation procedure

(in process)

4.4 Evaluation

4.4.1 validity

(in process)

4.4.2 reliability

(in process)

4.4.3 efficiency (time)

(in process)

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