

Sentence Grammaticality Judgments: Do Task Instructions Matter?

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1. Introduction

Studying Language through Grammaticality Judgments

- Linguistics asks how language works in the mind.
- The grammaticality judgment task uses grammatical intuition to understand how language works.

Prescriptive Rules: A Threat to Reliable Judgments

- There are two types of linguistic rules:

- Descriptive: Describes intuitive knowledge. *Sentences may end in prepositions.*

- Prescriptive: Describes how language *should* be used.

Never end a sentence with a preposition.

- Linguists only want descriptive rules, so how do we prevent prescriptive judgments?

Instructions: A potential solution?

- Do instructions change whether participants are prescriptive?

Intuitive. Consider your gut reaction.

Prescriptive. You are an English professor...

A middle ground? You are tutoring your friend in English...

- Only one previous study: Cowart (1997).
 - Found no difference in judgments between *Intuitive* and *Prescriptive* instructions.
 - Methodological limitations.

2. Hypothesis and Objective

Hypothesis. Participants in the prescriptive condition are more likely to choose prescriptively-correct sentences.

Objective. Reproduce Cowart (1997) with more participants and improved stimuli.

3. Methods

Participants. 200 workers on Amazon Mechanical Turk.

Task. Choose between two sentences according to instructions.

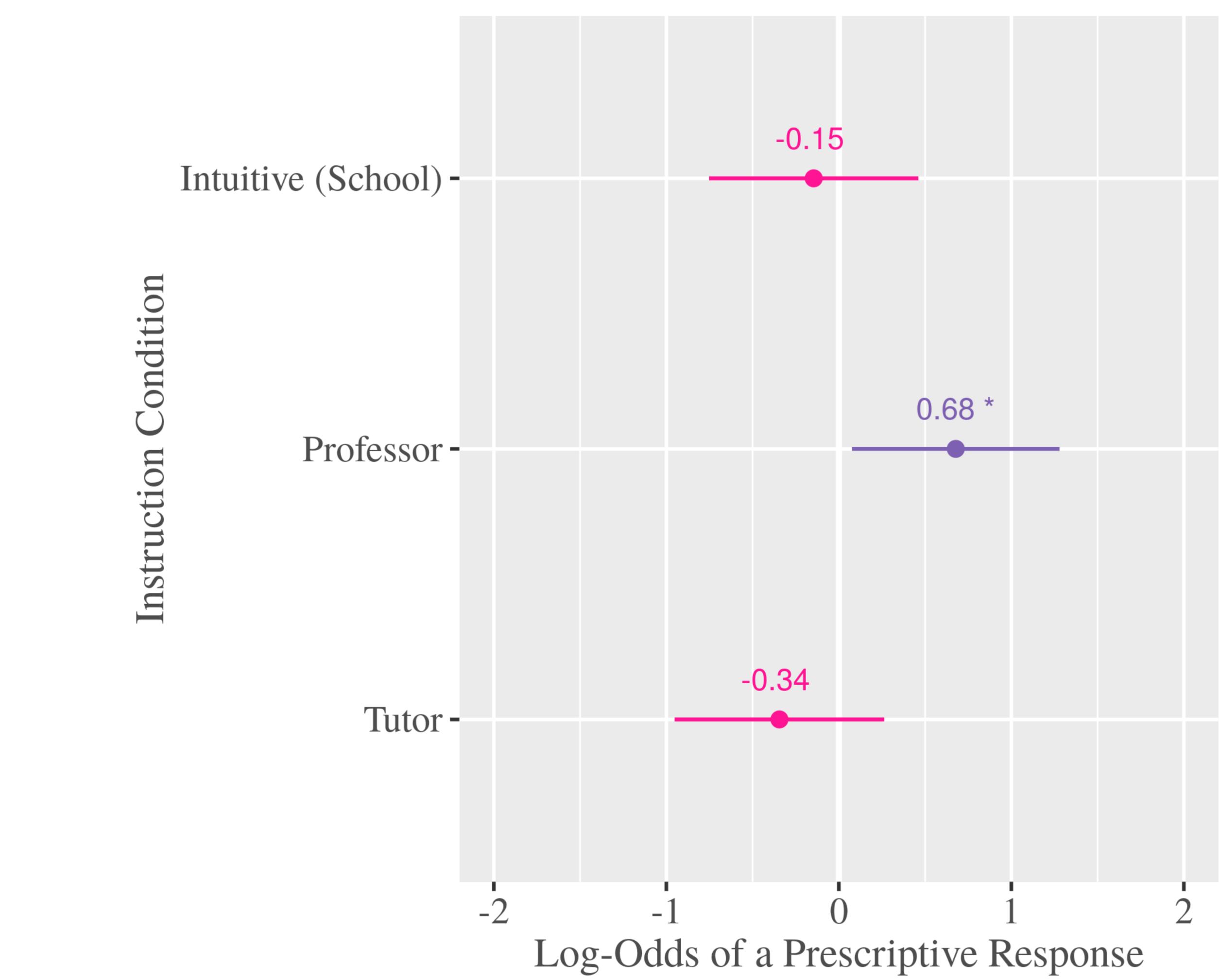
Stimuli. Sentence pairs manipulate presence of prescriptive rule.

- (1) *The master violinist was a musician whom few professionals could really compare to.*
- (2) *The master violinist was a musician to whom few professionals could really compare.*

Design. Each participant sees:

- One set of instructions (intuitive, prescriptive, or tutor).
- All sentence pairs presented pseudo-randomly.

Log-Odds of a Prescriptive Response by Instruction Condition



4. Results

Analysis. Logistic regression with *Instruction* as a predictor variable and response (prescriptive or non-prescriptive) as an outcome.

Results. The odds of a prescriptive response were increased in the *Prescriptive* condition ($\beta = 0.6778, p < 0.05$).

5. Significance

- Conclusion: Instructions *do* matter.
- Implication: Avoid prescriptive instructions.
 - Helps linguists get more reliable data.
 - More reliable data means:
 - More complete documentation of endangered languages for future generations.
 - Smarter artificial intelligence.
- Many researchers use the internet to collect data. The unique feature about my innovation is harnessing the internet's power to validate an experimental method.
- This solves the problem of whether a common linguistics method should consider standardized task instructions.
- Solution: Yes, more standardized instructions can prevent prescriptive judgments.

6. Acknowledgements

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7. Selected references

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