

# Syntax, conversation, discourse-pragmatics, lexicon, and mode in *if you ask me* constructions: A corpus-based analysis

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# Roadmap

1. Introduction: Setting the stage

2. Methods

3. Results

4. Discussion

5. Conclusions



# 1. Introduction: Setting the stage

- ❖ The syntax of conditionals has been explored from a corpus-based and typological perspective
- ❖ **Special interest in:** the order of the protasis and apodosis and interactions with other grammatical domains (Diessel 2001: 442, 2005; Hetterle 2015: 120)
- ❖ **Methodology in previous research:** single predictors in monofactorial studies or two-way interactions



- **Today's talk**: a more comprehensive analysis of the syntax of conditionals than previous research
- **Today's talk**: a multifactorial perspective on how the position of the protasis **relates to more than one property of the construction's use**
- We focus on *if you ask me* constructions:

Ex. (1) MSNBC news (spoken discourse)

01 Speaker A: *I can't believe what happened yesterday. Why in God's name should Trump get a thank you? That was the epitome of narcissistic abuse **if you ask me!** The lowest point in US foreign policy I've witnessed in 52 years.*



- ❖ *If you ask me* constructions known as SPEECH-ACT CONDITIONALS (see Sweetser 1990)
- ❖ Function of the protasis similar to that of adverbials (Quirk et al 1985: 615):
  - *honestly*
  - *frankly*
  - *personally*
  - *seriously*
- ❖ *If you ask me* does not have a conditional value (Sweetser 1990: 118-119)
- ❖ Marks politeness rather than carrying its literal meaning



➤ The present study

❖ how the syntax of *if you ask me* constructions (order of the protasis) is correlated with other domains of language use:

1. **speaker** (i.e., whether *if you ask me* is used by the same or a different speaker)

2. **function** (e.g., positive or negative evaluation)

3. **lexicon** (verb lemmas of the apodosis)

4. **type of communication mode** (spoken vs. written)

✓ We are doing so from the perspective of Usage-Based Construction Grammar (Usage-Based CxG)

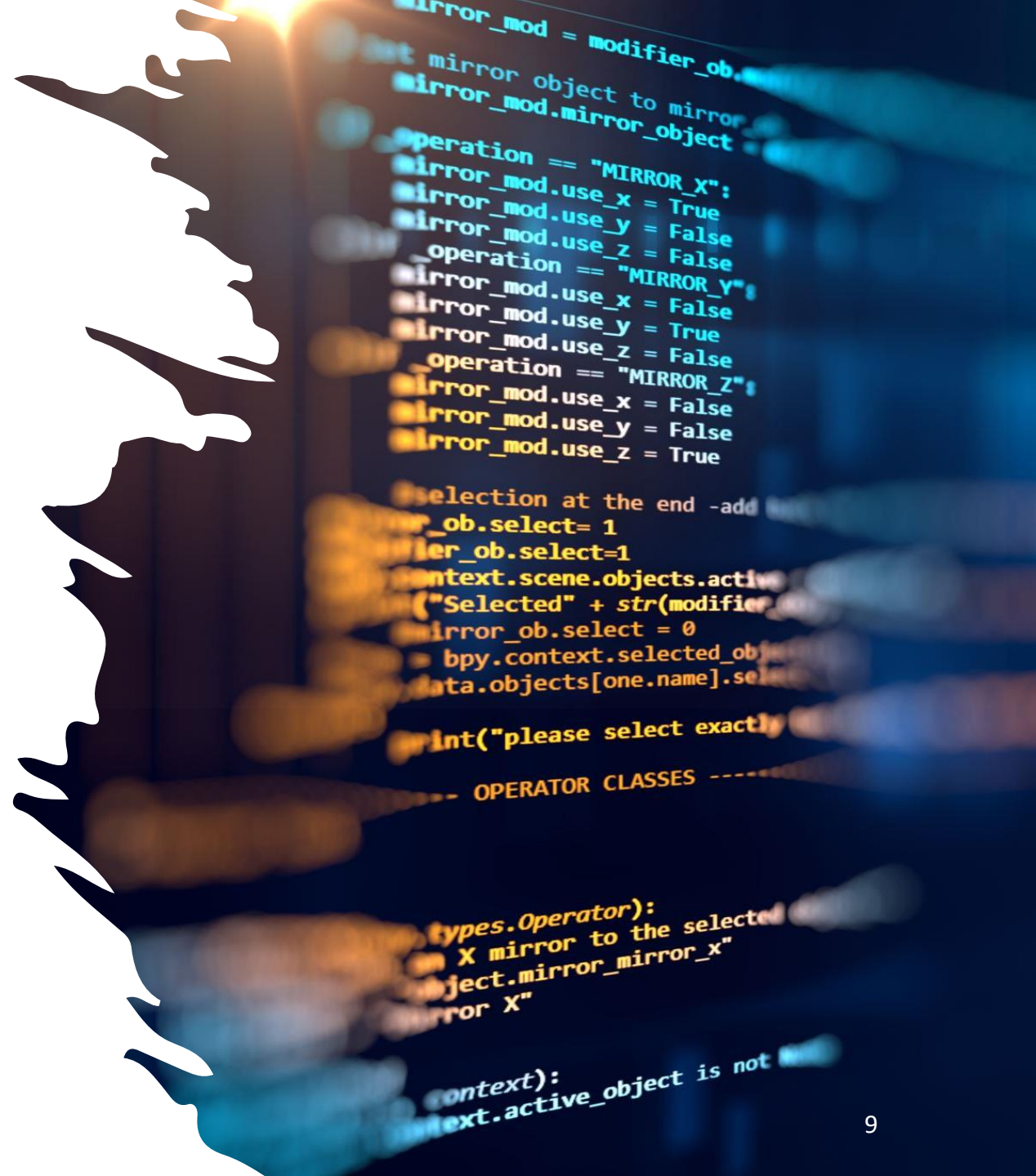


# Expectations



The existing literature on *if you ask me* is rather scarce so we motivate our expectations by drawing on previous more general research on speech-act conditionals

1. Expectations: Syntax-speaker
2. Expectations: Syntax-function
3. Expectations: Syntax-lexicon
4. Expectations: Syntax-mode



Expectations: Syntax-speaker

## Expectations: Syntax-speaker

- Initial (pre-posed) speech-act conditionals have a discourse-organizational function (Ford and Thompson 1986; Ramsay 1987)
- Attention-getter at the start of turns at interaction (De Stefani 2021)
- **Expectation #1:** Initial (preposed) *if you ask me*, as other types of speech-act conditionals, will also serve as an attention-getter at the start of turns at interaction, as in (2)

Ex. (2) Star Wars rebels -Visions and voices (spoken discourse)

01 Speaker A: *Mmm, maybe.*

02 Speaker B: *Ah, **if you ask me**, I think he's just been working too hard.*



## Expectations: Syntax-speaker

- Final (postposed) speech-act conditionals used in in cases where a speaker prolongs his turn (Declerck & Reed 2001: 356)
- **Expectation 2:** Final (postposed) *if you ask me*, as other types of speech act-conditionals, will also serve as a device that helps a speaker prolongs his turn, as in (3)

Ex. (3) NOS4A2-The gas mask man (spoken discourse)

01 Speaker A: *Yeah. Okay. All right. Wow, Ma. The yard looks really... looks really nice.*

02 Speaker B: *Cost me everything I made this week from the Gorsey house and Mrs. Supkin's, but it was money well spent **if you ask me**. Even the mailman said so.*



# Expectations: Syntax-function

## Expectations: Syntax-function

- Speech-act conditionals display an evaluative interpretation (i.e., speaker's attitude w.r.t. a situation) (see Sweetser 1990: 118)
- *If you ask me* constructions also display an evaluative interpretation and serve different functions
- Positive assessment or negative assessment (get the addressee to do something (advice)):

Ex. (4) The Goldbergs -Barry Goldberg's day off (spoken discourse)

01 Speaker A: *He's not afraid to look like an idiot.*

02 Speaker B: *Well, **if you ask me**, you ought to spend more time worrying about yourself and less time worrying about your brother.*



- Positive assessment or negative assessment (without getting the addressee to do something):

Ex. (5) What do the people want? | The baseline scenario (written discourse)

01 Speaker A: *Since that time the total cost of health care in the US has gone from 900 billion to nearly 2.5 trillion. That is epic fail of the part of the market **if you ask me**.*

## Expectations: Syntax-function

- **Expectation #1:** Initial (preposed) *if you ask me* involving positive or negative assessments will be used to get the addressee to do something (advice)
- Initial (preposed) *if you ask me* serves as an attention-getter that establishes joint attention (in the sense of Diessel 2006) and prepares the addressee for the suggested situation that should be performed
- **Expectation #2:** Final (postposed) *if you ask me* indicating positive or negative assessments will not be used to get the addressee to do something
- Final (postposed) *if you ask me* just serves as conversational device ensuring that the situation described by the apodosis is a personal opinion or judgment that does not require the addressee to do something



# Expectations: Syntax-lexicon

## Expectations: Syntax-lexicon

- **Expectation #1.** Apodoses in initial (preposed) *if you ask me* constructions with non-dictatorial verbs (e.g., *should, ought to, recommend, suggest*) (see Leech et al. 2009: 116)
  - **NOTE.** Connected to previous expectations: Initial (preposed) *if you ask me* (get the addressee to do something (advice))
  
- **Expectation #2.** Apodoses in final (postposed) *if you ask me* construction with epistemic judgment verbs (e.g., *sound, look, and seem*) or propositional attitude verbs (e.g., *think, believe, guess*)
  - **NOTE.** Connected to previous expectations: final (postposed) *if you ask me* (without getting the addressee to do something)
  - They profile the attitude or reaction of an interlocutor regarding a situation



# Expectations: Syntax-mode

## Expectations: Syntax-mode

- Protases of speech act-conditionals are not only attested in initial (preposed) position, but also in final (postposed) position in spoken and written discourse (Diessel 2005: 463)

- **Expectation:** *If you ask me* will appear in initial (preposed) and final (postposed) position in both spoken and written discourse

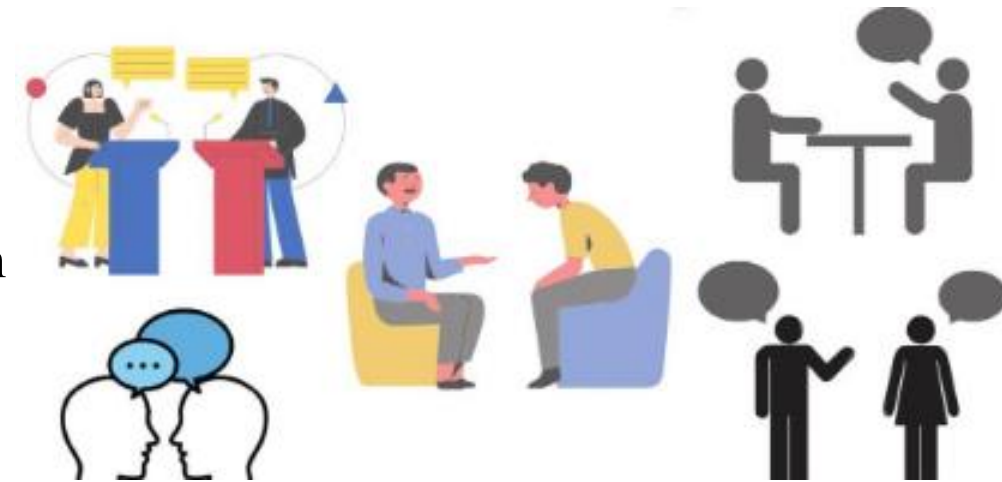


Table 1: Expectations of the present study

Interaction	Expectation 1	Expectation 2
Syntax-speaker	Preposed <i>if you ask me</i> will appear with a different speaker	Postposed <i>if you ask me</i> will appear with the same speaker
Syntax-function	Preposed <i>if you ask me</i> involving positive and negative assessments will be used to get the addressee to do something (advice)	Postposed <i>if you ask me</i> indicating positive and negative assessments will not be used to get the addressee to do something
Syntax-lexicon	Preposed <i>if you ask me</i> will occur with non-dictatorial verbs	Postposed <i>if you ask me</i> will occur with epistemic judgment verbs and propositional attitude verbs
Syntax-mode	<i>if you ask me</i> will appear in preposed and postposed position in spoken discourse	<i>if you ask me</i> will appear in preposed and postposed position in written discourse

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## 2. Methods

## 2.1 Data, retrieval, and annotation

❖ A total of 789 examples of *if you ask me* constructions from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)

❖ Examples of written discourse (e.g., newspapers) and spoken discourse (e.g., material from TV and movies subtitles)

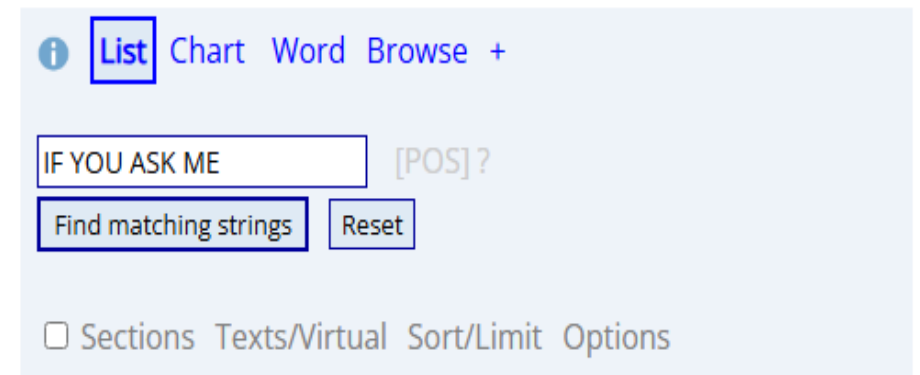
❖ NOTE:

✓ material derived from television and movie subtitles is obviously not perfect

✓ material is written-to-be-spoken

✓ **HOWEVER**.....

✓ written to approximate natural spoken language as much as possible!



□ The final sample of 789 attestations thus yielded then was coded for the relevant variables of our analysis:

- **POSITION: the response variable**, *if you ask me* is either *initial/preposed* or *final/postposed*
- **SPEAKER**: *if you ask me* produced by the same (turn-holding) or *if you ask me* produced by a different speaker (turn-taking)
- **FUNCTION**: whether *if you ask me* indicates a positive or negative assessment and whether it involves giving advice or not
- **VLEMMAAPOF**: the verb lemma that appears in the apodosis of the *if you ask me*
- **MODE**: the *if you ask me* attested in spoken or written discourse



## 2.2. Statistical analysis

- A predictive modeling approach to determine which of the predictors discussed before are correlated with, and predictive for, the variable POSITION (*preposed* vs. *postposed*) of *if you ask me*
- The ‘formula’ of our regression model

- ❖ **Response variable:**

- the variable **POSITION**

- ❖ **Fixed-effects predictors:**

- the variables **MODE** (*spoken* vs. *written*), **SPEAKER** (*different* vs. *same*) and **FUNCTION** (*eval\_neg* vs. *eval\_pos* vs. *eval\_neg\_with\_advice* vs. *eval\_pos\_with\_advice*)

- ❖ **Random-effects variation:**

- the variables **VLEMMAAPOD** (*be* vs. *think* vs. *should* vs. ...) and **SOURCE** (the original corpus source)



A thorough exploration of:

the distributions of fixed-effects predictors  
and the random effects on their own

and with the response variable **POSITION**

How about the **fixed-effects predictors**?

- Most cross-tabulations of the fixed-effects predictors with the response **POSITION** were unproblematic
- HOWEVER....
  
- The four levels of the predictor **FUNCTION** were so unevenly distributed (data sparsity and nearly complete separation with the two levels involving the presence of advice)
  
- TO SOLVE THIS ISSUE...
  
- *eval\_neg\_with\_advice* and *eval\_pos\_with\_advice* were conflated into one level called just *advice*

How about the **random effects**?

➤ the distribution of the random effects indicated that:

- hardly any repeated measurements for the variable **SOURCE** so **SOURCE** was not included as a random effect
- multiple repeated measurements for the variable **VLEMMAAPOD** so **VLEMMAAPOD** was included as a random effect

How about the **response**?

- The response variable **POSITION** was nearly equally distributed
- Meaning...
- the no-information rate of always predicting the more frequent level of **POSITION** (*postposed*) would only result in an accuracy of 50.44% (the null deviance of **POSITION** was 1093.724)

➤ We then used R 4.5.1 patched (R Core Team 2025) for our regression modeling:

1. using `lme4::glmer` (see Bates et al. 2015)
2. backwards model selection process using  $p$ -values based on `base::drop1`-based likelihood ratio tests

➤ Initial model `m_01` had the following structure:

```
m_01 <- glmer(POSITION ~ 1 +           # POSITION as a function of
  (MODE + SPEAKER + FUNCTION)^2 +     # fixed effects: predictors
  (1 | VLEMMAPOD)                     # random effects: intercepts per verb)
```

➤ It returned model results, but these came with a convergence warning:

- drop1 indicated that the interaction **SPEAKER:FUNCTION** was ns ( $p>0.29$ )
- Deleting this interaction led to **model m\_02**
  - ✓ No convergence warning anymore but the interaction **MODE:FUNCTION** was ns ( $p>0.062$ )
- Deleting this interaction led to **model m\_03**
  - ✓ Converged unproblematically but the predictor **FUNCTION** was ns ( $p>0.69$ )
- Deleting this predictor led to the final **model m\_final**
  - ✓ Converged unproblematically and fixed effect(s) to be discussed was only the interaction **MODE:SPEAKER** ( $p<0.00034$ )

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# 3. Results

What are the results of `m_final`?

Table 2: The coefficients of `m_final`

	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i> 2-tailed
Intercept (MODE: <i>spoken</i> & SPEAKER: <i>different</i> )	2.2352	0.331	7.186	<10 <sup>-12</sup>
MODE <sub>spoken→written</sub>	0.4289	0.3999	1.072	0.2835
SPEAKER <sub>different→same</sub>	-3.034	0.3134	-9.682	<10 <sup>-15</sup>
MODE <sub>spoken→written</sub> : SPEAKER <sub>different→same</sub>	-1.8164	0.5238	-3.467	≈.0005
standard deviation of VLEMMAAPOD (82 groups)	1.256			

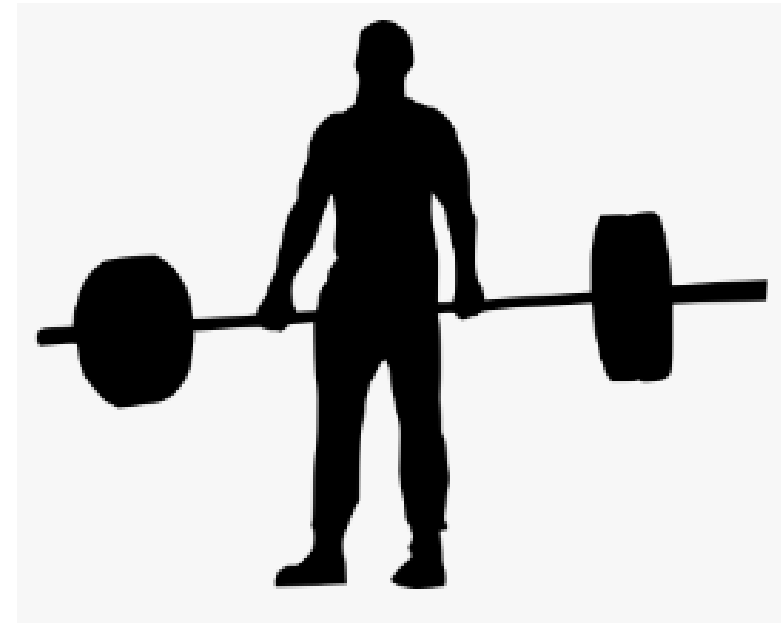
To contextualize and understand the results of `m_final`:

- (i) An assessment of its discriminatory (and, ideally, predictive) power
- (ii) An overview of the predictions that the model makes for all combinations of variable levels of `MODE:SPEAKER`



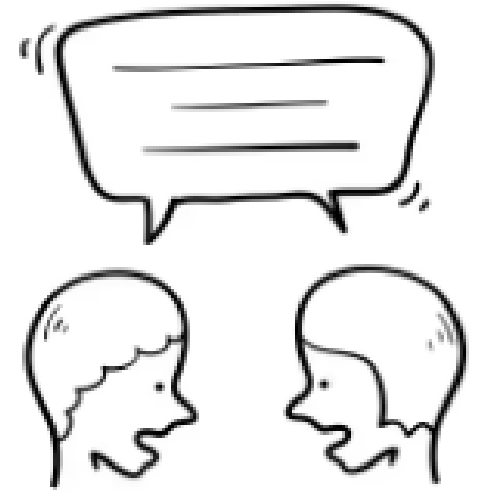
(i) An assessment of its discriminatory (and, ideally, predictive) power

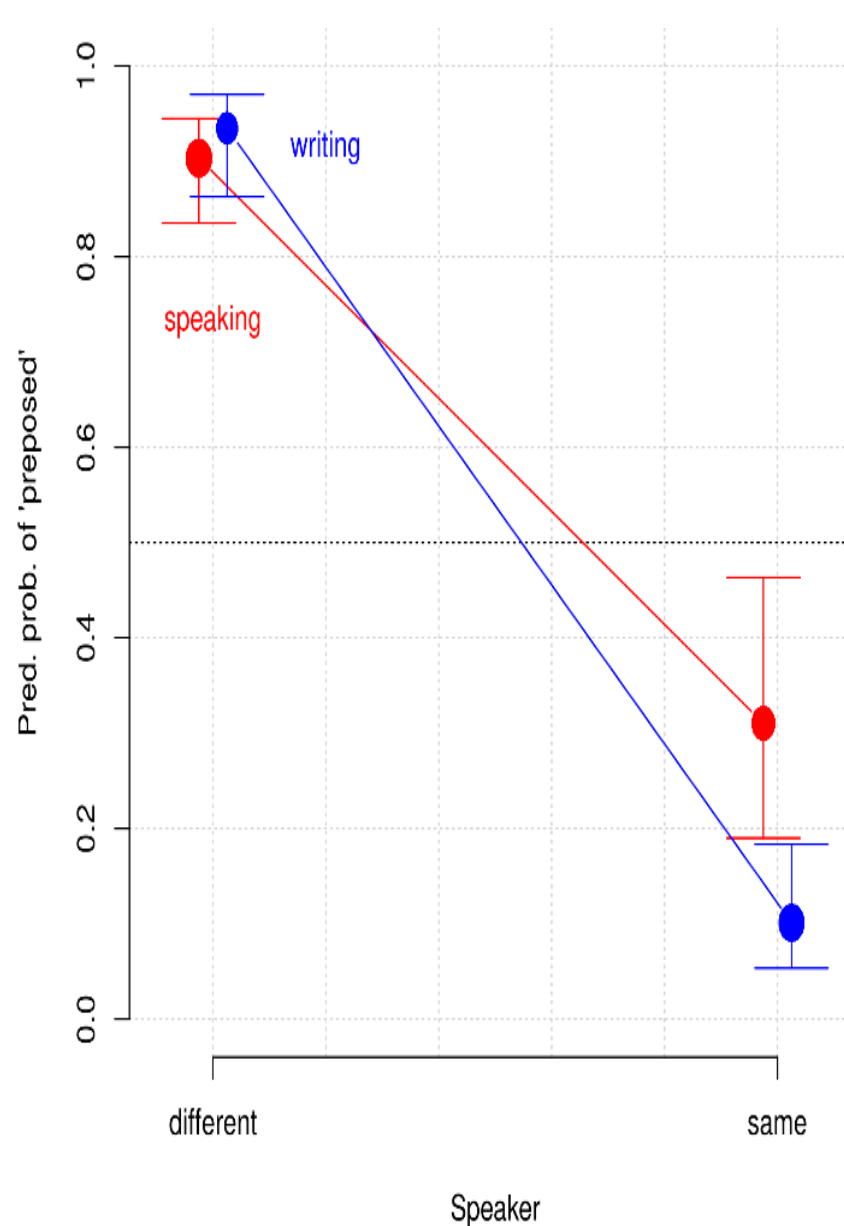
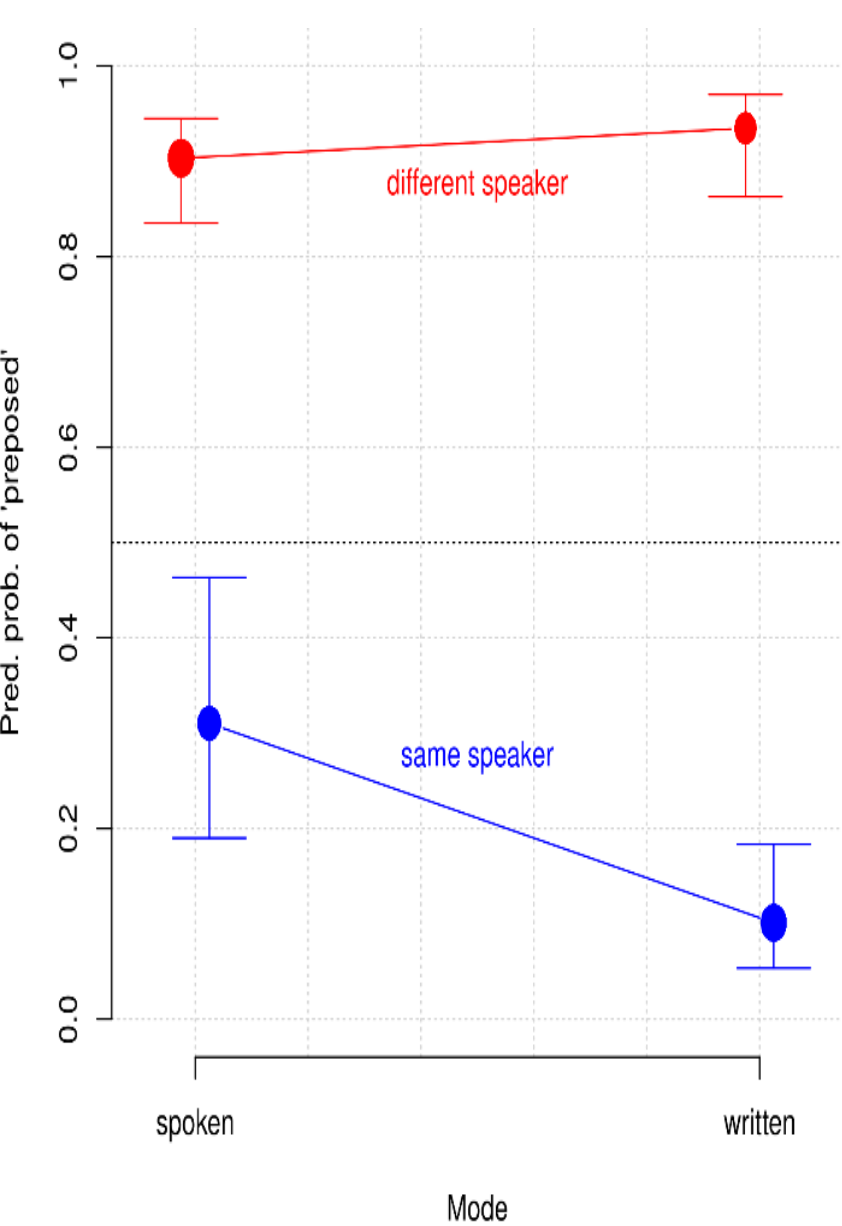
- (i) An assessment of its discriminatory (and, ideally, predictive) power
  - $R^2_{\text{marginal}} = 0.467$ : quite good (even though our fixed effects comprise only one interaction of two binary predictors)
  - $R^2_{\text{conditional}} = 0.64$ : not that much higher
  - Meaning...
  - Fixed effects do most of the predictive heavy lifting!



(i) An overview of the predictions that the model makes for all combinations of variable levels of **MODE : SPEAKER**

- ❖ A two-way interaction of two binary predictors
- ❖ This can be visualized from two different perspectives:
  1. what **MODE** (*spoken* vs. *written*) does for each level of **SPEAKER**
  2. what **SPEAKER** (*different* vs. *same*) does for each level of **MODE**





The left panel:

- when the speaker is different, **POSITION: preposed** is very likely regardless of the mode;
- when the speaker is the same, there is a significant difference between speaking and writing such that:
  - in speaking, **POSITION: postposed** is likely;
  - in writing, **POSITION: postposed** is significantly more likely

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of **POSITION: preposed** for **MODE: SPEAKER**

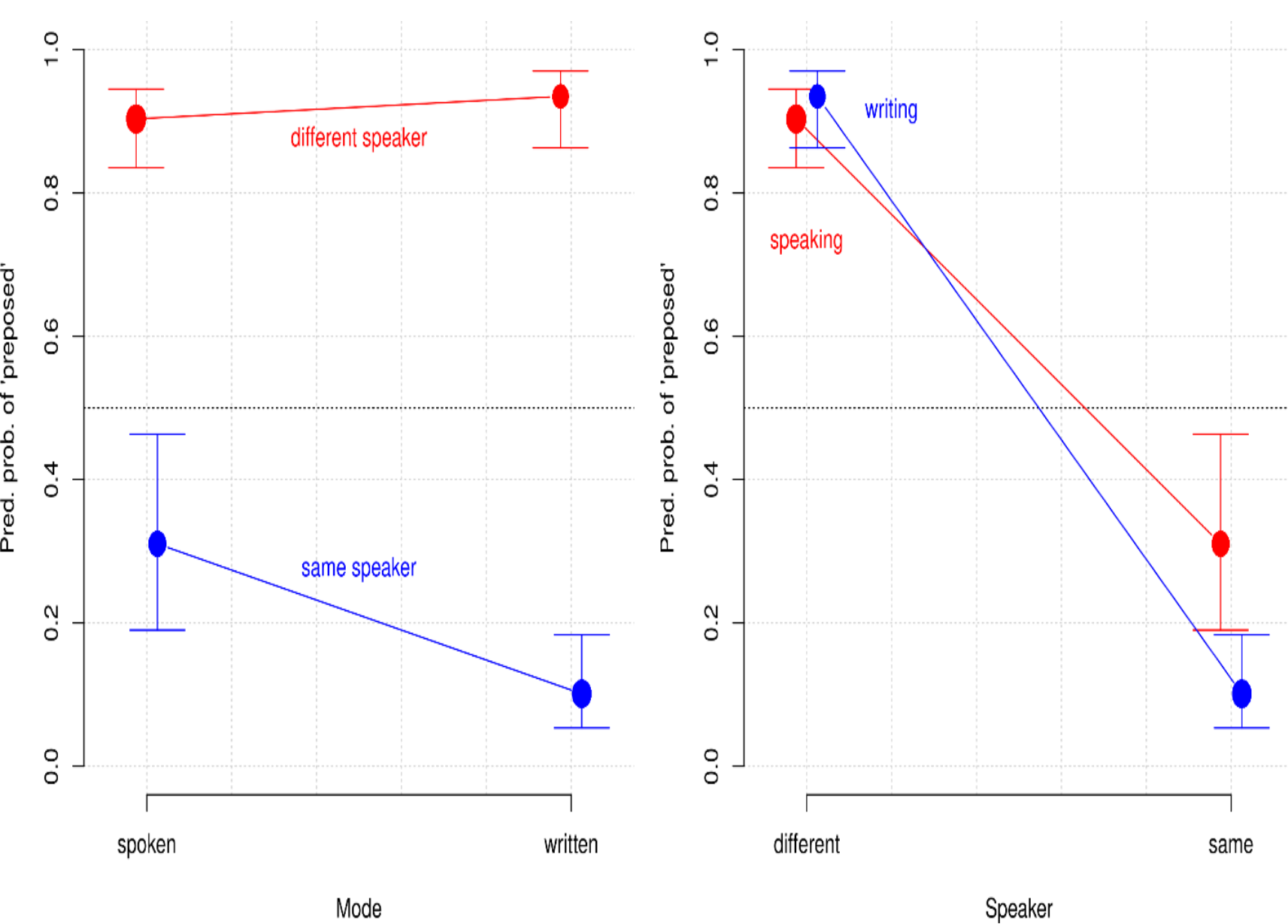


Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of POSITION: *preposed* for MODE:SPEAKER

The right panel:

- speakers being different always makes **POSITION: *preposed*** much more likely than speakers being the same, but ...
- that difference is significantly stronger in writing than in speaking

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# 4. Discussion

# Predicted probabilities of POSITION

*if you ask me* produced by a different speaker  
(**turn-taking**)

## Results

- ❖ *If you ask me* produced by a different speaker (**turn-taking**)
- ❖ When the speaker is different, it is very likely that *if you ask me* will appear in preposed position in spoken (6) and written discourse (7)

Ex. (6) First day (spoken discourse)

01 Speaker A: *Come on, baby. Come on, baby. Come on, come on, baby! It's just not comfortable*

02 Speaker B: ***If you ask me**, you should throw it away*



Ex. (7) Could Nebraska start a B1G Hockey Team? -Corn Nation (written discourse)

01 Speaker A: *I'm still desperately hoping that at the last minute we'll get a repeat of that scenario where the director and all their prepwork gets pushed aside and they reboot the franchise from square 1 with a whole new crew.*

02 Speaker B: ***If you ask me**, it's the best case scenario right now*



❖ These results align with our predictions

❖ *If you ask me* will appear in preposed position at the start of turns at interaction (different speaker) and in both spoken and written discourse



❖ *If you ask me* in preposed position and involving a different speaker serves as an attention-getter and orients someone else to a common focus of attention (De Stefani 2021)

❖ Why no significant difference between speaking and writing?



❖ Most examples from written discourse are cases of writing-that-represents-speaking



*if you ask me* produced by the same speaker  
(**turn-holding**)

## Results

- ❖ *If you ask me* produced by the same speaker (**turn-holding**)
- ❖ When the speaker is the same, it is very likely that *if you ask me* will appear in postposed position

Ex. (8) Face of hate: Curtis Allgier explained | Hatewatch | Southern (written discourse)

01 Speaker A: *I seen this man interviewed on lockup, awesome show i might add, and he was not a hostile person, most people that kill in prison are not bad people **if you ask me***



❖ These results align with our predictions

❖ *If you ask me* will appear postposed to the apodosis when a speaker prolongs his turn in a conversation

❖ Preposed *if you ask me* in this scenario would disrupt the flow of the story line of the speaker given that the flow of information is usually managed by a speaker through declarative main clauses



## NOTE

- ❖ Final position in spoken discourse is likely (9), but final position in written discourse is more likely (10)

Ex. (9) The Resident-Haunted (spoken discourse)

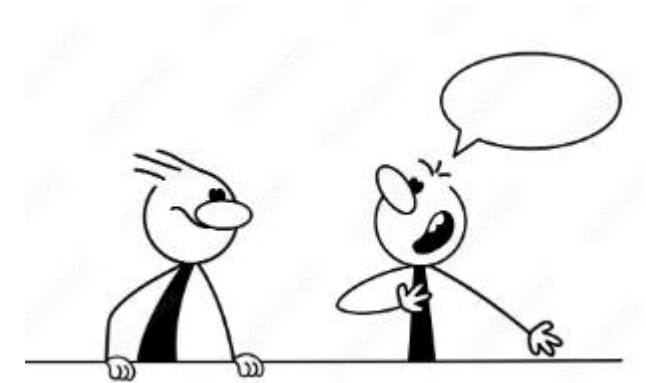
01 Speaker A: *Claire Thorpe makes \$3 million a year.*

02 Speaker B: *Yeah. She's not even a doctor. Seems like she's a complete incompetent **if you ask me.***



Ex. (10) Travel: The edge of the world - INSPIRER.nu Magazine-INSPIRER (written discourse)

01 Speaker B: *Have no fear though, if you go there you will not be a suicide witness, since 1979, the death rate has gone down, 124 deaths then & only 20 now, that's progress **if you ask me.***



- ❖ This does not align with our initial predictions in that we expected that postposed *if you ask me* will be equally frequent in spoken and written discourse

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# 5. Conclusions

- ❖ Grammatical domains are rarely islands!
- ❖ Most are intertwined!
- ❖ Syntax of constructions is always intertwined with more than one grammatical domain in language use
- ❖ Interrelated patterns emerge due to experience, social interaction, and cognitive mechanisms (Beckner et al. 2009: 2)



Thank you!

Any questions?