

Social Meaning in Syntax: Finite vs. Non-Finite Complements in Serbo-Croatian

In this paper, we investigate the impact of social evaluation (prestige- and ideology-related factors) on syntactic variation, a language component on which such factors should have no impact according to Labovian socio-syntactic theorizing (Labov 1993): syntax knowledge is allegedly stored too deeply in the linguistic motor to be available for social meaning making and identity profiling. We test the validity of this claim in a large-scale experiment in one of Europe's most interesting sociolinguistic arenas, viz. Serbia and Croatia.

In Slavic, clausal complements of modal, volitional, and aspectual verbs are typically infinitival (INF) (1a). Balkan Slavic languages like Bulgarian and Macedonian instead use finite complements (1b). Serbo-Croatian (SC) is typologically unusual in allowing both: INF forms (2a) and finite *da*-complements with present-tense agreement (2b), known as *da*-present clauses (DPCs). All standard SC varieties (Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Serbian) allow both, but usage diverges regionally: INFs dominate in Northwestern Croatian dialects, while DPCs are more common in Southeastern Serbian. Central dialects, including those of Northern Serbia (Vojvodina), exhibit both forms.

Although normative grammars often treat INF/DPC alternation as free variation, prior research has identified systematic structural constraints. INF complements are favored in contexts with impersonal subjects (Belić 2005), abstract or inanimate subjects (Kovačević et al. 2018; Arsenijević et al. 2025), epistemic modality (Kovačević et al. 2018), and syntactically smaller (vP-sized) complements (Wurmbrand et al. 2020).

Building on these findings, we test whether the INF/DPC alternation also carries socially meaningful variation, directly addressing Labov's (1993) claim that syntactic variables lack social indexicality due to low metalinguistic awareness. Some evidence already supports socially meaningful variation: Kovačević and Milićev (2018) show that ethnic Croats in Northern Serbia use INFs more than local Serbs, though less than Croats in Zagreb, even when controlling for demographic variables. These patterns reflect prescriptive discourse: Croatian authorities (Kačić et al. 1999) discourage DPCs as Balkanisms, while Serbian sources also caution against them (Tanasić 2015). These metalinguistic stances reflect broader cultural stereotypes (Todorova 1997), reinforcing the socially charged nature of this syntactic choice.

We designed a large-scale experiment targeting three regions (Croatia, Northern Serbia/Vojvodina, Southern Serbia) to elicit social perceptions of INF/DPC variants. Participants (N = 363, regionally balanced) were randomly assigned one of 24 target sentences derived from six syntactic contexts, each with two frames and both INF and DPC variants. Sentences included no other regionally marked features. For each item, participants first gave an acceptability judgment, then provided up to three keywords describing the speaker, followed by 12 trait-based ratings and a regional identification task. Here we focus on the keyword associations (N = 981).

Keywords were manually annotated for valence (positive, neutral, negative) and categorized into seven interpretive dimensions inductively derived from the data: prescriptivism (e.g., correctness), register (e.g., "formal," "casual"), character (e.g., "arrogant," "kind"), competence (e.g., intelligence, education), emotional tone (e.g., "angry," "enthusiastic"), physical attributes (e.g., "tall," "handsome"), and politeness/social distance (e.g., "official," "friendly"). Ordinal logistic regression models predicting valence by region (Croatia, Vojvodina, Southern Serbia) and complement type (INF/DPC) show that the alternation correlates with socially stratified judgments. In Croatia, INF constructions elicit more positive keywords, especially for competence, character, and normativity, aligning with stigmatization of DPCs in prescriptive guides (Kačić et al. 1999). In Southern Serbia, the pattern reverses: DPCs yield more positive evaluations, particularly in politeness, formality, and even prescriptivism. In Northern Serbia, INF remains more positively evaluated overall, but the gap is narrower than in Croatia (Figure 1 illustrates these regional trends across interpretive dimensions).

This gradient, regionally stratified pattern of social meanings suggests that the INF~DPC alternation functions as a syntactic variable in the sociolinguistic sense—subject to grammatical constraints yet open to socially meaningful interpretation. These findings contribute to growing work (Levon & Buchstaller 2015; Grondelaers et al. 2023) challenging the assumption that syntactic variables are socially inert.

- (1) a. Petr khochet zavershit' svoju domashnyuyu rabotu. *Russian*
Peter wants complete.INF self's home work
'Peter wants to complete his homework.'
- b. Petar iska da zavŭrshi domashnoto si. *Bulgarian*
Peter wants da complete.3sg home.work self.DAT.CL
'Peter wants to complete his homework.'
- (2) a. Petar mora/ želi/ pokušava raditi domaći.
Peter must wants tries do.INF home.work
'Peter must/wants/tries (to) complete his homework.'
- b. Petar mora/ želi/ pokušava da radi domaći.
Peter must wants tries da do.PRS.3SG home.work
'Peter must/wants/tries (to) complete his homework.'

Figure 1: Average valence of keyword associations by region and complement type across interpretive categories.



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