

VARIATION IN FRENCH PARTIAL INTERROGATIVES:  
SOCIAL MEANING AS A KEY FACTOR

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VARIATION IN FRENCH PARTIAL INTERROGATIVES

Many variants of partial questions in French, well studied phenomenon (Coveney, 2011).  
3 constructions under investigation here:

- IN SITU (IS) Tu vois qui ? ( *You see who?* ) S – V – WH
- FRONTING
  - V-S inversion (FINV) Qui vois-tu ? ( *Who see you?* ) WH – V – S
  - no V-S inversion (E) Qui tu vois ? ( *Who you see?* ) WH – S – V = ‘Who do you see?’

POSSIBLE FACTORS AT WORK IN THE VARIATION

- Syntax → e.g. ‘Fronting = movement = complexity’ (Jakubowicz 2011)
- Pragmatics → e.g. ‘IS = Focus position’ (Beyssade 2007, Boeckx 1999...)
- Phonology → e.g. ‘long non-wh part → Fronting likely’ (Hamlaoui 2010)
- ...
- Sociolinguistics (‘variation reflects a sociolect, one social group = one preferred structure’)  
→ e.g. ‘Working-class use more IS (>60%) than upper-class (<45%)’ (Quillard, 2001)  
‘Academics, Intellectuals use more FINV than other people’ (Ashby, 1977)

GOALS

Investigate other factors weighing on the variation, in a refined 3rd-wave sociolinguistics / signaling games / probabilistic pragmatics perspective (Eckert 2012, Lewis 1969, Goodman & Lassiter 2015):  
→ ‘Different variants convey different social cues’

AN AUDITORY MATCHED-GUISE TASK (Lambert & al. 1960)

Participants: 52 native speakers, 36/16 female/male, mean 26 y.o., median 22 y.o.

Procedure: 1°/ Participants listened to short dialogues where one person was setting a context (formal or informal) and another was asking a question (either target or filler with no partial interrogative). Gender of the speakers was crossed and counterbalanced between male and female voices so that all four combinations were presented: M-M, F-F, F-M, M-F

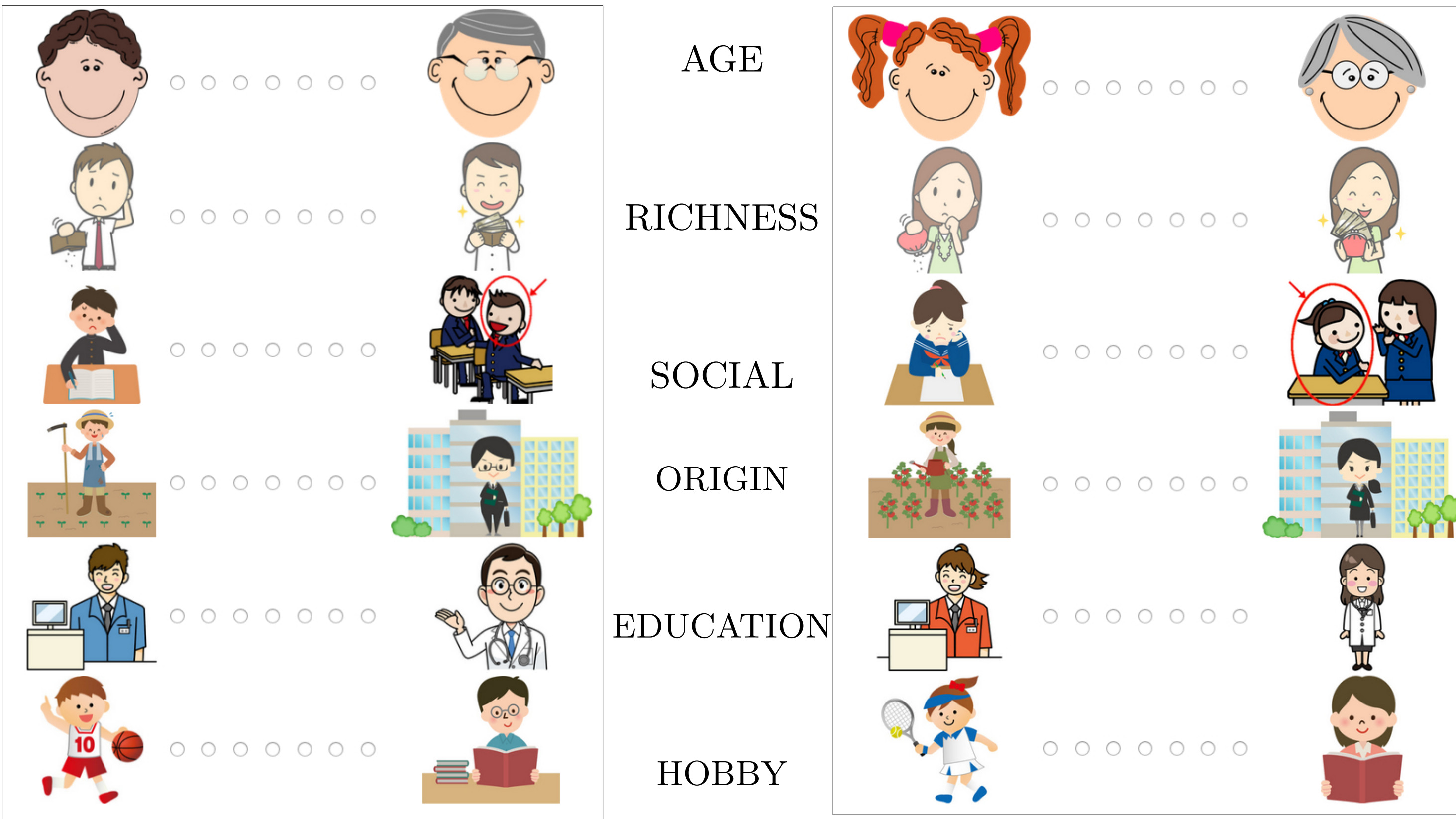
2°/ For each dialogue, participants had to place the second speaker on six different 7-point scales bounded by pairs of drawings associated with social stereotypes (AGE, RICHNESS, SOCIAL APTITUDE, GEOGRAPHIC ORIGIN, EDUCATION & HOBBY, previously normed)

Material: 3 practices, 30 targets, 30 fillers; target items of the sort:

Context	Condition 1	Sentence to judge	Condition 2
Eh, Jean il arrive demain.	INFORMAL	a. Il arrive à quelle heure ?	IS
		b. À quelle heure arrive-t-il ?	FINV
		c. À quelle heure il arrive ?	F
Jean arrive demain.	FORMAL	a. Il arrive à quelle heure ?	IS
		b. À quelle heure arrive-t-il ?	FINV
		c. À quelle heure il arrive ?	F

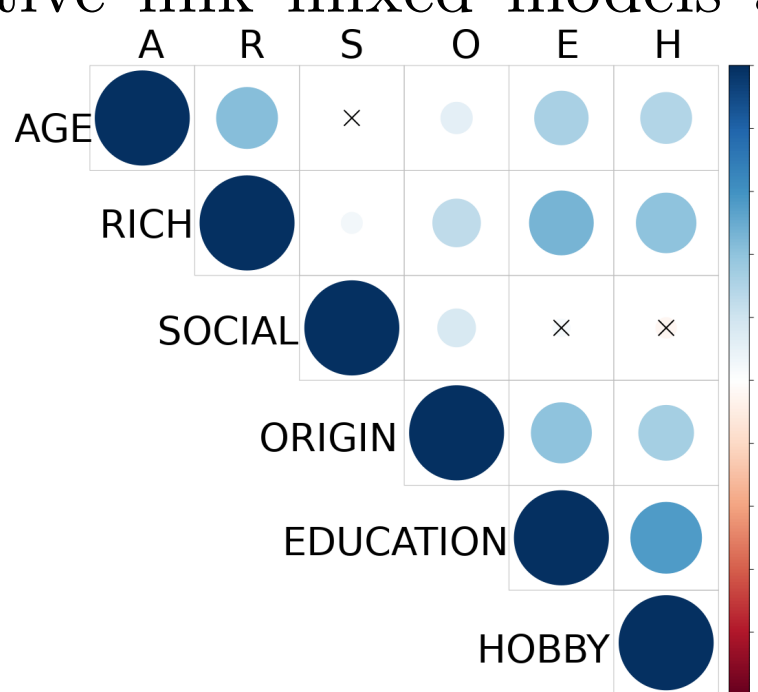
“Jean is coming tomorrow.” / “What time does he arrive?”

Answers: 52\*3\*2\*62 ~> 20,000 answers



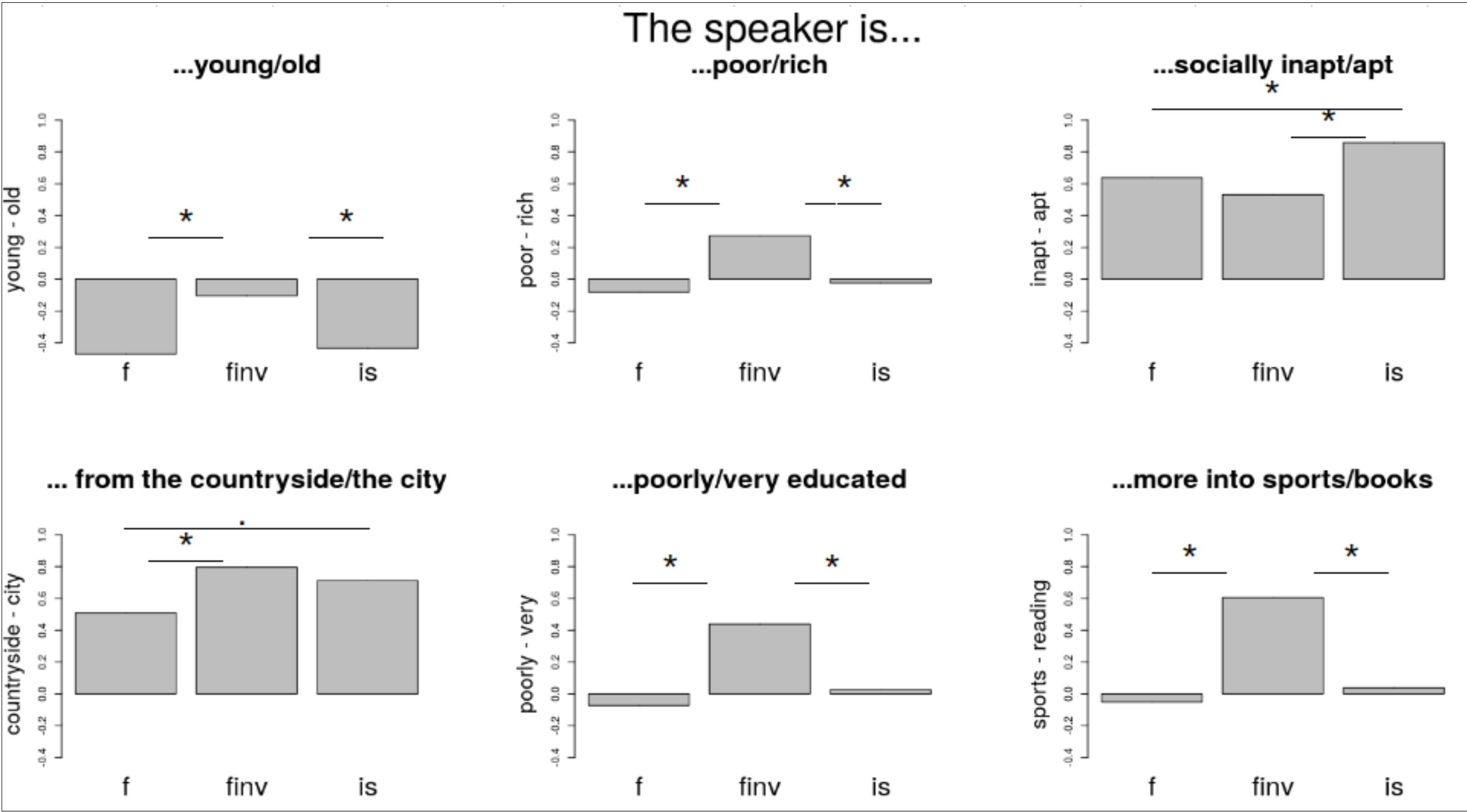
Analysis: scales recoded to values from -3 to +3, cumulative link mixed models analysis (R ordinal package, Christensen 2018)

Correlations between stereotypes (Pearson’s):  
(coherent with previous norming experiment)

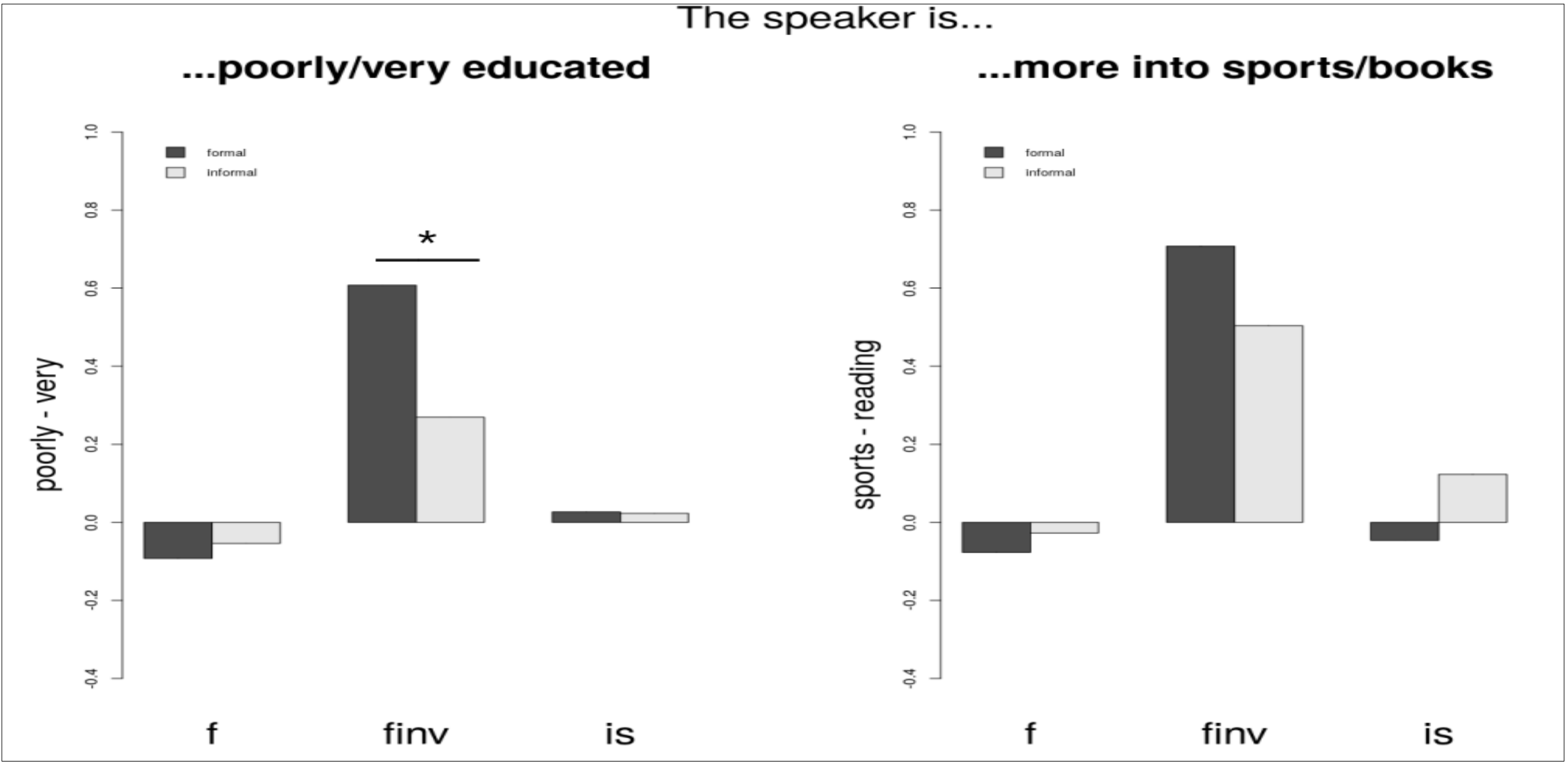


RESULTS

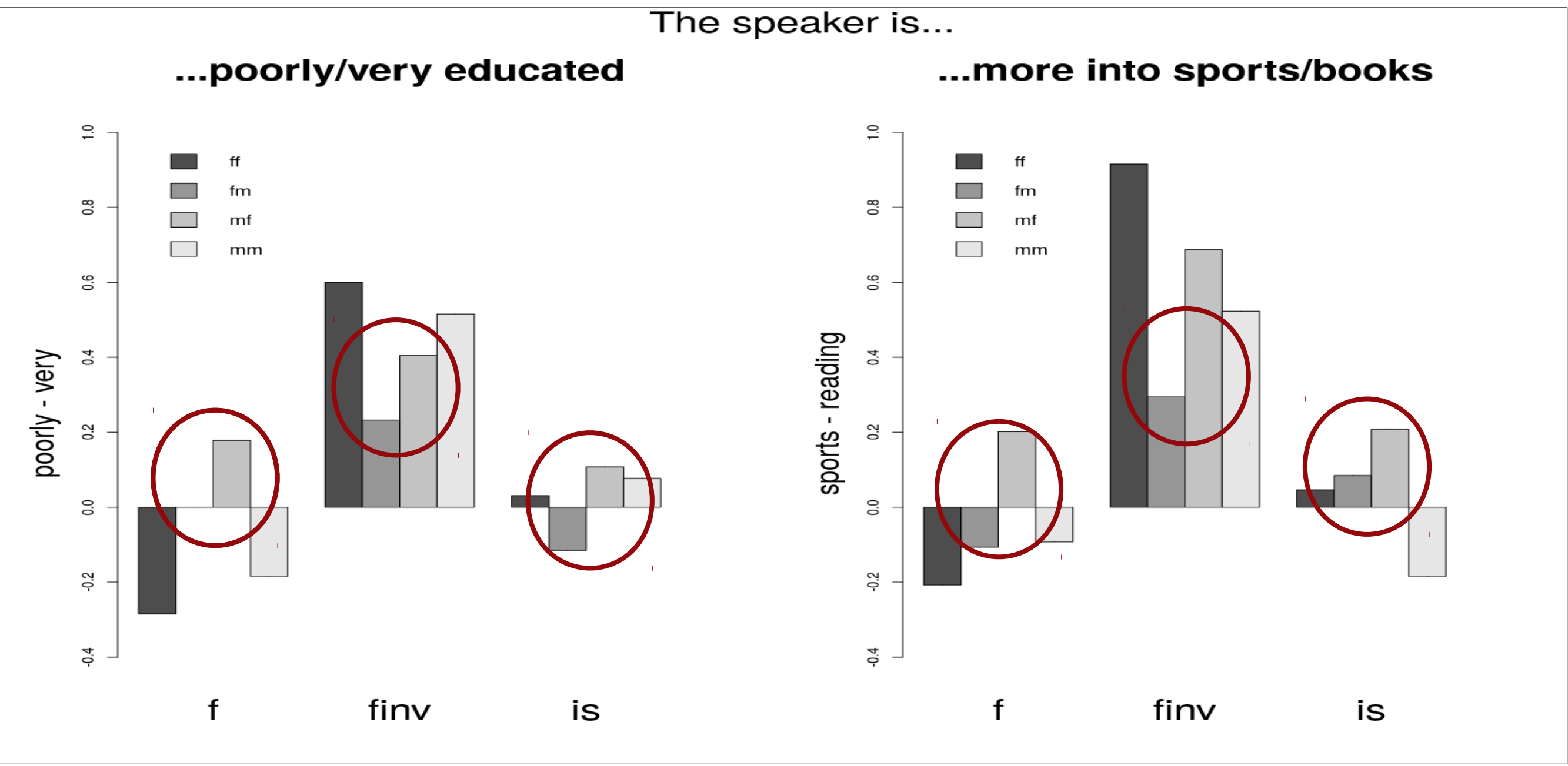
An effect of syntax: “Syntactic variation conveys different social cues.”



An effect of formality: “Variation is also a matter of context.”



An effect of speaker gender: “Different expectations weigh on bi-gendered interactions.”



CONCLUSIONS

- Social meaning games really are at play in the appreciation of an apparently free-choice syntactic alternation:  
→ *The way speakers form questions in French affects how they are perceived*
- Other speaker-external contextual factors weigh on sociolinguistic variation:  
→ *French native speakers have expectations on linguistic interactions, based on context formality and stereotypes associated with bi-gendered communication*

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