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***A new syntactic complexity indicator
in L2-English written texts:
Verb phrase versatility
(work-in-progress)***



Var4LCR conference, UCLouvain, 8 July 2025

Starting issue & background

How to conceptualise L2-English proficiency levels according to the CEFR?

What are the patterns of quantifiable features of a certain CEFR level for grammar & vocab in L2-English?

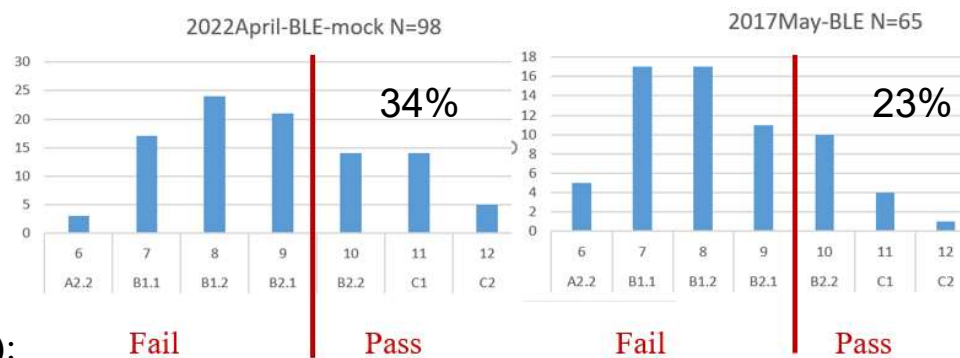
Practical start: L2-English **exam** needs validation:

- B2+ level, for undergrad English majors, end of year 1; its parts:
 - written part: Use of English test + reading + *written text production*
 - spoken part: three tasks
- high stakes exam: only one re-take is possible in a following semester
- criticised for its severity (high fail rate)
 - > exam validation needed!
- heterogeneous candidates:

The **corpus**: presently N = 562 texts, cca. 200 tokens each, partly transcribed

Today: two exam sittings where *formal letter* vs. *narrative* topics were offered

- complaint letters: April 2022: N = 98 texts, 20,271 tokens
- narratives: May 2017: N = 118 texts, 24,607 tokens



The research questions

Local, practical: language exam validation based on complexity quantification

Global, practical/theoretical: possible ways of partly automatic assessment

RQ1 (overall): What are the co-occurring patterns of syntactic/lexical complexity variation and how do they characterise L proficiency or the writing quality at a certain B2+ language exam?

RQ2 (overall): Is the exam valid based on that quantifiable construct?

RQ3 (overall): Can texts be automatically assessed based on them?

RQ here: How well does verb phrase versatility (VPV) characterise language proficiency in the two registers (formal letter vs. narrative texts)?

Multivariate systems

Syntactic complexity	Lexical complexity

Multivariate systems

Syntactic complexity

Biber-tagger/MAT (Nini 2019):

- Past Tense
- Perfect Aspect
- nominalisations
- existential *there*
- *be* as a main verb
- agentless passives/*by* passives
- various relative clause variables
- necessity modals, etc.

Lexical complexity

Multivariate systems

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Lexical complexity

Biber-tagger/MAT (Nini 2019):

- conjuncts (*moreover*)
- downtoners (*almost, nearly*)
- private verbs (*consider, realise*)
- public verbs (*announce, explain*)
- place adverbials, time adverbials
- attributive, predicative adjectives, etc.

(altogether 67 variables)

Multivariate systems

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L2SCA (Lu 2017):

- mean length of clause/sentence/T-unit
- amount of subordination (e.g. clause/sent.)
- amount of coordination
- degree of phrasal subordination, etc. (20)

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(67 variables)

Lextutor-based measures (Cobb 2024):

- family/type/token distributions
- K1-K2-K3up distributions
- type-token ratio
- lexical density (content words/tokens) (20)

Multivariate systems

*Brand new development:
CWLA (2025)!

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CVLA (Uchida & Negishi 2018)*:

- verbs/sentence
- (ARI, a readability measure)

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- average difficulty
- B per A (4)

Multivariate systems

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Our own measures:

- **manual:** raters' points; accuracy measures; verb phrase versatility, article usage vs. countability, etc.

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Multivariate systems

Syntactic complexity

Biber-tagger/MAT (Nini 2019):

- **Past Tense**
 - **Perfect Aspect**
 - nominalisations
 - existential *there*
 - ***be* as a main verb**
 - **agentless passives/by passives**
 - various relative clause variables
 - **necessity modals**, etc.
- „***I was at home.***“
-

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- ~~manual~~: raters' points; accuracy measures;
- **verb phrase versatility**: article usage vs. countability, etc.

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Our own measures:

- **manual**: raters' points
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Verb phrase versatility

= what verb tense, aspect, voice, modality and finiteness forms and distributions are present per tense

„Verb phrase” (VP) defined in the narrow sense:

- Quirk et al. (1985): „Verb phrases are [...] composed of two kinds of element, auxiliaries and main verbs.” (p. 61)
- Biber et al. (2021): „Verb phrases contain a lexical verb or primary verb as head or main verb, either alone or accompanied by one or more auxiliaries.” (p. 104)

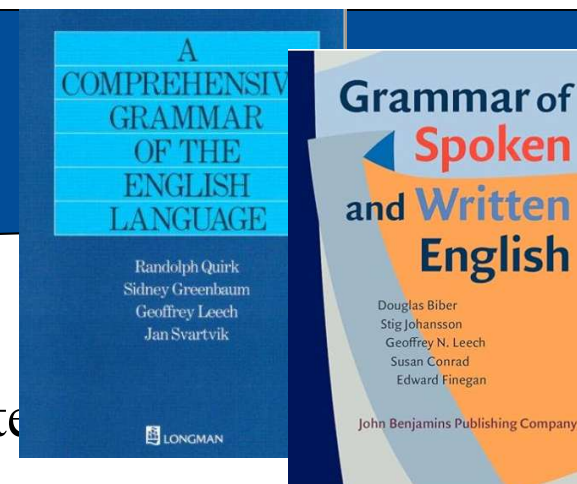
No single indicator in multivariate analytical systems, VPs are not represented as a unit (*I was at home* „falls apart” into two variables)

Could a single composite variable represent all the VP variables?

VPV is needed:

- In L2-English, VP variability is closely connected to proficiency development: non-simple VPs -> learner reaching above B1-B2

- 12/29 • Previous effort: syntactic similarity index (Mazgutova & Kormos 2015)



Verb phrase versatility: Text A

Simple Present, Simple Past

Text A

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am writing to you in regards to my recent stay at your motel located in New Orleans. Unfortunately I **had** a terrible experience during my stay. I would like to be compensated in one way or another, as I **feel** I have been misadvised to.

This unpleasurable experience of mine **came** about because of a faulty air conditioning unit. As you **know** the weather during my stay **was** unusually hot, and the lack of air conditioning **made** my stay unbearable. To relieve some of the heat stress, I **had** to pay out of my own pocket to purchase a portable ventillator, which of course **had** to leave at your motel, as it **was** too big to take with myself when I **had** to leave. As compensation I would like to recieve the cost of the ventillator in cash and the discount on my next day at your motel. The receipt for the ventillator **is** fortunately still in my posession.

Thank you for your response in advance, and I **hope** we can work out my compensation as soon as possible. I would not want to bad mouth your company because of faulty equipment.

Yours faithfully,

[real name]

Verb phrase versatility: Text A

Simple Present, Simple Past + progressives, perfectives, passive

Text A

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Yours faithfully,

[real name]

Verb phrase versatility: Text A

Simple Present, Simple Past + progressives, perfectives, passive + auxiliary VPs

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Thank you for your response in advance, and I **hope** we **can work** out my compensation as soon as possible. I **would not want** to bad mouth your company because of faulty equipment.

Yours faithfully,

[real name]

Verb phrase versatility: Text A

Simple Present, Simple Past + progressives, perfectives, passive + auxiliary VPs + non-finite verbs

Dear Sir or Madam,

Text A

I **am writing** to you in regards to my recent stay at your motel **located** in New Orleans. Unfortunately I **had** a terrible experience during my stay. I **would like** to be compensated in one way or another, as I **feel** I **have been** **misadvised** to.

This unpleasurable experience of mine **came** about because of a faulty air conditioning unit. As you **know** the weather during my stay **was** unusually hot, and the lack of air conditioning **made** my stay unbearable.

To **relieve** some of the heat stress, I **had** to pay out of my own pocket to **purchase** a portable ventilator, which of course **had** to leave at your motel, as it **was** too big to **take** with myself when I **had** to leave.

As compensation I **would like** to **recieve** the cost of the ventilator in cash and the discount on my next day at your motel. The receipt for the ventilator **is** fortunately still in my posession.

Thank you for your response in advance, and I **hope** we **can work** out my compensation as soon as possible. I **would not want** to **bad mouth** your company because of faulty equipment.

Yours faithfully,

[real name]

Verb phrase versatility: Text B

Simple Present, Simple Past + progressives, perfectives, passive + auxiliary VPs + non-finite verbs

Dear motel manager!

Text B

My name **is** [real name]. Last week I **stayed** at your hotel in New Orleans, and I **had** problems with the air conditioner in my room. The first day it **worked** well, but after that, it **broke** down quite often. When I **say** it **broke** down, I **mean** that it **blew** out hot air instead of cold. When it **is** 30 degrees outside a properly working AC **is** a must. Because I **had** a lot of thing **to do** while in New Orleans. I **had** no time **to find** another place **to stay**, so I **had** **to fix** the problem myself. Of my own money I **bought** a fan for the room, which I **left** there so the next customer **don't have** **to buy** one.

I **would like** some compensation for this. My idea **is** that you and the other workers **check** all of the air conditioners, and if they **do not work** properly, **fix** them. I **don't want** money or anything else! I **want** some kind of proof, so about this manner. Videos and picture of the fixing process! I **hope** I've **made** myself clear. This **was** one of the worst experiences I **have never been** to.

Thank you for **listening**,

[real name]

Verb phrase versatility: Text A vs. B

Dear Sir or Madam,

Text A

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Yours faithfully,
[real name]

Dear motel manager!

Text B

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Thank you for listening,
[real name]

Simple Present, Simple Past
progressives, perfectives passive
auxiliary VPs
non-finite verbs

Text A

CVLA analysis: C1
Raters: 5+4 points
on grammar+vocab
(max. 5 for each)

Visible
difference in
VP versatility

Text B

CVLA analysis: A2
Raters: 2+3 points
on grammar+vocab

Verb phrase versatility: Text A vs. B

Text A: 199 tokens	Text B: 203 tokens
29 VPs: 19 finite, 10 non-finite Normalised: 9.55 finite (3.02 non-simple), 5.03 non-finite /100 words	33 VPs, 28 finite, 5 non-finite Normalised: 13.80 finite (1.97 non-simple), 2.46 non-finite /100 words
Finite VPs: • 5 Simple Present: <i>feel, know, is, thank, hope</i> • 8 Simple Past: <i>had, came about, was, made, had, had, was, had</i> • 1 Present Progressive: <i>am writing</i> • 1 Present Perfect Simple/passive voice: <i>have been misadvertised</i> • 4 Modal VPs: <i>would like, would like, can work (out), would not want</i>	Finite VPs: • 13 Simple Present: <i>is, say, mean, *blow (out), is, is, don't have, is, check, do not work, don't want, want, hope, thank</i> • 11 Simple Past: <i>stayed, had, worked, broke down, broke (down), had, had, bought, left, was</i> • 2 Present Perfect Simple: <i>'ve made, *have been</i> • 1 Modal VP: <i>would like</i> • 1 Base form (imperative): <i>fix</i>
Non-finite VPs: • 8 VPs: <i>to be compensated, to pay, to purchase, to leave, to take, to leave, to receive, to bad mouth</i> • 2 non-finite clauses: <i>located, to relieve</i>	Non-finite VPs: • 5 VPs: <i>working, to do, to find, to stay, to fix, to buy, fixing</i> • no non-finite clauses

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Ratio 3:2

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Ratio 2:1

Verb phrase versatility: Text A vs. B

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Ratio 2:0

Verb phrase versatility quantification 1

VP features move in six distinct dimensions, independent of each other:

- tense: present, past
- aspect/perf: non-perfective, perfective
- aspect/prog: non-progressive, progressive
- voice: active, passive
- modality: no auxiliary, *will*, *would*, modal auxiliaries
- finiteness: finite, non-finite

A **single VP**: a point in that space, **VPV** value: distance from the origin
(0,0,0,0,0,0)

Text level VPV: the mean of VPV for each verb is calculated.

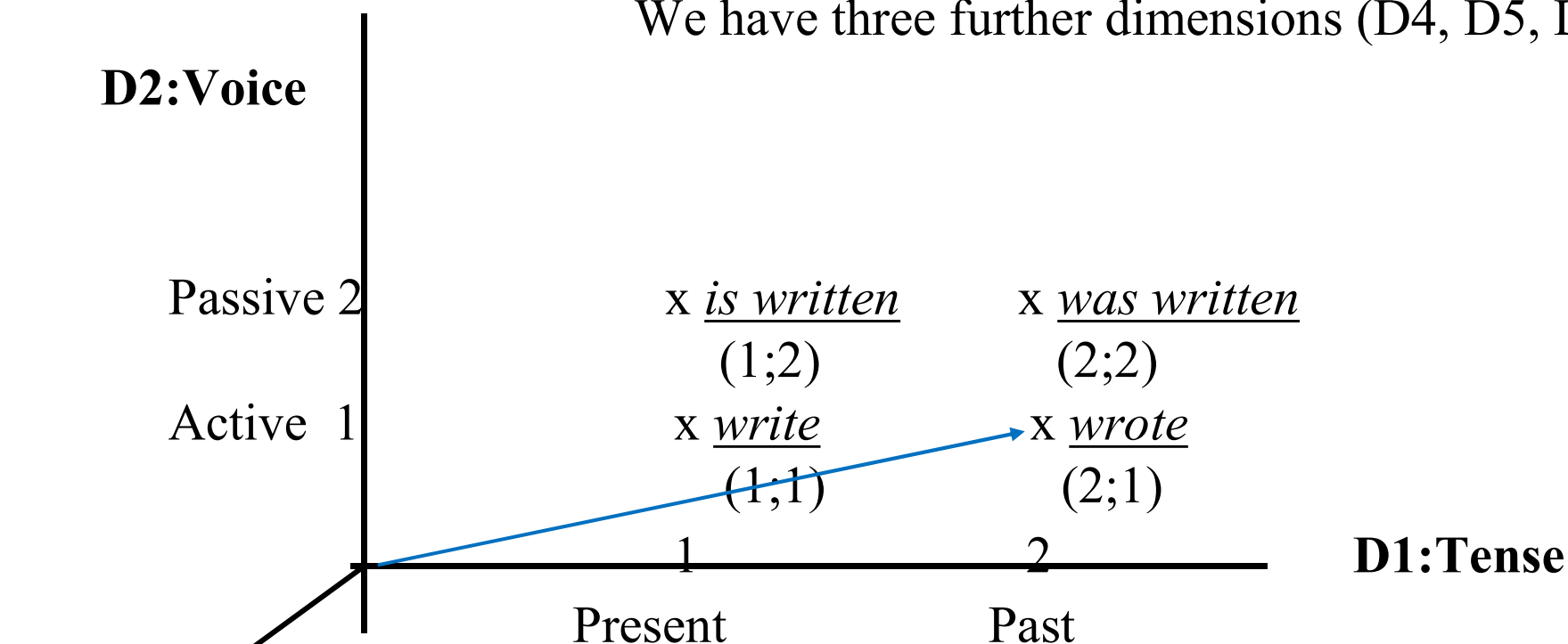


Mathematically appropriate solution: coordinate geometry.

(This would also turn the categorical variable into a numerical one.)

Verb phrase versatility quantification 2

We have three further dimensions (D4, D5, D6)



For two dimensions: $d = \sqrt{(x_2 - x_1)^2 + (y_2 - y_1)^2}$ In general: $\sqrt{\sum_{i=1}^n (y_i - x_i)^2}$

(Pythagorean Theorem) (Euclidean Distance)

Verb phrase versatility quantification 3

The alternative calculation is giving points:

- Give a point for any VP, e.g., *as you know* – one point
- Add an extra point if perfective, progressive, passive, etc. E.g., *I have been misadvised to* – three points

Pro: easy calculation: adding up and normalising

Con: mathematically less meaningful

VPV: Eucledian vs. point-based

Dear Sir or Madam,

Text A

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This unpleasurable experience of mine **came** about because of a faulty air conditioning unit. As you **know** the weather during my stay **was** unusually hot, and the lack of air conditioning **made** my stay unbearable. To relieve some of the heat stress, I **had** to pay out of my own pocket to purchase a portable ventilator, which of course **had** to leave at your motel, as it **was** too big to take with myself when I **had** to leave. As compensation I **would like** to receive the cost of the ventilator in cash and the discount on my next day at your motel. The receipt for the ventilator **is** fortunately still in my possession.

Thank you for your response in advance, and I **hope** we **can work** out my compensation as soon as possible. I **would not want** to bad mouth your company because of faulty equipment.

Yours faithfully,

[real name]

Text A:

Eucledian:

$\text{mean}_{\text{VPV}}=2.64$

Point based:

$\text{mean}_{\text{VPV}}=24.120$

Dear motel manager!

Text B

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Thank you for listening,

[real name]

Text B:

Eucledian:

$\text{mean}_{\text{VPV}}=2.592$

Point based:

$\text{mean}_{\text{VPV}}=20.197$

Cross-register variation pilot

Point-based VPV in 50 formal letters vs. 50 narratives:

	Formal letters	Narratives
Mean VPV of highest rated 25 texts	23.252	21.454
Mean VPV of lowest-rated 25 texts	19.327	17.891

Promising pattern:

- higher rated texts have higher VPV in both categories than lower-rated ones
- VPs in formal letters are more versatile in both categories than in narratives

Conclusion

Verb phrase variability needs a composite complexity indicator variable:

- importance of VPs in L2-English learning trajectories
- intuitively meaningful (teaching experience)
- promising first results
- may help L2-English complexity theorisation

Final message: the concept of VPV is not a shortcut but an elaboration.

References

Thank you.

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