

The Interdependence of Syntactic Representations and Psycholinguistic Mechanisms

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Traditionally, syntacticians have posited that grammatical knowledge is an encapsulated cognitive system that is distinct from the mechanisms employed in language acquisition and sentence comprehension ("competence/performance distinction", Chomsky 1965). In this talk, I explore the relevance of syntactic representations in real-time sentence comprehension and language acquisition. First, I examine the learnability of the that-trace phenomenon, a ban on subject extraction across an overt complementizer. This constraint exists in English, but not in Spanish. In (1), we see that an embedded subject may be questioned only if there is no complementizer 'that', whereas the equivalent sentence in Spanish is fine, in (2). Here, I argue that syntactic analyses make testable predictions about the strategies a learner might employ in acquiring this constraint. Specifically, I argue that Spanish-learning children can only acquire this property of their grammar if it's linked to another property in their input, as suggested by Rizzi (1982).

Second, I examine the real-time processing of resumptive pronouns in English and Hebrew. Resumptive pronouns are pronouns that serve as the tail of a relativization dependency. This is demonstrated in (3)–(4), in which the relativization headed by 'the boy'/ha-yeled is interpreted as coreferential with 'him'/oto. In English, this is argued to be a coreference dependency mediated by discourse context, whereas it is a syntactic binding relation in Hebrew (Chao & Sells 1983; Erteschick-Shir 1992; Asudeh 2010). I show that this abstract difference between the otherwise superficially similar dependency in the two languages has very different processing profiles, which follows if we have a transparent mapping between linguistic theory and psycholinguistics. The resulting picture is one in which grammars are systems that are well-integrated with learning and processing mechanisms. Methodologically, this implies that syntactic theory should take sentence processing/acquisition results seriously, and psycholinguistics should in turn consider syntactic analyses as testable hypotheses.

- (1) a. Who did Dale say Sarah saw ____?
b. Who did Dale say that Sarah saw ____?
c. Who did Dale say _____ saw Bob?
d. *Who did Dale say that _____ saw Bob?
- (2) ¿Quién dijo Dale que vió a Bob?
Who said Dale that saw ACC Bob
'Who did Dale say that saw Bob' (Spanish)
- (3) I saw the boy that Dalya knows the woman that loves him
- (4) Ani ra'iti et ha-yeled še- Dalya makira et ha-iša še ohevet oto
I saw ACC the-boy that Dalya knows ACC the-woman that loves him
'I saw the boy that Dalya knows the woman that loves him' (Hebrew)