

Syntactic Priming of Relative-Clause Attachments: Implications for the Mental Representation of Syntax

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Syntactic priming (a.k.a. structural priming) refers to the tendency of language users to repeat syntactic structure over consecutive sentence production or comprehension trials (typically without becoming aware of it). As such, the phenomenon has received much attention in psycholinguistics over the past 25 years. Syntactic priming is not only informative in terms of potential cognitive architectures and mechanisms for linguistic processing, but – more specifically – has also been argued to be revealing in terms of how our mental representation of grammar may look like (see, e.g., Branigan & Pickering, 2017).

In this talk, I will review a range of prominent findings from the syntactic priming literature, with particular focus on the priming of Relative Clause (RC) attachments within complex noun phrases, as in (e.g.) “The tour guide mentioned the bells of the church that...” (where the RC starting with “that” can either attach *high* to “the bells of the church” or *low* to “the church”, respectively). I will show that priming of RC-attachments (a) can be observed in various languages, (b) is not explainable in terms of semantic or pragmatic restrictions, (c) even holds true ‘across cognitive domains’ (e.g., using mathematical equations as primes and linguistic expressions as targets), and (d) cannot plausibly be explained in terms of re-using (sequences of) context-free rules.

I will argue that RC-attachment priming, which concerns the hierarchical configuration of recursively generated structure, may constitute one of the ‘purest’ forms of abstract structural priming effects in the literature to date. Other types of structural alternations (e.g., active vs. passive voice; prepositional dative vs. double object sentences, etc.) arguably have received more attention in syntactic priming research, but are mostly characterisable in terms of basic lexical choices which involve (e.g.) head-specific subcategorization frames or the use of different types of head-modifying adjuncts. More generally, I conclude that moving away from simple context-free grammars, and towards more recent representational formalisms, opens up new theoretical perspectives on the representations involved in syntactic priming.