Gradient acceptability at the intersections of syntax, discourse, and language processing

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In this presentation, I highlight some of the main arguments from my new book, *Gradient Acceptability and Linguistic Theory* (Oxford University Press 2022)*,* in the context of previous and ongoing studies from our lab at Purdue focusing on the interfaces between syntax, discourse, and language processing.

As Schütze (1996) and many others have shown, there are a variety of factors in addition to syntactic constraints that can affect participants' responses in an acceptability judgment task. These include semantic, discourse-pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and prosodic constraints as well as general cognitive factors, task effects, and linguistic experience of individuals. Thus, a major challenge for syntax research is to be able to identify the sources of variation in judgments and their relevance for theoretical interpretation. Much of the recent research in experimental syntax has centered around techniques for distinguishing syntactic constraints from other factors. In this presentation, I take a slightly different approach and focus on the importance of certain theoretical assumptions for identifying the sources of variation in judgments and for assigning an interpretation. In particular, I highlight three such assumptions: (1) strict form-meaning isomorphism vs. flexible mappings; (2) probabilistic vs. categorical constraint application; and (3) narrow vs. broad view of grammatical competence. I situate these assumptions with respect to four families of theoretical frameworks: (1) derivational theories; (2) constraint-based theories; (3) OT-style theories; and (4) usage-based theories. I then discuss sample data sets showing how different theoretical assumptions can lead to different interpretations of the same judgment data. As examples, I discuss some of our previous and ongoing studies of relative clause extraposition in English, ditransitive constructions in English, and resumptive pronouns in Cantonese. These studies center the complex and subtle interplay of syntactic, discourse, and processing factors. I argue that while the patterns of judgments shown in these studies are compatible with various theoretical interpretations, some of them can most effectively be described as involving soft constraints within the grammar. Throughout the discussion, I also show how data from additional methods (corpus studies, production tasks, and comprehension tasks) can be used to supplement judgment data and narrow down the range of plausible interpretations within any of the theoretical frameworks.