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The syntax-lexicon continuum: Explaining variation in aphasic language

Abstract:

Prominent approaches to explaining language in aphasia are based on generative “words and rules” theories (e.g. trace deletion, double dependency, tree-pruning, discourse linking). However, generative theories have been challenged by a range of observations such as:

a) The preservation of formulaic language, which can have a formally complex syntactic structure.

b) Verb bias effects predicting aphasic performance, e.g. passive sentences are easier to process if they contain a passive-loving verb such as injure.

c) Cases where the formally more complex grammatical construction is preferred over the simpler construction, e.g. plurals over singulars or passives over actives.

These phenomena are pervasive enough that they need to be captured within the core theory.

We review the data and show how they can be explained using the framework of usage-based Construction Grammar, and its main innovation, the syntax-lexicon continuum. In this theory, all linguistic knowledge is described in terms of constructions which differ in complexity and their degree of concreteness/abstractness. The framework predicts a large number of lexically specific expressions and grammatical frames, each having meaning and being subject to frequency effects. We pay particular attention to passive constructions, which have been a traditional testing ground for theories of aphasia.

We also discuss clinical implications and introduce a tool for measuring usage-frequency properties of language output.

References:

