

Why memory matters in English grammar

The limitations of working memory are relevant to syntax as one of the cognitive pressures on the evolution of syntactic structures. After a brief introduction to the psychology of working memory (presented here as the active part of long-term memory rather than as a separate mental module), I shall introduce a simple measure of syntactic difficulty: dependency distance (the number of words between a word and the word on which it depends). I shall then present some research data on dependency distance in English and explore their implications for the following issues:

- the choice between dependency structure and phrase structure
- the learnability of dependencies (and more generally, of syntax)
- the position of SVO languages in word-order typology, and the idea of a 'consistently mixed' language
- the motivation for non-canonical word orders such as extraction and extraposition
- do all languages demand the same amount of memory?