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Similarity effects in sentence comprehension: the role of memory encoding

Cross-linguistic evidence shows that speakers sometimes agree a verb with an 'attractor' that is not its subject, even when the subject is adjacent to the verb, as in object relative clauses (e.g., *John speaks to **the patients** that the doctor **cure***). Such attraction errors are typically observed when the subject and the attractor mismatch in number or gender. However, recent evidence from our lab shows that sentence comprehension is actually *facilitated* when these two elements mismatch. I will suggest that the key factor underlying these effects is the similarity between the subject and other elements in the sentence, which penalizes the process of structure building/sentence encoding in memory. I will then review additional evidence for the role of similarity in sentence comprehension in other populations (children) and in other structures (weak islands). Since similarity-based interference is the signature of memory systems, I will end with a recent study we conducted showing that modulations of attraction due to the structural position of the attractor (c-command vs. precedence) fully align with variations in parameters of memory retrieval (accessibility and dynamics), leading to the tentative conclusion that syntactic theory is, in fact, a theory of memory.