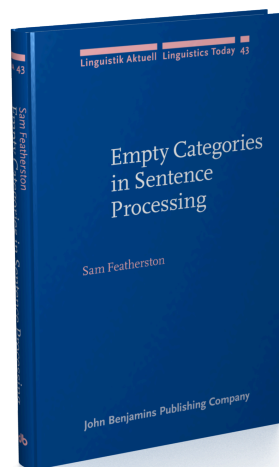


Foreword

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Sam Featherston
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Foreword

The work reported in this book came about as a result of the realization that the issue of the role of syntactic gaps in processing was unresolved. It is surprising that this should be the case, since there are few fields of study which seem to allow experimental approaches to produce answers to syntactic questions, and these few are generally investigated with great zeal. Gap processing shows the potential to be such a field, and it too had been very popular in the late eighties and the first half of the nineties. The early studies from both self-paced reading and cross-modal lexical priming (first and foremost Nicol & Swinney 1989) had shown clear effects at gap positions and this had been widely accepted as strong evidence that traces, or something similar, played an active part in human sentence processing. This, if confirmed, would be a fascinating discovery, as it would reveal a correspondence between the functioning of the human parser and a construct of generative grammar far closer than is normally assumed. The excitement was deflated with the publication of Pickering & Barry (1991) and their demonstration that the data could be interpreted otherwise, as activation of a complement of the verb at the verb position. Subsequent empirical work such as Nicol (1993) tended to strengthen the impression that the excitement about trace activation had been misplaced, since other accounts, not making use of traces, were available.

Roughly this was the situation when my attention was called to the phenomenon by Harald Clahsen at Essex. While alternative explanations had been put forward, the extensive work necessary to decide between them had not been undertaken, for two main reasons. First, it was difficult to see how this might be achieved using English materials, since objects are normally adjacent to verbs in English, and this was one of the confounds in the data which needed to be resolved. Second, the excitement that psycholinguistics was finding hard answers to questions of syntactic theory had been given a douse of cold water, and disillusionment set in: few doubted that the theoretically less interesting answer of Pickering & Barry would prove to be correct. Harald Clahsen had noticed that, while English data could not distinguish between the accounts,

German materials could, and suggested I should have a look. Thus began a fascinating journey into the various facets of the phenomenon, which, perhaps not surprisingly, became more complex as time went on. The original intention had been to perform one experiment in order to settle the issue of what the previous cross-modal priming experiments had been measuring. Instead of one experiment, three were necessary in order to produce an answer which could not be accounted for by any of the competing theories which do not assume additional processing at gap positions.

There remained, however, the unresolved question of what the data on the same topic from the other methodologies was showing. Surprising results require unanimity in the data to support them: since the cross-modal priming data showed one distribution of effects and the probe recognition data (e.g. McElree & Bever 1989) showed another, the overall position still had to be regarded as doubtful. This led the other experiments reported here, using probe recognition, sentence matching and event-related potentials, as well as self-paced reading. The result of this is perhaps as full an exploration of the topic as could be imagined.

I am occasionally asked why I chose to discuss two different frameworks' analyses of the experimental materials instead of assuming just one as is more usual. The answer is twofold: first, one of the aims of the study was to test the competing analyses of the two grammars. I regard it as deeply unsatisfactory that two generative grammar models can produce such different analyses of the same data. This strikes me as demonstrating that neither model has a sufficiently close relationship with the linguistic data it claims to represent. In order to rectify this situation, I look to psycholinguistic research and corpus-based work to provide a means of adjudicating between them, and this book is in part an attempt to do just that. The second reason for discussing the predictions of both Principles and Parameters Theory and Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar is that each of them has its descriptive strengths, but if we wish to gain the maximum insight into a syntactic structure it is often best to consider what each of them has to say about it.

Various other researchers have contributed suggestions, criticisms and revisions to this work, above all Harald Clahsen, to whom I owe many of the ideas for experimentation here. Particular thanks also to Thomas F. Muentz and Matthias Gross of the Hannover Medical School. Thanks also to Janet Fodor, Andrew Radford, Claudia Felser, Meike Hadler, Kerstin Maut and Sonja Eisenbeiß, as well as the Psycholinguistics Research Group at Essex for their comments and contributions, both to the design and construction of this work.

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Closer to home, I must say thank-you to my parents for their care and support, but most of all to Véronique, to whom this book is dedicated.

