

Linguistics and Technology Series

The Building Blocks of Language

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Abstract

Although generative and construction grammars both assume that some linguistic forms are stored and retrieved as wholes while others are strung together from simpler parts, they differ at least with respect to what is posited to be stored/retrieved as a whole and what is generated via rule-based composition. Within the generative framework, the determining factor for storage is regularity: While regular forms are put together on the fly from atomic units (e.g., *talk* + ?*d* --> *talked*; *frown* + ?*d* --> *frowned*), irregular forms are stored and retrieved as wholes (past tense of *think* is *thought*). In contrast, for construction grammarians frequency of use is an important factor that determines the status of a linguistic form: High frequency forms are stored/retrieved as unanalyzed chunks (past tense of *think* is *thought*; past tense of *talk* is *talked*) whereas low frequency ones are generated from a variety of subordinate parts (*frown* + ?*d* --> *frowned*). Although there is evidence for both the generative and the constructionist views, the jury is still out on the question of what is stored and what is not.

The debate has primarily focused on single words and to some extent on compound words. In order to gain new insight into this perennial question, a growing number of researchers are turning to regular, non-idiomatic multi-word sequences such as *in the middle of* and *I really like it*, and recent studies are showing that whole-sequence frequency of occurrence affects language comprehension and production. In this paper, I present some of my own research (self-paced reading, sentence recall, chunk recall with event-related brain potential recordings, chunk production) showing that speakers are sensitive to the frequency of use of regular, non-idiomatic multi-word sequences (*at the end of*, *I really like it*) as a whole, thus suggesting that they are stored/retrieved as wholes (favouring the constructionist view). Future research directions are also discussed.

Linguistics Circle of Halifax