Nodes, links, and psychological plausibility: A case study of the *make*-causative

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Construction(s), or node(s), and their links to other nodes in the network of linguistic knowledge are of course central to constructionist approaches. While the classic focus is on nodes (Goldberg 1995), current discussions in the field put a much stronger focus on the links between the nodes (Diessel 2019, Schmid 2020). This development aside, the "existence" or psychological reality of constructional nodes is by no means widely accepted outside the family of constructionist approaches. This may in part be due to the fact that (a) we gather much of the empirical evidence for nodes from corpora or via experiments that use stimuli based on a priori assumption of constructions. In addition, evidence from reading-time experiments can often be accounted for by general processing factors, such as, but not limited to, transitional probabilities.

This talk discusses the opposing predictions of the constructionist approach viz. general processing with respect to reading times of a "classic" argument structure construction. Two self-paced reading experiments on the *make*-causative (e.g., *she made them believe the story*) measured the reaction time of V_2 (e.g., *believe*). Previous research would predict that the reading time of the second verb depends on factors that increase processing costs such as object complexity (e.g., a personal pronoun vs. full/complex NP). In this pilot study using two variants of the maze paradigm (Boyce et al. 2020, Forster et al. 2009), we found that, overall, (i) V_2 RT is neither predicted by (verb) frequency, nor by object complexity, nor by transitional probability, but (ii) by how much the verb is statistically associated with the pattern. The former provides evidence for nodes (e.g., the absence of an effect of length between V_1 and V_2), whereas the latter is not unexpected given that the strengths of links between nodes can varies (commonly operationalised as "collostruction strength" or "surprisal").

While a complex picture emerges in the details, predominantly due to the task and its limitations, the results do suggest that the constructionist approach can account for these results better and more comprehensively beyond general processing-related factors. The results can be interpreted such that they provide evidence for the "reality" of constructions, but they are also insightful for current theoretical and methodological discussions within a constructionist and usage-based models of linguistic knowledge, especially concerning the links between nodes at different levels of specificity.

References

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