## Contents

Prefatory Note ................................................. i

1. Emergence .................................................. 1

2. The Minimalist Turn ....................................... 8

3. The Strict Emergentist Protocol ......................... 17

4. Mapping ...................................................... 27

5. Verb–Object Languages ................................... 36

6. Object–Verb Languages .................................... 46

7. Filler-Gap Dependencies .................................. 56

8. Constraints on Filler-Gap Dependencies ................ 66

9. Local Coreference .......................................... 78

10. Case and Alignment ....................................... 89

11. Agreement and Alignment ............................... 99

12. Filler-Gap Dependencies and Alignment .............. 107

13. Learning in Times of Plenty ............................ 118

14. Learning in Times of Scarcity .......................... 127

15. Natural Progress .......................................... 136

Appendix: The *That* Effect ................................. 140

References ....................................................... 151
Prefatory Note

This short monograph draws on materials from my classes, talks, publications and recent thinking on the forces that shape language and its acquisition. It is not in its ‘final form,’ and probably never will be, as I intend to make continual revisions and additions as new ideas and information become available.

As its subtitle suggests, *Natural Syntax* is intended for an audience with little or no background in the study of emergence or its possible relevance to the understanding of language. The chapters are divided into three main groups. Chapters 1 through 3 focus on matters of history and methodology that should make for easy reading. The next six chapters (4 through 9) examine properties of fairly basic syntactic phenomena – word order, *wh* questions and coreference, all of which should be familiar to most readers, including those with a relatively modest background in linguistics. Chapters 10 through 12 examine the differences between accusative and ergative languages with regard to case, agreement and filler-gap dependencies. The book comes to a close with two chapters on language acquisition, followed by some brief concluding remarks on the roots of natural syntax. An appendix seeks to shed light on the ‘*that*-trace effect,’ one of the most baffling phenomena in all of language.

Linguistics – and especially syntax – has been a hotbed of controversy for many decades, for reasons that await scrutiny and assessment by scholars of the history and philosophy of science. I do not believe that we should be looking forward to their judgment. Still, we cannot simply await it either. There are issues and ideas that call for consideration, some of which point toward novel conceptions of how language might work, as I will try to show in this book.

NOTE: This is the third version of *Natural Syntax* that I have made available for distribution. The first, with a pastoral scene on the cover, carries a 2020 release date; the second appeared in 2021, with a cover picture depicting a field of flowers. For possible future updates, please check my website, researchgate.net or academia.edu.
Acknowledgments

In working on the ideas in this book, I’ve benefitted a great deal from conversations and correspondence with a number of scholars, including Sharon Bulalang, Mark Campana, Lyle Campbell, Victoria Chen, Kamil Deen, Patricia Donegan, Kevin Gregg, John Hawkins, Raina Heaton, Gary Holton, Miseon Lee, Brian MacWhinney, Brad McDonnell, Yuko Otsuka, Peter Schuelke, Darcy Sperlich, and David Stampe. The editor for this project was Miho Choo, who uncovered many flaws and suggested many improvements, for which I am very grateful.
Language is one of nature’s most mysterious phenomena. Its workings have eluded scholars for thousands of years, and there is no reason to think that a major breakthrough is at hand. The danger of a deep irony is real: the quest to explain language may lie beyond the reach of the only creatures who are able to use it. But of course we must nonetheless try.

1.1 The emergentist idea

One avenue of inquiry that has shown some promise in recent years remains lightly explored. It takes as its starting point emergence, the process whereby the interaction of simple mechanisms, forces and events produces a system with its own novel properties.

The term was coined by the nineteenth-century philosopher George Henry Lewes, who drew a distinction between ‘resultants’ and ‘emergents.’

... every resultant is clearly traceable in its components, because these are homogenous and commensurable. It is otherwise with emergents... The emergent is unlike its components ..., and it cannot be reduced to their sum or their difference.

(Lewes 1875:413)

Lewes’s friend and colleague, the British philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill, offered an early concrete example.

The chemical combination of two substances produces, as is well known, a third substance with properties different from those of either of the two substances separately, or both of them taken together. Not a trace of the properties of hydrogen or oxygen is observable in those of their compound, water.

(Mill 1842, Book III, Ch. 6)
An awareness of emergence is fundamental to understanding the mysteries of nature. Put simply, things are often not what they appear to be.

Take for instance the striking internal architecture of bee hives, with their carefully arranged rows of perfect hexagons.

Evidence of geometrical ability in bees? Alas, no; just evidence for emergence.

When [spherical] honey cells are packed together, the wax walls will undergo deformation. ... the surface tension between two honey cells acts to create a flat plane surface. Since each cell contacts just six other cells, the surface tensions of the wax and the packing pressure of the bees will force each sphere into a hexagonal shape. The hexagonal shape maximizes the packing of the hive space and the volume of each cell and offers the most economical use of the wax resource... The bee doesn’t need to “know” anything about hexagons.  
(Elman, Bates, Johnson, Karmiloff-Smith Parisi & Plunkett 1996:111; also Thompson 1917:608ff)

Or consider the behavior of flocks of birds, whose seemingly coordinated dance back and forth across the sky is best appreciated by direct observation.

I recall watching such a display once and marveling at the complexity of the avian choreography playing out above me. In fact, I should have been marveling at its simplicity. It turns out that flocking behavior reflects the interaction of the three simple ‘principles’ paraphrased below. (The terms and their description vary somewhat from author to author.)
• Alignment: Go in the same direction as those around you.
• Cohesion: Don’t get too far from those around you.
• Separation: Don’t get too close to those around you.
  (Reynolds1987, https://www.red3d.com/cwr/boids/)

You can see a computer simulation of these three principles in action here:

*How do boids work? A flocking simulation*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbUPfMXXQIY; also http://www.harmendeweerd.nl/boids/

**Emergentism versus essentialism**

A typical linguistic analysis starts with a grammatical phenomenon (say, subject–verb agreement), for which its offers a description and explanation in grammatical terms, making reference to notions such as ‘subject,’ ‘verb’, ‘agreement’ and the like. That’s called **essentialism.**

*An ... “essentialist” ... explanation generally appeals to one or more factors that are unique to the complex phenomenon itself.*
  (Tachihara & Goldberg 2019:237; also Scholz, Pelletier & Pullum 2016)

The vast majority of theoretical work in linguistics is essentialist in character, including ‘Principles-and-Parameters’ theory, the influential variety of generative grammar outlined in Noam Chomsky’s seminal book, *Lectures on Government and Binding* (Chomsky 1981).

*Lectures on Government and Binding*  
Noam Chomsky

The leading idea upon which Principles-and-Parameters theory was built is Universal Grammar (UG), a set of inborn linguistic principles that offer grammatical explanations for a wide variety of phenomena. (Whether successful or not, the use of grammatical explanations for grammatical phenomena is a classic instantiation of essentialism.)

One principle of UG, widely acclaimed and the focal point of work for at least two decades, offers an explanation for why invisible categories are permitted in certain positions but not others. (I deliberately present the constraint in its full technical detail to
give readers a sense of what traditional UG actually looked like, outside of textbooks. I do not expect the average reader to actually understand the principle, nor is there any reason to do so at this point.)

**The Empty Category Principle (ECP)**

An empty category must be properly governed.

- $\alpha$ governs $\beta$ iff $\alpha$ m-commands $\beta$ and there is no barrier for $\beta$ that excludes $\alpha$.
- $\alpha$ excludes $\beta$ if no segment of $\alpha$ dominates $\beta$.
- $\gamma$ is a barrier for $\beta$ iff (a) or (b):
  1. $\gamma$ immediately dominates $\delta$, and $\delta$ is a blocking category for $\beta$.
  2. $\gamma$ is a blocking category for $\beta$, and $\gamma$ is not IP [Inflectional Phrase].
- $\gamma$ is a blocking category for $\beta$ iff $\gamma$ is not L-marked and $\gamma$ dominates $\beta$.
- $\alpha$ L-marks $\beta$ if $\alpha$ is a lexical category that $\theta$-governs $\beta$.
- $\alpha$ $\theta$-governs $\beta$ iff $\alpha$ is a zero-level category that $\theta$-marks $\beta$, and $\alpha$ & $\beta$ are sisters.

(Chomsky 1986a:8ff)

It has been repeatedly noted in the literature that principles like the ECP are ‘domain-specific’ – they are relevant only to language.

... *the system of basic principles, UG, appears to be unique in significant measure to [language].*

(Chomsky 1977:3)

... *there is good reason to think that the language faculty is guided by special principles specific to this domain...*

(Chomsky 1980b:44)

*My own belief is that the principles [of UG] do not generalize, that they are in crucial respects specific to the language faculty...*

(Chomsky 1986b:xxvi)

... *a Universal Grammar, not reducible to history or cognition, underlies the human language instinct.*

(Pinker 1994:238)

*None of the highly abstract and tightly knit principles and parameters of universal grammar bear any resemblance whatsoever to derivations from non-linguistic principles*

(Piattelli-Palmarini 1998:334 & 339)
Put simply, classic generative grammar explains grammatical phenomena by reference to grammatical principles. That’s not the way emergentism works.\(^1\)

**The emergentist program**

A defining feature of the emergentist program is a commitment to explaining the properties of language by reference to the interaction of deeper and more general properties of cognition. The point has been emphasized in a large and varied literature over a period of several decades, as the following representative assertions help illustrate.

*Language is a new machine built out of old parts.*

(Bates & MacWhinney 1988:147)

... in very significant ways, language is a radically new behavior. At a phenomenological level, it is quite unlike anything else that we (or any other species) do. It has features that are remarkable and unique. The crucial difference between this view and the view of language as a separable domain-specific module ... is that the uniqueness emerges out of an interaction involving small differences in domain-nonspecific behaviors.

(Elman 1999:25)


The phenomena of language are best explained by reference to more basic non-linguistic (i.e., “non-grammatical”) factors and their interaction – physiology, perception, processing, working memory, pragmatics, social interaction, properties of the input, the learning mechanisms, and so on.

(O’Grady 2008b:448)

... the structure of human language must inevitably be shaped around human learning and processing biases deriving from the structure of our thought processes, perceptuomotor factors, cognitive limitations, and pragmatic constraints.

(Christiansen & Chater 2008:490)

\(^1\) In fact, as we will see in the next chapter, it may not be the way generative grammar works any more either.
In order to qualify as emergentist, an account of language functioning must tell us where a language behavior “comes from.” In most cases, this involves accounting for a behavior in a target domain as emerging from some related external domain.

(MacWhinney 1999b:xii; also MacWhinney 1999a:362)

**Emergentism** refers to the idea that unique, complex phenomena can be explained by the development of more basic processes that interact in dynamic ways with each other and the environment.

... The emergentist perspective predicts that languages will be constrained by communicative pressures and domain-general processes related to attention, memory, categorization, and cognitive control.

(Tachihara & Goldberg 2019:237 & 238)

## 1.2 Complex systems

An emergentist approach to language in the 21st century situates linguistics within the study of **complex systems** – systems composed of multiple parts that interact with each other in intricate ways, taking on properties and manifesting effects that could not have been predicted in advance.²

- Complex systems are ‘dynamic;’ they are subject to flux and change rather than long-term stability. The weather is constantly changing, traffic increases and decreases throughout the day, the human body ages with the passage of time.

- Complex systems are subject to ‘phase transitions’ that bring about qualitative changes over time. Water can turn into ice, fall becomes winter, a tadpole morphs into a frog.

- Complex systems are ‘non-linear,’ often yielding consequences far out of proportion to the seemingly simple factors and events from which they evolve. A randomly selected lottery number can bring wealth, a dropped ball can determine a national championship, the cross-species transmission of a microscopic virus to a single human can result in a pandemic.

Complex systems are everywhere: the weather, evolution, society, the economy, politics, ecosystems, football games, rush-hour traffic, human history, your life … The possibilities are essentially endless, and some scenarios are deliberately fanciful. Might it

---

² For a brief and very helpful on-line lecture on complex systems (made by Complexity Labs), see: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vp8v2Udd_PM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vp8v2Udd_PM). For a brief treatment of the non-linear effects, see: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xn98WnMxMs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xn98WnMxMs). For phase transitions and various related notions: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSWm8p5tSiw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSWm8p5tSiw).
be possible, for example, for a butterfly in Brazil to trigger a tornado in Texas by simply flapping its wings, thereby creating a cascade of ever more complex effects? 3

Other scenarios are more realistic and more related to our field of study. The most obvious question has to do with whether language could be a complex system, with its form and use reflecting the interaction of yet to be discovered forces and factors. The possibility is worth considering.

Language certainly looks like a complex system. It consists of many interacting parts: sounds, meanings, words, inflection, ordering, exceptions, metaphors, idioms and so forth. Moreover, it also manifests the other key properties of complex systems mentioned above:

- It is in a constant state of flux: language change, linguistic development, attrition.
- It exhibits signs of phase transition: languages with OV order transition to VO order; a child’s halting production of two-word utterances quickly evolves into the ability to produce complex sentences of any length; the entire system can be lost as the result of neurological trauma or decline; and so on.
- It manifests non-linear behavior: access to even a small vocabulary and a modest set of combinatory operations results in the ability to produce and understand an unlimited number of sentences of potentially unlimited complexity.

The big question is whether recognizing that language is a complex system sheds light on the sorts of problems that we need to confront as linguists:

- Why do languages have the properties that they do, as manifested in phenomena such as case, agreement, relativization, referential dependencies and the like?
- How are these properties acquired with such ease by children?
- What are the limits on variation across and within languages?

These are the questions with which this book deals. Before beginning to address them, however, it is useful to consider some developments in a more mainstream line of linguistic research. The next chapter examines the Minimalist version of generative grammar initiated by Noam Chomsky in the early 2000s.

---

3 E. N. Lorenz, ‘Does the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?’, American Association for the Advancement of Science, 139th Meeting, Washington DC. December 29, 1972. The title of the talk, chosen by the session chair, was inspired by a critical remark directed at Lorenz several years earlier to the effect that if his theory were right, ‘one flap of a seagull’s wings could change the climate forever.’
By the mid 1990s, doubts had emerged about the viability of essentialism as a central tenet of the generative research program. Indeed, the doubters included Noam Chomsky himself, who launched a new explanatory strategy that came to be known as ‘Minimalism.’

A key feature of this approach involved a fundamental rethinking of Universal Grammar.

*There is no longer a conceptual barrier to the hope that the UG might be reduced to a much simpler form, and that the basic properties of the computational systems of language might have a principled explanation instead of being stipulated in terms of a highly restrictive language-specific format for grammars.*

(Chomsky 2005:8)

This line of thinking culminated in the Strong Minimalist Thesis, the focus of this chapter.

### 2.1 The Strong Minimalist Thesis

In a major reversal of the earlier view that Universal Grammar consists of universal grammatical principles (as its name implies), Chomsky began to move toward an entirely different conception of the language faculty.

*The optimal situation would be that UG reduces to the simplest computational principles, which operate in accord with language-independent conditions of computational efficiency.*

(Chomsky 2017:296)
Strictly speaking, the Strong Minimalist Thesis is an endorsement of emergentism, at least in the broadest sense of the term – a development predicted years earlier by the emergentist pioneer Brian MacWhinney.

Recent developments within the theory of generative grammar, as well as psycholinguistic extension of the generative framework, have suggested that linguistic theory may eventually be compatible with an emergentist framework. (MacWhinney 1999:xvi)

Indeed, the label ‘emergentist’ is now being used by some proponents of the Minimalist approach to describe their work.

... we will present a new view of the nature of parameters, one which represents a major departure from the ‘classical’ view, and which is compatible with minimalist assumptions, as well as being in certain respects more compatible with functionalist views on language acquisition and change. This is the ‘emergentist’ theory of parameters...

(Biberauer & Roberts 2017:142; also Newmeyer 2017:560)

An even more extreme emergentist idea, reaching into the domain of animal cognition, has also been put forward. (Notice the name of the fourth author.)

A recent development, the variational learning model (Yang, 2002), proposes that the setting of syntactic parameters involves learning mechanisms first studied in the mathematical psychology of animal learning.... Parameters are associated with probabilities: parameter choices consistent with the input data are rewarded and those inconsistent with the input data are penalized. The computational mechanism is the same – for a rodent running a T-maze and for a child setting the head-directionality parameter – even though the domains of application cannot be more different.

(Yang, Crain, Berwick, Chomsky & Bolhuis 2017:116)

**The problem of evolution**

Minimalist thinking in contemporary generative grammar is driven by a concern that had previously received little attention – the need for a plausible theory of how language evolved in the human species, apparently quite recently.

... any linguistic theory is going to have to meet two conditions: the conditions of acquirability and evolvability. UG must permit acquisition of [language], and it must have evolved in the human lineage – and if current best guesses are correct, it must have evolved recently.

(Chomsky, Gallego & Ott 2019:25; also Chomsky 2019:12-13)
... the emergence of language is a very recent evolutionary event [within the last 80,000 – 100,000 years]: it is thus highly unlikely that all components of human language, from phonology to morphology, from lexicon to syntax, evolved independently and incrementally during this very short span of time. Therefore, a major impetus of current linguistic research is to isolate the essential ingredient of language that is domain specific and can plausibly be attributed to the minimal evolutionary changes in the recent past.
(Yang, Crain, Berwick, Chomsky & Bolhuis 2017:114)

Obviously, ‘less is more’ in confronting this sort of challenge.

_We can all agree that the simpler conception of language with a reduced innate component is evolutionarily more plausible – which is the impetus for the Minimalist Program of language._
(Yang, Crain, Berwick, Chomsky & Bolhuis 2017:115)

The recent attention to evolutionary considerations is intriguing. In 1975, Noam Chomsky participated in an exchange of views, billed as a ‘debate,’ with the celebrated Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget.

Piaget, who was 80 at the time of the meeting, had devoted his career to the study of child cognitive development. Although he was clearly not familiar with the details of Chomsky’s theory, he expressed skepticism about Universal Grammar based on considerations of evolutionary plausibility.¹

_I cannot accept the [UG] hypothesis … this mutation particular to the human species would be biologically inexplicable; it is already very difficult to see why the randomness of mutations renders a human being able to “learn” an articulate language, and if in addition one had to attribute to it the innateness of a rational linguistic structure, then this structure would itself be subject to a random origin…_
(Piaget 1980:31; also Bates 1994:141)

¹ Elizabeth Bates, a founder of modern emergentism, made a similar point a decade later: ‘It is hard to imagine how we could have developed elaborate, innate and domain-specific mechanisms for language in a relatively short period of time’ (Bates 1994:141).
Chomsky dismissed Piaget’s concerns.

Although it is quite true that we have no idea how or why random mutations have endowed humans with the specific capacity to learn a human language, it is also true that we have no better idea how or why random mutations have led to the development of the particular structures of the mammalian eye or the cerebral cortex. Little is known concerning evolutionary development but from ignorance, it is impossible to draw any conclusion.

(Chomsky 1980a: 36)

In retrospect, it appears that Piaget was prescient in his skepticism over how a cognitive system as elaborate as Universal Grammar, as then conceived, could have evolved in a realistic period of time. Moreover, Chomsky’s response was barely relevant, since it evoked biological structures (the mammalian eye and the cerebral cortex) that evolved over millions of years, compared to the apparent quite sudden emergence of language within the last 200,000 years.

At the time, Piaget’s position was not taken seriously, but today he is being hailed in some quarters as an early Minimalist!

... some aspects of Piaget’s vision were on the right track, but premature. In some sense, Piaget was a minimalist, a modern biolinguist ante litteram. Chomsky’s ‘classical stance’ (rich, overspecified UG) may have been a necessary step in the development of the field, but in the long run, at least some aspects of Piaget’s vision may prove more productive ...

(Boeckx 2014:90-91)

It is easy to see a non-linear effect here. Had Chomsky grasped the importance of Piaget’s point at the time, UG would have been nipped in the bud. There would have been no Government-and-Binding theory or its various Principles-and-Parameters successors. Some scholars who went into other professions would have become linguists, and some who became linguists would have gone into other professions. Linguistics would have been a very different discipline, although, of course, we will never know how different. That’s just the way emergence works.

2.2 Rebooting Universal Grammar

The term ‘language faculty’ is widely used within linguistics to refer to the ability to acquire and use language – a distinctly human trait. Proponents of Universal Grammar note the uniqueness of language at every opportunity as if that fact were a novel discovery or an issue of contention. It is neither. As Jackendoff (2002:94) notes, ‘it is an ancient observation that only humans speak.’ As the following broad sampling of remarks
illustrates, this is the consensus view among modern scholars as well, regardless of their theoretical persuasion.

Language is a purely human and noninstinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols.
(Sapir 1921:7)

From time immemorial, the animals and spirits of folklore have had human characteristics thrust upon them, including always the power of speech. But the cold facts are that Man is the only living creature with this power.
(Hockett 1958:569)

Clearly no one denies that human beings are the only creatures that are able to learn and use grammar in its full-blown form.
(Elman, Bates, Johnson, Karmiloff-Smith, Parisi & Plunkett 1996:372)

Language is one of the hallmarks of the human species – an important part of what makes us human.
(Christiansen & Kirby 2003:300)

Language is a unique hallmark of the human species.
(MacWhinney 2005:383)

... language has evolved only in humans ...
(Ambridge & Lieven 2011:365)

**Inside the language faculty**

The key question for linguistics has always been simple and straightforward: of what does the language faculty consist? It is here that generative linguistics made its mark in the history of ideas by making Universal Grammar the centerpiece of its theory of the language faculty.

_UG is the theory of the human faculty of language._
(Chomsky 1977:3; also 74)

_UG is a theory of the “initial state” of the language faculty, prior to any linguistic experience._
(Chomsky 1986b:3-4)

_UG is a theory of the initial state S₀ of the relevant component of the language faculty._
(Chomsky 1993:1)
It is amply clear what that theory proposed: an inborn system of grammatical categories and principles of the type exemplified in Lectures on Government and Binding and countless subsequent publications by hundreds of scholars, led by Chomsky himself, over a period of many years. (If you’re having any doubts about what traditional Universal Grammar was like, have another look at the Empty Category Principle, outlined in §1.1.) The published literature is replete with assertions that confirm the character of UG as it developed over a period of several decades, beginning in the 1960s.

... the child has an innate theory of potential structural descriptions that is sufficiently rich and fully developed so that s/he is able to determine ... which structural description may be appropriate [for any particular sentence].

(Chomsky 1965:32)

... universal grammar (UG) [is] the grammar underlying the grammars of all particular human languages...

(Piattelli-Palmarini 1989:23)

Children are preprogrammed to adhere to [certain linguistic principles] as part of the blueprint for their development. Just as a child cannot help but grow fingers and toes, and not wings or claws, so these linguistic principles, and not others, grow in the child.

(Crain & Thornton 1998:27)

Where does linguistic knowledge come from? ... this knowledge is inborn.

(Guasti 2002:17)

... children are born with a set of universal linguistic principles ... many aspects of adult grammar are innate.

(Crain, Goro & Thornton 2006:31)

Grammar, though abstract and remote, is just like our arms and legs – an apparatus that we have from birth, whose use we refine by experience.

(Roeper 2007:247)

... a great deal of grammatical information must already be present in the child’s brain at birth.

(Snyder & Lillo-Martin 2011:670)

Modern nativists assumed that there exists a language-specific “genetically determined initial state” ... for explaining language growth in the individual. That initial state, named Universal Grammar, contains the innate linguistic principles for language to develop.

(Boeckx & Longa 2011:258)
The UG hypothesis argues that at least some of the learning biases necessary to solve [the] induction problem take the form of innately specified, language-specific constraints ..., which often correspond to specific linguistic phenomena.
(Pearl & Sprouse 2013:24-25)

Universal Grammar ... is essentially a series of biases that allow the child to make sense of hugely ambiguous linguistic data in a uniform and efficient manner. But crucially, the UG-based approach assumes that all of these biases are specific to the domain of language and cannot be derived from other domains at all.
(Becker & Deen 2020:45)

**Salvaging the name**

The traditional UG-based theory of the language faculty now appears to have been wrong, as even many of its former proponents, including Chomsky, have come to recognize (see §2.1). Yet, for some reason, there is an attempt afoot to salvage the term by making ‘Universal Grammar’ the name for the language faculty.

The term Universal Grammar (UG), in its modern usage, [is] a name for the collection of factors that underlie the uniquely human capacity for language – whatever they may turn out to be...
(Nevins, Pesestsky & Rodrigues 2009:357)

*UG is the technical name for the genetic component of the language faculty.*

(Chomsky 2013 ‘After 60+ years of generative grammar: A personal perspective,’ lecture at Princeton University: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rgd8BnZ2-iw, around 21:45)

*The term Universal Grammar (UG) is a label for [the] striking difference in cognitive capacity between “us and them [humans and animals].”*

(Chomsky, Gallego & Ott 2019:230)

The strategy has not gone unnoticed.

*UG comes in two forms: a definitional form and an empirical form. The definitional one is that UG consists of those attributes characteristic of the human mind that makes first language acquisition both possible and systematically successful in the absence of teaching.*

(Rooryck, Smith, Lipták & Blakemore 2010:2651)

*Chomsky’s notion of Universal Grammar (UG) [is now] the programmatic label for whatever it turns out to be that all children bring to learning a language.*

(Evans & Levinson 2009:430)
We do not use the term [Universal Grammar] in its most general sense, in which it means simply “the ability to learn language”. The claim that humans possess universal grammar in this sense is trivially true...

(Ambridge, Pine & Lieven 2014:e53)

The reduction of UG to a terminological convention has proven to be polemically convenient.

The question of whether language exists is, basically, the question of whether UG exists.

(Chomsky 2011:270)

The controversy about the existence of universal grammar is a controversy over whether there is some genetic property that distinguishes human beings from everybody else.

(Chomsky 2012 question-and-answer session: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbKO-9n5qmc, around 2:30)

No rational person can believe that there is no genetic basis for the fact that a human infant, but no other organism, instantaneously and effortlessly extricates from the environment language-relevant data, and in a rather comparable way quickly attains rich linguistic competence, again a feat beyond other organisms even in its rudimentary aspects. But that is what is entailed by denying the existence of UG.

(Chomsky 2015:96)

The existence of UG is hotly denied. Hotly denied. Overwhelmingly. [A] huge literature [is] saying it’s ridiculous. What the literature is saying is that everything is a miracle. That’s exactly what it’s saying. Because there is no alternative [to UG] – there is no coherent alternative.

(Chomsky 2013 ‘After 60+ years of generative grammar: A personal perspective,’ lecture at Princeton University: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rgd8BnZ2-iyw, around 22:54ff)

These remarks are quite surprising. True, many scholars have expressed opposition to the idea of inborn grammatical principles, including now Chomsky himself. However, there is no literature that denies the existence of a uniquely human language faculty and there never has been, as the quotes at the beginning of §2.2 help show. The proposal that humans have an inborn ability to learn and use language is not a breakthrough for cognitive science. It is simply a statement of the position that everyone in the field has always held, including many opponents of generative grammar, as the following assertions confirm.

In one way or another, every modern approach to language acquisition deals with the fact that language is constructed anew by each child, making use of innate capacities of some sort.

(Slobin 1985:1158)
... there is a biological foundation for language, just not in the form of specific linguistic structures preformed in the human genome. The issue, then, is not whether human beings are biologically prepared for language acquisition; they are.
(Tomasello 1995:133 & 137)

... there are compelling reasons to believe that the possession of language by humans has deep biological roots. We are the only species that has a communication system with the complexity and richness of language.
(Elman 1999:1)

Proponents of the emergentist view acknowledge that something is innate in the human brain that makes language possible, but that something may not be a special-purpose, domain-specific device...
(Bates & Goodman 1999:33)

Everyone pretty well agrees that human beings are especially suited to learn language.
(O’Grady 2005a:180)

All researchers agree that there is clearly some genetic involvement in speech and language...
(Ambridge & Lieven 2011:368)

The challenge is now the same for everyone – to offer a characterization of the human capacity for language without positing inborn grammatical principles. The evolving Minimalist Program has brought generative grammar ‘back to the pack,’ where it joins a crowded field of ideas and hypotheses, including many of emergentist inspiration. Perhaps too many! Recent interest in emergentism has created ‘an embarrassment of riches,’ notes MacWhinney (2015:9), leaving students and scholars to make sense of a landscape in which ‘all of these approaches fall under the general category of Emergentism.’

In the next chapter, I will outline a deliberately narrow conception of what a contemporary emergentist approach to language might look like.
There are many varieties of emergentism and many ways to exploit its leading ideas in confronting the explanatory challenges presented by the study of language, including the two most central issues of all:

- Why do languages have the particular properties that they do?
- How are those properties acquired by children?

In developing an emergentist approach to these questions, I will propose three theses, each of which runs directly counter to standard lines of thought within formal linguistics.

The first thesis challenges the existence of syntactic structure, the second rejects the reality of grammar, and the third proposes that the operations required to bring together form and meaning in natural language are shaped primarily by processing pressures. Together, the three make up what I will call the Strict Emergentist Protocol.

I will begin by outlining each idea in turn.

### 3.1 Direct mapping

It has long been a matter of consensus that language provides a way to map meaning onto form (sound or gesture) in the case of speech, and form onto meaning in the case of comprehension.

* A sentence is a spoken sound with meaning.
  (Aristotle, cited by Everson 1994:91)

* Grammars are complex behavioral solutions to the problem of mapping structured meaning onto a linear string of sounds.
  (Elman, Bates, Johnson, Karmiloff-Smith, Parisi & Plunkett 1996:39)

* ... every approach to language presupposes, at least tacitly, that a language determines a specific sound-meaning correlation.
  (Chomsky 2015:93)

The challenge, of course, lies in determining the mechanisms by which sound and meaning are associated.
[The study of language is] concerned not with form and meaning separately, but with the connections between them, these being the real phenomena of language.
(Sweet 1891:7)

... a major task of linguistics should be to investigate ... how this thought-to-sound pairing is possible, for thoughts and sounds themselves have little in common aside from the fact that both flow through time.
(Chafe 2018:28)

The dominant view in formal linguistics holds that the mapping between sound and meaning must be ‘mediated’ by syntactic structure. I will refer to this idea as ‘mediated mapping.’

**Mediated Mapping**
The relationship between form and meaning in natural language is mediated by hierarchical binary-branching syntactic representations (i.e., ‘tree structures’).

Mediated mapping is a central doctrine in the literature on generative grammar.

... the correlation of sound and meaning is mediated by syntactic structure ...
(Jackendoff 2007:3)

A crucial part of understanding a sentence is to construct its syntactic structure.
(van Gompel & Pickering 2007:289)

Structural relations such as c-command, expressed in hierarchical sentential representations, determine all sorts of formal and interpretive properties of sentences: agreement and other morphosyntactic properties, the binding of anaphors and other aspects of referential dependencies, etc.
(Rizzi 2016: 338)

In contrast, I will seek to advance the case for a more direct relationship between form and meaning – the thesis of direct mapping.
**Direct Mapping**

The mapping between form and meaning does not require the mediation of syntactic representations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FORM</th>
<th>MEANING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Harry left</em></td>
<td><em>LEAVE</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>&lt;h&gt;</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The principal consequence of this proposal is the elimination of syntactic structure as a level of representation.¹

> Only two levels of processing are specified: a functional level (where all the meanings and intentions to be expressed in an utterance are represented) and a formal level (where the surface forms appropriate for a given meaning/intention are represented). Mappings between the formal and functional levels are ... direct.
> (MacWhinney, Bates & Kliegl 1984:128)

> [Language] maps a string of words directly onto a semantic representation without the mediation of grammatical principles or syntactic structure.
> (O’Grady 2015:102)

> Syntactic representations are neither computed during comprehension nor in production.
> (Christiansen & Chater 2016:17)

To avoid possible confusion, two clarifications are in order. First, the rejection of syntactic structure applies specifically to ‘tree structures.’ It does not deny that speech involves words of particular types (nouns, verbs, etc.) that are inflected and linearized in particular ways. Second, I am not proposing that syntax can be dispensed with, only that it should be reconceptualized as a set of operations that map strings of words directly onto semantic representations and vice versa in ways to be explored in the chapters that follow.

### 3.2 Algorithmic orientation

In influential work, Marr (1982) proposed that cognitive systems can be studied at three different levels of analysis.

---

¹ A different line of inquiry may someday support this conclusion. In widely used cue-based or content-addressable theories of memory retrieval during parsing (e.g., Lewis et al. 2006), items are stored and organized based on their semantic and morpho-syntactic features. Systems of this type cannot easily encode hierarchical structure. For discussion, see Alcocer & Phillips (2012), Wagers & McElree (2013), and Cunnings (2017).
Marr’s three levels of analysis:

- The computational level describes the goal(s) of the system, the information that it manipulates and the constraints that it must satisfy.

- The algorithmic/representational level is concerned with the representations and data structures involved and the algorithms that manipulate these representations.

- The implementational/physical level focuses on how the system is physically realized (e.g., what neural structures and neuronal activities implement the visual system).

(Marr 1982; also Johnson 2017)

Generative grammar offers a computational-level theory as it is concerned solely with the study of language as a system of knowledge, not with the question of how that knowledge is put to use in the course of speech and comprehension.

Finding algorithms by which Chomsky’s theory may be implemented is a completely different endeavor from formulating the theory itself. In our terms, it is a study at a different level, and both tasks have to be done.

(Marr 1982:28)

Linguistic theories are computational-level theories of language, while psycholinguistic theories of comprehension or production are algorithmic-level descriptions of how knowledge of language can be put to use.

(Johnson 2017:172)

On Chomsky’s view, here is what a generative grammar does:

To avoid what has been a continuing misunderstanding, it is perhaps worthwhile to reiterate that a generative grammar ... attempts to characterize in the most neutral possible terms the knowledge of the language that provides the basis for actual use of language by a speaker-hearer. When we speak of a grammar as generating a sentence with a certain structural description, we mean simply that the grammar assigns this structural description to the sentence...

(Chomsky 1965:9; also 1957:48)
To make the point clear, Chomsky proposes an analogy with arithmetic.

... *the algorithm level doesn’t exist for [arithmetic]. It’s the same with language. Language is kind of like the arithmetical capacity. There’s some system in there that determines the sound and meaning of an infinite array of possible sentences. But there’s no question about what the algorithm is.*

(Chomsky 2012a; also Momma & Phillips 2018:235)

... *a rule of multiplication is described as if it’s an action but it isn’t. The same for generative processes; there’s no algorithm. There’s an implementation, but no algorithm.*

(Chomsky 2013, from a talk entitled ‘After 60+ years of generative grammar: A personal perspective,’ given at Princeton University. Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rgd8BnZ2-iw; the excerpt above occurs at 1:28:56)

As traditionally conceived, the study of grammatical systems informs and guides a separate research program devoted to the investigation of ‘performance’ – the use of language to produce and understand speech.

*When we say that a sentence has a certain derivation ..., we say nothing about how the speaker or hearer might proceed, in some practical or efficient way, to construct such a derivation. These questions belong to the theory of language use – the theory of performance.*

(Chomsky 1965:9; also 1957:13)

Still, it is widely assumed in work on formal syntax that the grammar has a significant role to play in speech and comprehension.

*[Parsing and perception] have their own mechanisms, and can access unbounded external resources, but in doing so they surely access the generative mechanisms ...*

(Chomsky 2015:95-96)

This view is widely adopted in psycholinguistic work as well.

... *the most basic assumption about the nature of the human sentence processor is that it obeys the fundamental principles of grammar.*

(Ferreira, Christianson, & Hollingworth 2001:13)

*Because the correlation of sound and meaning is mediated by syntactic structure, the processor must ... develop enough syntactic structure in both perception and production to be able to make the relation of sound and meaning explicit.*

(Jackendoff 2007:3)
When sentences are processed, speakers and listeners build syntactic structures...

(Traxler 2011:355)

Humans use their linguistic knowledge in at least two ways: on the one hand, to convey what they mean to others or to themselves, and on the other hand, to understand what others say or what they themselves say. In either case, they must assemble the syntactic structures of sentences in a systematic fashion, in accordance with the grammar of their language.

(Momma & Phillips 2018:234)

In contrast to the standard view, the Strict Emergentist Protocol focuses exclusively on the algorithmic level. There is no grammar – no system of knowledge independent of the operations that produce and interpret speech.

Algorithmic Orientation

The mapping between form and meaning is executed by algorithms operating in real time in the course of speaking and understanding.

Direct Mapping and Algorithmic Orientation fit well together: the first thesis denies the existence of syntactic structure, and the second rejects the mechanism (generative grammar) that produces representations of this type in the first place.

3.3 Processing determinism

Taken together, direct mapping and algorithm-level analysis virtually force a third thesis: in the absence of grammar, the properties of language must be explained in other ways. The most promising line of inquiry, I believe, involves the need to manage processing cost – the demands that storage and computation place on the resources of the language faculty.

Processing Determinism

The properties of algorithms are shaped by forces that seek to minimize processing cost.

Two types of forces seem to be in play – one internal and the other external.

Internal forces

Internal forces, which are my core concern here, reflect limitations on cognitive resources, particularly those related to working memory – the system responsible for the temporary storage and manipulation of information (e.g., Gathercole 2008:33).

... the [processor] should operate in the most efficient manner possible, promptly resolving dependencies so that they do not have to be held any longer than necessary. This is a standard assumption in work on processing, where it
is universally recognized that sentences are built in real time under conditions that favor quickness.
(O’Grady 2005b:7)

*Speed in communicating the intended message from speaker to hearer and minimal processing effort in doing so are the two driving forces of efficiency...*
(Hawkins 2014:48; also Hawkins 2004:9)

Speed and efficiency can be achieved in a variety of ways. One is to create form-meaning mappings that minimize the burden on working memory.

... *there is an advantage to reducing the burden on working memory, whatever its nature and whatever its capacity ... the effects of this advantage can be discerned in the way that sentences are built.*
(O’Grady 2005b:6)

*The conclusion I derive from much of the working memory literature, and from comparisons of different domain sizes within and across languages, is simply that the more items there are to process ... the harder it is – i.e., ... processing difficulty ... increases where there are more forms and their properties to process and hold in working memory...*
(Hawkins 2014:232)

Another way to improve efficiency is to enhance the prospects for predicting what lies ahead in the sentence.

[Another] *big idea involves frequency, predictability, expectedness, and surprisal. There are different terms here, and differences in detail, but the basic intuition seems to be much the same: the more expected something is, the easier it is to process.*
(Hawkins 2014:232)

*Current psycholinguistic theories emphasize the importance of prediction for efficient language comprehension. This trend dovetails with the broader treatment of cognitive agents as “prediction engines” that anticipate the future and update knowledge databases when their predictions are disconfirmed.*
(Ferreira & Chantavarin 2018:443)

**External forces**

In contrast to internal forces, external pressures arise from factors manifested in experience, including the relative frequency of particular items and patterns in the speech of others. This too makes sense: the more frequently a word or pattern is heard and used, the stronger and more accessible the associated processing operations become.
The processes that create templates ... automatically give greatest associative strength to those aspects of analysis that occur most frequently. This has the consequence that broad-ranging canonical sentence patterns will be the most strongly confirmed. (Townsend & Bever 2001:175)

A word or ... syntactic construction ... must reach a certain activation threshold in order to become available ... The activation ... will fluctuate as a consequence of its recency and frequency of use... (Paradis 2004:29)

Repeated exposure to a particular [linguistic] pattern ... increases [the] speed and fluency of processing of the pattern. (Bybee & McClelland 2005:396)

Every time a target is retrieved, its activation increases. (Jaeger & Tily 2011:325)

... frequency information is an important source of predictive processing in native speakers. (Kaan 2014:262)

... items become more readily available .... as a result of being used in processing ...
(Sharwood-Smith & Truscott 2014:96)

... automatization is a gradual process driven by frequency. (Diessel 2015:315)

... the more frequently a construction is used, the easier it becomes to process. (Imamura, Sato & Koizumi 2016:2)

Taken together, internal and external forces favoring efficiency, speed and accessibility create ‘attractor effects’ that direct language learners and language users down particular computational paths. As we will see in due course, those paths minimize processing cost, ultimately shaping much of what we think of as ‘syntax.’ First, though, it is necessary to avert potential confusion involving the goals of the minimalist and emergentist programs.

An overlap in terminology
A key claim of the Strong Minimalist Thesis is that language is shaped by the demands of ‘efficient computation.’ (In the generative literature, these demands are sometimes dubbed ‘third-factor effects,’ in contrast to the constraints imposed by UG and the information gleaned from experience.)
... the principles of language are determined by efficient computation.
(Berwick & Chomsky 2011:30)

A primary goal of linguistic theory ... has been to try to reduce UG assumptions to a minimum ... There have been two approaches to this problem: one seeks to reduce or totally eliminate UG by reliance on other cognitive processes; the second has approached the same goal by invoking more general principles that may well fall within extra-biological natural law, particularly considerations of minimal computation...
(Chomsky 2011:263; also 2005:9 and 2019:21)

The optimal solution would be that UG reduces to the simplest computational principles, which operate in accord with language-independent conditions on computational efficiency.
(Chomsky 2017:296)

The mention in these passages of ‘cognitive processes,’ ‘simplicity’ and ‘efficiency’ overlaps with the terminology used in the emergentist literature to describe processing.

... efficiency is the driving force behind the design and operation of the computational system for human language.
(O’Grady 2005b:2)

... efficiency relates to the most basic function of languages which is, as I see it, to communicate information from the speaker (S) to the hearer (H): Communication is efficient when the message ... is delivered ... in rapid time and with the most minimal processing effort that can achieve this communicative goal.
(Hawkins 2014:230-31)

At times, it appears as though Chomsky is referring to real-time processing when he discusses computation, as he makes reference to memory, forgetting, load, cost and the like.

We therefore hope to be able to establish a “Phase Impenetrability Condition,” which guarantees that mappings to the two interfaces can forget about what they have already done, a substantial saving in memory.

... What objects constitute phases? They should be as small as possible, to minimize computational load.
(Chomsky 2005:16-17)

[The mapping to the conceptual-intentional interface] is universal, hence in effect instantaneous and costless.
(Chomsky 2007, note 17)
Nothing more than phase-level memory is required to identify [certain] properties at the semantic interface, where the information is required.  
(Chomsky 2008:145)

... minimization of computation calls for erasure of all but one copy, so that the phonological component can forget about the others.  
(Chomsky 2008:146)

Despite the allusions to memory and forgetting, to cost and to speed, Chomsky is not proposing a model of how sentences are produced and comprehended; his notion of computational efficiency cannot be equated with processing cost, which he sometimes refers to as ‘communicative efficiency’ (e.g., 2011:275).2 As previously noted (§3.2), Chomsky’s proposals apply to a system of knowledge, viewed abstractly and sometimes described metaphorically, not to the algorithms that create form-meaning mappings in the course of speech and comprehension.

In sum, the Strict Emergentist Protocol defines what might be called a theory of ‘natural syntax.’ Put simply, such a theory seeks to understand the properties of language by reference to a more general constraint on efficient cognition.

... the avoidance [and minimization] of cognitive demand is a fundamental principle of cognition...  
(Christie & Schrater 2015:2, citing Kool et al. 2010)

A spate of recent work demonstrates that humans seek to avoid the expenditure of cognitive effort, much like physical effort ...
(otto & Daw 2019:92)

On the view that I will develop, cognitive demand in the case of language is managed in exactly the way prescribed by the Strict Emergentist Protocol – the mapping between form and meaning is executed without the mediation of syntactic structure, by algorithms operating in real time and shaped by forces that seek to minimize processing cost.

---

2 Both uses of the term ‘computational’ are appropriate in their own right, since a computation is simply an operation on a representation.
One of the most fundamental tenets of modern linguistics is that languages have a grammar – a system of ‘rules’ that distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable sentences based on their syntactic properties.

The fundamental aim in the linguistic analysis of a language L is to separate the grammatical sequences which are the sentences of L from the ungrammatical sequences which are not sentences of L and to study the structure of the grammatical sequences.

(Chomsky 1957:13)

This idea is inconsistent with the Strict Emergentist Protocol, which calls for a direct mapping between form and meaning that is driven by processing-based algorithms.

**Direct Mapping**

The mapping between form and meaning does not require the mediation of syntactic representations.

**Algorithmic Orientation**

The mapping between form and meaning is executed by algorithms operating in real time in the course of speaking and understanding.

**Processing Determinism**

The properties of algorithms are shaped by forces that seek to minimize processing cost.

My goal in this chapter is to outline the first of several steps needed to implement a system of form-meaning mapping that complies with the Emergentist Protocol.

### 4.1 The basics of mapping

There can be no doubt that the use of language requires a cognitive system that brings together form and meaning in a way that is compatible with the practices of other members of a speech community. It has been suggested that this system is by definition a generative grammar – a proposal that significantly narrows the boundaries within which debate over the nature of language can take place.

To question the validity of generative grammar is to hold that there is no specific sound-meaning correlation ... that differentiates, say, English and
Finnish. Since no one believes that, there can be no serious question about the validity of generative grammar, though of course that leaves open the form that it might take.  
(Chomsky 2015:93; also 1965:6-7)

A related issue involves the distinction between a grammar and a processor, which aligns roughly with the contrast between Marr’s computational and algorithmic levels (see §3.2).

[Theories of grammar] are concerned with what the [sentence’s] structure is for either speaker or hearer. Processing theories are concerned with how the structure is built in real time...

(Jackendoff 2002:57 & 31)

The challenge for a theory of natural syntax (and for linguistic emergentism in general) does not turn on a distinction between a grammar and a processor – the contrast is clear enough. The real question is whether a grammar is essential to an explanatory theory of language. There has been little serious debate on this matter, but the legitimacy of the question has occasionally been acknowledged.

... there must be psychological mechanisms for speaking and understanding, and simplicity considerations thus put the burden of proof on anyone who would claim that there is more than this. To defend the more traditional view, what is needed is some sign of life from the postulated mental grammar.

(J.D. Fodor 1978:470)

My plan is to start, in this chapter and the next two, with a very simple set of facts involving canonical word order – arguably the most fundamental typological feature of all. The goal will be to show, bit by bit, that the widely supposed need for a grammar to accommodate these and other facts represents a significant error in our thinking about language.

Representing form and meaning

The sort of algorithms that are needed to satisfy the Strict Emergentist Protocol assume the existence of a representation of sound (gesture in the case of sign language) and a representation of meaning. I will have little to say here about the representation of sound, for which a string of written words will stand as a proxy. Moreover, for the most part, I will make use of very simple semantic representations that contain little more than information about predicates and their arguments. In the examples that follow, predicates are represented in upper case and arguments in italicized lower case, along the lines illustrated below; see Kroeger (2018:67-68) for a similar notation.
A full semantic representation must of course include information about tense, aspect, modality, number, gender, definiteness and the like. As the need arises, I will occasionally add information of this type. Nonetheless, as we will see, the form-meaning mappings underlying a very substantial number of syntactic phenomena require reference to little more than the pared-down representations exemplified above.

Semantic representations do not come ready-made of course; they must be built. My key proposal in this regard is that all mappings between form and meaning start with a maximally simple template, called a *semantic base*. As depicted below, the semantic base consists of a position for a predicate (PRED) and a position for a single argument – henceforth the *base argument* (represented by the symbol $\beta$).

### The semantic base

$$\text{PRED}$$

$$\langle \beta \rangle$$

The semantic base is the *sine qua non* of syntax – the minimal and least costly semantic representation needed for forming and interpreting a sentence of any type.

### The Semantic Base Hypothesis

In both production and comprehension, the processor takes the semantic base as its starting point.

There is good reason to think that the processor benefits from knowing what lies ahead.

*... both production and comprehension involves extensive use of prediction.*

(Pickering & Garrod 2013:332)

*Predictive mechanisms are likely important for the robustness of language understanding ...*

(Phillips & Ehrenhofer 2015:414)

The relevant prediction in the case at hand lies in the certainty that every clause will have as its foundation a semantic representation consisting of a predicate and at least one argument. Put simply, the semantic base is the foundation of syntax.

In order to pre-empt possible misunderstandings, three additional points are in order:

- The base argument position is thematically and topically unspecified. Depending on the choice of predicate, it could ultimately accommodate an
agent, a patient or some other argument type. Moreover, depending on the context, the base argument could be used to convey new or old information; it could be definite or indefinite; and so on.

• The base argument need not be overtly expressed. Like the null arguments that appear in many languages, it nonetheless has a place in the semantic representation.

• There may be a small number of verbs in some languages that, contrary to the prediction of the Semantic Base Hypothesis, literally have no argument (so-called ‘zero valency’). Spanish llover ‘to rain’ is often mentioned as an example. However, such verbs are rare, and the cost of correcting the failed prediction (by deleting the default argument position) is too minor to be disruptive.

With these ideas in mind, we can now consider some actual examples. I will initially focus on quite elementary syntactic phenomena – mostly word order in simple canonical sentences. However, the stakes will be raised significantly as we progress through the next several chapters.

4.2 Simple intransitive patterns

I will begin by considering clauses that consist of an intransitive verb and a sole argument, often informally called its ‘subject.’ (I employ the terms ‘subject’ and ‘direct object’ for the purpose of descriptive convenience only; the use of grammatical relations in any other way would entail the existence of syntactic representations, in violation of the thesis of Direct Mapping.)

Two algorithms

Let us take as our first example the English sentence Harry left, which has the (simplified) form and meaning repeated below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harry left.</td>
<td>LEAVE &lt;h&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two mapping algorithms are needed here, one to identify the nominal Harry as the predicate’s only argument and another to associate the verb left with the predicate function. As a first approximation, these algorithms can be formulated as follows. (The symbol \( \mapsto \) stands for ‘is mapped onto.’)

• The First-Argument Algorithm:

  Map the referent (Ref) of the nominal onto the first-argument position.

  \[
  N \mapsto \text{PRED} \\
  \text{<Ref..>}
  \]
The Predicate Algorithm:

*Map the content of the verb onto the predicate position.*

\[ V \mapsto \text{EVENT} \]

Here is how these algorithms go about mapping the form *Harry left* onto the appropriate semantic representation.

**Harry left.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 0: Projection of the semantic base</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRED &lt;β&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1: First-Argument Algorithm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Harry</em>... \mapsto \text{PRED} &lt;h&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(The referent of the nominal is mapped onto the first-argument position.)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 2: Predicate Algorithm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Harry left</em> \mapsto \text{LEAVE} &lt;h&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(The content of the verb is mapped onto the predicate position.)*

Used in this way, the two algorithms make up a processing routine that helps define the skeletal syntax of an intransitive sentence in a language such as English.

**VS patterns**

As the preceding example helps illustrate, the order in which algorithms are activated reflects (and determines) a sentence’s word order. Thus, activation of the First-Argument Algorithm before the Predicate Algorithm a sentence such as *Harry left* reflects the fact that English is a ‘subject–verb’ (SV) language. Things work slightly differently in a verb-initial language such as Irish.

D’imigh Harry.
left Harry
‘Harry left.’

Here too the sentence’s word order reflects the relative timing of the two basic algorithms that we have been considering – but with a different end result.
**D’imigh**  **Harry.**

left  Harry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 0: Projection of the semantic base</th>
<th>PRED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;β&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1: Predicate Algorithm</th>
<th>( D’imigh ) ( \Rightarrow ) LEAVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;β&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 2: First-Argument Algorithm</th>
<th>( D’imigh ) Harry ( \Rightarrow ) LEAVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;h&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can easily be seen here, the mapping operations for English and Irish are identical. However, they differ in the order in which they apply, in accordance with the language’s choice of linearization option – SV or VS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SV routine</th>
<th>VS routine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1:</td>
<td>Step 1:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Map 1st argument</td>
<td>Map verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2:</td>
<td>Step 2:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Map verb</td>
<td>Map 1st argument</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This idea offers a natural way to make sense of word order: it is a simple timing effect reflecting the order in which algorithms are activated.

Yet another possibility is manifested in Spanish, in which both SV and VS orders are permitted.

Harry partió.    Partió    Harry.

Harry left    left    Harry

Here, the algorithms can apply in either order, with a subtle side-effect: the VS order places the referent of the subject in focus, making that pattern particular appropriate as in the answer to a question such as ‘Who left?’ (e.g., Bolinger 1954, Contreras 1978).

### 4.3 Algorithms for production

Although I will focus in this book on the mapping of form to meaning rather than vice versa, it is worth noting that speech production also invites an algorithmic treatment. Indeed, in the simplest case, production and comprehension could be the product of the same algorithms, running in opposite directions.
Two production algorithms

- The First-Argument Algorithm:
  Map the first argument onto the nominal.

\[ \text{PRED} \rightarrow \text{N} \]
\[ \langle \text{REF} \rangle \]

- The Predicate Algorithm:
  Map the predicate onto the verb.

\[ \text{PRED} \rightarrow \text{V} \]
\[ \langle \ldots \rangle \]

Here is an example of how this might work for the sentence *Harry left*.

**Production routine for *Harry left*.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 0: Meaning to be encoded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LEAVE [ \langle h \rangle ]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1: First-Argument Algorithm for Production</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LEAVE [ \rightarrow \text{Harry} \ldots ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ \langle h \rangle ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(The first argument is mapped onto a nominal.)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 2: Predicate Algorithm for Production</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LEAVE [ \rightarrow \text{Harry left.} ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ \langle h \rangle ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(The predicate is mapped onto a verb.)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The close parallels between comprehension and production are consistent with the view that the two uses of language draw on essentially the same processing mechanisms.

... we know that for the most part linguistic information functions fairly uniformly in many diverse kinds of processing activity, including comprehension, production, translation ... That there is so close and predictable a relationship between the production activity and comprehension activity of any given speaker of a natural language militates strongly against any theory on which the production [system] is independent from the comprehension [system].

(Sag & Wasow 1999:224)

*I take the computational system ... to be identical in the relevant respects for both production and comprehension ...*

(O’Grady 2005b:7)
Traditional accounts of language assume separate processing “streams” for production and comprehension. They adopt ... a perspective that is incompatible both with the demands of communication and with extensive data indicating that production and comprehension are tightly interwoven.
(Pickering & Garrod 2013:346)

... production involves essentially the same representation-building processes as comprehension, except in reverse...
(Sharwood-Smith & Truscott 2014:96)

... fundamental properties of parsing and generation mechanisms are the same... differing behaviors reduce to differences in the available information in either task.
(Momma & Phillips 2018:248)

I leave open the question of the extent to which the mirror-like symmetry seen in the production and comprehension of simple intransitive patterns might hold more generally.

4.4 Algorithms and ‘grammaticality’
The standard view of the relationship between grammar and processing within generative linguistics is that the processor draws on procedures that implement grammatical rules and principles.

Most theories of sentence processing today incorporate the claim that parsing is both fast and grammatically controlled... Each new word is incorporated into the current representation in accord with the grammar.
(Frazier 1998:126)

... the most basic assumption about the nature of the human sentence processor is that it obeys the fundamental principles of grammar.
(Ferreira, Christiansen, & Hollingworth 2001:13)

The division of labor assumed in these descriptions allows the grammar to be responsible for well-formedness, leaving the processor with the job of expressing and interpreting sentences that satisfy the ‘grammaticality filter.’

My view is substantially different. Consistent with the principles of direct mapping and algorithmic orientation, I treat ‘ungrammaticality’ simply as a failure of mapping. The key idea, to be discussed in more detail in chapter 13, is that the repeated activation and use of particular algorithms and sequences of algorithms creates processing routines, which come to serve as well-worn paths for mapping a form of a certain type onto a corresponding semantic representation. With time and experience, processing routines become entrenched and inflexible to the point where alternatives are no longer countenanced.
Once strengthened to the point where they are more or less fixed, ... routines have the de facto effect of defining a set of acceptable sentences.
(O’Grady 2005b:212)

... if learners consistently hear structures of type X and never hear some alternative, Y, then inferring the ungrammaticality of Y seems a safe bet.
(Hawkins 2014:69; also Stephanowitsch 2008)

This is why – to take a simple example – speakers of English routinely activate the First-Argument Algorithm before the Predicate Algorithm, rather than vice versa. The more familiar and entrenched routine wins out over unattested alternatives; SV word order is accepted and VS order is rejected.

The grammar is thus left without a job to do in at least one of the areas (word order) for which it has traditionally been assigned responsibility. Returning to Fodor’s criterion (‘what is needed is some sign of life from the postulated mental grammar’), we must ask whether the grammar, as traditionally construed, will show signs of life in other domains. If the Strict Emergentist Protocol is on the right track, any such signs should turn out to be illusory.

In sum, at least for the cases considered in this chapter, the traditional functions of the grammar – building syntactic structure and adjudicating grammaticality – have been set to the side in favor of algorithms that create direct mappings between form and meaning. The point of proceeding in this way is not to eliminate syntax; it is to uncover deeper explanations for why syntactic phenomena have the particular properties that they do. In this regard, three claims lie at the heart of an algorithmically oriented approach to mapping.

• Algorithms provide a direct mapping between form and meaning, without the mediation of syntactic structure and without reference to grammatical principles.

• The order in which the algorithms are activated reflects and determines a sentence’s word order.

• The entrenchment of particular algorithms has the effect of licensing certain form-meaning mappings to the exclusion of others, thereby creating a de facto standard for assessing a sentence’s acceptability.

The next chapter seeks to extend these ideas to transitive patterns.
Transitivity offers a dramatic increase in the expressive capacity of language, introducing options of various sorts, all of which must be accommodated by the computational resources of the language faculty. The most basic of these options involves the choice of word order.

A survey of basic transitive patterns in 1377 languages reveals that the two most common word orders by far are SOV and SVO, which together represent almost 90% of world’s languages. (The estimates below exclude 189 languages for which no basic word order has yet been determined.)

### Order of subject, verb and direct object

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Order</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SOV</td>
<td>565</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SVO</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VSO</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>all others</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Dryer 2011, ch. 81)

I will focus in this chapter on SVO and VSO/VOS languages with a view to outlining how three simple algorithms interact to create the form-meaning mappings associated with these types of sentences. The next chapter will deal with SOV languages.

### 5.1 Extending the semantic base

The defining feature of transitive patterns is that they are built around a verb that takes two core arguments.¹

```
VERB
<1 2>
```

Given its argument properties, transitivity clearly requires expansion of the semantic base. There are two obvious ways to accomplish this. One option is to add a second-argument position, allowing the base-argument to maintain its status as first argument.

---

¹ For the sake of exposition, I will define a core argument as an argument whose relationship to the verb is not mediated by a preposition, roughly following a suggestion made by Paul Kiparsky in unpublished work in the 1980s. The prototypical core arguments are agents and patients.
Argument Addition (Add a second-argument position)

\[
\text{PRED} \quad \Rightarrow \quad \text{PRED} \\
<\beta> \quad \Rightarrow \quad <\beta \_> \\
\uparrow \quad \quad \quad \quad \text{added argument position}
\]

The other option is to extend the semantic base in the opposite direction by adding a first-argument position.

Argument Addition (Add a first-argument position)

\[
\text{PRED} \quad \Rightarrow \quad \text{PRED} \\
<\beta> \quad \Rightarrow \quad <\_ \beta> \\
\uparrow \quad \quad \quad \quad \text{added argument position}
\]

Both options yield the same result – a predicate with two argument positions.

Two notes of caution are in order before proceeding.

- Argument addition has nothing to do with thematic roles. The operation that creates a first-argument position does not add an agent argument, and the operation that creates a second-argument position does not add a patient argument. These operations create \textit{positions} only.

- The thematic role of the arguments that occupy those positions is determined by the semantics of the predicate. For example, \textit{hunt} has the type of meaning that calls for an agent as its first argument, whereas \textit{fear} implies an experiencer. \((ag = \text{agent}, \ exp = \text{experiencer})\)

\[
\text{HUNT} \quad \quad \quad \quad \quad \text{FEAR} \\
<ag \ldots> \quad \quad \quad <exp \ldots>
\]

\textit{Harry hunts tigers.} \quad \textit{Harry fears tigers.}

It is true, of course, that the first argument of a transitive verb tends to be an agent and the second argument is almost always a patient, but transitivity is not restricted to this particular configuration. On the view adopted here, the defining feature of transitivity is simply the extension of the semantic base to include two argument positions.

As we will see as we proceed, the strategy used to extend the semantic base has important consequences for a language’s morphosyntax. I will return to this matter in chapter 10. In the meantime, I will be focusing on languages, including English, that expand the semantic base by adding a second-argument position.
SVO patterns

Bringing together form and meaning in a transitive pattern requires two operations. The first is Argument Addition, described above, which expands the semantic base. The other is an algorithm that maps the second argument onto that newly added position.

The Second-Argument Algorithm

Map the referent of the nominal onto the second-argument position.

\[ N \mapsto \text{PRED} \]

\[ <1 \text{REF}> \]

In an SVO language such as English, the Second-Argument Algorithm applies after the Predicate Algorithm, reflecting (and ensuring) that the second argument is post-verbal. Here is an example.

**Harry plays football.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 0: Projection of the semantic base</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRED&lt;br&gt;(&lt;\beta&gt;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1: First-Argument Algorithm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Harry</em>... (\mapsto) PRED&lt;br&gt;(&lt;h&gt;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: Predicate Algorithm + Argument Addition (in tandem)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Harry</em> plays... (\mapsto) PLAY&lt;br&gt;(&lt;h__&gt;_) added argument position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3: Second-Argument Algorithm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Harry plays</em> football (\mapsto) PLAY&lt;br&gt;(&lt;h__f&gt;)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As illustrated in Step 2, the verb marks a major milestone in the sentence’s formation since it triggers activation of two mutually dependent algorithms.

- the Predicate Algorithm, which identifies PLAY as the predicate denoted by the verb.
- Argument Addition, which creates a second-argument position to accommodate the transitive predicate.

Now let’s consider how these same procedures might work in a language with verb-initial order.
VSO/VOS patterns

For a VSO language such as Irish, the order of the first two algorithms is reversed, ensuring that the verb is the first component of the sentence to be mapped onto the semantic representation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SVO routine (English)</th>
<th>VSO routine (Irish)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1: Map 1st argument</td>
<td>Map verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: Map verb</td>
<td>Map 1st argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3: Map 2nd argument</td>
<td>Map 2nd argument</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here is an actual example from Irish.

*Imríonn Harry peil.*
plays Harry football

Step 0: Projection of the semantic base

\[ \text{PRED} <\beta> \]

Step 1: Predicate Algorithm + Argument Addition (in tandem)

\[ \text{Play} \ldots \rightarrow \text{PLAY} \]
\[ <\beta> \leftrightarrow \text{added argument position} \]

Step 2: First-Argument Algorithm

\[ \text{Play Harry} \ldots \rightarrow \text{PRED} \]
\[ <h> \]

Step 3: Second-Argument Algorithm

\[ \text{Play Harry football} \rightarrow \text{PLAY} \]
\[ <h_f> \]

Here Step 1 is crucial, as it involves both the identification of the predicate (the Predicate Algorithm) and the creation of a second argument position to accommodate the verb’s transitivity (Argument Addition).²

A very small number of languages have a preferred VOS order – a mere 1.8% of the languages in Dryer’s data.

---

² It has been suggested that there may be two types of VSO languages – those like Irish, in which just the verb occurs before the subject, and those like Niuean, in which the verb and at least some of its dependents appear in a pre-subject position. For discussion, see Clemens & Polinsky (2017).
Malagasy:
Manao mofo Harry.
bake bread Harry
‘Harry baked bread.’

Even in these cases, however, the consensus view is that the agent still occupies the first position in argument structure (a matter to which I return in chapter 9).

This makes ample sense from a processing perspective. As the instigator of the action denoted by the verb, the agent is the starting point of the event, as widely recognized in the semantic literature.

... the agent is at the head of the causal chain that affects the patient.
(Kemmerer 2012:50)

Moreover, patienthood often entails prior agency: an entity cannot become a patient until an agent has acted upon it (Falk 2006:33, Schlesewsky & Schlesewsky 2009:41). For instance, in the event described by the sentence The cat scratched the dog, the patienthood of the dog depends on prior action by the cat. The ubiquity of this asymmetry suggests that events are systematically conceptualized in a way that treats the agent as the first argument.

On this view, then, what makes VOS patterns unusual is that the order in which the argument algorithms are activated does not align with the internal organization of argument structure: the Second-Argument Algorithm is activated before the First-Argument Algorithm.

\textit{VOS order}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Step 1: Map verb.
  \item Step 2: Map 2\textsuperscript{nd} argument.
  \item Step 3: Map 1\textsuperscript{st} argument.
\end{itemize}

A similar departure from the apparent default alignment arises in the case of OSV patterns, which are also highly unusual; see §6.2.

\section*{5.2 Signs of processing determinism}
So far, I have said nothing about the role of processing determinism in shaping the algorithms that I have been describing – other than to suggest that these procedures are strengthened and entrenched through repeated activation (see §4.3). However, there are internal pressures at work here too. One such effect shows up in the positioning of various ‘non-nuclear’ parts of sentences, such as prepositions, possessors (genitives) and modifiers.
It has been known for many decades that interesting correlations exist with regard to the placement of these items.

**Preferred Word Orders in Verb–Object Languages**

- Prepositions rather than postpositions
- N + Adjective
- N + Possessor
- N + Relative Clause

(Greenberg 1963:61ff)

John Hawkins has proposed that these preferences reflect a processing-driven propensity to minimize the distance between items that enter into a semantic dependency.³

**Minimize Domains** (paraphrased)

The human processor prefers to minimize the domain in which relations of dependency are processed.

(Hawkins 2004:123)

Take for instance a verb of motion such as *go, walk* or *dash*, which calls for a preposition denoting direction such as *to* or *toward*. As illustrated below, domain minimization favors prepositions over postpositions in SVO languages so as to minimize the distance between the verb and the direction-marking element.⁴ (The statistical data cited below is from Hawkins 2004:124.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred</th>
<th>Dispreferred</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preposition pattern</td>
<td>Postposition pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>walk to the door</em></td>
<td><em>walk the door to</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V  P</td>
<td>V  P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>↑__↑</td>
<td>↑____________________↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(observed in 161 languages)</td>
<td>(observed in 18 languages)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another example involves the positioning of adjectives and possessors. In order to minimize the distance between a verb and the noun representing its patient argument, we would expect these items to occur after the noun. As illustrated below, Malay works in this way. (English is unusual in this regard; I’ll talk about that shortly.)

---

³ An early version of this insight is evident in Behaghel’s First Law: ‘Conceptually related entities are placed close together’ (Behaghel 1932).

⁴ As illustrated here, I assume a linear measure of distance, in contrast to Hawkins’ calculus, which makes reference to classic syntactic structure (2014:11ff).
Malay:

\[
\text{beli kereta baru} \quad \text{beli kereta lelaki itu}
\]

‘buy a new car’

\[
\text{buy car new} \quad \text{buy car man the}
\]

V  N  Adjective

\[
\text{buy car man the} \quad \text{buy man the car}
\]

V  N  Possessor

\[
\text{buy  car new} \quad \text{buy new car}
\]

V  Adjective  N

\[
\text{buy  car new} \quad \text{buy new car}
\]

V  Adjective  N

(observed in 134 languages)

(observable in 14 languages)

These positioning facts are expected in a syntax shaped by processing pressures.

\[If a particular property can be derived from a smaller rather than a larger domain, then less effort will be expended in its processing, and processing can be faster... Simultaneous processing and working-memory loads are reduced when domains are small.\]

(Hawkins 2004:27; also 2014:13)

An unexpected pattern

It is a well-known fact some languages allow mappings that seem more costly than necessary. A striking example comes from Mandarin, which allows relative clauses to intervene between a verb and the noun representing its patient argument.

\[
yudao [zuotian hui jia de] pengyou
\]

\[
\text{run into yesterday go home LNK friend}
\]

\[
\text{met friends [who went home yesterday]}
\]

The positioning of the relative clause in this pattern creates a very substantial distance between the verb and the noun. Given domain minimization, it would have made more sense to place the relative clause after the noun, as English does.

And, in fact, 99% of all verb–object languages do place relative clauses after the noun (Hawkins 2014:128). But Mandarin, with its billion-plus speakers, does not.

How could this have happened? There is probably no way to know for sure. The more immediate question has to do with whether and how this typologically unusual pattern might fit into the ‘economy’ of the language’s overall syntax.
A promising approach lies in a calculus of affordability that creates an implicational scale for managing cost.

**Affordability**

If a language permits a more costly operation, it should also permit a less costly operation of the same type.


The underlying logic is comparable to that used by consumers: if you’re willing to pay a surcharge of fifty dollars, you would also be willing to pay a surcharge of just twenty dollars. Here’s what this means for Mandarin.

*Relative clauses are on aggregate longer and more complex categories than possessive phrases, which are on aggregate longer than single-word adjectives. If a language permits the relative clause to intervene between [V] and N, it permits the less complex possessive phrase, and if it permits the latter it generally permits single-word adjectives.*

(Hawkins 2004:129)

**Calculus for Domain Minimization**

Single-word adjective > Possessor > Relative clause

And, sure enough, that’s just the way things work in Mandarin. Not only can relative clauses occur pre-nominally, so can a possessor and a single-word adjective.

Intervening possessor in Mandarin:

yu dao  **nage nuhai de** pengyou
visit that girl LNK friend
‘visit that girl’s friend’

Intervening single-word adjective in Mandarin:

yu dao  **hao** pengyou
visit good friend
‘visit a good friend’

A less spectacular example of the same sort of effect can be seen in English, where a possessor can intervene between a verb and the noun representing its patient argument.5

---

5 The complexity of the possessor is a factor here: long possessors like *the right honorable gentleman* are more likely to occur after the possessee (*the policy of the right honorable gentleman*) than before it, according to a corpus study conducted by Rosenbach (2005). The same is true for adjectives; compare *a tall man* with *a man taller than Jerry*. 
Intervening possessor in English:
visit *that girl*’s friends
↑____________↑

The pre-nominal positioning of the possessor may not be optimal, but it nonetheless complies with the logic underlying Affordability: as predicted, English also permits pre-nominal adjectives.

Intervening adjective in English:
visit *good* friends
↑________↑

All these contrasts illustrate an important feature of natural syntax, which is that pressures and preferences – rather than absolute laws – shape syntactic phenomena, including word order. As the examples above illustrate in a preliminary way, it is possible to accommodate variation and flexibility in the mapping between form and meaning while also adhering to the deeper forces that make language possible in the first place.

5.3 Sentences and structure

According to the ideas that I have been outlining, a sentence is just what it has always appeared to be – a string of words. It has no syntactic structure, and it is mapped directly onto a semantic representation by processing algorithms, consistent with the Strict Emergentist Protocol.

This does not mean that there is no structure of any sort in language. Words still consist of syllables and morphemes, for instance, and semantic representations have an obvious internal organization. The key point for now is simply that *syntactic structure*, in the sense of a hierarchical representation of a sentence’s component words and phrases, does not exist – contrary to the standard view.

*Sentences are composed of smaller expressions (words and morphemes). These smaller units are composed into units with hierarchical structure...*

(Hornstein, Nunes & Grohman 2005:7)

*It is beyond dispute that hierarchical structure plays a key role in most descriptions of language.*

(Frank, Bod & Christiansen 2012:4522)

*Syntax is about the study of sentence STRUCTURE.*

(Carnie 2013:72)

*A fundamental property of syntactic structure is that words forming sentences are assembled into hierarchically organized units.*

(Rizzi 2016:341)
In sum, consistent with the ideas developed in the two preceding chapters, there are no procedures to combine words into phrases and sentences. And there are no grammatical rules either. There are just algorithms that implement efficient operations for creating mappings between form and meaning. What we think of as ‘grammatical’ sentences are just sentences for which a language’s processing algorithms can create form-meaning mappings.

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that we are still dealing with the most elementary of facts, largely related to canonical word order, for which three generalizations were proposed.

- The order in which the First-Argument and Predicate Algorithms are activated determines and reflects the relative order of the subject and verb in SVO and VSO patterns.
- The order in which the First-Argument and Second-Argument Algorithms are activated determines and reflects the relative order of the subject and direct object in VSO and VOS patterns.
- The typologically preferred positioning of prepositions, adjectives, possessors and relative clauses is determined by processing cost.

I will extend the scope of our inquiry to a small degree in the next chapter by examining some basic properties of verb-final languages.
Typologists generally draw a line between ‘verb-early’ SVO and VSO languages on the one hand and ‘verb-final’ SOV languages on the other.

... there are two, and only two, logically possible ways for a grammar to be optimally efficient ... namely when heads consistently precede or consistently follow their non-heads.

(Hawkins 2014:136)

At first glance, SOV word order appears to be counter-productive since it postpones to the very end of the sentence the syntactically most informative word – a state of affairs that has triggered some wry humor among speakers of SVO languages.

... after which [in an SOV language] comes the verb, and you find out for the first time what the man has been talking about.

(Mark Twain, ‘The awful German language,’ an essay written in 1880)

Although aimed at German, Twain’s complaint could just as easily be applied to almost half the world’s languages – raising the obvious question of how SOV languages manage to work as well as they evidently do.

At the algorithmic level, the difference between verb-final languages and their SVO and VSO counterparts is minor. In fact, it can be reduced to a difference in the order in which three simple and familiar algorithms are activated.

**The activation order of algorithms by word order type**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SVO</th>
<th>VSO</th>
<th>SOV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1:</td>
<td>Map 1st argument</td>
<td>Map verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2:</td>
<td>Map verb</td>
<td>Map 1st argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3:</td>
<td>Map 2nd argument</td>
<td>Map 2nd argument</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nonetheless, as we will see next, the position of the verb in SOV languages has a significant impact on how the burden of mapping form onto meaning is managed in the course of syntactic computation.
6.1 The basic syntax of SOV languages

Let’s begin by considering an example from Korean that illustrates how algorithms go about mapping an SOV pattern onto an appropriate semantic representation.

Harry-ka chwukkwu-lul hanta.
Harry-NOM football-ACC play

Step 0: Projection of the semantic base

PRED

<br>

Step 1: First-Argument Algorithm

Harry<sub>NOM</sub>... ⨿ PRED

<h<sub>h</sub>>

Step 2: Argument Addition (triggered by the presence of a second nominal) ...

Harry<sub>NOM</sub> football<sub>ACC</sub>... ⨿ PRED

<h<sub>f</sub>>

... permitting activation of the Second-Argument Algorithm

Harry<sub>NOM</sub> football<sub>ACC</sub>... ⨿ PRED

<h<sub>f</sub>>

... second argument

Step 3: Predicate Algorithm

Harry<sub>NOM</sub> football<sub>ACC</sub> play ⨿ PLAY

<h<sub>f</sub>>

A fundamental difference between SOV languages on the one hand and SVO and VSO languages on the other shows up early in this example. As illustrated above, the appearance of the second nominal (‘football’) forces activation of two algorithms:

- Argument Addition, which creates a second-argument position in the projected predicate.
- the Second-Argument Algorithm, which associates the nominal football with the newly created second-argument position.

‘Verb-early’ and verb-final languages differ in a striking way with regard to the predictions that arise in the course of processing:

- In SVO and VSO languages, the verb triggers a prediction about the number and type of arguments that can be expected later in the sentence.
- In SOV languages, the number and type of arguments triggers a prediction about the type of verb that can be expected later in the sentence.
A role for case

It is commonly observed that SOV languages often use case marking to distinguish among a verb’s arguments.

*Universal 41*

*If the verb follows both the nominal subject and the nominal object as the dominant order, the language almost always has a case system.*

(Greenberg 1963:75)

Although Greenberg’s initial generalization was based on a mere 30 languages, its essential correctness has since been confirmed by data from a much larger number of languages.

*Proportion of languages with case distinctions* (sample of 502 languages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SOV</th>
<th>SVO</th>
<th>V-initial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>72%</strong></td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(181/253)</td>
<td>(26/190)</td>
<td>(28/59)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It’s easy to see why case marking is so useful in SOV languages. In the Korean example on the previous page, the accusative case on the second nominal serves a dual function: it, both predicts an upcoming transitive verb and identifies itself as that verb’s second argument. Precisely this point is frequently made in the literature on case and processing.

*Case marking can signal differences in [thematic roles] prior to the verb, ... reducing forward-looking dependencies ...*

(Hawkins 2004:247)

*[Case-marking] allows for the early determination of the thematic role and grammatical function of each nominal argument before the parser reaches the clause-final verb position. ... overt case-marking is a strategy that compensates for the late appearance of V in SOV languages.*

(Ueno & Polinsky 2009:679)

Consistent with these considerations, there is a ‘surprisal effect’ when the expectations generated by the case marking on a preverbal argument cannot be accommodated by the later-occurring verb.
There is a clear surprisal effect in Japanese when the verb *atta* 'met' is received after the NP *Mary-o*, because [that] verb cannot take an accusative-marked NP as its argument.

Bob-*ga* Mary-*o* atta ...  
Bob-*NOM* Mary-*ACC* meet.*PST*


### 6.2 The mechanics of scrambling in SOV languages

A signature feature of SOV languages with case marking is the flexibility that they show in the ordering of arguments. Because case distinguishes the first argument from the second argument, the corresponding algorithms can be activated in either order, as illustrated in the following examples from Korean.

**SOV:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sonye-<em>ka</em> yolisa-<em>lul</em> minta.</th>
<th>Yolisa-<em>lul</em> sonye-<em>ka</em> minta.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>girl-<em>NOM</em> chef-<em>ACC</em> push</td>
<td>chef-<em>ACC</em> girl-<em>NOM</em> push</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>↑ 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;-arg</td>
<td>↑ 2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;-arg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>algorithm</td>
<td>algorithm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘The girl pushes the chef.’

**OSV:**

| ↑ 2<sup>nd</sup>-arg          | ↑ 1<sup>st</sup>-arg          |
| algorithm                    | algorithm                    |

‘The girl pushes the chef.’

The OSV pattern – often referred to as the ‘scrambled’ option – can easily be mapped onto a semantic representation by simply reversing the activation order of the first two algorithms used for transitive clauses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOV order</th>
<th>OSV order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1:</td>
<td>Map 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2:</td>
<td>Map 2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3:</td>
<td>Map verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Map 2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Map 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; argument</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The role of case in regulating the form-meaning mapping required for OSV patterns is illustrated in the following example.
Yolisa-lul sonye-ka minta.

chef\textsubscript{ACC} girl\textsubscript{NOM} pushes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 0: Projection of the semantic base</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;β&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1: Argument Addition + Second-Argument Algorithm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chef\textsubscript{ACC} … \rightarrow PRED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;β c&gt; \leftarrow added argument position</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 2: First-Argument Algorithm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chef\textsubscript{ACC} girl\textsubscript{NOM}… \rightarrow PRED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;g c&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 3: Predicate Algorithm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chef\textsubscript{ACC} girl\textsubscript{NOM} push \rightarrow PUSH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;g c&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The key to accommodating OSV order lies in Step 1, where two things happen.

- The presence of the accusative case on the sentence-initial nominal triggers the creation of a second-argument position in the predicate (Argument Addition).
- Application of the Second-Argument Algorithm maps the sentence-initial nominal onto the newly created position.

Because case has no meaning of its own, it is not mapped onto the semantic representation. Its function is simply to ensure that each nominal in a sentence triggers the appropriate algorithm and ends up being associated with the proper argument position in the semantic representation. Thus, even when the accusative-marked argument precedes its nominative-marked counterpart, listeners should be able to project key properties of the yet-to-be-encountered predicate.

Support for this prediction comes from an eye-tracking study conducted by Frenck-Mestre et al. (2019) that focused on sentences such as the one above. They report that native speakers of Korean can often anticipate the event in the picture on the left (below) before hearing the verb.
This is clear-cut evidence for the role of case in mapping form onto meaning, independent of word order and even of the verb.

**A matter of usage**

OSV patterns are far less common than their SOV counterparts in languages such as Korean and Japanese.

... only 1.2% of the sentences in the Korean Sejong corpus have OSV order.
(Kwon, Polinsky & Kluender 2006:3; also Nam 1988)

... the ratio of frequencies of occurrences between the [SOV] pattern and the [OSV] pattern in Japanese is 17 to 1.
(Kuno 1973:353-54)

Indeed, use of the OSV pattern is largely restricted to situations in which the patient argument is discoursally prominent, often because of its topicality.

*Speakers tend to spell out discourse-prominent items earlier than non-prominent items.*
(Hwang-Jackson 2008:121)

*Leftward movement [increases] the topicality of a moved phrase.*
(Choi 1997:556; also Choi 1999)

... given information [topicality] is produced earlier and new information later.
(Ferreira & Yoshita 2002:670)

A further consequence now follows. If it is true that frequency of activation contributes to the strength and accessibility of a processing protocol (see §4.2), the less used OSV routine should be harder to access and therefore more costly than the more entrenched SOV routine. This seems to be correct.

*In all of the experiments [participant questionnaires, eye-tracking, self-paced reading], we found that scrambled sentences cost more processing resources than canonical sentences.*
(Mazuka, Itoh, and Kondo 2002:157)

[Japanese scrambled sentences have] a non-canonical structure, which demands an additional cognitive load in a human parser.

... [Our] result showed more activation at the left inferior frontal gyrus and the left dorsal prefrontal cortex during the comprehension of scrambled sentences than that of canonical sentences. This indicates, in accordance with previous findings on scrambling ... that the parsing strategy ... demands an additional cognitive activation in the brain.
(Kim, Koizumi, Ikuta et al. 2009:163 & 151-52)
... numerous studies on Japanese have observed that non-canonical [OSV] sentences ... incur higher processing costs than canonical [SOV] sentences.
(Imamura, Sato & Koizumi 2016:2)

... scrambled sentences should be more difficult to process than canonically-ordered sentences. And indeed, many studies have shown longer response latencies and/or higher error rates for scrambled structures in tasks involving comprehension questions or sensicality/acceptability judgments.
(Witzel & Witzel 2016:477)

A further observation sheds additional light on the functioning of the algorithms that are responsible for managing the expressive options permitted by verb-final languages.

... we found that the locus of the processing load is at the second argument of the scrambled sentence.
(Mazuka et al. 2002:158)

O S V
↑
locus of the processing load

Why does the spike in processing load not occur on the sentence-initial argument in OSV sentences? The answer lies in the possibility of a null subject in these languages.

Transitive sentence with a null subject in Korean and Japanese

Chayk-ul ilkessta. (Korean) Hon-o yonda. (Japanese)
book-ACC read.PST.DECL book-ACC read.PST.DECL
‘(S/he) read a book.’ ‘(S/he) read a book.’

The null-subject option is widely exploited in Korean and Japanese; indeed, it is far more commonly manifested than scrambling.

The average proportion of overt subjects across caregivers’ speech [in Korean] ... in adult-to-adult conversations ... is 0.31.¹
(Kim 2000:328, citing Hong 1985; also Kwon & Sturt 2013)

Because subjects are so frequently unexpressed, many sentences require activation of the Second-Argument Algorithm as the initial step in the mapping process. This is what happens in the next example, in which the first argument is represented as ‘?’ to indicate that its identity is left to contextual inference.

¹ Fry (2001) and Kim (2008) give even lower estimates for the use of overt subjects in transitive patterns in Japanese and Korean, respectively.
In sum, a sentence-initial direct object is therefore not a good predictor of an OSV pattern. A far more reliable indicator is the presence of a nominative-marked argument to the right of the accusative.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
o_{\text{ACC}} \quad s_{\text{NOM}} \quad v \\
\uparrow \\
\text{point at which OSV routine can be triggered}
\end{array}
\]

Not coincidentally, this is the very point at which the spike in processing difficulty is observed in Mazuka et al.’s experiment.

### 6.3 More signs of processing determinism

The previous chapter documented an important effect of processing determinism on the ordering of non-nuclear components of sentences (prepositions, possessors and adjectives) in verb–object languages (§5.2). A parallel set of generalizations applies to object–verb languages.

**Preferred word orders in Object–Verb Languages**

- Postpositions rather than prepositions
- Adjective + N
- Possessor + N

(Greenberg 1963:61ff)

These facts help confirm Hawkins’ observation that languages seek to minimize the distance between the verb and parts of the sentences to which it is semantically related.
**Minimize Domains** (paraphrased)

The human processor prefers to minimize the domain in which relations of dependency are processed.

(Hawkins 2004:123)

The relationship between a verb of motion and a morpheme denoting direction or location is once again informative. In contrast to their SVO counterparts, object–verb languages strongly favor postpositions over prepositions. There is a good processing-related reason for this, as the examples below help illustrate. (The statistical tendencies cited here are from Hawkins 2004:124.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred</th>
<th>Dispreferred</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Postposition pattern</td>
<td>Preposition pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( the ) door ( to ) ( walk )</td>
<td>( to ) the door ( walk )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \text{P} \quad \text{V} )</td>
<td>( \text{P} \quad \text{V} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \uparrow )</td>
<td>( \uparrow )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(observable in 204 languages)

By the same reasoning, pre-nominal possessors and adjectives should be preferred over their post-nominal counterparts in SOV languages. This too is true.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred</th>
<th>Dispreferred</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the man’s car ( ) buy</td>
<td>car the man’s ( ) buy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessor ( ) N ( ) V</td>
<td>N Possessor ( ) V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \uparrow )</td>
<td>( \uparrow )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(observable in 177 languages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred</th>
<th>Dispreferred</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>good ( ) food ( ) eat</td>
<td>food good ( ) eat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj ( ) N ( ) V</td>
<td>N Adj ( ) V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \uparrow )</td>
<td>( \uparrow )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are just the sorts of asymmetries that are expected in a syntax shaped by processing pressures. To repeat Hawkins’ observation from the previous chapter:

*If a particular property can be derived from a smaller rather than a larger domain, then less effort will be expended in its processing, and processing can be faster... Simultaneous processing and working memory loads are reduced when domains are small.*

(Hawkins 2004:27; also 2014:13)
In sum, even in the case of the very simple examples that we have been considering, it is possible to see how a theory of natural syntax constrained by the Strict Emergentist Protocol can shed light on various important puzzles:

- Why SOV languages tend to have case.
- How case contributes to the possibility of scrambling.
- Why scrambling increases processing cost.
- Why SOV languages tend to have postpositions, pre-nominal adjectives and pre-nominal possessors.

I will turn next to a puzzle that takes us into the darker depths of syntax, where we find a phenomenon that seems almost deliberately designed to increase processing cost – but in a natural way and for natural reasons.
There are two basic strategies for forming wh questions. The first, called the in situ strategy, places a wh word in the position appropriate for its grammatical relation (as traditionally construed). In an SVO language such as Mandarin, for example, a ‘subject’ wh word occurs in the preverbal position and a ‘direct object’ wh word in the postverbal position.

Subject wh question:
Shei kanjian le ni?
who see ASP you
‘Who sees you?’

Direct object wh question:
Ni kanjian le shei?
you see ASP who
‘Who do you see?’

In contrast, English employs a ‘movement’ strategy that places the wh word at the left edge of the clause.

Subject wh question:
Who is helping Mary?

Direct object wh question:
Who is Mary helping?

The formation of patterns of this type creates a ‘filler-gap dependency,’ also known as a ‘wh dependency.’ Its signature feature is most evident in a question such as the one below, in which the wh word occurs sentence-initially rather than in the position where a second argument would normally appear, marked below by a gap (_).

Who is Mary helping _?

Although I will follow tradition in employing the term ‘filler-gap dependency’ (alongside ‘wh dependency’) and will make use of the gap notation for expository purposes, I do not equate gaps with actual structural positions. They are simply a way to indicate the first
point at which a particular *wh* dependency could be resolved in the course of processing – right after the verb in the example above. A similar view is quite widely held in the psycholinguistic literature (e.g., Traxler & Pickering 1996, and Pickering 2000; see Hawkins 2004:171-72 for discussion).

### 7.1 A *Wh* Algorithm

There is widespread agreement that the resolution of filler-gap dependencies comes with significant processing cost, since the *wh* argument must be stored until a suitable open-argument position can be identified.

> *A well-known finding from the processing literature is that filler-gap structures (such as *wh* questions) strain working memory capacity, because the filler (the *wh* phrase) must be held in working memory until it can be assigned to a gap.*
> (Goodall 2004:102)

> ... there appears to be a consensus on the following basic point in the psycholinguistic literature. Filler-gap dependencies are hard to process, and they are characterized by a heightened processing load and a constant effort to relate the filler to the appropriate gap site ...
> (Hawkins 2004:173)

> *It has been clear for some time that a sentence with [a filler-gap dependency] incurs a relatively high degree of processing difficulty, compared to a minimally different sentence without the dependency.*
> (Hofmeister & Sag 2010:380)

So, why do languages use the ‘movement’ strategy for *wh* questions? Presumably because the front edge of a sentence is a highly salient position, which makes it a good place for the word indicating the type of information that the speaker is seeking. The more urgent issue for now has to do with how filler-gap dependencies can be resolved in the course of mapping form onto meaning.

Two steps are crucial.

- The *wh* word must be temporarily held in a neutral place until there is an opportunity to associate it with an open argument position. I will refer to this as ‘*Wh Storage.*’

  **Wh Storage**

  *Store the *wh* argument in a neutral position.*

  \[ wh \rightarrow \text{PRED} \quad \text{wh}<\ldots> \quad \uparrow \]
• At some later point, the dependency must be resolved by associating the stored \(wh\) argument with an open position in argument structure. I will formulate the relevant algorithm as follows.

**The Wh Algorithm**

 Associate the stored \(wh\) argument with an open position in argument structure.

\[
PRED \quad \rightarrow \quad PRED \quad \quad \quad \quad wh_{\ldots} \rightarrow \quad <\ldots wh_{\ldots}>\]

Here is an example of how these algorithms work in the case of a direct object \(wh\) question.

**What did Dan buy \_?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Projection of the semantic base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wh Storage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>First-Argument Algorithm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Predicate Algorithm + Argument Addition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Wh Algorithm:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As illustrated here, the \(wh\) argument is put into storage (Step 1) and held there while the First-Argument Algorithm maps \(Dan\) onto the appropriate position (Step 2). Once the Predicate Algorithm subsequently maps \(BUY\) onto the \(PRED\) position (Step 3), the \(wh\) argument can be associated with the open second-argument position (Step 4).

The psycholinguistic literature supports exactly this scenario. Indeed, electrophysiological activity in the brain reflecting event-related potentials precisely traces the path that the processor follows in seeking to resolve a filler-gap dependency.
Holding an incomplete wh dependency in working memory [gives] rise to a sustained anterior negativity... Completion of the wh dependency elicits a P600 response.¹


Who do the neighbors usually visit _?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUSTAINED ANTERIOR NEGATIVITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>💬 P600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(For a review of further evidence in support of quick resolution of filler-gap dependencies, see Phillips 2006:797-98 & Phillips & Wagers 2007:747-58.)

So far, so good but a greater challenge lies ahead – the formation and interpretation of filler-gap dependencies that extend across a clause boundary.

### 7.2 Cross-clausal filler-gap dependencies

For the purposes of preliminary discussion, I will focus on bi-clausal sentences in which a predicate takes a clausal second argument, as exemplified below. (Note that I treat ‘clauses’ as predicate-argument complexes, not syntactic phrases.)

Mary said [Dan met a stranger].

SAY

<\textit{m} >

\textit{m} = Mary

MEET

<\textit{d s}>

\textit{d} = Dan, \textit{s} = stranger

As seen here, the matrix predicate SAY takes as its second argument a clausal complex consisting of the predicate MEET and the arguments \textit{Dan} and a stranger.

In such cases, it is possible to create a wh dependency that extends from the left edge of the sentence into the embedded clause.

**Cross-clausal filler-gap dependency:**

Who did Mary say [Dan met _]?

Not all languages permit ‘long-distance’ wh dependencies of this type, and even those that do – like English – often restrict the phenomenon to the clausal arguments of particular matrix verbs.

¹ Sustained negativity and P600 are commonly studied components of brain responses known as event-related potentials (ERPs).
... the only long-distance filler-gap expression to occur with any regularity at all are specific formulas with the verb THINK or SAY.
(Ambridge & Goldberg 2008:353; also Dabrowska 2004:196-200 and Verhagen 2006)

Moreover, there is good evidence that cross-clausal filler-gap dependencies incur significantly more processing cost than their monoclusal counterparts.

One very clear result was that [sentences with cross-clausal wh dependencies were read more slowly than monoclusal sentences containing wh dependencies] ... carrying a filler across a clause boundary and assigning it to a gap ... is the source of the difficulty.
(Frazier & Clifton 1989:104)

If the gap is located in an embedded clause, the filler must be transported across the embedded clause boundary... Carrying a filler across a clause boundary results in additional processing cost.
(Kluender 1998:253; also Kluender & Kutas 1993)

Psycholinguistic research shows ... that processing clause boundaries generally lowers acceptability ratings and causes an increase in processing time.
(Hoffmeister & Sag 2010:383)

There is good evidence that wh dependencies increase the difficulty of a sentence. Sentences with wh dependencies are rated as harder and less acceptable than sentences without wh dependencies, and sentences with longer wh dependencies are rated as harder and less acceptable than sentences with shorter wh dependencies.
(Phillips 2013a:90)

This brings us to the question of how the mapping mechanisms deal with sentences that contain wh dependencies that extend across a clause boundary.

A reactivation operation

Let’s return to our sample sentence.

Who did Mary say [Dan met _]?

A critical region in the formation and interpretation of this sentence occurs at the verb say, by which point the wh word has been encountered, and Mary has been identified as the verb’s first argument.
Who did Mary say

\[
\text{SAY} \\
\begin{array}{c}
wh < m > \\
\uparrow \quad \uparrow \\
\text{stored \(wh\) argument \(1^{st}\) \text{argument}} \\
\end{array}
\]

The status of \textit{who} is yet to be determined, as there is no place for it in the first portion of the sentence. Crucially though, SAY takes a clausal argument, whose presence creates a new set of opportunities to resolve the \textit{wh} dependency.

Who did Mary say … (Dan met)?

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{SAY} \\
wh < m > \\
\uparrow \\
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{PRED} \\
< \ldots > \\
\end{array}
\]

In order to take advantage of those opportunities, the processor must extend the \textit{wh} dependency into the lower clause, where it can be reactivated and ultimately resolved.

Who did Mary say [ …

\[
\uparrow \\
\text{Reactivation of the \textit{wh} dependency occurs around here.}
\]

The necessary procedure, which I will call the Reactivation Algorithm, can be formulated as follows.

\textbf{The Reactivation Algorithm}

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{PRED} \\
wh < \ldots > \\
\uparrow \\
\text{reactivated \textit{wh} dependency}
\end{array}
\]

As depicted here, the \textit{wh} dependency associated with the sentence-initial \textit{wh} word is reactivated at the onset of the embedded clause.

I assume that, like all algorithms, reactivation applies at the first opportunity – that is, as soon as the embedded clause is encountered. Once this has happened, as in the example below, the processor proceeds with its usual intra-clausal routine, identifying the first argument (\textit{Dan}) and the predicate (MEET).

Who did Mary say … \textbf{Dan met} _? \\

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{MEET} \\
wh < d > \\
\end{array}
\]

The \textit{wh} dependency can then be resolved by associating \textit{who} with the second-argument
Some evidence for reactivation

Evidence from a variety of sources confirms the suggestion that the *wh* dependency is reactivated at the approximate point where the processor encounters the embedded clause.

**i. ERP evidence**

Left Anterior Negativity, a sign that a *wh* dependency is being held in memory, is observed at the beginning of the embedded clause.

What did you say [that the children bought _]?  

LAN continues into this region.  

(Kluender & Kutas 1993:608-10; also Phillips, Kanzina & Abada 2005:423^2)

**ii. Reading time evidence**

Increased reading time – a reflex of reactivating the *wh* word – has been observed at the beginning of the embedded clause.

Native speakers of English [*N = 25, mean age = 24*] ‘showed elevated reading times’ at the complementizer THAT in the first sentence below compared to the second one.  

(Marinis, Roberts, Felser & Clahsen 2005:69)

The key sentence types:

- Bi-clausal pattern containing a cross-clausal filler-gap dependency:

  [FILLER]  
  The nurse who the doctor argued [that the rude patient had angered _] went home.  
  [GAP]  

  slow-down around here reflecting reactivation of the *wh* dependency

---

^2 Phillips et al. (2005:423) note that although the negativity persists for the duration of the *wh* dependency, ‘the growth of the negativity is confined to the first clause plus the complementizer that at the beginning of the embedded clause.’

^3 Another measure, considered by Gibson & Warren (2003) and Marinis et al., involves response times at the gap in the embedded clause, which appear to be shortened in cases where the *wh* phrase has been reactivated.
• Bi-clausal pattern with no filler-gap dependency:

The nurse thought the doctor argued [that the rude patient had angered the staff].

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{no wh word and} \\
\text{no slowdown}
\end{array}
\]

Only the first sentence contains a cross-clausal *wh* dependency and only that sentence manifests a slowdown at the onset of the embedded clause – a plausible sign that reactivation took place.\(^4\)

### iii. Acquisition evidence

When young children produce *wh* questions containing a cross-clausal filler-gap dependency, they sometimes repeat the sentence-initial *wh* word at the beginning of the lower clause.\(^5\)

*What* do you think [what pigs eat _ ]?

*Who* did he say [who _ is in the box]?  

... adults can readily reactivate the *wh* phrase covertly and move on to the articulation of the embedded clause ... Some children ... produce another instance of the sentence-initial *wh* phrase to strengthen their memory representation of the filler-gap dependency.


### iv. Typological evidence

Some languages place a copy of the *wh* word at the beginning of the embedded clause.

German (some Cologne dialects):

*Wen* glaubt Hans [wen Jakob _ gesehen hat]? 

whom thinks Hans whom Jakob _ seen has

‘Whom does Hans think that Jakob has seen _?’

(McDaniel 1989:569n)

*Wen* willst du [wen Hans _ anruft]?

who want you who Hans _ call

‘Who do you want Hans to call _?’

(Thornton 1990:220)

---

\(^4\) The *wh* word in these sentences is a relative pronoun rather than an interrogative pronoun, but nothing turns on this; the same type of filler-gap dependency is in play.

Romany:

**Kas o Demiri mislinol [kas Arifa dikhla_]?**
whom does Demiri think whom Arifa saw _
‘Who does Demiri think that Arifa saw _?’
(McDaniel 1989:569n)

Passamaquoddy:

**Wen Mali wewitahamacil [wen kisiniskamuk_]?**
who Mary remember who I.dance.with
‘Who does Mary remember I danced with _?’
(Bruening 2006:28)

A somewhat different effect is found in languages such as Irish, where a special complementizer (aL) occurs at the left edge of clauses into which a wh dependency extends, presumably signaling reactivation of the wh argument. (The complementizer for clauses with no wh dependency is goN.)

**Cé [aL dúradh léithi [aL cheannódh é]]?**
who COMP was.said with.her COMP would.buy _ it
‘Who was she told _ would buy it?’
(McCloskey 2001:94n)

### 7.3 Islands on the horizon

A central issue in the study of filler-gap patterns involves the need for constraints on cross-clausal dependencies, as illustrated in the second of the two sentences below.

**What do you know (for certain) [that he said _ to Jane]?**

* **What do you know (for certain) [who he said _ to _]?**

The embedded clause in the second example is an ‘island’ – a configuration that blocks the extension of a filler-gap dependency.

The search for an explanation of island effects has helped shape the history of syntactic theory since the 1960s.

*I think that it is fair to say that within linguistics there is almost no controversy about the importance of island effects and the need for general and abstract explanations for them.*

(Phillips 2013a:79)
Two general lines of inquiry can be identified. One posits the existence of formal grammatical constraints that are typically treated as principles of Universal Grammar.

*By far the largest body of work on island effects has assumed that they are consequences of formal grammatical constraints that block displacement operations that remove phrases from island domains.*

(Phillips 2013a:78)

The other approach, often dubbed the ‘reductionist’ account, holds that island effects can be traced to processing considerations.

... a competing line of thought [is] that the variation in acceptability judgments associated with [islands], both language-internally and crosslinguistically, can be better explained by appealing to cognitive constraints on language processing.

... if one of the goals of linguistic inquiry is to explain why we have the linguistic constraints that we do, the [processing]-based view accounts for islands as the byproduct of general principles of cognition. In contrast, the [grammar]-based theory offers no insight into WHY islands exist, at least at this time.

(Hofmeister & Sag 2010:367 & 403-04)

The debate is often heated, as the following two comments illustrate.

**Against the reductionist account:**

*There are many challenges facing resource-based reductionist accounts of island effects. What matters here is not the sheer number of challenges, but the fact that so many of the premises of such accounts are not met.*

(Phillips 2013a:108)

**Against the UG account:**

*The grammatical constraints that have been proposed to account for syntactic islands are almost uniformly complex, arbitrary, and ultimately either too strong, too weak, or both. They express intricate and highly specific limitations on just a subset of the linguistic dependencies possible in natural language. They are arbitrary in the sense that they bear no relationship to other constraints, emanate from no general principles of language, and have no relevance or parallel outside language.*

(Hofmeister & Sag 2010:406)

Only the reductionist line of inquiry is compatible with the Strict Emergentist Protocol. I will pursue this approach in the next chapter.
Many different types of constraints on filler-gap dependencies have been proposed over the past several decades. My purpose in this chapter is to outline a reductionist explanation for three of these constraints: a little-discussed island pattern in Russian, a widely studied restriction on multiple *wh* dependencies, and the curious interaction of filler-gap relations with phonological contraction in English. I discuss the notorious ‘that-trace effect’ in an appendix to this book.

Setting aside the possibility of cognitive pathologies, I assume that every normal human being has the processing capacity needed to manage the complexities of their native language. However, processing cost is real and it has a major effect on shaping the internal workings of language, including the syntax of filler-gap dependencies. The following two assumptions are crucial for this line of reasoning.

- Costly processing routines are resisted, unless they are encountered in the speech of others.
- If a costly routine is permitted, less costly routines of the same type must also be allowed.

The latter assumption follows directly from the notion of **Affordability** (see §5.2), restated here.

**Affordability**

If a language permits a more costly operation, it should also permit a less costly operation of the same type.


An application of this idea to the syntax of filler-gap dependencies has been promoted, in one guise or another, at least since the mid 1970s when it surfaced in work by Keenan & Comrie (1977) on the typology of relative clauses. (I will return to this matter in chapter 12.)

... *if a given strategy is used to encode a fairly easy meaning and that strategy is “strong” enough to encode a rather difficult meaning, then it is surely strong enough to encode the meanings of intermediate difficulty.*

(Keenan & Comrie 1977:88)
An affordability metric was later quite widely adopted in processing-based approaches to typology.

*If there is a preference ranking $A > B > C > D$ among structures of a common type in performance, then there will be a corresponding hierarchy of grammatical conventions (with cut-off points and declining frequencies of languages).*

(Hawkins 2004:256; also p. 216ff)

*... the greater the demands that a particular pattern makes on the processor, the less likely that languages will develop a computational routine for dealing with it... This in turn explains the familiar implicational facts ... if the ‘harder’ pattern is possible, then so is the comparable ‘easier’ one.*

(O’Grady 2005b:214)

As we will see next, Affordability also contributes to natural explanation for the syntax of islands.

### 8.1 An island constraint in Russian

There are substantial differences across languages in their tolerance of filler-gap dependencies. A very basic difference involves the contrast between intra-clausal and cross-clausal *wh* dependencies, first mentioned in the preceding chapter. (As previously noted, I use the term ‘clause’ as shorthand for what might better be called a ‘predicate-argument complex.’ As before, ‘gaps’ are used to represent the approximate point in time at which a *wh* dependency is resolved, not an actual structural position.)

Intra-clausal dependency:

**Who** do you like _?

Cross-clausal dependency:

**Who** do you think [you like _ ]?

The latter pattern places a greater burden on the processor because of the need to extend the filler-gap dependency across a clause boundary, reactivating it in a lower clause.

**Who** do you think [ ... (you like)?

↑

*Reactivation of the wh dependency*

This suggestion fits well with common observations in the processing literature relating to the cost of cross-clausal dependencies.
We consistently found that a [filler-gap dependency in English, Greek and German] with single, double, or triple embedding is less acceptable than an unembedded structure.

... A main finding was that [extractions] from that-clauses are less acceptable than unembedded ones.

(Alexopoulou & Keller 2007:133 & 136)

Psycholinguistic research shows ... that [the] processing [of] clause boundaries generally lowers acceptability ratings and causes an increase in processing time.

(Hofmeister & Sag 2010:383)

Moreover, as observed in the preceding chapter, there is direct evidence (ranging from ERP effects, to errors in child speech, to languages with ‘wh copying’) that confirms the reactivation of the wh argument in the lower clause. Two predictions now follow.

• Because of the cost associated with reactivation, there could be languages whose speakers uniformly reject cross-clausal wh dependencies.

• Consistent with Affordability, if a language permits cross-clausal wh dependencies, it should also allow intra-clausal wh dependencies.

As we will see next, both predictions turn out to be correct.

**Russian versus English**

Support for the first prediction comes from Russian, in which wh dependencies cannot extend into a (finite) embedded clause.¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intra-clausal dependency:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kogo</strong> oni videli _?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who.ACC they.NOM see.PST.PL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Who did they see _?’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cross-clausal dependency:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>* <strong>Kogo</strong> Olga skazala [čto oni videli _]?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who.ACC Olga.NOM say.PST.FEM that they.NOM see.PST.PL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Who did Olga say that they saw _?’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Dyakonova 2009:215)

The most obvious way to capture the difference between Russian and English is to reduce it to the following simple contrast:

¹ Van Gelderen (2001:97) suggests that there may be individual variation in the extent to which cross-clausal dependencies are unacceptable.
**Russian versus English**

English allows reactivation; Russian doesn’t.

This fits well with both of the predictions stated on the previous page.

- Russian lacks a reactivation operation and therefore rejects cross-clausal *wh* dependencies.
- English permits reactivation and, consistent with Affordability, allows not only cross-clausal *wh* dependencies but also intra-clausal dependencies.

**Infinital clauses**

We find in Russian a further instructive fact: despite an aversion to cross-clausal dependencies, it permits patterns of this type when the lower clause is infinitival.²

```
Kogo Olga nadeyala's [uvide't _]?  
who.ACC Olga.NOM hope.PST.3SG see.INF _

‘Who did Olga hope to see _?’
```

(based on Dyakonova 2009:216; also Hawkins 2004:194)

Why should a *wh* dependency be able to extend into an infinitival clause, but not a finite clause?

One possibility is that infinitival clauses, which generally cannot stand alone as independent sentences, are more integrated into the argument structure of the matrix verb than a finite clause is. As previously observed by various scholars, the ubiquity of argument sharing in infinitival patterns points in this direction. In the examples below, for instance, the unexpressed first argument of the infinitival verb has the same referent as an argument of the matrix verb. (I use a dot [.] to indicate an unexpressed argument.)

Max hoped [. to stay].

They persuaded Mary [. to leave].

*The more the two events coded in the main and complement clauses share [arguments], the more likely they are to be semantically integrated as a single event; and the less likely is the complement clause to be coded as an independent finite clause.*

(Givón 1990:527)

² An improvement also occurs when the embedded clause is subjunctive:

```
Komu Ira hočet [čtoby my otDALI _ kotjat_]?  
who.DAT Ira.NOM want.PRS.3SG that.SUBJ we.NOM give.away.PST.PL _ kittens.ACC

‘Who does Ira want that we give the kittens to _?’
```
The less independent a complement clause is, the higher is the probability of its being fully integrated into the main clause...
(Givón 1990: 561)

In light of these observations, I will represent the difference between infinitival and finite complement clauses as follows.

Infinitival clause:  
*I hope to see Mary.*  

Finite clause:  
*I hope that I’ll see Mary.*

As depicted here, the infinitival clause is directly integrated into the argument structure of the matrix predicate. In contrast, the finite clause stands on its own, associated with the matrix predicate but not directly dependent on it.

Now consider the case of a *wh* dependency that extends into an embedded infinitival clause.

Who do you hope [to see _ ]?

If in fact an infinitival clause is tightly integrated into the argument structure of the matrix clause to begin with, the filler-gap dependency could perhaps be resolved directly, without the need for reactivation. That is, the *wh* dependency might simply extend directly into the infinitival clause, where it could be associated with the open second position in the argument grid of SEE. Depicted simply:

Who do you hope [to see _ ]?

This proposal leads to a series of predictions that help confirm its plausibility.

---

3 Here is a more formal depiction.
First, there should be no languages in which a copy of a sentence-initial *wh* word appears at an infinitival-clause boundary.

*What did you promise [what to bring _ ]?*

Although I know of no typological survey on this subject, Crain et al. (2017:135) report that *wh* copying in German, a language well known for this phenomenon, is restricted to finite clauses.

Second, child learners of English shouldn’t reproduce a sentence-initial *wh* word at an infinitival-clause boundary.

*Who did you decide [who to visit _ ]?*

This prediction too seems to be correct.

The English-speaking children who produced *wh*-questions with a copy of the *wh*-word in tensed embedded clauses did not pronounce a *wh*-copy in questions with infinitival embedded clauses.

(Crain et al. 2017:135; also Thornton 1990:247)

Third, psycholinguistic studies should reveal no signs of *wh* reactivation at an infinitival-clause boundary (e.g., no ERP effects or reading slowdown). Consistent with this prediction, Keine (2020) reports no signs of reactivation at an infinitival-clause boundary in a timed self-paced reading task that he conducted to investigate this very issue.4

The results indicate that [an infinitival clause] crossed by movement does not facilitate dependency completion [by reactivating the *wh* argument], in direct contrast to [full tensed clauses]. This asymmetry ... is of course precisely what is predicted if intermediate landing sites are created in [the latter case but not in the former].

(Keine 2020:145)

In sum, there is good reason to believe that infinitival clauses differ from their finite counterparts in ways that fit well with a cost-based account of the syntax of cross-clausal *wh* dependencies.

---

4 The key contrast involves sentences of the following sort:

Who did the lawyer claim [that the accusations had hurt _ ]? (tensed embedded clause)

Who did the lawyer claim [the accusations to have hurt _ ]? (infinitival embedded clause)
8.2 Wh islands in English

Although English permits a filler-gap dependency to extend across a clause boundary, a restriction on this practice is evident in the following contrast, also noted in the previous chapter.

No wh word in the embedded clause:

What do you know (for certain) [that he said _ to Jane]?

Wh word in the embedded clause:

*What do you know (for certain) [who he said _ to _]?

The lower clause in the second sentence is a ‘wh island.’ Intuitively, extension of the filler-gap dependency initiated by sentence-initial what is blocked by the presence of who at the left edge of the lower clause.

When a filler is being held in working memory and a clause boundary is being crossed, which already taxes the parser, the occurrence at the clause boundary of a second expression whose [interpretation] must simultaneously be activated represents an additional processing load. This convergence of multiple processing tasks is perceived as ungrammaticality.

(Kluender & Kutas 1993:579)

A dependency into a wh island ... requires processing an embedded interrogative ... while holding a filler phrase in working memory and actively searching for a suitable [gap].

(Hofmeister & Sag 2010:385; also p. 383)

On this view, wh islands arise from the interaction of reactivation (itself a costly operation) with the need to simultaneously manage two wh dependencies at the onset of the lower clause. The first dependency (represented below in grey-colored small caps) is carried over from the higher clause, whereas the other (in bold face) originates in the embedded clause.

*What do you know (for certain) [who he said _ to _]?

Reactivation is blocked.

The sentence can therefore not be formed or interpreted by the language’s algorithms.
The end result is an Affordability metric that exactly matches the typological facts.

**Affordability metric for extending wh dependencies**

i. no extension across a clause boundary

ii. extension across a clause boundary if there is no other wh dependency

iii. extension across a clause boundary even if there is another wh dependency

(based on O’Grady 2012:497; also Hawkins 2004:192ff, 266 and O’Grady 2005b:214ff)

The first option is exemplified by Russian (see §8.1) and the second by English. Instances of the third option have been reported for Italian and Norwegian, in which reactivation is apparently permitted even in the presence of a second wh dependency.

\[\text{tuo fratello, a cui mi domando [che storie abbiano raccontato \_ \_]} \]

your brother to whom I wonder which stories they have told \_ \_

(Rizzi 1982:50 for Italian; Maling & Zaenen 1982 and Kush & Dahl 2022 for Norwegian)

In sum, cross-linguistic variation in the syntax of islands reflects a cost-based continuum consisting of natural break points, such as clause boundaries and the presence of a second filler-gap dependency. There is no absolute constraint per se, but Affordability ensures a strong regulatory effect nonetheless. As usual, if the language tolerates a more costly pattern, it must permit less costly patterns as well.

One final point is worth considering before moving on. If the cost of reactivation contributes to island effects and if there is no reactivation at infinitival-clause boundaries (as suggested in §8.1), then wh-island effects should disappear, or at least be sharply diminished, when the lower clause is infinitival. This prediction seems to be correct.

**Weakened wh-island effects in infinitival clauses**

Which engines does he know [how to repair \_ \_]?  
Compare: *Which engines does he know [how people can repair \_ \_]? 

Which clothes were you wondering [what to do \_ \_ with \_]?  
Compare: *Which clothes were you wondering [what I should do \_ \_ with \_]?  


**8.3 A constraint on contraction**

A very different type of constraint on filler-gap dependencies involves a notorious contrast in the contractibility of want to in sentences such as the following.

Contraction is possible:  
Do you **want** to stay?

Contraction is unnatural:  
Who do you **want** to stay?

\[\text{wanna} \]

\[\text{*wanna} \]
It is a remarkable fact about both language and science that a single casually pronounced word might shed light on the workings of human cognition, but that does seem to be the case.

Syntacticians’ enduring interest in the wanna facts reflects the momentous role they have played in shaping modern linguistic theory.

(Getz 2019:120)

The search for an account of this contrast has yielded a number of spectacular proposals, including the idea that contraction is blocked by an invisible Case-marked trace.

A Case-marked trace blocks contraction.

(Jaeggli 1980:242)

Who do you want [NP t_obj] to stay?

↑

If it is true, as a matter of principle, that movement rules leave a trace in mental representations, then contraction will be blocked as a matter of principle over a position from which the question word has been moved.

(Chomsky 1980b:160)

The proposal was hotly contested in a debate that ‘raged within the pages of Linguistic Inquiry for nearly a decade’ (Getz 2019:119).

...the importance of the contraction debate is in our view this: it reveals that [trace theory] is far from the exemplary token of a scientific movement its enthusiasts would have us believe. Rather, this debate indicates that faith in the virtues of [trace theory] is independent of genuine factual accomplishments ... and that its most prominent developers do not shy away from citing as instances of explanatory success domains where they have never achieved anything more than descriptive failure.

(Postal & Pullum 1982:137)

A different way to approach the contractibility asymmetry is to consider it from a processing perspective.

Let us assume that contraction is subject to a preference of the following sort, whose articulatory motivation is evident.

**Natural Contraction**

Contraction of the string XY is most natural when X adjoins to Y without delay.

(O’Grady 2005b:139ff)
Let us further assume (again uncontroversially) that the resolution of a filler-gap dependency is a real-time operation and that it occurs upon encountering the verb *want* in the pattern below. (Recall that the gap symbol represents an approximate point in time, not a position in syntactic structure.)

**Who do you want to stay?**  
\[ \uparrow \]

*The filler-gap dependency is resolved at this point.*

There is independent evidence for this proposal: in patterns where contraction is impeded by the need to resolve the *wh* dependency, *want* has a lengthier articulation and is followed by a prosodic break (Warren, Speer & Schafer 2003). Both traits point to activity at the verb consistent with resolution of the *wh* dependency.

**Who do you want to sit down?**  
\[ \uparrow \]

*lengthening and prosodic adjustment at the point where the filler-gap dependency is resolved*

Taken together, these facts point to a plausible explanation for the *wanna* mystery. The key insight lies in the conflicting demands of *wh* dependencies on the one hand and contraction on the other.

- **Processing pressures** demand resolution of the filler-gap dependency at the verb *want* – the very point where contraction might otherwise occur.

  **Who do you want to stay?**  
  \[ \uparrow \]

- **Phonological considerations** call for the immediate adjunction of *want* and *to* if there is to be contraction.

  **Who do you want to stay?**  
  \[ \uparrow \]

* *wanna*

The two requirements are mutually incompatible: prompt resolution of the *wh* dependency at *want* stifles the opportunity for immediate adjunction with *to* – a pre-requisite for contraction. This conflict, not a Case-marked trace, undermines the naturalness of *wanna*.

### Two related puzzles

It is now possible to consider in a fresh light two otherwise puzzling facts about *want to* contraction. A first puzzle is that pre-school children produce the forbidden pattern at an unexpectedly high rate in experimental studies involving elicited production.

*Children use wanna [in the forbidden pattern] nearly half the time (47%) – far more than adults (2%).*

(Getz 2019:124; also Zukowski & Larsen 2011)
This may seem surprising, but it actually makes sense. That is because the processing-based impediment to contraction cannot come into effect until learners realize that wanna is the contracted version of want to – which is not obvious at the outset.\(^5\)

One piece of evidence for the pedigree of wanna comes from the presence of the (barely audible) verbal suffix -s in patterns with a third-person singular subject.

He wanna stay for a week.

However, this clue is counterbalanced by the apparent presence of a past tense marker in patterns such as the following.

He wanna-d a dog.

She wanna-d Alan to stay.

They wanna-d a go right away.

This is an illusion of course: wanna-d is really a contraction of wanted, not the past tense of wanna. However, the homophony here could easily contribute to a delay in sorting things out.\(^6\) And without an awareness that wanna is a contracted form, the principle of Natural Contraction is not in play.

A second puzzle stems from the fact that there is some variation among even adults with respect to the acceptability of contraction in wh questions.

*There exist dialects in which contraction is systematically permitted across the alleged Case-marked traces, so that [sentences like *WHO DO YOU WANNA DRIVE THE CAR?*], ungrammatical for me and many others, are grammatical.*

(Pullum 1997:96; also Pullum & Postal 1979:704-05 and Ito 2005)

This is a surprising turn of events, if contraction is blocked by an invisible Case-marked trace whose presence is required by principles of Universal Grammar, as Jaeggli’s proposal implies.

On the processing account, however, we need only assume that some speakers of English permit contraction under slightly less than optimal conditions. This suggestion comes with an important proviso: no speaker of English should allow contraction only when there is an intervening filler-gap dependency. That is, consistent with Affordability, anyone who allows the more demanding instance of contraction in the first sentence below should also accept the less demanding variety exemplified in the second sentence.

---

\(^5\) The idea that wanna is a word in its own right has been frequently proposed over the years; see Getz (2019) for a recent proposal and O’Grady (2008a) for a critical review of the earlier literature.

\(^6\) In fact, a search of maternal speech to Adam, Eve and Sarah in the CHILDES corpus reveals an almost identical number of instances of wants to and wanted to (36 and 37, respectively), in addition to 344 instances of want to. However, the corpus gives no clue as to the actual pronunciation of these items.
**Contraction that is hindered by a filler-gap dependency**
Who do you wanna drive the car?

**Contraction with no filler-gap dependency**
Do you wanna drive the car?

This seems to be correct.\(^7\)

In sum, constraints on filler-gap dependencies – whether they involve impediments to contraction or the presence of island effects – are natural reactions to processing cost. The resolution of a \(wh\) dependency can block contraction in English. Russian minimizes processing cost by renouncing the reactivation operation needed to extend a \(wh\) dependency into a finite clause. English has that operation, but can’t use it to extend a \(wh\) dependency into a finite clause that has a second filler-gap dependency in play. And so on.

Some languages are willing to pay the price for reactivation, and some (e.g., Italian and Norwegian) are even willing to deal with two stored filler-gap dependencies in the same clause. But the number of ‘takers’ should (and does) decrease as the cost grows.

*If there is a [processing-based] preference ranking ... among structures of a common type ..., then there will be ... corresponding cut-off points and declining frequencies of languages.*
(Hawkins 2004:256; also p. 216ff)

Moreover, consistent with Affordability, the adoption of a more costly option comes with the obligation of also permitting less costly options. There are no languages that insist upon contraction at a point where a \(wh\) dependency is resolved, no languages that allow only cross-clausal \(wh\) dependencies and no languages that permit only double \(wh\) dependencies. Those are not natural options, and they are not found in natural language.

---

\(^7\) We should not rule out the possibility that adults who accept the ‘forbidden’ pattern nonetheless make subtle phonetic adjustments when producing it in their own speech, as an extension of Warren et al.’s study might well show.
A core tenet of natural syntax is that the algorithms that define the mapping between form and meaning are shaped by processing pressures. The syntax of coreference (also known as ‘anaphora’\(^1\)) provides another opportunity to evaluate this claim.

... anaphora has not only become a central topic of research in linguistics, it has also attracted a growing amount of attention from philosophers, psychologists, cognitive scientists, and artificial intelligence workers... [It] represents one of the most complex phenomena of natural language, which, in itself, is the source of fascinating problems...
(Huang 2000:1)

... [anaphora] figures prominently in a vast amount of works, either as the main research topic, or, perhaps even more frequently, as a diagnostic for constituency, derivational history, and other abstract aspects of grammatical analysis.
(Büring 2005:ix)

Most work on this subject focuses on reflexive pronouns such as *himself, herself* and *themselves*, which introduce referential dependencies that must be resolved with the help of another element, called an ‘antecedent.’

> Reflexive pronouns lack the capacity for independent reference, and therefore must depend on another expression for their interpretation.
(Reuland 2018:82)

Crucially, there are constraints on what and where that ‘other expression’ can be, as the following contrast helps illustrate.

Mary pinched herself.

*Herself pinched Mary.

As a first and informal approximation, it appears that a subject can serve as the antecedent for a direct object, but not vice versa.

---

\(^1\) The terms ‘coreference,’ ‘anaphora’ and ‘binding’ overlap in their meaning and are often used interchangeably, as I also do here.
When the subject and object are identical, we use for the latter a so-called reflexive pronoun, formed by means of SELF...
(Jespersen 1933:111)

[Basic] subjects in general can control reflexive pronouns and in some languages control of reflexives is largely restricted to basic subjects.
(Keenan 1976:315)

The central observation is that, in a transitive clause, in which the two arguments have the same reference, it is the OBJ which is expressed as a reflexive pronoun, and the [subject] as its antecedent.
(Falk 2006:61)

This constraint seems to be universal.

...there appears to be no language in which the patient argument outranks the agent argument for the purposes of anaphora.
(Falk 2006:66)

In every ergative language, as in every accusative language, the 'antecedent', i.e. the controller of reflexivity, is the [agent argument].
(Dixon 1994:138-39)

All languages evidently have some binding principles, and they are quite similar.
(Sag & Wasow 1999:230)

This chapter explores the possibility that coreference asymmetries have a natural syntax, in accordance with the Strict Emergentist Protocol. I will focus my attention on patterns, like the ones above, in which coreference requires a reflexive pronoun rather than a plain pronoun such as him or her.  

2 I thus exclude examples such as the following in which coreference can be expressed by either a reflexive pronoun or a plain pronoun. For a discussion of this phenomenon, see O’Grady (2015).

Larry’s diary contained [a flattering description of him/himself].
Richard didn’t think [that Mary should see those two pictures of him/himself].
John was going to get even with Mary. [That picture of him/himself] in the paper would really annoy her, as would the other stunts he had planned. (Pollard & Sag 1992:274)
9.1 The natural facts of anaphora

Two long-standing generalizations help define the basic syntax of anaphora.

- The reflexive pronoun requires a co-argument as its antecedent (that is, an argument of the same predicate).
- The antecedent must be in some sense more ‘prominent’ than the pronoun, consistent with the observation above that a subject (agent) can serve as antecedent for a direct object (patient), but not vice versa.

There are two basic approaches to the characterization of prominence in the literature on anaphora.

One approach, best exemplified by Principle A of generative grammar, draws on the architecture of syntactic structure. Its key claim is that a reflexive pronoun must look to a higher (so-called ‘c-commanding’) NP for its interpretation.

Principle A (paraphrased)

A reflexive pronoun must have a higher antecedent in the same clause.

(based on Chomsky 1981:188)

The contrasting examples below help illustrate how this principle works.

The first sentence is acceptable since the antecedent (Mary) occurs in a higher position than the reflexive pronoun, in contrast to the situation in the unacceptable pattern to the right.

The second approach makes use of argument structure to capture the asymmetries underlying coreference. One way to do this is to organize arguments in terms of their grammatical relations.

Subject < Primary object < Secondary object < Other complements

An anaphor must have a less oblique co-argument as its antecedent, if there is one.

(Pollard & Sag 1992:266)

Another strategy is to posit a hierarchy of thematic roles.

Agent < Location, Source, Goal < Theme

A reflexive pronoun cannot be higher on the thematic hierarchy than its antecedent.

I too adopt an approach based on argument structure, but with a focus on how the organization of argument structures interacts with processing pressures.

A first claim in this regard is that the agent is invariably the first argument of a prototypical transitive verb.\[3\]

\[
\text{PRED} \\
<\text{ag pat}> \\
1 \ 2
\]

As noted in §5.1, this makes sense from a processing perspective since the activity of an agent typically marks the starting point of the event and is ultimately responsible for the patienthood of the second argument.

\textit{The Agent outranks the [Patient] because it is the Agent’s act that results in the Patient’s affectedness.}

(Falk 2006:33)

\textit{… the agent is at the head of the causal chain that affects the patient.}

(Kemmerer 2012:50; also Bornkessel-Schlesewsky & Schlesewsky 2009:41, Cohn & Paczynski 2013:75, and Sauppe 2016:10)

At the level of event conceptualization and processing, then, the agent is clearly ontologically prior and in this sense counts as the first argument, consistent with its traditional position in argument structure.

\textbf{An algorithm for coreference}

We can now formulate the following algorithm for the interpretation of reflexive pronouns.

\textit{The Anaphor Algorithm}\[4\]

\[
<\alpha, x> \\
\overset{\leftarrow}{\text{\Leftrightarrow}}_{\alpha}
\]

Three points help clarify the purpose and functioning of the Anaphor Algorithm:

- It applies to semantic representations (argument structure), not strings of words.

\[3\] Passivization downgrades the agent by removing it from the first-argument position.

\[4\] In its full form, the algorithm should be formulated as follows in order to make room for the possible presence of arguments other than just the reflexive pronoun and its antecedent.

\[
<\ldots \alpha \ldots x \ldots> \\
\overset{\leftarrow}{\text{\Leftrightarrow}}_{\alpha}
\]

\textbf{Mary} told me about \textbf{herself}.
I talked to \textbf{John} about \textbf{himself}.
\textbf{Larry} bought \textbf{himself} an ice cream cone.
• It is triggered by the presence of a referential dependency (represented here as $x$) that is introduced by a reflexive pronoun.

• It resolves the referential dependency by associating it with a ‘prior’ co-argument, represented in the algorithm by the symbol $\alpha$. (‘prior’ = ‘prior in argument structure’; co-argument = argument of the same predicate)

A concrete example follows.

*Mary pinched herself.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 0: Projection of the semantic base</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$&lt;\beta&gt;$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1: First-Argument Algorithm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Mary</em>... $\mapsto$ PRED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$&lt;m&gt;$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 2: Predicate Algorithm + Argument Addition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Mary pinched</em>... $\mapsto$ PINCH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$&lt;m_1&gt;$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 3: Second-Argument Algorithm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Mary pinched herself</em> $\mapsto$ PINCH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$&lt;m_x&gt;$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 4: Anaphor Algorithm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$&lt;m_x&gt;$ $\Longleftrightarrow m$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the final step, the just-encountered reflexive pronoun receives its interpretation thanks to the Anaphor Algorithm, which selects the verbal predicate’s first argument (*Mary*) as the only possible antecedent. By acting immediately and locally in this way, the algorithm minimizes the burden on working memory, a major factor in processing cost.

Psycholinguistic experimentation confirms this scenario, providing evidence that upon encountering a reflexive pronoun, the processor acts quickly and decisively to select a local co-argument as the antecedent over potential competitors.

... from the earliest measurable point in time referential interpretations are determined by constraints [on coreference] in tandem with other sources of information.

(Clackson, Felser & Clahsen 2011:140; also O’Grady 2005b:167-69)

Reflexive binding relations ... have been found to be established extremely quickly during processing.

(Cunnings, Patterson & Felser 2014:51)
These findings fit well with the spirit of the Anaphor Algorithm: immediate resolution of the referential dependency at minimal cost.

**Unacceptable referential dependencies**

On the assumption that the presence of a reflexive pronoun argument automatically triggers the Anaphor Algorithm, there is a natural account for the unacceptability of sentences like the one below.

*Herself pinched Mary.*

Here, the usual operations produce the following semantic representation, in which the reflexive pronoun is the first argument, for which (by definition) there can be no prior co-argument.

\[
\text{PINCH} \\
< x \ m > \\
*= \leftrightarrow \\
\]

\[x = \text{herself}; \ m = \text{Mary}\]

As a result, the Anaphor Algorithm is unable to do its work and the referential dependency is left unresolved, disrupting the mapping between form and meaning.

The next sentence illustrates another classic contrast.

[Harry’s brother] pinched himself.

Here, the co-argument of the reflexive pronoun is *Harry’s brother*, not *Harry*. This in turn ensures, correctly, that *Harry* cannot be selected by the Anaphor Algorithm as the antecedent for *himself*.

\[
\text{PINCH} \\
< b \ x > \\
\leftrightarrow b \\
\]

\[(b = \text{Harry’s brother})\]

A third key contrast involves biclausal patterns such as the one below, in which there appear to be two potential antecedents for the reflexive pronoun.

Harry thinks [Fred injured himself].

Crucially, however, the only permissible interpretation is the one in which the reflexive pronoun refers to *Fred*, its co-argument. This is exactly the result guaranteed by the Anaphor Algorithm.

Harry thinks [Fred injured himself].
VOS languages

The organization of argument structure is often reflected, at least loosely, in a language’s canonical word order: agents precede patients in transitive clauses in over 90% of the world’s languages. Crucially, however, linear order cannot be the decisive factor for the syntax of coreference since the Anaphor Algorithm operates on semantic representations (i.e., argument structure), not on strings of words.

A striking illustration of this point comes from the VOS language Malagasy, in which the verb’s second argument precedes its first argument (Keenan 1976:314-15).

\[
\begin{array}{c|c|c}
\text{2nd ARG} & \text{1st ARG} & \text{PAT} \quad \text{AGT} \\
\hline
\text{Manaja} & \text{tena} & \text{Rabe.} \\
\text{respect} & \text{self} & \text{Rabe} \\
\end{array}
\]

‘Rabe respects himself.’

Although the reflexive pronoun (the second argument) is encountered before its antecedent in the spoken sentence, the Anaphor Algorithm gives exactly the right result when applied to the corresponding semantic representation.

\[
\text{RESPECT} \quad <r_{ag} x_{pat}> \quad \rightarrow \quad r
\]

As illustrated here, interpretation of the reflexive pronoun is determined by the prior argument – the agent Rabe.

In sum, the facts from Malagasy are just what we would expect if that language has the same type of argument structure as English and essentially the same system of local coreference as well. Despite the differences in word order, the agent is always the first argument and therefore prior to the referentially dependent reflexive pronoun, in accordance with the Anaphor Algorithm.

9.2 Anaphora in ditransitive patterns

The two ditransitive patterns of English offer further evidence in support of the Anaphor Algorithm. As the examples below illustrate, these patterns are characterized by a contrast in the relative ordering of the patient and goal arguments.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Prepositional ditransitive:} & \quad \text{Double object ditransitive:} \\
\text{I threw the ball to Robin.} & \quad \text{I threw Robin the ball.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[\text{As discussed in §5.1, the VOS word order of Malagasy reflects application of the Second-Argument Algorithm before the First-Argument Algorithm. For an even more extreme case involving the interaction of word order and anaphora, see the discussion of Balinese in O’Grady (2021).}\]
I assume that more than just word order is in play here and that the two patterns have different argument structures, in accordance with a widely accepted proposal.

... the double object construction requires the semantics of caused possession and the to-dative construction requires the semantics of caused motion.
(Yang 2016:191; also Pinker 1989:82)

According to this idea, the prepositional pattern describes an event in which the speaker acts on the ball by making it go to Robin. On this interpretation, the patient (ball) is the second argument and the goal (Robin) is the third argument.

*I threw the ball to Robin.*

THROW

<ag pat go>

In the double object ditransitive, in contrast, the speaker acts on Robin by having him/her receive the ball. Thus, the goal is the second argument and the patient is the third.

*I threw Robin the ball.*

THROW

<ag go pat>

If this is right, then there is no fixed thematic-role hierarchy for patient and goal arguments. Rather, the two arguments can be ordered in different ways relative to each other, depending on how the event is conceptualized.

Thematic roles are positions in a structured semantic representation.
(Pinker 1989:76)

Arguments are ordered by the lexico-semantics of the verb.
(Weschler & Arka 1998:411-412)

Idiomatic expressions provide independent evidence for this view. The key insight, illustrated in the examples below, is that idioms in ditransitive patterns typically consist of the verb and its third argument (O’Grady 1998).

Prepositional ditransitive – the goal is the third argument:
**I threw** Harry to the wolves.

PAT  GOAL

‘I sacrificed Harry to further my own interests.’

Double object ditransitive – the patient is the third argument:
**I threw** Harry some crumbs.

GOAL  PAT

‘I made a minor concession to Harry to placate him.’
(O’Grady 1998)
Consistent with the proposed differences in argument structure, the idiom consists of the verb and its goal argument (*to the wolves*) in the prepositional pattern, but of the verb and its patient argument (*some crumbs*) in the double object pattern.

All of this leads to a prediction about coreference: the patient argument should be able to serve as an antecedent for the goal argument in the prepositional pattern, and the reverse should be true in the double object pattern. This is correct, as the next examples show.

Prepositional ditransitive – the patient argument resolves the referential dependency

<ag pat goREFL>
I described Max to himself.
(compare: *I described himself to Max.)

Double object ditransitive – the goal argument resolves the referential dependency

<ag go patREFL>
I showed Max himself in the picture
(compare: *I showed himself Max in the picture.)

This is the expected result since the antecedent in both acceptable patterns is the second argument and hence prior to the third-argument reflexive pronoun. Resolution of the referential dependency therefore complies with the usual algorithm.6

The interaction of anaphora with filler-gap dependencies

Further challenges occur in sentences where the syntax of anaphora interacts with the syntax of filler-gap dependencies.

**Who** did you describe _ to **himself**?

*Who** did you describe **himself** to _?

In both patterns, the antecedent (*who*) precedes the anaphor, yet only the first sentence is acceptable. This contrast too follows from the Anaphor Algorithm.

In the acceptable sentence, the *wh* word is the second argument of DESCRIBE.

Resolution of the filler-gap dependency:

**Who** did you describe _ . . .?

DESCRIBE

<y wh ...> 

↑

The *wh* word is identified as the verb’s second argument.

---

6 The Anaphor Algorithm does not require that the antecedent be the first argument, only that it be prior to the reflexive in argument structure, which is in fact the case in these ditransitive patterns. See also note 4.
This allows \textit{who} to resolve the referential dependency that arises when the anaphor (the verb’s third argument) is subsequently encountered.

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{2}^\text{nd ARG} & \text{1}^\text{st ARG} & \text{3}^\text{rd ARG} \\
\text{Who} & \text{did} & \text{you} \\
\text{describe} & \_ & \text{to} \text{himself,}\? \\
\text{DESCRIBE} & \langle y \text{wh } x \rangle & \leftrightarrow \text{wh}
\end{array}
\]

In the unacceptable sentence, in contrast, the reflexive pronoun is the verb’s \textit{second} argument and the \textit{wh} word is the third argument. At the point where the reflexive pronoun in encountered, only the first argument (\textit{you}) is available as a potential antecedent.

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{3}^\text{rd ARG} & \text{1}^\text{st ARG} & \text{2}^\text{nd ARG} \\
\text{*Who} & \text{did} & \text{you} \\
\text{describe} & \text{himself} & \_ \text{... (to } \_\text{)}? \\
\text{DESCRIBE} & \langle y \ x \ ... \rangle & \leftrightarrow \text{*y}
\end{array}
\]

The result is a person-feature mismatch and an unacceptable sentence. This is just the right outcome.

\section*{9.3 Making sense of anaphora}

How could a system of local coreference built around the Anaphor Algorithm have emerged in the first place? One possibility is that sentence planning is shaped by the structure of the event that is to be expressed, independently of the word order conventions that determine the spoken form of the sentence.

\[
\ldots \text{the agent drives the event to take place to begin with} \ldots \text{[it] serves to initiate} \\
\text{the construction of an event representation } \ldots.
\]

(Cohn & Paczynski 2013:75)

In the case of a transitive event, planning should therefore follow a path whose starting point involves the projection of an agent. This has the effect of creating the conditions under which a later argument (a patient, for example) can derive its referent from its prior co-argument.

\textit{Steps in the conceptualization of a transitive pattern} (\textit{Jerry pinched himself}:)

1. Choose event \hspace{1cm} 2. Choose \textit{1}st arg. \hspace{1cm} 3. Choose \textit{2}nd arg.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{PINCH} \\
<\ldots> \Rightarrow \text{PINCH} \\
\langle j \ldots \rangle ag \\
\text{PINCH} \\
\langle j x \rangle ag \text{ } pat \\
\leftrightarrow \text{j}
\end{array}
\]

\textit{... the agent drives the event to take place to begin with} \ldots \text{[it] serves to initiate} \\
\text{the construction of an event representation } \ldots.
\]

(Cohn & Paczynski 2013:75)

In the case of a transitive event, planning should therefore follow a path whose starting point involves the projection of an agent. This has the effect of creating the conditions under which a later argument (a patient, for example) can derive its referent from its prior co-argument.

\textit{Steps in the conceptualization of a transitive pattern} (\textit{Jerry pinched himself}:)

1. Choose event \hspace{1cm} 2. Choose \textit{1}st arg. \hspace{1cm} 3. Choose \textit{2}nd arg.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{PINCH} \\
<\ldots> \Rightarrow \text{PINCH} \\
\langle j \ldots \rangle ag \\
\text{PINCH} \\
\langle j x \rangle ag \text{ } pat \\
\leftrightarrow \text{j}
\end{array}
\]
This scenario fits well with MacDonald’s (2013) suggestion that the computational burden of planning and producing utterances promotes choices that reduce processing cost. An obvious way to contribute to that goal in the case of anaphora is to ensure that the intended referent occupies a position in argument structure that is prior to that of its pronominal co-argument. The end result is the syntax of anaphora that I have proposed, with agents prior to patients in argument structure regardless of word order, creating the very facts and contrasts that we have been considering.

The principles that generative grammar uses to regulate coreference are widely acclaimed for their descriptive success and have come to be a showcase example of Universal Grammar – its ‘crowning achievement’ according to Truswell (2014:215) and a ‘window onto the mind’ according to others.

*Within the framework of generative grammar, anaphora has for some time been seen as “the window onto the mind,” providing crucial evidence in support of the innateness hypothesis.*

(Huang 2000:16)

Anaphora does indeed provide a glimpse into the language faculty, but what it reveals is not Universal Grammar. On the view outlined in this chapter, neither grammatical principles nor syntactic structure enters into the computation of coreference. Instead, the interpretation of reflexive pronouns is shaped by processing pressures that promote the rapid resolution of referential dependencies – the very requirement embodied in the Anaphor Algorithm. Put simply, coreference has a natural syntax.
As we have seen in previous chapters, a simple semantic base, consisting of a predicate and a minimal argument structure, serves as the predictable starting point for all sentence-level mappings between form and meaning in natural language.

**The semantic base**

\[
\text{PRED } <\beta>
\]

A consequence of this assumption is that computations involving transitive verbs are possible only if the semantic base is expanded to accommodate an additional argument. As noted in §5.1, there are in principle two ways to do this – by adding a second-argument position or by adding a first-argument position.

**Addition of a second-argument position**

\[
\text{PRED } \Rightarrow \text{PRED } <\beta> \\
\uparrow \text{ added second-argument position}
\]

**Addition of a first-argument position**

\[
\text{PRED } \Rightarrow \text{PRED } <\beta> \\
\uparrow \text{ added first-argument position}
\]

As we proceed, it is important to bear in mind a key point from chapter 5, which is that Argument Addition only creates positions; it has nothing per se to do with thematic roles, which are independently derived from the semantics of the predicate.

On the view just outlined, both options for extending the semantic base yield a predicate with two argument positions.

\[
\text{PRED } <1 \ 2>
\]

---

* This chapter draws on material in O’Grady (2022).
However, the two strategies for expansion do not have identical consequences. Indeed, as we will see next, they lead down two very different morphosyntactic paths, ultimately creating the phenomenon called *alignment*.

In traditional terms, alignment reflects a fundamental contrast in language – whether the subjects of intransitive verbs have morphosyntactic properties that more closely resemble those of subjects of transitive verbs or those of direct objects.¹

The two alignment options

The goal of this chapter is to present an explanation for the origins of this contrast and for the intricate web of consequences that follow from it, especially with regard to case.

### 10.1 Case and the semantic base

A fundamental insight from the field of typology is that expected elements are expressed with a minimum of phonological complexity.

*Often, a typologically unmarked value is zero coded ... because the counterpart marked value ... is less expected or less salient.*

(Croft 2003:116)

*... the zero alternate is preferred ... where [it is] more expected and predictable, making the processing more efficient overall.*


I will refer to this observation as the ‘expectedness’ generalization.

**Expectedness**

The expected argument is minimally marked, compared to other arguments.

If this idea is on the right track, the base argument – which is invariably present and therefore obviously ‘expected’ – should have minimal case marking (ideally none), whereas any added arguments should carry a robust case marker.

¹ Recall that I use the terms ‘subject’ and ‘direct object’ for the sake of descriptive convenience only; they have no independent status in a theory of natural syntax. What I call a subject is really just a first argument and what I call a direct object is just the second argument of a transitive verb.
**Predictions**

- Case marking on the base argument should be minimal.
- Case marking on an added argument should be more robust.

With these predictions in mind, let us turn now to case marking in so-called ‘accusative’ languages.

**The accusative option: Addition of a second-argument position**

A large number of languages make use of a system of case marking in which the second argument in a transitive sentence carries an overt case marker, but the first argument is left bare. If our reasoning is correct, this pattern of marking should signal the addition of a second-argument position.

**Addition of a second-argument position**

\[
\begin{array}{l}
\text{PRED} & \text{PRED} \\
<\beta> & \Rightarrow <\beta_-> \\
& \uparrow \\
& \text{added second-argument position}
\end{array}
\]

Turkish offers a typical example.

Turkish (Nominative = Ø; Accusative = -ü; data from Kornfilt 1997)

**Intransitive verb**

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{Hasan} & \text{ayrıl-di.} \\
\text{Hasan.NOM} & \text{leave-PST.3SG} \\
& \Omega
\end{array}
\]

‘Hasan left.’

**Transitive verb**

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{Hasan} & \text{öküz-ü al-di.} \\
\text{Hasan.NOM} & \text{ox-ACC buy-PST.3SG} \\
& \Omega -ü
\end{array}
\]

‘Hasan bought the ox.’

As illustrated here, Turkish uses a null suffix (the so-called ‘nominative’) for its base argument in both intransitive and transitive sentences and the ‘accusative’ suffix -ü or one of its allomorphs to mark its added second argument. Such systems are called ‘accusative,’ reflecting the name of their overt case.

**Case marking in a classic accusative language**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Argument</th>
<th>Case</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>base argument</td>
<td>• nominative (usually Ø, as in Turkish)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>added (second) argument</td>
<td>• accusative (overt; -ü in Turkish)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consistent with Expectedness, this type of system can be characterized as follows:
• The base argument is minimally marked.
• The second argument bears an overt case marker by virtue of being in the ‘added’ position.

**The ergative option: Addition of a first-argument position**

Now, let’s consider what happens in languages that accommodate transitivity by adding a first-argument position.

**Addition of a first-argument position**

\[
\text{PRED} \quad \text{PRED}
\]

\[
<\beta> \quad \Rightarrow \quad <\_\beta>
\]

↑

added first-argument position

If our reasoning is on the right track, such languages should manifest a system of case marking with the following characteristics:

• The first argument should bear a special case-marker (by virtue of being in the ‘added’ position).
• The base argument should be minimally marked.

Various languages appear to work precisely this way. West Greenlandic offers a straightforward example, with the suffix -p on the first argument of a transitive verb, but no marking on either the sole argument of an intransitive verb or the second argument of a transitive verb.

West Greenlandic (data from Manning 1996:3)

Intransitive verb: PRED

\[\text{Oli} \quad \text{sinippoq.} \quad <\beta>\]

\[\text{Oli.ABS} \quad \text{sleep.3Sg} \quad \emptyset\]

‘Oli sleeps.’

Transitive verb: PRED

\[\text{Oli-}p \quad \text{neqi} \quad \text{neri-vaa.} \quad <\_\beta>\]

\[\text{Oli-\text{ERG}} \quad \text{meat.ABS} \quad \text{eat-3Sg.3Sg} \quad -p \quad \emptyset\]

‘Oli eats meat.’

A case system of this type is usually called ‘ergative,’ reflecting the name of the case marker that appears on the added first argument (the subject of a transitive verb).

**Case marking in a classic ergative language**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Argument</th>
<th>Case</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>base argument</td>
<td>•absolutive (usually (\emptyset))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>added (first) argument</td>
<td>•ergative (overt; -p in West Greenlandic)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There is nothing surprising about ergativity on the view I am outlining. Indeed, ergative systems of case marking should exist. That is because the addition of a new first-argument position, which is signaled by the ergative case marker, is simply one of two logical options for extending the semantic base in order to accommodate transitivity.

**Rethinking case**

An intriguing side-effect of this approach is the revelation that the function of case is not to encode grammatical relations, contrary to the commonly expressed view exemplified in the following assertions.

*Case [is] a distinctive, overtly marked form which can be assumed to indicate that [the] NP bears some identifiable grammatical or semantic relation to the rest of the sentence.*

(Trask 1993:35)

... *the view taken here is that each morphological case expresses at least one grammatical relation*...

(Blake 2001:50)

*[One function of case is] for distinguishing between the two core arguments of a transitive clause, i.e. the subject and the direct object.*

(De Hoop & Malchukov 2008:568)

By considering only accusative languages, it is easy to think that case functions as a marker of grammatical relations, with the nominative reserved for the subject and the accusative for the direct object.

**Case in an accusative language – the traditional view**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Grammatical Relation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nominative</td>
<td>•subject (of an intransitive or transitive verb)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accusative</td>
<td>•direct object</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, there is no such one-to-one mapping in ergative languages, where a single case is used for the subject of an intransitive verb and the direct object of a transitive verb.

**Case in an ergative language – the traditional view**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Grammatical Relation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ergative</td>
<td>•subject (of a transitive verb)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>absolutive</td>
<td>•subject (of an intransitive verb)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>•direct object</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This alignment of case and grammatical relations undermines standard views about the function of case marking, as a number of commentators have noted.

*The unique dissociation of case and argument-hood in ergative languages has afforded researchers new means of testing conclusions regarding the privileged grammatical status of subject, the relative import and function of case and agreement in the grammar, and the origins of constraints on extraction in ergative languages and beyond.*

(Longenbaugh & Polinsky 2017:709)

The approach that I have adopted offers a new way to think about the role of case marking, assigning each case a single major function in all languages: null case is uniformly associated with the base argument, while an overt case is used to pick out the added argument.

**Case marking in natural syntax**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>least marked (usually null)</td>
<td>• indicates the base argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more marked</td>
<td>• indicates an added argument</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10.2 A word order effect

A puzzling consequence of ergative alignment is an intriguing word order effect. It is a well-established fact that ergative languages almost always have either verb-final or verb-initial basic order; there are very few SVO languages with ergative alignment.

**Mahajan’s Generalization**

Ergative languages exhibit SOV and VSO order, but not SVO.


As I see it, the asymmetry identified by Mahajan’s Generalization reflects a ‘sidedness’ effect – whether particular arguments appear on the left or right side of the verb, a basic component of linearization. The generalization that I propose is as follows:

**Sidedness Harmony**

Base arguments manifest a uniform sidedness: they typically all occur on the same side of the verb.

The key intuition is that just as base arguments have a signature form of case marking (usually null), so they tend to have a consistent placement with respect to the verb.

Sidedness Harmony has different consequences for the two major types of alignment. In accusative languages, ‘subjects’ of intransitive and transitive verbs (both associated with the base argument position) should either uniformly precede or uniformly follow the verb.
### Sidedness Harmony in accusative languages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Verb-initial</th>
<th>Verb-medial</th>
<th>Verb-final</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intransitive:</strong></td>
<td>VS</td>
<td>SV</td>
<td>SV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transitive:</strong></td>
<td>VSO/VOS</td>
<td>SVO</td>
<td>SOV</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consistent with the harmony requirement, the base argument (bold-faced) occurs on the right side of the verb in VSO/VOS languages and on the left side in SVO and SOV languages.

In ergative languages, in contrast, Sidedness Harmony entails that the subject of an intransitive verb and the direct object of a transitive verb (the base arguments in that language type) should consistently precede the verb or consistently follow it. As illustrated below, this requirement is met in verb-initial and verb-final patterns, but not in verb-medial languages.

### Sidedness Harmony in ergative languages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Verb-initial</th>
<th>*Verb-medial</th>
<th>Verb-final</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intransitive:</strong></td>
<td>VS</td>
<td>SV</td>
<td>SV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transitive:</strong></td>
<td>VSO/VOS</td>
<td>SVO</td>
<td>SOV</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the middle column reveals, an ergative language with SVO order runs afoul of Sidedness Harmony since its base argument occurs to the left of the verb in intransitive sentences and to the right in transitive constructions. This is the very pattern that has been identified in the typological literature as exceedingly rare.

Sidedness Harmony predicts a principled class of exceptions, however: ergativity should be permitted in an SVO language if the basic order for intransitive patterns is VS. As illustrated below, this combination of patterns has the effect of uniformly placing the base argument on the right side of the verb.

#### A sidedness pattern compatible with ergativity in an SVO language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>VS</th>
<th>SVO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intransitive:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transitive:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, languages of this very type have been documented.

*For the vast majority of languages, the position of subjects is the same in intransitive clauses as in transitive clauses. However, there are a number of types of languages in which it is not. The first type are languages in which word order follows an ergative pattern.*

(Dryer 2011b)

The example that follows is from Muna, a Malayo-Polynesian language spoken on two islands off the coast of Sulawesi in Indonesia.
Transitive – subject to the left of the verb, direct object (base argument) to right:

\[
\text{S} \quad \text{V} \quad \text{O}
\]

o katogha ne-mbolaku kenta topa.

ERG crow 3SG.REALIS-steal fish dry

‘The crow stole the dry fish.’

Intransitive – subject (base argument) to the right of the verb:

\[
\text{V} \quad \text{S}
\]

no-tende tora dahu.

3SG.REALIS-run again dog

‘The dog ran again.

(van den Bert 1989:150 & 163, cited by Dryer 2011b)

Raina Heaton (pers. comm.) reports a similar pattern for Huastec, an ergative Mayan language of Mexico.

Another word order factor may be in play here too. Drawing on an observation by Beatrice Primus, Hawkins (2014:189) notes that the majority of object-initial languages (a highly unusual word order type) are ergative.

... the majority of languages classified hitherto as object before subject [have] ergative-absolutive morphology, including OSV languages (Dyirbal, Hurrian, Siuslaw, Kabardian, Fasu) and OVS languages (Apalai, Arecuna, Bacairi, Macushi, Hianacoto, Hishkaryana, Panare, Wayana, Asurini, Oiampi, Teribe, Pari, Jur, Luo, Mangaraya).

(Hawkins 2014:189; also Primus 1998, 1999)

Here too we see a sidedness effect. As Dryer (2011) notes, ergative OSV and OVS languages tend to place the sole argument of an intransitive verb to the left, thereby creating a uniform position for the base argument in both transitive and intransitive sentences.

\[
\text{OSV} \quad \text{OVS}
\]

\[
\text{SV} \quad \text{SV}
\]

The end result is a system in which base arguments systematically appear sentence-initially, on the left side of the verb, consistent with the requirements of Sidedness Harmony.

10.3 The accusative advantage

A long-standing mystery remains: why is the ergative option relatively unusual and often unstable?

... ergativity plays a role in only 25 percent of the world’s languages. Although being widespread geographically and genetically, the ergative pattern in a
given language is often complemented by a nominative/accusative pattern. The fact that few languages are exclusively ergative, together with the observation that most languages can do without ergativity at all, suggests that ergativity is a marked phenomenon in natural language.
(van de Visser 2006:2)

... the nominative alignment is more diachronically stable than the ergative alignment, i.e. the expected life-time of [a] nominative construction is considerably longer than that of [an] ergative construction.
(Maslova & Nikitina 2007:29)

... ergative languages do not appear to be consistently ergative; rather, they show ergative patterns only in a subset of their grammar.
(Coon & Preminger 2012:1-2)

It is sometimes suggested that the preference for accusativity might be attributed to processing pressures of some sort.

... several researchers have proposed that ergative alignment systems appear to be a “recessive feature” cross-linguistically, susceptible to degradation and total loss in diachronic development and in contact scenarios with neighboring accusative languages... The underlying assumption (which is not unquestionable itself) is that phenomena that are harder to process or learn should be less common. If ergative alignments are more difficult to process or to learn, this would offer a compelling explanation for the cross-linguistic infrequency of ergative alignment systems.
(Longenbaugh & Polinsky 2017:4 [ms])

But what would make ergative alignment harder to process?
One possibility worth considering comes from a comparison of the two options for extending the semantic base.

**Accusative option: Addition of a second-argument position**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRED</th>
<th>PRED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(\langle \beta \rangle) (\Rightarrow) (\langle _ _\rangle)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (\uparrow)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

added second-argument position

**Ergative option: Addition of a first-argument position**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRED</th>
<th>PRED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(\langle _ \beta \rangle) (\Rightarrow) (\langle _ _\rangle)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (\uparrow)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

added first-argument position
A suggestive difference here is that the accusative option allows the base argument to retain the status of first argument that it enjoys in intransitive patterns. (As the sole argument, it is automatically also the first argument.) By comparison, the ergative option is somewhat disruptive since it forces a repositioning of the base argument in transitive patterns, placing it in the second position, as illustrated directly above. As we will see in the next chapter, this displacement plays a very major role in the sometimes unusual syntax of ergativity.

In sum, natural syntax offers answers for a series of questions that arise in the typology of accusative and ergative languages.

- Why there are two major systems of case marking – accusative and ergative. (Each system reflects a different way to extend the semantic base; §10.1.)

- Why accusative case tends to be overt, whereas the nominative tends to be null. (By virtue of its status as the base argument in an accusative language, the nominative is expected and is therefore minimally marked; §10.1.)

- Why ergative case tends to be overt, whereas the absolutive tends to be null. (By virtue of its status as the base argument in an ergative language, the absolutive is expected and is therefore minimally marked; §10.1.)

- Why ergative languages tend not to have SVO word order. (SVO order in an ergative language is incompatible with Sidedness Harmony; §10.2.)

- Why OSV and OVS languages tend to be ergative and to have SV intransitive patterns. (Such patterns uniformly place the base argument in the prominent sentence-initial position; §10.2.)

- Why accusative systems are more common and more stable than ergative systems. (The base argument in an accusative system consistently aligns with the first argument in both intransitive and transitive patterns; §10.3.)

As explained at the outset, the chain of reasoning that yields answers to these questions begins with a simple semantic base that serves as the starting point for the mapping between form and meaning. The need to make extensions to the base in order to accommodate transitivity results in the case-related alignment effects (accusative versus ergative) that lie at the heart of the typological literature. As we will see in the next chapter, an additional set of effects related to alignment show up in the syntax of agreement.
Languages are selective in their use of agreement. Many avoid it completely, and those that allow it restrict the potential triggers in various ways, often reflecting alignment contrasts (ergative versus accusative). As I will try to explain in this chapter, the architecture of agreement, including its sensitivity to alignment, is shaped by considerations of processing cost. A first set of facts come from an examination of accusative languages.

11.1 Agreement in accusative languages

Agreement in languages with an accusative system of alignment typically targets the sole argument of an intransitive verb and the first argument of a transitive verb (the ‘subject’), as in the following examples from English and Turkish.

**English**

Intransitive pattern:
She **work-s** hard.

Transitive pattern:
She **eat-s** rice every day.

**Turkish**

Intransitive pattern:
Hasan **ayrıl-di**.
Hasan.Nom leave-Pst.3SG
‘Hasan left.’

Transitive pattern:
Hasan **iki öküz-ü al-di**.
Hasan.Nom two ox-Acc buy-Pst.3SG
‘Hasan bought two oxen.’

This pattern of agreement can be summarized as follows.

* This chapter draws on material in O’Grady (2022).
Agreement in accusative languages (English, Turkish)

Intransitive: 
Transitive: 
PRED 
PRED 
\( \langle \beta \rangle \) \( \langle \beta \_ \rangle \) 
\( 1 \) \( 1 \ 2 \)
\( Agr \) \( Agr \) 
\( \_ \)

Some accusative languages also permit agreement with the second argument. Swahili is one such language. (SA = subject agreement; OA = object agreement; PRS = present; IND = indicative)

Swahili

Intransitive pattern:

Juma a-na-kimbi-a.
Juma SA-PRS-run-IND
‘Juma is running.’

Transitive pattern:

Juma a-na-m-pend-a Miriam.
Juma SA-PRS-OA-like-IND Miriam
‘Juma likes Miriam.’
(data from Deen 2006)

Double agreement of this sort can be represented schematically as follows:

Intransitive: 
Transitive: 
PRED 
PRED 
\( \langle \beta \rangle \) \( \langle \beta \_ \rangle \) 
\( 1 \) \( 1 \ 2 \)
\( Agr \) \( Agr \) 
\( \_ \)

\( (a-) \) \( (a-) \) \( (-m-) \)

Languages that agree with a third argument (e.g., an ‘indirect object’ or an oblique) are vanishingly rare.

Taken together, the facts just reviewed suggest that the first argument is the most accessible target for agreement in accusative languages. This conclusion makes sense for two reasons.

• The first argument offers the only option for agreement in the maximally simple semantic base.

\( \langle \beta \rangle \) 
\( 1 \)
• Only the first argument is necessarily present in all expanded semantic representations, thereby creating an opportunity for maximal uniformity in the application of the agreement operation – a further processing advantage.

\[
PRED <\beta _1 < \ldots > \\
1 2 \ldots
\]

The status of the second argument as the next most accessible agreement target (in those languages that allow double agreement) also makes sense from a processing perspective. As the product of the operation that makes a minimal (one-place) extension to the semantic base, it is ‘next in line’ if agreement is to seek out an additional target.

We are left with a calculus that can be summarized as follows, mirroring the relational hierarchies that have long been central to work on typology (see Croft 2003 for a summary).

**Agreement Calculus for Accusative Languages**

First argument > Second argument > …

Interestingly, however, a competing calculus can account for the same facts.

**Alternative Agreement Calculus for Accusative Languages**

Base argument > Added argument > …

There is an obvious reason for this overlap: the base argument in an accusative language corresponds to the first argument and vice versa.

**Accusative languages**

\[
PRED <\beta > \\
1
\]

In other words, an accurate generalization about the preferred agreement target in accusative languages can be stated in two ways – with reference to the first argument or with reference to the base argument.

Crucially, however, both versions of the agreement calculus are rooted in exactly the same fact. The favored agreement target (whether it is characterized as the first argument or the base argument) appears in essentially every sentence that is uttered, thereby ensuring maximal availability. This fits well with the idea that the architecture of agreement is shaped by processing considerations such as predictability and ease of access.

Ergative languages shed further light on agreement by allowing us to avoid the convergence of ‘first argument’ and ‘base argument’ that arises in accusative languages.
**Ergative languages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRED</th>
<th>PRED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(&lt;\beta&gt;)</td>
<td>(_\beta)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As illustrated here, the base argument corresponds to the second argument in an ergative system of alignment, opening the door for a different perspective on the syntax of agreement.

### 11.2 Agreement in ergative languages

Ergative languages manifest variation in agreement that is not seen in accusative languages. However, as we will see next, that variation is almost eerily predictable, given the account of alignment that I have put forward.

#### Agreement with a base argument that is not a first argument

A first option for agreement in ergative languages is exemplified by Pashto, an Indo-Iranian language. As illustrated below, it targets the sole argument of an intransitive verb and the second argument (the ‘direct object’) of a transitive verb.

**Agreement targets the base argument**

Intransitive pattern:

\[ \text{woman} \text{OBL-office-from} \text{came-3FSG} \]

‘The woman came from the office.’

Transitive pattern:

\[ \text{I.Erg woman saw-3FSg} \]

‘I saw the woman.’

(data from Babrakzai 1999:78 & 103)

The Pashto pattern of agreement can be summarized schematically as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intransitive:</th>
<th>Transitive:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRED</td>
<td>PRED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(&lt;\beta&gt;)</td>
<td>(_\beta)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Pashto facts demonstrate that agreement doesn’t have to favor a first argument – contrary to what happens in accusative languages, where the first argument and the base
argument are one and the same. As Pashto transitive patterns reveal, agreement can favor the base argument over the first argument when the two are distinct from each other.¹

**Agreement Calculus for Pashto**

Base argument > Added argument > …

If it is possible for agreement to be triggered by a base argument that is not a first argument, could the reverse also be true? That is, could there be languages in which agreement targets a first argument that is not also the base argument? Once again, we must look to ergative languages for the answer since only they dissociate the first and basic argument positions.

**Agreement with a first argument that is not a base argument**

Enga, an ergative language of Papua New Guinea, appears to manifest exactly the agreement pattern that we are seeking since it systematically targets the first argument even when it is not also the base argument.

Enga

Intransitive pattern – agreement with the sole argument:

nambá p-e-ó.

I go-PST-1SG

‘I went.’

Transitive pattern – agreement with the first argument (not the base argument):

namba-mé mená dóko p-i-ó.

I-ERG pig DEF hit-PST-1SG

‘I hit (killed) the pig.’


The Enga agreement pattern can be represented as follows.

**Agreement targets the first argument**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intransitive:</th>
<th>Transitive:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRED</td>
<td>PRED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;β&gt;</td>
<td>&lt;β&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ Agr \rightarrow \]

\[ (-ó) \]

¹ Some ergative languages, such as Yup’ik (Eskimo-Aleut), have systems of double agreement in which there is one set of agreement markers for the base argument and a different set for the added first argument. In the examples below, from Payne (1997:135-36), the suffix -nga is associated with the base argument and -a with the added first argument.

Ayallruu-nga. Tom-am cingallru-a -nga.

Travel -1Sg Tom-Erg greet -3Sg-1Sg

‘I traveled.’ ‘Tom greeted me.’
In sum, we end up with the following typology of agreement.

i. In accusative languages (e.g., English, Turkish), where the base argument and the first argument are one and the same, there is no variation. Agreement is invariably triggered by the first/base argument.

   First/Base argument > …

ii. By contrast, in ergative languages, where the first argument and the base argument are dissociated in transitive patterns, there is the possibility of variation.

   • In some cases (e.g., Pashto), the verb agrees with the base argument rather than the first argument.

   Base argument > …

   • In other cases (e.g., Enga), the verb agrees with the first argument rather than the base argument.

   First argument > …

This makes perfect sense from a processing perspective. The base argument and the first argument share a fundamental property: they are predictably and reliably present in essentially every sentence in the language. As depicted in the semantic representations below, all sentences – transitive or intransitive – have a base argument since they are all derived from the semantic base. Moreover, of necessity, they all have a first argument, which may or may not also be the base argument in a transitive pattern.

**The ubiquity of first and base arguments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intransitive</th>
<th>Transitive (accusative lg.)</th>
<th>Transitive (ergative lg.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRED</td>
<td>PRED</td>
<td>PRED</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(&lt;β&gt;)</td>
<td>(&lt;β_1&gt;)</td>
<td>(&lt;_β&gt;)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(1 2)</td>
<td>(1 2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, regardless of alignment type and regardless of the agreement option – first argument or base argument – the preferred target is consistently present and accessible. The end result is a maximally uniform and efficient implementation of agreement that fits well with the tenets of natural syntax.

Indeed, the above observation opens the door to a new way of thinking about accessibility. Contrary to generalizations that treat the subject as privileged, despite conflicting evidence from many ergative languages, an alternative now presents itself. The preferred target for an operation such as agreement need only meet one simple requirement: it should be always present and available, as illustrated in the schema above. In other words, the accessibility hierarchy can be reduced to just what its name implies – accessibility.
11.3 Some less common forms of agreement

If the proposal just outlined is right, no language should allow agreement with just the added argument. More precisely:

• No accusative language should allow agreement with just the second argument (its ‘direct object’).

• No ergative language should allow agreement with just the first argument of a transitive verb (its ‘subject’).

Such patterns run afoul of the accessibility calculus, since an agreement operation of either type would fail to target the more accessible first/base argument. Yet, both unexpected patterns do seem to exist.

*Agreement with just the direct object in the accusative language Teiwa* [Indonesia]

Intransitive pattern – no agreement:

ha(‘an) gi.

you go

‘You go.’

Transitive pattern – agreement with the second argument (only):

ha(‘an) n-oqai g-unba’?

you my-child 3SG-meet

‘Did you meet my child?’

(Fedden et al. 2013:48 & 35)

*Agreement with just the first argument of a transitive verb in the ergative language Halkomelem* [Salish]

Intransitive pattern – no agreement:

í:mex te Strang.

walking DET Strang

‘Strang is walking.’

Transitive pattern – agreement with the first argument (only):

q’ô:y-t-es te Strang te sqelá:w.

kill-TR-3SG.ERG DET Strang DET beaver

‘Strang killed the beaver.’

(Wiltschko 2006)

However, these types of agreement systems are rare (e.g., Baker 2013:22), and special provisos seem to apply.

In the few languages that allow only second-argument agreement, the phenomenon appears to have developed ‘by accident,’ through the grammaticalization of clitic direct object pronouns.
... grammatical agreement systems evolve historically from the morphological incorporation of pronouns into verbs ...

(Bresnan & Mchombo 1987:741; also Siewierska 1999, for a more general discussion)

Indeed, the purported agreement suffixes in such cases often bear a strong phonological resemblance to pronouns. This is evident in several Alor-Pantar languages, including the above-mentioned Teiwa (Fedden et al. 2013, 2014), as well as in the Austronesian languages Palauan (Levin 2019) and Roviana (Schuelke 2020).

**Pronouns and second-argument agreement in Palauan**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SINGULAR</th>
<th>PLURAL (EXCLUSIVE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pronoun</td>
<td>Agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st person</td>
<td>ngak -ak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd person</td>
<td>kau -au</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd person</td>
<td>ngii -ii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Pronoun Agreement Pronoun Agreement)

Ergative languages in which agreement operations target only first arguments of transitive verbs also seem to have a special property. The only examples that I have encountered occur in case-less languages such as Halkomelem, where there is a need for an alternative way to indicate ergative alignment. In the absence of case marking, agreement fulfills that function by singling out the added first argument as special.

\[ \text{PRED} \]
\[ < \_ \beta > \]

Agreement targets just the added first-argument position.

This is exactly parallel to what happens in ergative systems of case marking, where overt case inflection is typically reserved only for the first argument of a transitive verb.

In sum, it has been possible to address a number of puzzles in the syntax of agreement that arise as part of the alignment phenomenon.

• Why accusative languages uniformly favor agreement with the first/base argument.
• Why ergative languages may allow agreement with either the base argument or the first argument.
• Why certain types of agreement systems are rare or even non-existent.

The insight offered by natural syntax is that the various instantiations of agreement observed in language are best understood by reference to processing pressures. As we have seen, a cost-based calculus emerges from those pressures, resulting in a computational system that seeks out the most accessible and predictably present argument as the agreement target.
The cost of filler-gap dependencies is sensitive to a variety of factors. One of those factors, as documented in chapter 7, involves whether the dependency crosses a clause boundary. But other factors are in play as well, including the status of the wh argument itself – whether it is a first argument or a base argument, for example. This in turn leads to the possibility of a contrast between accusative and ergative languages similar to the alignment effect that helps shape the syntax of agreement, as discussed in the preceding chapter.

12.1 Filler-gap dependencies in accusative languages

Several types of evidence suggest that wh dependencies involving a subject gap are favored in accusative languages, including English.

i. Simplicity in form

Consistent with the well-established generalization that the unmarked option has the simplest form (e.g., Hawkins 2014:19), only subject wh questions avoid the need for an ‘inverted’ auxiliary verb in English.

Subject wh questions (no need for an auxiliary verb; no inversion):
Who _ helped Mary?
Who _ gave advice to Jerry?

Non-subject wh questions (auxiliary verb and inversion required):
Who did Mary help _?
Who did Mary give advice to _?

ii. Early mastery by child language learners

A number of studies have established early mastery of subject wh questions. In a comprehension study of 100 English-speaking children aged 3;0 to 5;5, for instance, the participants were significantly better at interpreting subject wh questions than their direct object counterparts.
### Percentage correct

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject <em>wh</em> Q</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dir. Obj. <em>wh</em> Q</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Tyack & Ingram 1977)*

A similar finding was reported in an elicited production task involving 23 children (2;6 to 4;11) learning English as a first language in comparison to 30 children (2;4 to 5;0) learning Japanese as a first language.

... *subject wh* questions are easier than *object wh* questions for English-speaking children, but there is no difference in relative difficulty between the two question types for Japanese-speaking children.

*(Yoshinaga 1996:111-12)*

The contrast between English and Japanese is particularly interesting, since it suggests that the subject advantage involves the filler-gap dependency itself, rather than simply the choice of the argument to be questioned. Japanese, with its in situ *wh* questions, showed no subject–object asymmetry.

### iii. Ease of processing by adults

There is ample evidence that a *wh* dependency is easier to process in subject patterns than in direct object patterns, even for adults.

... *subject wh* interrogatives are judged more acceptable than *object wh* interrogatives...

... even in quite commonplace [filler-gap dependencies], the distance between the filler and gap can have a significant bearing on both measurable processing difficulty and judgments of acceptability, as obtained in controlled experimental circumstances.

*(Hofmeister & Sag 2010:381; also Arnon, Estigarribia, Hofmeister et al. 2005)*

A parallel finding has been well-documented for relative clauses, a close sister of *wh* question patterns.

... parsing of object relatives is harder than that of subject relatives – a line of studies since the 1970s showed that they take more time and are more prone to errors...

*(Friedman, Belletti & Rizzi 2009:68)*

Subject relative clause: 
the dog [that _ chased the child]

Direct object relative clause: 
the dog [that the child chased _]
... object-extracted structures (relative clauses ... and wh questions ...) caused greater difficulty in language production compared to subject-extracted structures. In particular, it took participants longer to initiate their productions and to articulate the words in the object-extracted conditions.
(Scontras, Badecker, Shank, Lim & Fedorenko 2015:12-13)

iv. Less attrition in cases of impairment
A similar subject advantage has been reported for various types of language impairment.

Comprehension of which-questions [by two males, aged 58 and 75, with Broca’s aphasia] was asymmetric, with subject gap versions comprehended significantly better than object gap versions, the latter yielding chance-level performance...
(Hickok & Avrutin 1996:314)

One of the four agrammatic (Broca’s) aphasic subjects showed a subject/object asymmetry in all wh questions tested.
(Thompson et al. 1999:169)

In an eye-tracking study that required participants to respond to questions about depicted events, the eight participants with Broca’s aphasia showed ‘significantly lower accuracy, slower response times, and increased interference ... in the object-extracted WHICH questions relative to the other conditions.’

Which mailman did the fireman push _ yesterday afternoon?
(Sheppard, Walenski, Love & Shapiro 2015:781 & 785)

v. A markedness advantage
There is ample typological evidence that the least marked type of filler-gap dependency involves a subject gap – at least in accusative languages (more on that later); the next least marked pattern involves a direct object gap.

... filler-gap dependency hierarchies for relativization and wh movement across grammars appear to be structured by the increasing complexity of the permitted gap environments in the lower positions of [the hierarchy below].

Subject > Direct Object > Indirect Object/Oblique

The grammatical cut-off points ... correspond to declining processing ease ... 
(Hawkins 2014:4)
This idea reflects an important line of inquiry that was initiated by Keenan & Comrie’s pioneering study on the typology of relativization.

... if a given strategy is used to encode a fairly easy meaning and that strategy is “strong” enough to encode a rather difficult meaning, then it is surely strong enough to encode the meanings of intermediate difficulty.

(Keenan & Comrie 1977:88)

These and related considerations raise the obvious question: why are wh dependencies involving subjects preferred? What, precisely, makes them easier to acquire, to process, to retain, and to use?

**The proximity explanation**

One idea, adopted by a number of scholars, focuses on the possibility of a proximity or ‘earliness’ effect.

*The Active Filler Hypothesis* (paraphrased)

Associate the filler with a ‘gap’ as quickly as possible.


Similar proposals are common in the literature.

... if it has recognized the existence of a wh filler, the parser will posit an empty category at the left-most possible ... site without waiting ...

(Frazier & Clifton 1989:113)

... the longer a predicted category must be kept in memory before the prediction is satisfied, the greater is the cost for maintaining that prediction; and the greater the distance between an incoming word and the most local head or dependent to which it attaches, the greater the integration cost.

(Gibson 1998:1)

... much evidence indicates that shorter dependencies are preferred over longer dependencies, and that longer dependencies incur a greater processing cost.

(Phillips, Kazanina & Abada 2005: 407)

... increasing the distance between two linguistically dependent items creates difficulty for language processing because the distant item decays over time.

(Lewis, Vasishth & Van Dyke 2006:450)

Proximity-based approaches are promising since subject gaps do in general occur closer than other arguments to the beginning of a sentence, where the wh word is. Subjects precede other arguments in more than 96% of the world’s languages that have an
identifiable canonical order; see Dryer (2011a). However, the proximity hypothesis is not entirely successful. In the VOS language Malagasy, for instance, only subjects can participate in a wh dependency, despite their greater distance from the front of the sentence. (PRT = ‘grammatical particle’)

**Subject wh question**

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
V & O & S \\
iza & no & nivy ny akoho _? \\
\text{who PRT buy the chicken _} \\
\text{‘Who bought the chicken?’}
\end{array}
\]

**Direct object wh question**

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
V & O & S \\
*inona & no & nivy _i Bao? \\
\text{what PRT buy _ Bao} \\
\text{‘What did Bao buy?’}
\end{array}
\]

(Potsdam 2004:245)

This suggests a need to reconsider the proximity analysis.

**The accessibility explanation**

A somewhat different approach, which I favor, assigns primacy to the first argument in accusative languages for the same reason that it is the most accessible target for agreement, as discussed in the previous chapter.

- The first argument offers the only option for forming a wh dependency in the maximally simple semantic base.

  \[
  \text{PRED} \\
  <\beta> \\
  1
  \]

- The first argument is also present in all expanded semantic representations.

  \[
  \text{PRED} \\
  <\beta _...> \\
  1 2 ...
  \]

The omnipresence of the first argument therefore creates a unique opportunity for maximal uniformity in the choice of a language’s favored wh dependencies – an obvious processing advantage.

We thus end up with the familiar calculus.

**Calculus for Wh Dependencies in Accusative Languages**

First argument > Second argument > …
As noted in the previous chapter, this calculus aligns almost perfectly with the traditional relational hierarchy first proposed for relative clauses by Keenan & Comrie and subsequently amended by Hawkins.

**Relational Hierarchy**

Subject > Direct Object > Indirect Object/Oblique

(Hawkins 2004:177; also Keenan & Comrie 1977:66.)

However, as was the case for the syntax of agreement in accusative languages, a competing version of the calculus can account for the same facts.

**Alternative Calculus for Wh Dependencies in Accusative Languages**

Base argument > Added argument > …

As observed in our discussion of agreement, the existence of competing generalizations stems from the fact that the base argument in an accusative language always corresponds to the first argument, and vice versa.

**Accusative languages**

\[
\begin{array}{c|c}
\text{PRED} & \text{PRED} \\
<\beta> & <\beta_1> \\
1 & 1 2 \\
\end{array}
\]

Regardless of how it is characterized, the first/base argument is the preferred target for \textit{wh} dependencies for a very good reason: it is present in every sentence of every language, thereby enjoying a level of predictability and accessibility far beyond that of any other argument.

But what would happen if the base argument were not also the first argument? One way to get at this question is to examine ergative languages, in which the base argument occupies the second-argument position in a transitive pattern.

**Ergative languages**

\[
\begin{array}{c|c}
\text{PRED} & \text{PRED} \\
<\beta> & <\beta_1> \\
1 & 1 2 \\
\end{array}
\]

What type of filler-gap dependencies are preferred in languages of this type? Do they uniformly favor subject gaps, as predicted by the traditional relational hierarchy (subject > direct object > …), or is a different sort of generalization called for? As we will see next, this line of inquiry does not end well for hierarchies based on grammatical relations.

*If the basis of consideration is widened to include languages exhibiting an ergative-absolutive alignment, the neat pattern encapsulated in the [traditional] accessibility hierarchy appears to break down.*

(Longenbaugh & Polinsky 2016:99)
12.2 Filler-gap dependencies in ergative languages

Ergative languages manifest variation in the syntax of filler-gap dependencies that is reminiscent of the variation seen in the architecture of agreement described in the preceding chapter. Two options can be identified.

A first ergative option – filler-gap dependencies favor the base argument

It is well known that a very substantial subset of ergative languages allow only filler-gap dependencies involving an ‘absolutive’ – i.e., either the subject of an intransitive verb or the direct object of a transitive verb.

In the WALS survey of thirty-two ergative languages, only five were shown to permit long-distance extraction of the ergative subject with a gap, and all belonged to one of two families.

(Longenbaugh & Polinsky 2016:102; also Polinsky 2017:9[ms])

The Mayan language Kaqchikel manifests a typical ergative syntax in its wh questions. (The basic word order in Kaqchikel is VOS.)

*Wh word is the subject of an intransitive verb*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achiké</th>
<th>n-Ø-anin</th>
<th>?</th>
<th>PRED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>who</td>
<td>INCOMPL-3SG.ABS-run</td>
<td>&lt;β&gt;</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Who is running?’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Wh word is the direct object of a transitive verb*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achiké</th>
<th>n-Ø-u-tz’ub-aj</th>
<th>ri ixōq?</th>
<th>PRED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>who</td>
<td>INCOMPL-3SG.ABS-3SG.ERG-kiss-TR</td>
<td>DET woman</td>
<td>&lt;β&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Who is the woman kissing _?’</td>
<td>1 2</td>
<td>~wh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A similar asymmetry defines relativization in many ergative languages, including Tongan.

*Relativization of the subject of an intransitive verb*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>E fefine</th>
<th>[na’e ‘alu _ ki Tonga]</th>
<th>PRED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the woman</td>
<td>PST go _ to Tonga</td>
<td>&lt;β&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘the woman who went to Tonga’</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rel~z</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Relativization of the direct object of a transitive verb

E fefine ['oku ‘ofa‘i ‘e Sione _] PRED
the woman PRS love ERG Sione _
‘the woman who Sione loves’

Relativization of the subject of a transitive verb

*Not acceptable; a resumptive pronoun pattern is required.
(data from Otsuka 2001:191-92)

It is evident from these contrasts that Kaqchikel and Tongan favor the base argument, not the first argument (the ‘subject’), in patterns involving filler-gap dependencies.¹

Base argument > …

The Polynesian language Niuean presents a somewhat less transparent manifestation of the same preference. In Niuean, wh dependencies can target both subjects and direct objects. (The basic word order in Niuean is VSO.)

**Wh argument is the subject of a transitive verb**

V  S  O
Ko e pupsi fé ne tutuli _ tūmau e lapīti? PRED
PRED cat which PST chase _ always ABS rabbit <_ β>
‘Which cat always chased the rabbit?’

**Wh argument is the direct object of a transitive verb**

V  S  O
Ko e pupsi fé ne tutuli tūmau he kulī _? PRED
PRED cat which PST chase always ERG dog _ <_ β>
‘Which cat did the dog always chase?’

(Tollan, Massam & Heller 2019)

An important question now arises: which of a transitive verb’s two arguments is the preferred target in Niuean? A preference for the subject would be consistent with a calculus favoring first arguments, whereas an advantage for the direct object would point toward a calculus that privileges the base argument. Which prediction is right?

A possible answer comes from an eye-tracking experiment in which participants were asked to respond to questions based on a short contextual story. The results revealed an

¹ A similar preference is found in Tagalog and many other Western Austronesian languages, which use a system of symmetrical voice to consistently pick out the base argument, which is the only licit target for question formation. See O’Grady & Bulalang (2019) for a detailed discussion.
advantage for the patterns in which the question word is an absolutive – that is, the base argument.\(^2\)

\[ ... \text{absolutive [base] arguments are preferred independent of subject or object status.} \]
(Tollan, Massam & Heller 2019:10)

In sum, in at least some languages that dissociate the first argument and the base argument (Kaqchikel, Tongan and Niuean), the base argument is the preferred target for \(wh\) movement.

Base argument > Added argument > …

Could there also be ergative languages that favor the first argument over the base argument when forming filler-gap dependencies, just as there are some ergative languages that prefer the first argument over the base argument when selecting an agreement target? The answer appears to be yes.

**A second ergative option – filler-gap dependencies favor the first argument**

A first-argument preference for filler-gap dependencies in an ergative language can be discerned in the syntax of relativization in Kaqchikel. Although Kaqchikel targets just base arguments in forming \(wh\) questions (as noted earlier), it allows both subjects and direct objects to be relativized.

**Relativization of the subject of a transitive verb**

\[
\text{ri ala' [ri ru-q’et-en ri xtän _]} \quad \text{PRED} \\
\text{Det boy REL 3SG.ERG-hug-PERF Det girl _} <\_\_\_\_β> \\
\text{‘the boy who is hugging the girl’} \\
\]

**Relativization of the direct object of a transitive verb**

\[
\text{ri xtän [ri ru-q’et-en _ ri ala’]} \quad \text{PRED} \\
\text{Det girl REL 3SG.ERG-hug-PERF Det boy _} <\_\_\_\_β> \\
\text{‘the girl who the boy is hugging’} \\
\]

As was the case with Niuean, the key question has to do with which of the two arguments of a transitive verb is an easier target for the filler-gap dependency. A study of the ability of 28 adult native speakers to produce relative clauses in an elicitation task yielded findings that point toward a strong subject preference.

---

\(^2\) An earlier study by Longenbaugh & Polinsky (2016) on Niuean relative clauses, which measured response times in a question comprehension task, revealed no difference between subjects and objects of transitive verbs.
A key finding was the relatively low rate of production for direct object relative clauses [compared to subject relative clauses – 24.3% versus 85%]. No individual participants were more successful in their production of direct object relative clauses than transitive subject relative clauses.

(Heaton, Deen & O’Grady 2016:41)

We therefore end up with the following typology of filler-gap dependencies, which exactly parallels the syntax of agreement.

i. In accusative languages (e.g., English), where the base argument and the first argument are one and the same, there is no variation. The first/base argument is always the preferred target of filler-gap dependencies.

First/Base argument > …

ii. In ergative languages, where the first argument and the base argument in transitive patterns are dissociated, there is the possibility of variation.

• In some cases (e.g., Tongan, Niuean and Tagalog), the base argument rather than the first argument is the preferred target for filler-gap dependencies.

Base argument > …

• In other cases (e.g., relative clauses in Kaqchikel), the first argument is the target of choice.

First argument > …

A unifying logic underlies variation in the syntax of filler-gap dependencies in accusative and ergative languages, just as it does for the syntax of agreement. The preferred argument – whether it is the first argument or the base argument – is predictably present in every single sentence (in every single language) and therefore enjoys a level of predictability and accessibility far beyond that of any other argument.

The ubiquity of first and base arguments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intransitive</th>
<th>Transitive (accusative lg.)</th>
<th>Transitive (ergative lg.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRED</td>
<td>PRED</td>
<td>PRED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(&lt;\beta&gt;)</td>
<td>(&lt;\beta_{-}&gt;)</td>
<td>(-\beta_{&gt;_})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(1\ 2)</td>
<td>(1\ 2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Like so much else in language, the relational hierarchy is driven by more basic factors – in this case, the advantages of accessibility and uniformity.

As was the case for agreement, the rationale underlying the typology of filler-gap dependencies departs quite fundamentally from the traditional logic of hierarchy-based generalizations, with their emphasis on standard grammatical relations. That departure is in fact a key element of natural syntax. ‘Subject’ and ‘direct object’ are technical
grammatical terms – artifacts, not natural concepts. They therefore have no place in an explanatory theory of language that respects the Strict Emergentist Protocol.

In contrast, notions such as ‘first argument’ and ‘base argument’ correspond to positions in the semantic representations that are independently required if language is to express meaning. As such, they are a natural part of cognition and their contribution to the syntax of mapping fits well with the larger picture that I have been sketching.
A child’s acquisition of language is one of the most natural events in life. Barring pathology or neglect, its success is guaranteed, regardless of the child’s intellectual aptitude and regardless of the language being learned. There can be only one explanation for this: children’s brains must be especially suited to the type of languages that humans speak.

*Human language is the way it is, and children learn it so successfully, because it is a good fit for the brain.*

(O’Grady 2015:100)

Everyone believes this, and the point is frequently made in one form or another by scholars whose views otherwise differ.

*[The linguistic system is] one of the organs of the body, in this case a cognitive organ, ... which reduce[s] somehow to “the organical structure of the brain.”*

(Chomsky 2007b:12)

*The key to understanding the fit between language and the brain is to understand how language has been shaped by the brain, not the reverse. The process by which language has been shaped by the brain is, in important ways, akin to Darwinian selection. Hence, we suggest that it is a productive metaphor to view languages as analogous to biological species, adapted through natural selection.*

(Christiansen & Chater 2008:498)

But the challenge remains: what is the character of the fit, and why has it been so difficult to identify?

*Despite several decades of empirical work, we are nowhere near a complete theory of language acquisition.*

(Yang 2016:75)

The reason for the slow progress, I suggest, is that there is in fact no such thing as language acquisition, at least in the sense of a developmental process devoted specifically to the construction of a grammar. What *appears* to be language acquisition is simply the emergence of processing routines.
Development takes place as [processing] routines are strengthened and automatized at different rates.
(O’Grady 2005b:205; also pp. 193 & 210)

Acquisition is simply the lingering effects of processing activity.
(Sharwood-Smith & Truscott 2014:93)

Language acquisition is nothing more than learning to process.
(Christiansen & Chater 2016:10)

In fact, I will adopt a somewhat stronger version of this idea here, which is that ‘acquisition’ emerges from attempts by the processor to facilitate its own operation.

The Amelioration Hypothesis
Language acquisition is a side-effect of processing amelioration.
(O’Grady 2013:254)

What this means, as I see it, is that the emergence of language is shaped by a drive to improve the efficiency of the mapping between form and meaning – the very goal that helps fashion the properties of language in the first place. Herein may lie the sought-after ‘good fit’ between language and the brain.

As suggested in my initial discussion of processing determinism (see §3.3), two factors contribute to this outcome.

• Internal forces seek to reduce processing cost by favoring operations that minimize the burden on working memory and maximize predictability.
• External usage-based forces encourage the automatization and entrenchment of routines as the result of their repeated activation in response to experience.

13.1 Starting syntax

If language acquisition can in fact be reduced to processing amelioration, then – ideally – every question about why linguistic development follows the particular course that it does should have exactly the same answer: ‘because it’s the most natural option.’ Which is to say that every step in development should contribute to the effectiveness and economy of the language’s form-meaning algorithms, commensurate with the available input. Needless to say, we are a long way from being able to say that this prediction is borne out. Nonetheless, there are some indications that the idea might be on the right track.
The first major step in the emergence of syntax includes the use and interpretation of sentences whose meaning includes a predicate and an argument, the very structure that defines the semantic base.

\[
PRED <\beta> \]

Indeed, a very large number of early sentence-like patterns in children’s speech are of just this type (Valian 1991, Tsujimura 2008).

I tired.
You go.
Mommy sleeping.

There is no simpler place for the mapping between form and meaning to take root than in sentences whose semantic representation meets the most minimal of requirements – the presence of a predicate and a single argument. There is also no better platform for subsequent syntactic development, including the emergence of basic transitive patterns and the selection of an alignment option. From this, much else follows – a system of case, commitment to a particular pattern of agreement, a mechanism for managing filler-gap dependencies, and so on.

If this idea is on the right track, we should expect to see evidence of ‘attractor effects’ – pressures that draw learners down natural developmental paths, thereby facilitating the acquisition of broad swaths of a language, well beyond the simple two-word sentences in which the semantic base is first manifested. Here are a few examples of possible attractor effects, based on my treatment of several of the phenomena considered in chapters 9 through 12. (If you haven’t read those chapters, you may want to skip the rest of this section. For discussion of attractor effects from a somewhat different theoretical perspective, see Ibbotson 2020, ch. 6.)

• In the absence of indications to the contrary, learners should automatically adopt the default option for accommodating transitivity, which is to allow the base argument to retain its status as first argument and to add a second-argument position (§10.1 & 10.3).

The accusative option:

\[
PRED \quad PRED
\begin{array}{c}
<\beta> \\
\Rightarrow
\end{array}
\begin{array}{c}
<\beta> \\
\uparrow
\end{array}
\quad added\ argument\ position
\]
• In the presence of indications that transitivity calls for the addition of a first-argument position (e.g., an ergative pattern of case marking), learners should expand the semantic base in the opposite direction (§10.1).

The ergative option:

\[
\begin{align*}
PRED & \quad \Rightarrow \quad PRED \\
<\beta> & \quad \uparrow \\
\text{added argument position}
\end{align*}
\]

As we have seen in previous chapters, the choice of alignment option creates a second layer of attractor effects that guide learners still further into the syntax of their language:

• In an accusative language, learners should be attracted to a system of agreement that favors subjects of transitive verbs over direct objects (§11.1).

• In an accusative language, learners should be attracted to \(wh\) dependencies that favor subjects of transitive verbs over direct objects (§12.2).

• In an ergative language, learners should be able to acquire systems of agreement and \(wh\) dependencies that comply with either option, depending on the input (§11.2 & §12.2).

• In languages of both types, learners should be attracted to a system of coreference in which the antecedent is a prior co-argument of the pronoun (§9.1).

These paths have the effect of minimizing the cost of creating form-meaning mappings. Systems of agreement and relativization end up targeting the most accessible argument. The procedures responsible for the resolution of referential dependencies select an immediately available antecedent. And so on.

These outcomes all make natural sense, given the importance of minimizing processing effort. For that reason, they also align well with the idea expressed at the outset: language is a good fit for the brain. The job of ‘language acquisition’ is to respect that fit by deriving form-meaning algorithms that meet the highest standards of processing economy. The typological facts provide indirect evidence for this very scenario since systems of mapping that do a poor job of accommodating processing pressures tend not to exist – presumably for that very reason. That’s why it’s hard to find languages that agree only with direct objects, or that allow only second arguments to be relativized, or that permit patient arguments to serve as antecedents for agent reflexives.

There is also much to discover by examining the developmental trajectories of the phenomena that are instantiated in particular languages. Two separate types of learning need to be considered. The first type, to which the rest of this chapter is devoted, concerns phenomena like word order that are amply instantiated in ambient speech. The second type, discussed in the next chapter, calls for a different line of reasoning since it involves phenomena whose properties are not so generously exemplified in caregiver speech.
13.2 Word order algorithms

On the view I am putting forward, the job of the child is identical to the job of the adult language user – to bring together form and meaning in the most efficient manner possible. Let’s consider in this regard the situation of a fifteen-month-old child who knows no syntax but has a small vocabulary that includes a few names and a few intransitive verbs (run, play, fall, go, smile). What might happen when she hears her father say (for the first time) Oh, Kittie fell, perhaps in a context where the family cat rolled off the couch?

The little girl’s goal is not to learn language. It’s just to process what she has heard – that is, to map the two words onto a meaning. She begins, reasonably, with the semantic base – the minimal starting point for all syntax.

\[
\text{PRED} \\
\langle \beta \rangle
\]

As illustrated below, two operations are required to map the utterance Kittie fell onto this primitive semantic representation.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Kittie fell.} \\
\text{Step 0: Projection of semantic base} \\
\text{PRED} \\
\langle \beta \rangle
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Step 1: Upon encountering Kittie, the word’s referent is mapped onto the argument position.} \\
\text{Kittie} & \Rightarrow \text{PRED} \\
& \langle k \rangle
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Step 2: Upon encountering fell, the event it denotes is mapped onto the predicate position.} \\
\text{Kittie fell} & \Rightarrow \text{FALL} \\
& \langle k \rangle
\end{align*}
\]

A processor that goes through this series of operations every time it encounters an intransitive sentence (You laughed, Mommy smiled, They left, etc.) will gradually develop two general algorithms, to be activated in the following order.\(^1\)

---

\(^1\) I leave open the possibility that the processing operations might initially be restricted to particular lexical items such as go, fall, and so on (‘item-based learning’) before being extended to syntactic classes such as ‘verb.’ This is a well-worn issue, which has no immediate implications for the proposal that I am putting forward.
The First-Argument Algorithm:

*Map the referent (REF) of the sentence-initial nominal onto the first-argument position.*

\[ \text{N} \mapsto \text{PRED} \quad \langle \text{REF} \rangle \]

The Predicate Algorithm:

*Map the content of the verb onto the predicate position.*

\[ \text{V} \mapsto \text{EVENT} \quad \langle \text{REF} \rangle \]

Over time, these two algorithms and the routine that they form are strengthened through repeated activation, facilitating the processor’s functioning by automatizing its operation.

* [Operations] gather strength as they prove useful.*

(Anderson 1993:18)

**Strengthening and entrenchment through repeated activation**

\[ \text{N} \mapsto \text{PRED} \quad \langle \text{REF} \rangle \]

\[ \text{V} \mapsto \text{EVENT} \quad \langle \text{REF} \rangle \]

\[ \text{N} \mapsto \text{PRED} \quad \langle \text{REF} \rangle \]

\[ \text{V} \mapsto \text{EVENT} \quad \langle \text{REF} \rangle \]

\[ \text{N} \mapsto \text{PRED} \quad \langle \text{REF} \rangle \]

\[ \text{V} \mapsto \text{EVENT} \quad \langle \text{REF} \rangle \]

As noted in §4.4, the end result is not only the capacity to effortlessly produce and understand SV patterns, but also an aversion to unattested options (VS patterns, for instance) – just what the literature on syntactic development shows.

* ... empirical evidence converges toward the hypothesis that children, as early as they have been tested (2;11 in language production, 1;07 in language comprehension), have an abstract grammatical representation of the [correct] word order of their language.*

(Franck, Millotte & Lassotta 2011:133)
Even before children reach their second birthday, their representations of sentence meaning and form are not strictly tied to particular words. To detect the English word-order pattern in the input and apply it to sentences with novel verbs, the children must have represented their linguistic experience in terms abstract enough to isolate the similarity in the participant roles of diverse events and in the sentence formats of different transitive verbs.

(Gertner, Fisher & Eisengart 2006: 689)

13.3 Getting up to speed

There is general agreement that speed is a crucial component of processing efficiency, presumably because quick execution of the required operations facilitates the time-sensitive computations associated with language use. Put simply, language makes the brain work fast.

... the child must develop computational procedures ... to facilitate split-second processing in adult speech and comprehension.

(Sagarra & Herschensohn 2010:2022)

Speed is enhanced by the automatization of mapping operations that result from repeated activation in the course of hearing and using language.

As sequences of actions are performed repeatedly, they become more fluent and integrated.

(Bybee & McClelland 2005:382)

The processes that create templates ... automatically give greatest associative strength to those [mappings] that occur most frequently.

(Townsend & Bever 2001:175)

... the more frequently a construction is used, the easier it becomes to process.

(Imamura, Sato & Koizumi 2016:2)

Repeated exposure to a particular ... morpheme, a word, or even a sequence of words increases speed and fluency of processing of the pattern.

(Bybee & McClelland 2005:396)

This scenario fits well with the known facts of development in general.

...increases in processing speed reflect a relatively long process of entrenchment and automatization of the relation between form and meaning, something, we would argue, that has to happen over and over again in the learning of language.

(Lieven & Tomasello 2008:169-70)
...frequency of occurrence is an important determinant of language acquisition.
(Diessel 2007:108)

Data from naturalistic studies have shown that input frequency is a major determinant of the acquisition of a variety of syntactic structures...
(Kidd 2012:171)

...frequency effects are ubiquitous across [words, inflectional morphology, simple syntactic constructions, more advanced constructions], and, indeed, across language acquisition in general.
(Ambridge, Kidd, Rowland & Theakston 2015:261)

These outcomes are essentially what one would expect if processing routines are being formed, strengthened, and ultimately automatized in proportion to their frequency of activation: processing speeds up and errors disappear.

This is not a parochial conclusion. Essentially the same idea has been implemented in generative models of language acquisition as well.

As learning proceeds, the child will access the target grammar with increasing probability, while non-target but linguistically possible grammars may still be used, albeit with decreasing probabilities.
(Yang 2016:5-6)

English speakers reject null subject sentences because the [−] value in English is very high and the [+] value very low as a result of repeated long-term exposure to sentences with pronoun subjects and very infrequent exposure to subjectless sentences.
(Truscott & Sherwood-Smith 2004:10)

[The] model assumes that the grammars in the child’s hypothesis space are associated with probabilities or weights. Learning takes place not by changing one grammar to another ... but as changes in the probabilistic distribution of the grammars in response to input data.
(Yang 2018:668)

In sum, processing pressures interact with language input to encourage the creation of routines that facilitate the mapping between form and meaning. Although the purpose and value of these routines is simply to improve the functioning of the processor, their emergence is accompanied by interesting side effects, including two signature features of what is traditionally thought of as language acquisition.

• a steady improvement in production and comprehension as processing routines are honed and strengthened in response to experience
• an aversion to unattested patterns for which there is no processing routine
The result is the illusion that a set of grammatical rules is being acquired, when in fact we are simply observing processing amelioration – the development of algorithms whose activation in a particular manner and order facilitates the mapping between form and meaning.

But this is at best only part of the story. That’s because not all processing routines are shaped by experience and exposure. Some arise in a very different way. We’ll turn to them in the next chapter.
The question of how children learn so much so fast and so well is complicated by the fact that not everything that they end up knowing can be traced to what they actually hear. This apparent paradox is often referred to as ‘Plato’s Problem’ or the problem of ‘Poverty of Stimulus.’

Plato’s problem ... is to explain who we know so much, given that the evidence available to us is so sparse.
(Chomsky 1986b:xxvii)

... in every domain of growth, including acquisition of a particular language, there’s an enormous gap between the data that are available and the state that’s attained. ... In language it’s called the problem of “poverty of stimulus.”
(Chomsky 2012b:8)

Poverty-of-stimulus claims are closely associated with theories of Universal Grammar. In the absence of sufficient information to support learning, so the story goes, inborn principles become essential to an understanding of how children come to master many features of language.

There are at least two circumstances under which the input might be too impoverished to support learning. The first involves a situation in which children quickly acquire a complex feature of language that is infrequently instantiated in the input. It is as if, somehow, they know exactly what to do from the outset, without the need for practice, assistance or feedback. As we will see shortly, the syntax of local coreference offers an apparent example of this.

A second situation is even more puzzling, since it requires children to avoid producing particular types of patterns as a matter of natural instinct, without the help of instruction or correction. A classic example involves constraints on filler-gap dependencies, a matter to which I will turn later in this chapter.

14.1 Acquiring constraints on anaphora

The syntax of anaphora offers an instructive example of how the problem of sparse input can be overcome by processing pressures that direct learners along particular developmental paths. I will focus here on two illustrations, one from English and the other involving Chinese.
14.1 Acquiring constraints on anaphora

The syntax of anaphora offers an instructive example of how the problem of sparse input can be overcome by processing pressures that direct learners along particular developmental paths. I will focus here on two illustrations, one from English and the other from Chinese.

Reflexive pronouns in English

According to the generative analysis of anaphora (briefly reviewed in chapter 9), learning to interpret reflexive pronouns is not a trivial accomplishment. After all, the relevant constraint (Principle A) presupposes the existence of abstract syntactic representations and an awareness of the role of structural prominence (c-command) in resolving referential dependencies. Just as importantly, instances of reflexive pronouns are surprisingly infrequent in parental speech. The data below, from CHILDES, consists of a series of hour-long bi-weekly child-caregiver interactions over a period of months: from 2;3 to 5;2 for Adam, from 1;6 to 2;3 for Eve, and from 2;3 to 5;1 for Sarah.

### Number of reflexive pronouns in maternal speech

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>himself</th>
<th>herself</th>
<th>itself</th>
<th>themselves</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of reflexive pronoun patterns is surprisingly low – even more so if one takes into account the fact that 19 of the 42 examples simply express the meaning ‘alone,’ as in *by himself*, *by itself* and so on.¹

In this and other cases, the adequacy of the input available to children needs to be measured against each component of the three-part puzzle that language learners confront every time they encounter a new word: what is its form, what is its meaning, and what is its syntax? Children’s exposure to a handful of reflexive pronouns may well allow them to identify the form that reflexive pronouns take (*him* + *self*, *her* + *self*, etc.). It may even give them enough information to identify an important component of the meaning of these forms: *himself* refers to a male human, *herself* refers to a female human, and so on. However, the syntax of these items is another matter.

Given that the absence or infrequency of a particular pattern does not suffice to ensure its unacceptability (e.g., Yang 2016:143), why should mere exposure to a sentence such as *He hurt himself* lead a child to automatically reject patterns such as the following?

---

¹ A similar state of affairs has been documented for Japanese. Orita et al. (2021) report that there were just 49 instances of the Japanese reflexive pronoun *zibun* in 40,412 utterances produced by a mother in speech samples collected when her child was between 2;11 and 5;00 years of age. Moreover, many occurrences of the pronoun (32 in all) had a non-reflexive meaning, similar to English ‘alone’ or ‘by himself/herself.’
*His sister hurt himself.
*He said she hurt himself.

Yet, as a large number of experimental studies have demonstrated, children are remarkably successful at avoiding this sort of overreach. Indeed, they typically use and interpret reflexive pronouns correctly from the earliest point at which they can be tested.

Children display adultlike comprehension of sentences including reflexives from about 3 years and produce such sentences spontaneously from about 2 years. Children ... can compute the local domain and, within this, determine the antecedent.

(Guasti 2002: 290)

Not surprisingly, children’s early success with anaphora has led to the conclusion that Principle A must be inborn, as observed by Otsu (1980) in his pioneering study of children’s interpretation of pronouns.

... the finding [of early mastery] ... supports the claim that [Principle A] is part of the innate schematism that allows language acquisition.

(Otsu 1980:188; also p. 191)

Evidence has accumulated showing that knowledge of binding is continuously operative in child grammar.

(Guasti 2002:308)

How can children do so well, based on so little experience, if there is no inborn grammatical principle for anaphora? The answer lies in the algorithm that guides the interpretation of reflexive pronouns.

**The Anaphor Algorithm**

\[
<\alpha, x> \xrightarrow{\alpha}
\]

In effect, there is nothing here that has to be learned since the algorithm simply instantiates a pre-existing natural impulse to favor mappings that minimize operating cost.

... the [local] interpretation of reflexive pronouns is a prototypical case of computational efficiency – the referential dependency is resolved not just at the first opportunity, but immediately...

(O’Grady 2005b:197)

The consequence of that impulse is the prompt resolution of the referential dependency by selecting the nearest possible antecedent – a co-argument. In a very real sense, children do indeed know exactly what to do from the outset: as little as possible.
Some independent support for this idea comes from the interpretation of reflexive pronouns in Chinese.

**Reflexive pronouns in Chinese**

A familiar feature of Chinese syntax is the relatively wider range of options for resolving referential dependencies. As illustrated in the following examples, reflexive pronouns can be interpreted in either of two ways: they can select as their antecedent a local co-argument or an argument in a higher clause.

\[\text{Zhangsan renwei [Lisi xihuan ziji]. (ziji = Lisi or Zhangsan)}\]

Zhangsan thinks Lisi like self
‘Zhangsan thinks that Lisi likes self.’

\[\text{Meimei shuo [Didi ba ziji-de yizi banzou le]. (ziji = Didi or Meimei)}\]

sister said brother BA self-GEN chair move ASP
‘Sister said that Brother moved self’s chair.’

(Su 2004:254)

At least two distinct algorithms seem to be in play in Chinese. One is a local operation that, like its English counterpart, seeks out a co-argument antecedent.

**Local Anaphor Algorithm**

\[<\alpha, x> \rightarrow_\alpha\]

The other is a ‘long-distance’ operation that selects an antecedent in a higher argument structure.

**Long-Distance Anaphor Algorithm**

\[\text{PRED}\]

\[<\alpha, _> \rightarrow_\alpha\]

\[<\ldots, x> \rightarrow_\alpha\]

Consistent with the logic of affordability (see §5.2) – and with the typological facts – any language that permits long-distance anaphora must also allow patterns of local anaphora.

More generally, if an anaphor is possible or required in a complex environment, its occurrence in smaller and easier-to-process environments [those involving a co-argument antecedent] will be at least as productive as, and possibly more productive than, in the more complex environments.

(Hawkins 2004:100; also Y. Huang 2000:93)
This is in fact the way Chinese works.

*Although there are specific conditions under which ZIJI can take a long-distance antecedent ..., as far as we know there is no instance in which it must do so.*

(Hyams & Sigurjonsdottir 1990:86)

Moreover, as also expected, children learning Chinese initially favor the Local Anaphor Algorithm – the option that allows them to do as little as possible. Adoption of a more costly option, such as an algorithm that permits cross-clausal referential dependencies, comes later and only in response to patterns of usage observed in the speech of others.

*Chinese children [as young as 4] predominantly allow ZIJI to be locally bound rather than [long-distance] bound... Even provided with a biasing pragmatic context toward a [long-distance] antecedent, Chinese children still prefer to link ZIJI to its local antecedent...*

(Chien & Lust 2006:35; also Su 2004)

These findings fit well with the view that linguistic development and typological variation are shaped by the same processing pressures.

*... acquisition data will reflect ease of processing, just as adult performance does... Smaller domains will precede larger ones ... [T]he simplest environments ... are postulated first, on account of their processing ease, and any extension beyond them ... will be forced on the learner by positive evidence from the relevant language.*

(Hawkins 2004:273)

We see a parallel set of phenomena in the syntax of filler-gap dependencies.

### 14.2 Navigating islands

There is a long tradition within linguistics of treating island phenomena as particularly clear-cut examples of the need for Universal Grammar.

*Islands have long been regarded as strong motivation for domain-specific innate constraints on human language. They are obscure and abstract, and they are a parade case of a linguistic phenomenon that is likely to be difficult to observe in the input that children must learn from. As such, they have been regarded as a good example of the need for Universal Grammar.*

(Phillips 2013b:132)

Two examples are worth considering in this regard since they illustrate an alternative and perhaps more natural way to think about islands.
A constraint on cross-clausal dependencies

As noted in §8.1, Russian and English differ with respect to the acceptability of the following two patterns.

Intra-clausal filler-gap dependency:
Who did Olga see _?

Cross-clausal filler-gap dependency:
Who do you think [Olga saw _]?

Russian allows only the first pattern, but English permits both since it has access to an operation that reactivates a wh dependency – at significant cost – in a lower clause.

Who do you think [Olga saw _]?

\[
\text{WHO saw } \_ \\
\uparrow \\
\text{reactivation}
\]

It has been suggested that processing-based accounts of island effects create learnability problems when there is cross-linguistic variation.

... if the island effect is non-universal, i.e., it applies in some languages but not in others, then the child has to learn about whatever property of the target language is responsible for the cross-linguistic variation. ... If the variation is due to [differences] in how language processing resources are deployed in language production and comprehension, then this is a problem that we have very little idea of how to address.

(Phillips 2013a:104)

The solution lies in children’s natural propensity to favor mappings that minimize processing cost.

For Russian children, the way to realize this preference is simple: do nothing. Because they encounter no sentences that require reactivation, they have no reason to add that costly algorithm to their sentence-building options. So they don’t.

The path is also straightforward for children learning English, although it takes them in a different direction. The key trigger is exposure to sentences in which a wh dependency extends into an embedded clause. (According to Pearl & Sprouse 2013:34, such patterns make up about 1% of child-directed wh questions.)

What do you think [we should do now _]?
Who do you think [Baby Bear saw _]?

After exposure to even a small number of such sentences, the need for reactivation should be evident, paving the way for its addition to the system for building and interpreting filler-gap dependencies in English.
A constraint on multiple *wh* dependencies

Now consider the *wh* island effect illustrated in the following two examples.

*No *wh* word in the second clause:*

What do you know (for certain) [that he said _ to Jane]?

*Wh* word in the second clause:

*What do you know (for certain) [who he said _ to _]?

As suggested in §8.2, the difference in the acceptability of the two sentences can be traced to the onset of the embedded clause, where reactivation of the sentence-initial *wh* dependency takes place. In the unacceptable second sentence, reactivation is made impossible by the presence of a second *wh* dependency. This is the break point for English in terms of processing cost. As a result, reactivation fails, disrupting the attempt to resolve the *wh* dependency introduced by *what*.

*What do you know (for certain) [who he said _ to _]?  
↑  
Reactivation is blocked by the presence of another *wh* word.*

If these proposals are on the right track, island constraints reflect a reluctance to accept a costly operation that is not otherwise called for – along the lines detailed in §8.2.

**Affordability metric for extending *wh* dependencies**

i. no extension across a clause boundary (Russian)

ii. extension across a clause boundary if there is no other *wh* dependency (English)

iii. extension across a clause boundary even if there is another *wh* dependency (Italian)

(based on O'Grady 2012:497; also Hawkins 2004:192ff, 266 and O’Grady 2005b:214ff)

Crucially, the syntactic variation manifested here is essentially self-regulating. The job of the learner is simply to permit as little as possible.²

² I would be remiss not to mention here a (welcome) parallel in the generative literature.

**The Subset Principle**

Learners must select the smallest possible language compatible with the input at each step of the learning procedure.

(Clark:1992:101; also Fodor & Sakas 2005 for extensive discussion)

By ‘smallest’ language, proponents of the Subset Principle have in mind the language with the more restrictive grammar – e.g., a grammar that permits only intra-clausal *wh* dependencies versus one that also permits cross-clausal dependencies. Although the Subset Principle is formulated in terms of grammatical mechanisms, the underlying intuition can easily be understood in terms of processing cost in most cases.
14.3 Managing input

The picture that I have been sketching of how linguistic development moves forward under conditions of input scarcity fits well with the broader idea outlined in the preceding chapter. In particular, what we think of as language acquisition is actually processing amelioration – the creation and strengthening of low-cost routines in order to minimize the burden of computing the form-meaning mappings observed in ambient speech. This strategy is manifested in two quite different ways.

First, when there is ample input relevant to a particular phenomenon, processing is improved by automatizing and entrenching routines that are repeatedly activated. This leads not only to more efficient processing, but also to the rejection of mappings that are not instantiated in the language to which the child is exposed. That is why, for example, children learning English produce SV utterances rather than VS patterns.

Second, processing considerations can shape the properties of language even in the absence of rich input. This can happen in either of two ways:

• An operation that is maximally parsimonious can be adopted as the default, solely for reasons of cost and efficiency. The Anaphor Algorithm emerges in this way: there’s a need to interpret reflexive pronouns, and the Anaphor Algorithm offers the least costly way to do so. It therefore becomes the default strategy, which is subsequently reinforced and maintained with the help of exposure to the few sentences in the input that contain reflexive pronouns.

• By the same token, in the absence of evidence for their necessity, many hypothetical operations are never instantiated. Reactivation in Russian is a case in point. Its absence simply reflects the fact that children learning the language never encounter \(wh\) dependencies that extend across a clause boundary.

In sum, when there is ample input, as is often the case for word order patterns and various inflectional practices, development is driven by learning. On the other hand, when there is little or no relevant input, as seems to be the case for anaphora and constraints on filler-gap dependencies, the development is shaped largely by processing pressures. That’s how children learning English end up with co-argument antecedents for reflexive pronouns; it’s how children learning Russian end up rejecting cross-clausal \(wh\) dependencies; and so on.

A fundamental truth in all of this, well-illustrated by the two phenomena that we have been considering, is that the success of young language learners comes from doing what is in some sense ‘natural.’ It is frequently observed – by parents and professionals alike – that children’s acquisition of key components of language appears effortless. And, indeed, it literally is. What could require less effort than doing nothing?

In effect, then, the poverty-of-stimulus problem is an illusion. Not because there is more input than previously imagined, but because the role of input in linguistic development obeys a simple principle, without which languages could not be acquired.
The availability – necessity tradeoff

The less a particular type of input is available, the less it is needed.

In other words, there is a direct relationship between the amount of available data and its necessity. This is the very balance that one would expect if emergence were allowed to run its course over months, years and even generations. Any phenomenon for which input of a particular type is necessary but unavailable should be quickly culled from the language – unless it is the direct product of internal processing pressures that remain stable over time, in which case its tenure is assured. Obvious cases in point include the syntax of anaphora and the syntax of islands, as we have seen.

All of this leads to an instructive paradox. As we have seen, some phenomena in language are well instantiated in child-directed speech and others are not. Ironically, it is the latter phenomena that are easiest to acquire! No one should be unhappy about this, not even the proponents of usage-based development who place their bets entirely on generous amounts of friendly input.

Despite the daunting scope of linguistic phenomena begging an explanation, usage-based theories of language representation have a simple overarching approach. Whether the focus is on language processing, acquisition, or change, knowledge of a language is based in knowledge of actual usage and generalizations made over usage events.

(Ibbotson 2013:1; also Tomasello 2009 and Lieven 2014, among many others)

The enormity of the challenges confronting this thesis should not be underestimated. Frequency effects involve not only tokens but also yet-to-be-defined types, at levels of analysis ranging from the very concrete to the highly abstract (Ambridge et al. 2015). Overgeneralizations have to be identified and corrected (e.g., Boyd & Goldberg 2011). Distributional tendencies require careful assessment to determine whether they are robust enough to support a useful generalization and, if so, how many exceptions can be tolerated before a revision is required (Yang 2016). And so on.

All in all, we should be more than pleased if significant pieces of language emerge for free in response to processing pressures. Indeed, in a theory of natural syntax, usage-based learning is no more desirable than Universal Grammar. The first is too difficult, and the other is too easy. Emergence is just right – a modest amount of input interacting with natural cost-driven preferences and restrictions.
In the spring of 1973, David Stampe found himself pressed for time. A PhD student at the University of Chicago, he had been offered a much coveted post-doctoral position at MIT. And he had just learned, as he laughingly told me years later, that MIT was ‘taking the term “post-doc” more literally’ than he had imagined they would. Determined to complete his degree in short order, he spent the summer writing a 74-page dissertation, with the working title ‘How I Spent My Summer Vacation’ – later revised, with intense encouragement from the University of Chicago dissertation secretary, to ‘A Dissertation on Natural Phonology.’ It became the founding document of a theory by the same name, which Stampe went on to develop in collaboration with his wife and fellow linguist Patricia Donegan, among other scholars.

David Stampe (1938-2020)  
Patrician Donegan

Stampe’s starting point was the simple assumption that humans are ‘imperfectly adapted for speech’ (1973:42).

... it becomes increasingly clear that in general the conditions of the use of language ... are responsible for the nature of language. This is not by any means a peculiarity of phonology, but phonology presents a particularly striking case.

(Stampe 1973:43)

*Phonology ... emerges from speaker abilities (and inabilities).*

(Donegan 2015: 49)

Stampe and Donegan’s key observation was that a variety of natural factors impede the production of sounds and sound patterns to varying degrees. Signs of these impediments
are evident in the early speech of children, who manifest difficulty with word-final voiced stops, consonant clusters, nasal vowels, and weak syllables, among other well-documented phenomena.

[da] ‘dog’  [fam] ‘from’
[dek] ‘desk’  [bap] ‘bump’
[fæf] ‘giraffe’  [wej] ‘away’

Similar effects are ubiquitous in typology: CV syllables are the default, a voiceless obstruent is preferred to its voice counterpart in a coda position, consonant clusters are uncommon, and so on. From clues such as these, it is possible to discern a system of articulatory pressures that offer insights into why phonological systems have the properties that they do and why they are acquired in the way that they are.

Not surprisingly, a number of scholars suggested that the ideas that inspired natural phonology could be extended to language in general.

[An essential objective is] the quest for extralinguistic foundations ... in the sense of extralinguistic factors which either determine/prohibit or disfavor conceivable properties of linguistic structures.
(Dressler 1985:286)

“Natural” ... is synonymous to cognitively simple, easily accessible (especially to children), elementary and therefore universally preferred, i.e., derivable from human nature... it is clearly a relative, gradual concept.
(Dressler 1999:135)

... the concept of naturalness is motivated by the existence of varying degrees of ease for [the] human brain, namely that some things are easier to handle than others ... Therefore, the theory of naturalness entails a theory of preference, which, in turn, forms the basis of a system of predictions.
(Galèas 2001:11-12; also Galèas 1998)

Linguistic principles have a non-linguistic basis and as such lead to explanatory preferences, [attributing] linguistic phenomena holistically to “the nature of things”...
(Dziubalska-Kołaczyk 2007:73)

What is more widespread in the languages of the world is more natural for the speaker ... What is cognitively simpler (for the speaker) is realized in more languages.
(Cvetko-Orešnik & Orešnik 2017:137)
It is easy to see the connection between these ideas and contemporary linguistic emergentism, including the variety of natural syntax that I have been outlining. Like articulation and perception, the formation and interpretation of sentences places heavy demands on the resources of the language faculty. Arguments need to be expressed and identified with the help of case, word order and agreement; referential dependencies call for resolution; filler-gap dependencies have to be managed. And, of course, the entire system has to somehow be acquired by children who are still learning to walk.

We don’t understand how language works – and it’s quite possible that we never will. But since we are nonetheless compelled to try, there is work to be done. The particular line of inquiry that I have outlined in this book sets to the side traditional assumptions about grammar and structure in favor of a focus on the role of processing pressures in shaping the properties of language. That strategy has yielded a set of results that address various fundamental puzzles in the syntax of human language. Among others:

- why SOV languages are likely to have postpositions and pre-nominal modifiers; SVO and VSO languages are likely to have prepositions and post-nominal modifiers
- why SOV languages are more likely than SVO and VSO languages to have case marking
- why accusative systems of case marking are more widely instantiated than ergative systems
- why SVO languages are almost never ergative (unless they have intransitive VS patterns)
- why OSV and OVS languages tend to be ergative
- why accusative languages always target subjects as the primary agreement trigger
- why ergative languages may target subjects as the primary agreement trigger, but they don’t have to
- why wh dependencies in accusative languages always favor subjects
- why wh dependencies in ergative languages may favor subjects, but they don’t have to
- why agent arguments can serve as antecedents for patient anaphors, but not vice versa
- why languages that permit long-distance anaphoric dependencies always permit local dependencies
- why cross-clausal filler-gap dependencies are heavily restricted within and across languages
why the algorithms needed to bring together form and meaning emerge with remarkable speed and efficiency in the course of development

Does every single phenomenon in every single language have a principled natural explanation? No, there are lots of arbitrary things in language, but that’s not the place to begin. Priority must be given to the phenomena that make human language unique among systems of communication – case, agreement, anaphora, filler-gap dependencies and the like. If I’m right, the properties of these phenomena point toward the viability of a natural syntax for human language.

So what comes next? Who knows? Cognitive science is itself a complex system. It does not move forward in a predictable manner, nor is its progress linear. Findings and people interact in unexpected ways, producing outcomes that cannot be anticipated. Some of those outcomes are dead ends; others are major advances. But there is often no way to know ahead of time – or even at the time – which is which, and thus no sure way to avert mistakes or hasten breakthroughs. As usual, emergence plots its own course.
Appendix

The *That* Effect

One of the enduring mysteries of natural language involves the contrast illustrated below, in which the presence of a complementizer undermines the acceptability of a cross-clausal *wh* dependency.

Embedded subject *wh* question with a complementizer:
*Who did you say *[that] is here]*?

Embedded subject *wh* question with no complementizer:
Who did you say *[is here]*?

The phenomenon, first noted by Perlmutter (1968), is restricted to patterns in which the *wh* word corresponds to the first argument (subject) of the embedded clause. The complementizer does not undermine the acceptability of a pattern involving a direct object question.

Embedded direct object *wh* question with or without a complementizer:
Who did you say *[that] Mary saw _]*?

I will henceforth refer to this set of facts as the *‘that’ effect.*

The motivation for the *that* effect is a long-standing puzzle in syntactic theory and has been the subject of countless studies, none of which has yielded a consensus on anything other than the phenomenon’s importance.

_Hopefully, it is clear by now that the problem ... is significant for linguistic theory and fascinating in its own right. Of this there should be no doubt._

(Pesetsky 2017:1022)

---

1 The traditional term, *‘that’-trace effect,* assumes the internal structure depicted below, in which the complementizer is immediately followed by a subject gap corresponding to the trace of the fronted *wh* word.

*Who did you say *[that _] is here]*?

\[\text{complementizer} \quad \text{subject gap (‘trace’)}\]
For many years, analyses of the *that* effect within generative grammar have drawn on the Empty Category Principle (§1.1), typically in combination with exquisitely abstract syntactic representations – a tradition that continues in various forms. I propose a quite different approach that treats the phenomenon as an emergent property of processing pressures, to which I now turn.

1. Complementizers and Reactivation

As discussed in detail in §7.2, there is strong evidence from the study of processing, language acquisition and typology that cross-clausal *wh* dependencies must be reactivated at the onset of the lower clause, at significant cost. (As usual, I use the term ‘clause’ as shorthand for ‘predicate-argument complex.’)

\[
\text{Who did you say [ …}
\]

\[
\text{Reactivation of the wh dependency}
\]

\[
\text{occurs at the onset of the lower clause.}
\]

As we will next, this operation interacts in an intriguing way with the presence of a complementizer, ultimately producing the *that* effect.

The unacceptable sentence

Let’s begin by picking up the unacceptable sentence *Who did you say [that is here]?* in midstream, right after the processor encounters the matrix verb *say*.

\[
\text{Who did you say …}
\]

\[
\text{At this point, the sentence-initial wh argument has been identified and stored. In addition,}
\]

\[
\text{the verb say and its first argument (you) have been mapped into the semantic representation,}
\]

\[
\text{as depicted below.}
\]

\[
\text{Who did you say …}
\]

\[
\text{SAY}
\]

\[
\text{wh<y>}
\]

\[
\text{↑}
\]

\[
\text{(y = you)}
\]

\[
\text{open position for clausal argument}
\]

If the *wh* dependency is to be resolved, two additional operations would now have to take place.

i. The complementizer should trigger projection of a finite clausal argument.

\[
\text{Projection of an embedded clause after encountering that:}
\]

\[
\text{Who (did) you say [that …}
\]

\[
\text{PRED}
\]

\[
\text{<…>}
\]

\[
\text{embedded clause template}
\]
ii. Reactivation should immediately extend the *wh* dependency into the embedded clause, where it can eventually be resolved.

Reactivation:

Who did you say [that ...  

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{PRED} \\
\text{wh}<\ldots> \\
\uparrow \\
\text{reactivated } wh \text{ dependency}
\end{array}
\]

So far, so good. For some reason, though, the processing routine for cross-clausal *wh* dependencies derails as soon as the verb is encountered, giving rise to the *that* effect.

*Who did you say [that is here].  

\[
\uparrow \\
\text{point where the sentence fails}
\]

The question is why.

**The acceptable sentence**

An important clue comes from what happens when there is no complementizer.

Who did you say [ is here]?

Once again, I pick up the sentence at the matrix verb *say*.

Who did you *say* ...

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{SAY} \\
\text{wh}<y\_> \\
\uparrow \\
\text{open position for clausal argument}
\end{array}
\]

In the next step, the processor encounters the verb *is*, the nucleus of the upcoming complement clause.

Who did you say *is* ...

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{BE} \\
<_\_\_>
\end{array}
\]

This turn of events raises an intriguing possibility. Could the sudden availability of a verb with an open first-argument position trigger immediate resolution of the *wh* dependency at the onset of the lower clause – *without the need for reactivation*?
Resolution of the \textit{wh} dependency without reactivation:

\begin{center}
\textbf{Who} did you say \textit{is} \\
BE \\
\textless \textit{wh} ... \textgreater \\
\uparrow
\end{center}

\textit{The wh argument is associated with the open first-argument position before reactivation can be triggered.}

An interesting piece of evidence points in this very direction: the verb in the lower clause is able to fuse phonologically with the verb in the higher clause.

Who did you say’s here?

Phonological reduction of this type would not be possible if reactivation occurred at a point between \textit{say} and \textit{is}. As noted in §8.3, natural contraction requires that the second element adjoin to the first without delay – that is, without any intervening operations. The sentence’s acceptability therefore provides strong evidence for the conjecture that \textit{wh} dependency can be resolved in this case without the need for reactivation.

Who did you say \textit{is} (… here)?

\textit{The processor comes upon a verb with an open first-argument position at the onset of the embedded clause; resolution of the \textit{wh} dependency takes place immediately, without reactivation.}

We are now close to an understanding of the \textit{that} effect. Put simply, a complementizer should not undercut the possibility of circumventing reactivation – which is precisely what happens in patterns such as the following.

\begin{center}
*Who did you think \textbf{that} \textit{is} here? \\
\uparrow \\
\textit{reactivation} \uparrow \\
\textit{opportunity to resolve the \textit{wh} dependency} \\
\textit{triggered by the \textit{complementizer}}
\end{center}

As illustrated here, the complementizer triggers reactivation at a very inopportune moment, precluding the possibility of resolving the \textit{wh} dependency at what would otherwise have been the clause boundary.

\textbf{The essence of the \textit{that} effect}

In sum, the \textit{that} effect is nothing more (or less) than a lost opportunity to resolve a \textit{wh} dependency at the clause boundary, thereby avoiding the need for the reactivation operation. A grand prediction now follows:

A \textit{that} effect arises only when the presence of a complementizer precludes resolution of a \textit{wh} dependency at the clause boundary.
It immediately follows that there should be no *that* effect in patterns where, for reasons independent of the complementizer, the *wh* dependency cannot be resolved until a later point in the lower clause.

Direct object *wh* question:

Who did you say [that Mary met ]?

\( \text{reactivation} \rightarrow \) earliest opportunity to resolve the *wh* dependency

For obvious reasons, the *wh* dependency in this sentence cannot be resolved until after the processor encounters both the subject and the verb. The failure to avoid reactivation can therefore not be charged specifically to the complementizer; the facts would be no different if it was not present.

2. Further evidence

My analysis rests on a simple processing-based hypothesis: a complementizer must not undermine the possibility of circumventing reactivation. A broad range of facts from English and other languages provide further support for this account.

**Parenthetical phrases in subject *wh* questions**

A first observation involves the following striking contrast, previously noted by Bresnan (1977:194n) and Culicover (1993:557).

Basic pattern – unacceptable:

*Who do you think [that is the best candidate]?

Parenthetical pattern – acceptable:

Who do you think [that, *for all intents and purposes*, is the best candidate]?

(based on Bresnan 1977:194n and Culicover 1993:557)

The reason for the acceptability of the second sentence is evident: with or without a complementizer, the positioning of the parenthetical phrase in English independently rules out any opportunity for resolution of the *wh* dependency at the onset of the lower clause. The fact that the complementizer triggers reactivation, which is necessary in any case in this sentence, therefore does no harm.

Who do you think [that, *for all intents and purposes*, is the best candidate]?

\( \text{reactivation} \rightarrow \text{earliest opportunity to resolve the } *wh* \text{ dependency} \)

**The *whether* facts**

A similar pattern of effects emerges when the complementizer is *whether*.

*What was she wondering [whether might happen]?

\( \text{reactivation} \rightarrow \text{opportunity to resolve the } *wh* \text{ dependency} \)
This sentence cannot be salvaged by dropping *whether*, which – unlike *that* – is not deletable. However, there is one way out: the sentence improves dramatically if a parenthetical phrase is added.

\[
\text{?What was she wondering [whether, in the current situation, might happen]?} \\
\text{reactivation} \leftarrow \text{opportunity to resolve the wh dependency}
\]

This is expected. Due to the presence of the parenthetical, resolution of the *wh* dependency at the clause boundary is ruled out in any case. Reactivation is therefore necessary and appropriate, and has no negative side-effects.

**Pre-verbal adverbs**

A particularly intriguing feature of the *that* effect arises in sentences that contain a ‘pre-verbal’ adverb such as *often* or *never*, which prototypically appear between the subject and the verb.

Preverbal adverbs to the immediate left of the verb:

I think that [Harry *often/never* works hard].

Preverbal adverb in pre-subject position:

*I think that [often/never Harry works hard].*

When the processor encounters an adverb such as *often* or *never* without a preceding subject, it can therefore immediately infer the presence of a predicate with an open first-argument position.

\[
\text{Who do you think [ never \ldots]} \\
\text{PRED} \leftarrow \text{Thanks to the presence of the pre-verbal adverb a predicate with an open subject position is instantly inferred.}
\]

This creates an opportunity for resolution of the *wh* dependency at the onset of the clause, obviating the need for reactivation and correctly predicting the following contrast.\(^2\)

No complementizer:

Who do you think [ never works hard]?

\[
\text{PRED} \leftarrow \text{Resolution of the wh dependency takes place at the onset of the clause before reactivation has a chance to occur.}
\]

\(^2\) We see here a telling example of how a processing milestone can eclipse syntactic structure, as conventionally construed. The decisive moment for resolving the *wh* dependency in the example at hand arises not at the canonical position of the subject or even of the verb, but rather at a preverbal adverb!
With a complementizer:

*Who do you think [that never works hard]?  
↑

The complementizer triggers reactivation at the clause boundary, precluding the possibility of resolving the wh dependency in a more economical manner.

**Dummy subjects**

The following pair of sentences from Danish illustrate a way to avoid the *that* effect by adding a dummy subject.

Sentence with a complementizer and a subject *wh* dependency (unacceptable):

*Hvem tror du, [at har gjort det]?*  
who think you that has done it  

‘Who do you think that has done it?’

Sentence in which a ‘dummy’ subject has been added (acceptable):

Hvem tror du, [at der har gjort _ det]?  
who think you that there has done _ it  

‘Who do you think that there has done it?’

(based on Lohndal 2007:52, citing Elisabet Engdahl)

In the unacceptable first sentence, the *that* effect arises for the usual reasons. In the second sentence, in contrast, reactivation at the clause boundary has no negative consequences since resolution of the *wh* dependency has been postponed by the presence of the dummy subject.

**Complementizer-final and verb-final languages**

Kayne (1994) observes that there is no *that* effect in languages with a clause-final complementizer.

*To the best of my knowledge, ... *[THAT] effects* are not found in complementizer-final languages.*  
(Kayne 1994:53)

This is expected in the theory I propose since a complementizer in clause-final position will not interfere with the resolution of the *wh* dependency at the clause boundary. As illustrated in the following example from German, the opportunity to resolve the *wh* dependency in languages of this type does not arise until well into the sentence (at the verb *ist* ‘is’).
Was glaubst du, [dass geschehen ist]? (example from John Hawkins p.c.)
what think you that happened is

‘What do you think that has happened?’

Because resolution of the *wh* dependency at the onset of the lower clause would be impossible in any case, complementizer-induced reactivation is unproblematic. There is therefore is no *that* effect.

**Verb-initial languages**

A *that effect* is also not expected in verb-initial languages such as Irish.

rød nach bhfuil mé ag rá [aL tá _ fior]
thing NEG be I say PROG COMP be _ true
‘the thing I am not saying that is true …’
(McCloskey 2001:94)

Unlike English, in which an open argument position can be discerned at the verb, the processor must look *past* the verb in Irish for the first point at which the *wh* dependency might be resolved.

English (*that effect*):

*the thing [which I am not saying [that is true]]

Irish (*no that effect*):

rød nach bhfuil mé ag rá [aL tá _ fior]
thing NEG be I say PROG COMP be _ true

Because there is no possibility of resolving the dependency at the clause boundary in Irish, there should be no *that* effect in that language – and there isn’t.

**The effect of null subjects**

A long-standing observation in the literature on the *that effect* is that it does not appear in languages that allow null subjects. Italian is a case in point.

Chi hai detto [che ha scritto questo libro]?
who has said that has written that book
‘Who did you say that wrote that book?’

(Rizzi 1982, Phillips 2013 and Pesetsky 2017, among many others)
This too makes sense. Because the subject need not be overtly expressed in ‘pro-drop’ languages, an apparent pre-verbal gap is uninformative. It could signal an opportunity to settle the $wh$ dependency, or it could correspond to a null subject pronoun; the processor needs to proceed further into the sentence before drawing a conclusion.

\[
\text{Chi hai detto [che ha scritto questo libro]}? \\
\text{who has said [that has written that book]}
\]

Resolution of the dependency at the onset of the clause is therefore precluded in any case, and complementizer-driven reactivation has no negative consequences.\(^3\)

**The absence of a *that* effect in some languages**

Although complementizer-induced reactivation undermines the possibility of resolving the $wh$ dependency at the onset of the lower clause at minimal cost, some languages appear to accept that outcome.

**Icelandic:**

Hver sagði hann [að gaet ekki sungið þetta lag]?  
who said he that could not sing this song  
‘Who did he say that couldn’t sing this song?’

**Norwegian (northern variety):**

Hvem sa han [at kunne ekki synge denne sangen]?  
who said he that could not sing this song  
‘Who did he say that couldn’t sing this song?’  
(Hrafnbjargarson, Bentzen & Wiklund 2010:304)

This is not entirely surprising. As the syntax of coreference demonstrates (§14.1), languages do sometimes permit costly options – such as long-distance anaphora. There is therefore no reason in principle why a language must disallow complementizer-driven reactivation in the particular context that gives rise to the *that* effect.\(^4\)

---

\(^3\) A further factor could also be in play here since subjects may occur either pre-verbally or post-verbally in Italian. Interestingly, Rizzi (1982) argues that only *post-* verbal subjects can be questioned in Italian. (Menuzzi 2000 makes a similar point for Portuguese.) If this is so, then embedded subject *wh* questions in that language are verb-initial patterns, like their Irish counterparts, and would escape the *that* effect for that reason.

\(^4\) Indeed, there appears to be no alternative in Icelandic, which does not have the option of complementizer deletion (Lohndahl 2007:55, Maling & Zaenen 1978:480).
Indeed, it has even been reported that the *that* effect is tolerated by some speakers of English.\(^5\)

... *in a study of acceptability judgments of native speakers of English in the midwest, sentences such as [Who did you say that _ kissed Harriet?] received variable acceptance ...*  
(Sobin 1987:33)

... the *that*-trace effect is subject to cross-dialectal variation[;] *that*-trace violations are fully grammatical for some English speakers ...*  
(Snyder 2000:580)

There is, though, a key prediction to be made here: no speaker of English should accept only the pattern with the complementizer.

An impossible variety of English:

✓ Who did you say [that is at the door]?

*Who did you say [ is at the door]?

Anyone who accepts the first sentence should also accept its less costly counterpart. This seems to be right. Most speakers of English reject the first pattern and accept the second one; some evidently accept both; but no one accepts the first pattern and rejects the second. Lohndahl (2007:65) reports the same contrast for Norwegian.

**The absence of a *that* effect in English relative clauses**

Finally, the analysis we have been considering correctly predicts that there should be no *that* effect in relative clauses.

Cars [*that* stall] are immediately towed away.

The acceptability of such patterns is a long-standing puzzle in the literature.

*Because the [relative clause] judgments are the exact opposite of what most accounts of complementizer-trace phenomena predict, this puzzle is often called the “anti-*that*-trace effect,” and to this day has no obvious solution.*  
(Pesetsky 2017:1022)

The key observation is that no dependency is in play until *after* the complementizer is encountered. There is nothing about the word *cars* itself that would lead the processor to project such a filler-gap dependency; that job actually falls to the complementizer.

---

\(^5\) Some child language learners may also be oblivious to the *that* effect, at least initially.

‘... some children produced (ungrammatical) extractions of an embedded subject *wh* phrase as in *What do you think that _ can stop the witch?*’

(Lutken 2020:19; also Thornton 1990 and McDaniel et al. 2010)
Cars [that stall] are immediately towed away.

The existence of a filler-gap dependency cannot be inferred until at least this point.

The occurrence of that in these patterns therefore does not add to the cost of resolving the dependency. To the contrary, if anything, its presence facilitates processing by signaling a filler-gap pattern that would otherwise have been very difficult to recognize.

*Cars [ stall] are immediately towed away.

It is hard to imagine that the complementizer that, a single small word with little or no inherent processing cost, could be responsible for the range of syntactic phenomena that we have been considering. The key to understanding the word’s importance lies in its role in triggering the costly reactivation operation at the onset of a clause. Its disruptive effect arises only when that action precludes the possibility of resolving a wh dependency at the clause boundary, without the need for reactivation.

In sum, the that effect is not the product of a grammatical principle. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of various factors – the essence of emergence: the need to minimize processing cost, the toll associated with the reactivation operation, and the dispensability of complementizers in most contexts. There is nothing particularly remarkable or mysterious in any of this – just the usual natural stuff!
References

Baek, Soondo. 2007. Is subject extraction more difficult than object extraction? Unpublished ms., Kookmin University.


Chomsky, Noam. 2007b. Of minds and language. *Biolinguistics* 1, 9-27


In B. Hansen, A. Hyllested, et al. (eds.), Usque ad Radices: Indo-European studies in 

Press.

39, 565-87.


Deen, Kamil. 2006. Subject agreement in Nairobi Swahili. In J. Mugane, J. Hutchison & 
D. Worman (eds.), Selected proceedings of the 35th annual conference on African 
linguistics: African languages and linguistics in broad perspectives, 225-33. 
Somerville, MA: Cascadilla.

Singapore: Springer.

Diessel, Holger. 2007. Frequency effects in language acquisition, language use, and 

Diessel, Holger. 2015. Usage-based construction grammar. In E. Dąbrowska & D. Divjak 


Donegan, Patricia. 2015. The emergence of phonological representations. In B. 

Donegan, Patricia & David Stampe. 1979. The study of Natural Phonology. In D. Dinnsen 
(ed.), Current approaches to phonological theory, 126-73. Bloomington: Indiana 
University Press.

Dressler, Wolfgang. 1985. Morphonology: The dynamics of derivation. Ann Arbor, MI: 
Karoma.

Dressler, Wolfgang. 1999. What is natural in natural morphology? Prague Linguistic 
Circle Papers 3, 135-44.

Dryer, Matthew. 2002. Case distinctions, rich verb agreement, and word order type. 

Dryer, Matthew. 2011a. Order of subject, object and verb. In M. Dryer & M. Haspelmath 
(eds.) The World atlas of Language Structures Online. Munich: Max Planck Digital 
Library, chapter 81. Available online at http://wals.info/

Dryer, Matthew. 2011b. Order of subject and verb. In M. Dryer & M. Haspelmath (eds.) 
The world atlas of language structures online. Munich: Max Planck Digital Library, 
chapter 82. Available online at http://wals.info/

Dryer, Matthew. 2011c. Relationship between order of object and verb and order of 
relative clause and noun. In M. Dryer & M. Haspelmath (eds.) The world atlas of 
language structures online. Munich: Max Planck Digital Library, chapter 96. 
Available online at http://wals.info/


Kao, Rong Rong. 1993. Grammatical relations and anaphoric structures in Mandarin Chinese. PhD dissertation, Department of Linguistics, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa.


Malchukov, Andrej. 2014. In B. MacWhinney, A. Malchukov & E. Moravcsik (eds.),


Matasović, Ranko. 2010. *A short grammar of East Circassian (Kabardian)*. Transl from Croatian with the assistance of T. Gnjatović. 9th version. University of Zagreb. (Available at https://www.academia.edu/1489415/AGrammarofEastCircassianKabardian)


O’Grady, William. 2008b. The emergentist program. Lingua 118, 447-64.


Phillips, Colin & Shevawn Lewis. 2013. Derivational order in syntax: Evidence and


Sheppard, Shannon, Matthew Walenski, Tracy Love & Lewis Shapiro. 2015. The auditory comprehension of *wh*-questions in aphasia: Support for the Intervenor Hypothesis. *Journal of Speech Language, and Hearing Research*


