# Semantic Processing Universally Limits the Form of Multi-Term Constructions

T. Mark Ellison1,3 & Uta Reinöhl1, 2
1Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, 2Universität zu Köln, 3Australian National University

All languages combine terms into larger expressions. For instance, entity-denoting expressions might be built from nominal elements and possessors, or event-denoting ones from verbal elements and nominal expressions. We argue that processing constraints impose limits on combinations of terms, restricting the cross-linguistic variation space of possible constructions. In this talk, we present evidence for one such constraint: dependent arguments need to be expressed, even if activated, when driving metaphorical interpretations.

Linguists are familiar with obligatoriness constraints in language. In almost all cases described in the literature, these constraints are contingent, conventionalised language-specific syntactic rules. For instance, a language may be coarsely characterized as not being a "pro-drop" language. In contrast, we propose that, far from being restricted to these types of syntactic constraints, obligatoriness is found in all languages and across all parts of speech driven by processing constraints.

The processing phenomenon underlying obligatoriness involves terms which take semantic arguments. Terms of this kind frequently impose semantic subcategorisation on what counts as a normal argument. Arguments may be used which clash with this subcategorisation – but they necessarily drive a metaphorical interpretation (Glucksberg 2003). For instance, the relational noun *middle* is subcategorized for spatial or temporal containers with identifiable centers (e.g. *the middle of the room*), but it can also be used, metaphorically, with arguments that are of a different type and lack centers, e.g. *(John is in) the middle of trouble.* Arguments which match the subcategorisation can be dropped if already activated, e.g. *There is a room with a table in the middle*. This, however, is not possible in metaphorical uses. If no explicit argument is supplied, then clash with the subcategorisation precludes the correct interpretation, no matter how highly primed. In other words, the clashing argument must be expressed in order for the metaphorical combination to be interpreted correctly. This is precisely what is found in corpus evidence: utterances such as *When there is trouble, John is in the middle.* are not attested. Instead, the argument must be encoded overtly, i.e. *When there is trouble, John is in the middle of it*.

Evidence for the universal is supplied from two large-scale corpus studies of Indo-Aryan languages (Reinöhl 2016) and English, in combination with selected examples from a range of languages from different language families. Further support is found in the results of psycho-linguistic production experiments. We illustrate the scale of the phenomenon with a broad range of multi-term expressions.

Glucksberg, Sam. 2003. "The psycholinguistics of metaphor", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 7 (2), 92-96.

Reinöhl, Uta. 2016. *Grammaticalization and the Rise of Configurationality in Indo-Aryan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.