

Semantic Processing Universally Limits the Form of Multi-Term Constructions



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Combining Terms

Complex utterances combine smaller units (words or phrases) into larger units:

predicate with argument: **The dog ran**

nominal plus possessor: **the centre of the cake**

Conventional Obligatoriness

Some items cannot occur on their own, but require a particular kind of unit to cooccur

prepositions requires NP: **under the table**

verb requires subject: **it is raining**

Frequently, this restriction is a conventional stipulation of the language. Like the English excluding null subjects (mostly).

Processing Obligatoriness & Typology

Sometimes the process of communication limits what can be omitted while still maintaining the same meaning.

These constraints are not language-specific conventions, but universal constraints on viable communication. They contribute to delimiting the typology of possible languages.

This paper presents one such constraint, though there are likely more.

Semantic Arguments

Many content words are semantically incomplete - there is always more information which could be given. They allow for semantic arguments to enrich their representations.

Terms often impose semantic restrictions on what kinds of things are natural arguments.

Broken Restrictions Drive Metaphors

Violating the semantic restrictions for arguments forces the target term to be interpreted metaphorically. We say such arguments are metaphor-driving.

Metaphors Universally Limit Argument Omission

Metaphor-driving arguments are obligatory.

(1) *In cars, Julia was prone to nausea. On that trip through the Alps, she had to endure *waves / waves of it.*

(2) *iṣṭásya mádhye áditir ní dhātu naḥ*
Wish.GEN.SG.N middle.LOC.SG.N Aditi.NOM.SG.F down put.IMP.3SG GEN.1PL
Aditi should place us **in the middle of our wish**. (Vedic Sanskrit, RV 10.11.2)

The corresponding argument in literal uses is optional.

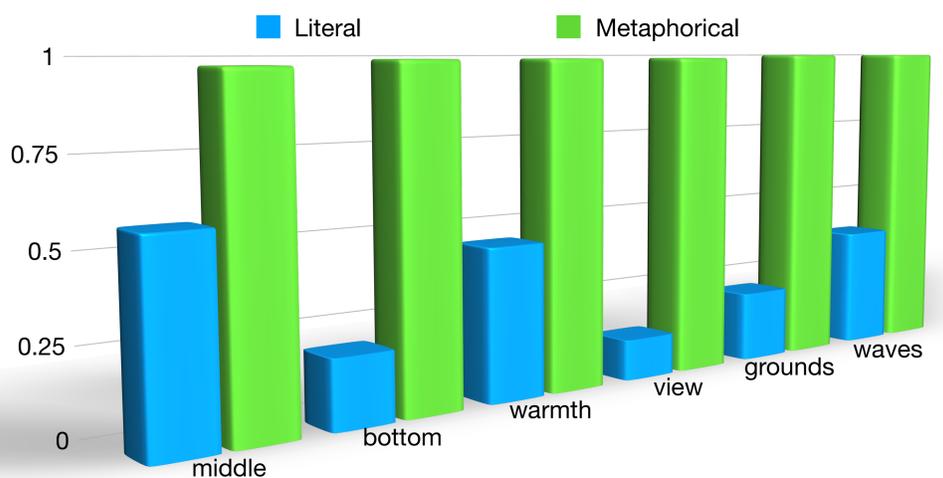
(3) *Lakes on Venus are made of lava. The atmosphere is dense enough, that the wind can whip up waves / waves of it.*

(4) *atha madhya āghārayati*
now middle.LOC.SG.N moisten.CAUS.3SG

Now, (he) pours (ghee) **onto the middle** (of the altar, i.e. as opposed to its corners). (Vedic Sanskrit, ŚaB 3.5.2.13)

Production Evidence

English-language survey - 257 participants.
Fraction of completions with overt arguments.



Conclusion

Processing shapes form: the argument driving the metaphorical interpretation of a term cannot be omitted.

All languages at all times are subject to constraints on communication effectiveness.

References

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