Intermediate Grammaticality

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Collaborators

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WHIT TABOR
The boy love the book

The boy loves the book
What did you that think the boy read?

What did you think that the boy read?
What did you wonder whether the boy read?
What did you smile because the boy read?

... ?
What cry if why east and the angry the?

... ?
All sentences above are ungrammatical, but there is no doubt that we understand at least some of them.

Not all grammatical violations are perceived in the same way: some of them are more severe than others.

This observation suggests that there is a sense in which we parse ungrammatical sentences (i.e. we compute and we extract their meaning).

But how does this happen? Which mechanism or (set of mechanisms) underlie ungrammatical sentence processing?
The grammar of a given language (e.g. English) is a system of rules that generates all and only the well-formed structures of that language.

To explain processing phenomena (i.e. how we understand and/or produce in real time the sentences of a given language) we have to add a theory of parsing to the theory of grammar.

The meaning of a sentence is computed on the output of the grammar (i.e. there are two distinct modules, one for syntax and one for semantics, which are in a feedforward relation, such that the output of syntax is the input of semantics).

The traditional grammar+parsing theory can generate output incrementally in real time (i.e. word-by-word as the sentence is processed) and for semantics to take the output of the parser and compute meaning for initial strings of well-formed sentences.
Two implications ...

The view according to which the **grammar** of a given language (e.g. English) is a **system of rules** that generate *all and only* the well-formed structures of that given language has two main implications:

(1) ungrammatical sentences are simply not generated by the grammar (the derivation stops as soon as the linguistic input cannot be accommodated by any rule of the grammar)

(2) the output of the grammar is strictly binary (grammatical vs. ungrammatical)
... and corresponding challenges

1. Ungrammaticality

If the derivation of the sentence crashes as soon as ungrammaticality is detected, and if semantics is computed over syntactic representations, we shouldn’t be able to derive the meaning of ungrammatical sentences at all (not even of seemingly easy ones, like “*John love the book”)

2. Gradient effects

If the grammar produces strictly categorical outcomes (grammatical vs. ungrammatical) then there is no room for intermediacy
The traditional view replies to these challenges by claiming that whichever system/mechanism is responsible for ungrammatical sentence processing and its gradient patterns, this must be outside of the grammar module.

- repair strategies
- memory limitations
- semantics
- reanalysis mechanisms
- interference
- ...
1. I will first try to substantiate the claim that ungrammatical sentences cannot be generated under the traditional view of grammar.

2. I will then turn to gradient effects. I will show that gradience is a core phenomenon in language: it is pervasive and measurable.

As a test case, I will focus on one of the most prototypical, and yet arguably most theoretically challenging, syntactic phenomena: islands (Ross, 1967). Islands are interesting because, although most linguistic theories claim that sentences violating island constraints are fully ungrammatical and uninterpretable, I will present experimental evidence revealing gradient patterns of acceptability and interpretability for islands, which calls for a theory of gradience.

3. To account for these facts, I will present a view that consists in adopting a more flexible rule-based system in which sentential elements can be coerced, under specific circumstances, to play a role that does not fully fit them. In this system, unlike traditional ones, structure formation is forced even under sub-optimal circumstances, generating semi-grammatical structures.
1. Ungrammaticality
Grammatical rules are phrase-structure rules taking this general form:

\[ A \rightarrow B \quad C \]

(“A rewrites as B and C”)

\[ VP \rightarrow V \quad NP \]

(Verbal Phrase rewrites as Verb, Noun Phrase)

\[ NP \rightarrow D \quad N \]

(Noun Phrase rewrites as Determiner, Noun)

---

\[
\begin{array}{c}
V \\
\hline
NP \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

loves

\[
\begin{array}{c}
V \\
\hline
NP \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

the book

loves

\[
\begin{array}{c}
V \\
\hline
NP \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

determiner

the

book
Generating sentences

Ungrammatical sentences cannot be generated under traditional grammatical and parsing accounts
Long-distance dependencies: Dependencies between two elements that are in a syntactic and semantic relation but not adjacent in the sentence (the original position of the wh-element is indicated by an underscore called a *gap*)

What did you think that John read ___?

One way to encode long-distance dependencies in phrase structure rules is through the slash feature notation (Gadzar, 1981)
The traditional view (in a nutshell)

What did you think that John read?

1. CP → NP[what] S/NP[what]
5. VP/NP[what] → V trace
8. PP/NP[what] → PP trace
9. CP → C[whether] S
The traditional view (in a nutshell)

What did you wonder about?

1. CP → NP[what] S/NP[what]
5. VP/NP[what] → V trace
8. PP/NP[what] → PP trace
9. CP → C[whether] S
The traditional view (in a nutshell)

*What did you wonder whether John read?

The derivation crashes as soon as the sentence turns out to be ungrammatical (i.e. when no rule can be applied to integrate the linguistic input in the tree)
2. Gradience in islands
Syntactic Islands

Islands = Encapsulated syntactic domains that prohibit the establishment of a long-distance dependency inside of them (the island domain is in red; the asterisk indicates ungrammaticality) (Ross, 1967)

**WHETHER ISLAND**
*What did you wonder whether John read __i?*

**COMPLEX NP ISLAND**
*What did you hear the news that John read __i?*

**ADJUNCT ISLAND**
*What did you smile because John read __i?*
Gradient effects in islands’ acceptability

Intriguingly, the acceptability of some of these islands has been shown to improve when the wh-element is made them lexically specific (e.g. which book)
(e.g. Sprouse et al. 2012, 2016; Sprouse & Messick 2015; Villata et al. 2016; Atkinson et al. 2016)

WHETHER ISLAND
?Which book did you wonder whether John read ___?

COMPLEX NP ISLAND
?Which book did you hear the news that John read ___?

ADJUNCT ISLAND
*Which book did you smile because John read ___?
Gradient islands’ effects in acceptability

This is illustrated in the plots below (data from Sprouse & Messick 2015): the island effect is significantly reduced (but not eliminated) for Whether and Complex NP islands with complex wh, but not for Adjunct islands (DD scores are a measure of the strength of the island effect, so the higher the bar, the stronger the island effect)
Beyond gradient acceptability

- The data reported above provide evidence for gradient acceptability patterns in island-violating sentences.
- Interestingly, we also have evidence showing that the increased islands’ acceptability is the result of comprehenders’ ability to interpret the island by forming a dependency inside of it.
The Maze Task
Task rationale

- Participants read the island preamble word-by-word up to a critical point (the verb inside the island, e.g. solved):

  What did you wonder whether the candidate solved ...

  ... before the interview in Paris?

  ... the problem before the interview?

- At this point they were asked to decide how to continue the sentence:
  - select a preposition (e.g. “before”), compatible with establishing a dependency inside of the island
  - select a determiner (“the”), compatible with not establishing a dependency inside the island
Notice that both options are ungrammatical:

- *violate the island constraint*, but interpreting the wh-word as the object of the verb thus assigning it a thematic role (theme), which renders the sentence interpretable:

  **What** did you wonder whether the candidate *solved ___* before the interview?

- *vacuous quantification* (i.e. the dependency between the wh-word and the verb is not established, and thus the wh-word lacks a thematic role)

  **What** did you wonder whether the candidate *solved the problem*?
Materials

We tested Whether, Complex NP, and Adjunct islands with both simple and complex wh

**WHETHER ISLAND**
What did you wonder whether the candidate solved...

**COMPLEX NP ISLAND**
What did you hear the news that the candidate solved... ... before the interview?

**ADJUNCT ISLAND**
What did you smile because the candidate solved... ... the problem?
Results

MAZE TASK

Fig. 1 Proportions of preposition selection (compatible with establishing a dependency inside an island) corrected for the control condition establishing the floor of gap selection in sentences in which gap selection is not expected (no long-distance dependency)
These results suggest that there is a strong correlation between gradient acceptability and the formation of island violating dependencies: islands that receive higher acceptability rates are those for which participants are more willing to form a dependency between the wh-word and the verb inside the island.

What are the mechanisms that generate gradience: are they grammar-internal or grammar-external?

The findings reported here from the Maze Task do not allow us to provide an answer to this question.

1. The syntactic derivation might fail as soon as the violation is detected (in line with standard assumptions) and some extra-grammatical mechanism might then kick in to cobble the sentence together.

2. The syntactic tree is generated in a more flexible rule-based system that allows the generation of semi-grammatical sentences.
Coercion

The mechanism we will invoke to account for ungrammatical sentence processing is coercion.

Coercion intervenes when there is no way to generate a full-formed syntactic tree by following the rules of the grammar.

In these cases, what the system does is to force one or more sentential elements to play a role that does not fully fit them.

There are two kinds of coercion:

1. **Interpretable coercion** = the system forms a thematically coherent tree (i.e. all thematic roles are assigned), despite the feature mismatch on some nodes, and the sentence results interpretable.

2. **Uninterpretable coercion** = the system forms a tree but not all element get their thematic roles, and the sentence thus results uninterpretable.

Interpretable coercion is triggered by the existence of a fully grammatical sentence that is analogue (i.e. syntactically and semantically similar) to the deviant one.

In the absence of such analogy, uninterpretable coercion applies.
Uninterpretable coercion

“John loves fell”

\[
S \rightarrow NP \text{ VP} \\
NP \rightarrow N \\
VP \rightarrow V \text{ NP}
\]
Coercion in Whether islands

- Whether-islands resemble a fully grammatical long-distance dependency, namely extraction from a declarative:

  Which problem did you wonder whether the student solved?

  Which problem did you think that the student solved?

1. “Wonder” and “Think” are mental-process verbs that subcategorise for a propositional complement
2. Both “wonder” and “think” are followed by a complementiser
3. Both “wonder” and “think” can refer to the subject’s degree of certainty about the embedded proposition: “wonder” indicates a high degree of uncertainty about the truth/falsehood of the complement, while “think” is more biased toward the truth of the complement (even though this bias can be reduced if “think” is focused, as in “I THINK that the student solved the problem, but I can’t swear to it”)

- Because of the analogue syntactic structures in which “wonder”-“think” and “whether”-“that” appear, and their close semantics, interpretable coercion occurs (most of the time)
When (interpretable) coercion occurs, “wonder” is coerced into “think” (a slash-propagator verb) and “whether” into “that” (a slash-propagator complementizer), thus allowing the propagation of the slash feature down the tree.
Complex vs. Simple wh

- Why Whether-islands with complex wh are more coercible than their simple counterparts?

  - What did you wonder whether the student solved?
  - What did you think that the student solved?

- Interpretable coercion is favoured by several factors, one of which is semantics: the interpretative pressure underlying interpretable coercion is stronger for a complex wh like “which problem”, which is already well suited to fill the role of the theme of “solved”, than for a semantically light simple wh like “what”. This lightness does not “push” the system enough in discovering interpretable coercion.
Complex vs. Simple wh

- Why Whether-islands with complex wh are more coercible than their simple counterparts?

- Interpretations favoring interpretable coercion are preferable under several factors, one of which is semantics: the interpretive pressure underlying interpretable coercion is stronger for a complex wh like "which problem" which is already well suited to fill the role of the theme of "solved" than for a semantically light simple wh like "what". This lightness does not "push" the system enough in discovering interpretable coercion.
Coercion in Complex NP islands

- Complex NP islands also have an analogue fully grammatical long-distance dependency:

  Which problem did you hear the news that the student solved?

  Which problem did you hear that the student solved?

- “Hear the news” and “Hear” denote the same hearing event.
- “Hear the news” and “Hear” appear in the same syntactic context.
- Interpretative coercion occurs, and even more so with complex wh than with simple one for the same reason discussed above for Whether-islands.
When (interpretable) coercion occurs, “hear the rumor” is coerced into “hear”, which allows the propagation of the slash feature down the tree.
Coercion in Adjunct islands

- Adjunct islands, unlike Whether and Complex NP islands, turn out not to have an analogue structure that is fully grammatical, and for this reason they are not (interpretably) coercible.

- The extraction from a declarative is not a valid analogy in this case:

  Which problem did you smile because the student solved?

  Which problem did you think that the student solved?

- “Smile” is unergative, while “think” is a sentence complement verb.
- “That” introduces a complement, while “because” introduces an adjunct.
For Adjunct islands, (interpretable) coercion would imply coercing an intransitive verb (e.g. smile) into a verb taking a sentential complement (e.g. think). This coercion however puts a lot of strain into the system because of the different argument structure of the two verbs. As a result, this type of coercion is very unlikely to occur.
Flexible rule-following system

- Gradience can be generated through a rule-based system under the assumption that syntax is coercible - when no rule can accommodate the input, then the system can be made more flexible.

- *Flexibility* is an option when the deviant structure resembles in some relevant respect to a fully grammatical one (the system *coerces* sentential elements to play a role that doesn’t fully fit them but that, at the same time, it’s not too far away from their actual role).
I claimed that *similarity/analogy* between sentences play a key role in processing: comprehenders’ ability to parse an island fundamentally relies on the existence of a fully grammatical sentence that resembles the island structure.

One might wonder, however, why similarity should be relevant in the first place in accounting for language processing phenomena.

Language processing brings some commonalities with *brain teasers*: when it comes to parse particularly cumbersome sentences, the mind must find “its path” through them (this is similar to what we have to do when we have to solve a metal brain teaser: there is a precise sequence of moves that we have to do in order to get it right).

Once the mind finds this sequence, this can be successfully applied to solve similar "brain teasers"
Linguistic brain teasers

Successfully parsing cumbersome sentences, even grammatical ones, might be challenging

- **Center embeddings:**
  - The rat that the cat that the dog loved chased died
  - The rat that the cat that the dog loved chased died
  - The rat (who was chased by the cat who, in its turn, was loved by the dog) died

- **Garden-path sentence:**
  - When the men hunt the birds that cheetahs eat typically scatter
  - When the men hunt, the birds that cheetahs eat typically scatter
  - The horse raced past the barn fell
  - The horse, (that was) raced past the barn, fell
Similarity in solving brain teasers

- **Islands**

  If you know how to “solve” this ...

  
  *What* do you think that the student read __ ?

  ... you might know how to “solve” this

  *What* do you wonder whether the student read __ ?

- **Center embeddings**

  If you know how to “solve” this ...

  The rat that the cat chased died

  ... you might know how to “solve” this

  The rat that the cat that the dog loved chased died
Toward a Theory of Timing Effects in Self-Organized Sentence Processing

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Evidence for Self-Organized Sentence Processing: Digging-In Effects

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Modeling Ungrammaticality: A Self-Organizing Model of Islands

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Check also: Tabor, Villata, Sprouse, Talk virtually presented at at AMLaP 2020
https://mediaup.uni-potsdam.de/Play/Chapter/259 (go to: 1h 39 min 07  sec)
Thank you

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