“Admitting that admitting sense into structural analyses makes sense”

Linguistic, developmental, and psycholinguistic research has documented a close relationship between the meaning of a verb and the syntactic structures in which that verb occurs, and has also shown that learners and comprehenders take advantage of this relationship in acquisition and processing. I will address implications of these facts for issues in structural ambiguity resolution. It has been shown that readers are sensitive to the statistical bias of a verb towards particular syntactic structures. I will argue that verb bias effects reflect the comprehender’s awareness of meaning-structure correlations, so that structural biases are based not on the verb itself (as is generally assumed in this literature) but on specific verb senses. I will first demonstrate that individual verbs show significant differences in their subcategorization profiles across parsed corpora, but that the cross-corpus bias estimates are much more stable once sense is taken into account. I will then show that consistency between sense-contingent subcategorization biases and experimenters’ classifications distinguish recent experiments which found effects of verb bias from those that did not. Finally, I will present results of a self-paced reading experiment showing that comprehenders expect different structural continuations after identical verbs, depending on what sense of the verb was used. These results argue that comprehenders learn and exploit meaning-form correlations at the level of individual verb senses, rather than the verb in the aggregate.

Refreshments will be available.
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