Producers Build Structures Only for Overt Arguments
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Abstract
In Japanese, any argument position may be occupied by a null pronoun. For example, the English sentence “I saw you” could be conveyed in Japanese with just the verb “saw (mita).” In theoretical linguistics, null arguments are represented in the syntactic structure (e.g., Tsujimura, 1996), and the structures with null pronouns and those with overt arguments are considered identical.

Using structural priming, we tested whether the two types of structures are equally represented in language production. The results show that the structures with null pronouns primed in less than those with overt arguments. We conclude that in production, syntactic structures are built on overt arguments.

Null Arguments in Japanese
Any argument(s) in Japanese may be null regardless of the availability of supporting context.

a. “John saw Mary.”
John-nom Mary-acc mita.

b. “John saw something.”
John-nom e mita.

c. “(Someone/I) saw Mary.”
(Someone/I)-nom Mary-acc mita.

d. “(Someone/I) saw something.”
(Someone/I)-nom e mita.

Assumptions of Japanese Syntactic Theories
• Null arguments that are subcategorized by the verb are represented in trees with pro (Tsujimura, 1996)
• Pronoun resolution depends on the structural position of null arguments (Saito, 1985)

Question
Do Japanese speakers generate full structural representations of a sentence with null argument(s) without a supporting context?

Method of Investigation
• Methodology: Structural priming
• Comparison of structures with null arguments with structures that have overt arguments.

Predictions:
• Japanese syntactic theories: Structures with null arguments should be similar to structures with explicit arguments in priming.
• Overt Structure Approach: Only overt arguments are represented, so structures with null arguments will prime differently than structures with overt arguments.

Results: Experiment 1
• The null argument condition (TOPIC-PATIENT) differs from the other conditions.
• Hi-marked overt argument (TOPIC-GOAL(n)-PATIENT) differs from other conditions.

Conclusions
Contrary to a basic assumption of theories of Japanese syntax, structures with null arguments patterned differently from structures with overt arguments or adjuncts.
• Structural features such as order of phrases/functions and case-marking of phrases influence structural priming in Japanese.
• When there is no supporting context, Japanese syntactic representations in production encode only the structural features of overt arguments.

References