

Heaviness vs. newness: The effects of structural complexity and discourse status on constituent ordering.

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Abstract

Variations in postverbal constituent ordering have been attributed to both grammatical complexity (heaviness) and discourse status (newness), although few studies compare the two factors explicitly. Through corpus analysis and experimentation, we demonstrate that both factors simultaneously and independently influence word order in two English constructions. While past investigations of these factors have focused on their effects in language comprehension, we argue that postponing heavy and new constituents facilitates processes of planning and production.

HEAVINESS VS. NEWNESS: THE EFFECTS OF STRUCTURAL COMPLEXITY
AND DISCOURSE STATUS ON CONSTITUENT ORDERING

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Variation in postverbal constituent ordering has been studied in both grammatical complexity (heaviness) and discourse status (newness), although few studies compare the two factors explicitly. Through corpus analysis and experimentation, we demonstrate that both factors simultaneously and independently influence word order in two English constructions. While past investigations of these factors have focused on their effects in language comprehension, we argue that processing heavy and new constituents facilitates processes of planning and production.¹

Even relatively fixed-word-order languages like English permit certain phrases to occur in more than one order. Examples 1–3 illustrate three familiar alternations in the sequencing of postverbal constituents

- (1) Heavy NP Shift¹ (HNPS)
 - a. The waiter brought the wine we had ordered to the table.
 - b. The waiter brought to the table the wine we had ordered.
- (2) Dative Alternation (DA)
 - a. Chris gave a bowl of Mom's traditional cranberry sauce to Terry.
 - b. Chris gave Terry a bowl of Mom's traditional cranberry sauce.
- (3) Verb-Particle
 - a. Sandy picked the freshly baked apple pie up.
 - b. Sandy picked up the freshly baked apple pie.

Why does such variation occur? This question can be asked from two closely related perspectives: (1) What factor(s) can influence the choice of one ordering over the other, and (2) What function(s) can constituent ordering variation serve?

This article addresses both of these questions. For the first question, we focus on proposals that grammatical complexity (heaviness) and discourse status (newness) are crucial factors in determining constituent ordering. Although both factors have been considered by different scholars, most studies overlook the possible effects of one or the other, and almost no studies have simultaneously investigated the two together in relation to constituent ordering. Some authors have even explicitly proposed that only one factor or the other is responsible for variation in constituent ordering. This led us to ask whether both newness and heaviness are relevant factors, or whether just one can account for constituent ordering variation. We investigated this question through

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² The term *syntax* used here is for convenience and should not be taken as a commitment to analyses of these phenomena involving movement transformations.





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