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# Closing the Gap: Syntactic Complexity does not disambiguate Gapping sentences

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**Introduction:** Gapping sentences in English such as:

- (1) *the butler met the queen in the living room and the hostess in the dining room*

are potentially ambiguous between a gapping reading (G) with an IP-coordinated-structure and a non-gapping reading (NG) with a lower conjunction structure. Evidence from recent experimental studies (Carlson 2001) has led to conclude that NG structures are highly preferred due to their simpler syntactic structure (see Frazier 1987), but context and discourse factors can bypass structural filters favouring the gapping reading. Crucially, D-factors have received little attention in the literature.

**Experiment:** Reading preferences in a questionnaire study were collected. Items comprising potentially ambiguous gapping sentences varied across 4 conditions, exhibiting increasing structural complexity via PP or CP attachment, but constant number of topics (2 for G, 1 for NG).

No main effect on structural complexity was found, as a strong preference for a NG-analysis was observed under any syntactic manipulation.

**Conclusion:** These findings call into question the assumed (Carlson 2001) prominent role of syntactic complexity in the processing of elliptical structures. The lack of a significant difference in the scores throughout the 4 conditions strongly suggests that discourse-based factors are able to disambiguate gapping sentences, corroborating previous similar studies on non-structural effects.

**References:** • Carlson, K. (2001). The Effects of Parallelism and Prosody in the Processing of Gapping Structures, *Language and Speech* 44(1), 1-26. • Frazier, L. (1987). Sentence processing: A tutorial review. In: M. Coltheart (Ed.), *Attention & Performance XII* (pp. 601-681). Hove, UK: Lawrence Erlbaum.