

Abstract knowledge versus direct experience in processing of Vietnamese coordinative compounds

Phuong Dang (dang.275@osu.edu); Andrea Sims (sims.120@osu.edu)

Department of Linguistics, The Ohio State University

This study investigates cognitive processing of multi-word expressions. It aims to answer the question whether these expressions are processed compositionally or holistically, explore the role of abstract knowledge (i.e., knowledge of grammatical constraints) and direct experience (i.e., frequency of occurrences) in their processing and finally provide insights into the nature of grammar and lexicon. The chosen materials are Vietnamese coordinative compounds. Their formation involves the combination of words of the same category into single lexical items whose meanings refer to more general and abstract concepts constituted by their components (Thompson, 1965; Ngô, 1984; Nguyễn, 1997); hence, they are multi-word expressions in Vietnamese, a monosyllabic language. They also vary in their reversibility and have a wide range of frequency.

Following Morgan and Levy (2016), the study specifically examines the predictive effect of abstract knowledge and direct experience on the ordering preferences of 51 attested two-word coordinative noun compounds in Vietnamese. Abstract knowledge was quantified using the probabilistic model of ordering preferences which estimates the predicted probability for each compound based on the grammatical constraints constraining the orderings of the compound components. Direct experience was calculated via corpus-based frequency counts for each compound. The ordering preferences (e.g., *bàn ghế* or *ghế bàn*?) were obtained using the forced-choice task in which 24 Southern Vietnamese participants chose their preferred ordering for each compound whose two orderings were embedded in the same sentence context.

The results show the correlation of both abstract knowledge and direct experience with the participants' ordering preferences for these coordinative compounds. However, direct experience has a stronger predictive power toward the ordering preferences than abstract knowledge. The findings reflect the predictive effect of frequency on the processing of multi-word expressions and support the theoretical account of a heterogeneous grammar in which there is no distinctive separation of words and rules components.

Examples of Vietnamese coordinative noun compounds

- (1) bàn ghế
table chair
'furniture'
- (2) sông núi
river mountain
'the whole nation'
- (3) gà quế
chicken chicken (archaic)
'chickens'

Key references

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