
Communicatively efficient language use: preference or avoidance?

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Different theories of communicative efficiency (e.g., Hawkins 2004; Gibson et al. 2019; Levshina 2022) typically highlight language users' preferred linguistic patterns and behaviours. For example, speakers favour structures with shorter syntactic dependencies (Ferrer-i-Cancho 2004; Liu 2008; Futrell et al. 2020) or produce more accessible units before less accessible ones (McDonald 2013). Such principles are less often framed in terms of the avoidance of dispreferred patterns – Grice's [1975] maxims "Avoid obscurity of expression" and "Avoid ambiguity" being notable exceptions. This bias represents a problem because it is often unclear whether language users prefer some patterns, avoid others, or do both.

I will illustrate the problem with two case studies. First, I will discuss a quantitative cross-linguistic study demonstrating that users of language-final languages avoid clauses with two overt arguments in transitive clauses of verb-final languages (Ueno & Polinsky 2009; Levshina, in press), whereas a corresponding preference for two-argument clauses in verb-medial languages is not found. The second one addresses Zipf's (1965[1935]) law of abbreviation: while more frequent words tend to be short, less frequent words can be either short or long (Morin & Koshevoy 2024). I will argue that such asymmetries, also known as implicational relationships in typology, are crucial for the understanding of the mechanisms behind communicatively efficient language use and structure, and that they should be reflected more systematically in our theories.

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