Why worry about complex syntax?

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What is complex syntax?

In which contexts does complex syntax occur?

Complex syntax in school texts

Complex syntax in other texts

What drives syntactic complexity?

Talking about complex things

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Complexity within phrases

(1) [the big hair biker] stroked [the cute little purring kitten]

(2) The mouse [that the cat chased] was very mischievous

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Complexity at the clause level

(3) There's the cat [$_{\text{Obj. rel.}}$ that the dog chased]

(4) The cat was chased $_{\text{Passive}}$ by the dog.

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(5) Botanists claim that some wildflowers, such as blazing stars, grow well in grasslands.

(6) Most grasslands are populated by large herds of grazing animals, such as bison, a species of mammal native to the American prairies. . . Millions of bison, commonly known as buffalo, once ranged over the American prairie, where they were preyed upon by wolves, coyotes, and humans. (Biggs et al., 2002, p. 83)

(7) Other important prairie animals include prairie dogs, which are seed-eating rodents that build underground 'towns' known to stretch across mile after mile of grassland, and the foxes and ferrets that prey on them. (Biggs et al, 2002, p. 83)

(source: presentation by Marilyn Nippold at the RCLST)

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Botanists claim [$_{Od}$ that some wildflowers, such as blazing stars, grow well in grasslands].

Complex syntax in school texts

PASSIVES and RELATIVE CLAUSES

Most grasslands are populated by large herds of grazing animals, such as bison, a species of mammal native to the American prairies. . . Millions of bison,
(that are) commonly known as buffalo, once ranged over the American prairie,
where they were preyed upon by wolves, coyotes, and humans.
(Biggs et al., 2002, p. 83)

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PASSIVES

[Relative clauses in brackets]

Other important prairie animals include prairie dogs,
[which are seed-eating rodents
[that build underground 'towns'
[(that are) known to stretch across mile after mile of grassland
]]] , and the foxes and ferrets [that prey on them].

Complex syntax in other texts

Complex texts are found in any job which involves understanding complex systems (Rose, 1989)

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Our language gets more complex when we start to talk about complex things, e.g. the rules of a running race versus the rules of a game of football.

A discourse in which we describe a complex body of knowledge is called an 'expository' discourse (exposition = explanation).

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Good prompts for expository discourse

1. Tell me the rules of your favourite sport or game
2. How would you solve a particular conflict between peers? (Nippold et al. 2007)
3. Tell me what you learnt in school today.

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Data taken from Nippold (2008)

Here are individuals describing their favourite team game. What kind of complex structures are being used?

(8) You just try to get a team. It doesn't matter how many you need. You just got like six. Play three on three or something like that. And just get a football or something like a cup or something. And just play. Make a field and stuff.

(9) So if the line gets past the offensive line, the offensive line on the other hand can't just grab people and throw them out of their way. They have to push them. They can't just pick them up and throw them out because then they will be called for holding, which is an illegal move. And you'll get penalized 5 yards for that.

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(10) You just try to get a team. It doesn't matter how many you need. You just got like six. Play three on three or something like that. And just get a football or something like a cup or something. And just play. Make a field and stuff.

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dependent/subordinate clause, conjoined clause, relative clause, passive

(11) So if the line gets past the offensive line, the offensive line on the other hand can't just grab people and throw them out of their way. They have to push them. They can't just pick them up and throw them out
because then they will be called for holding, which is an illegal move. And
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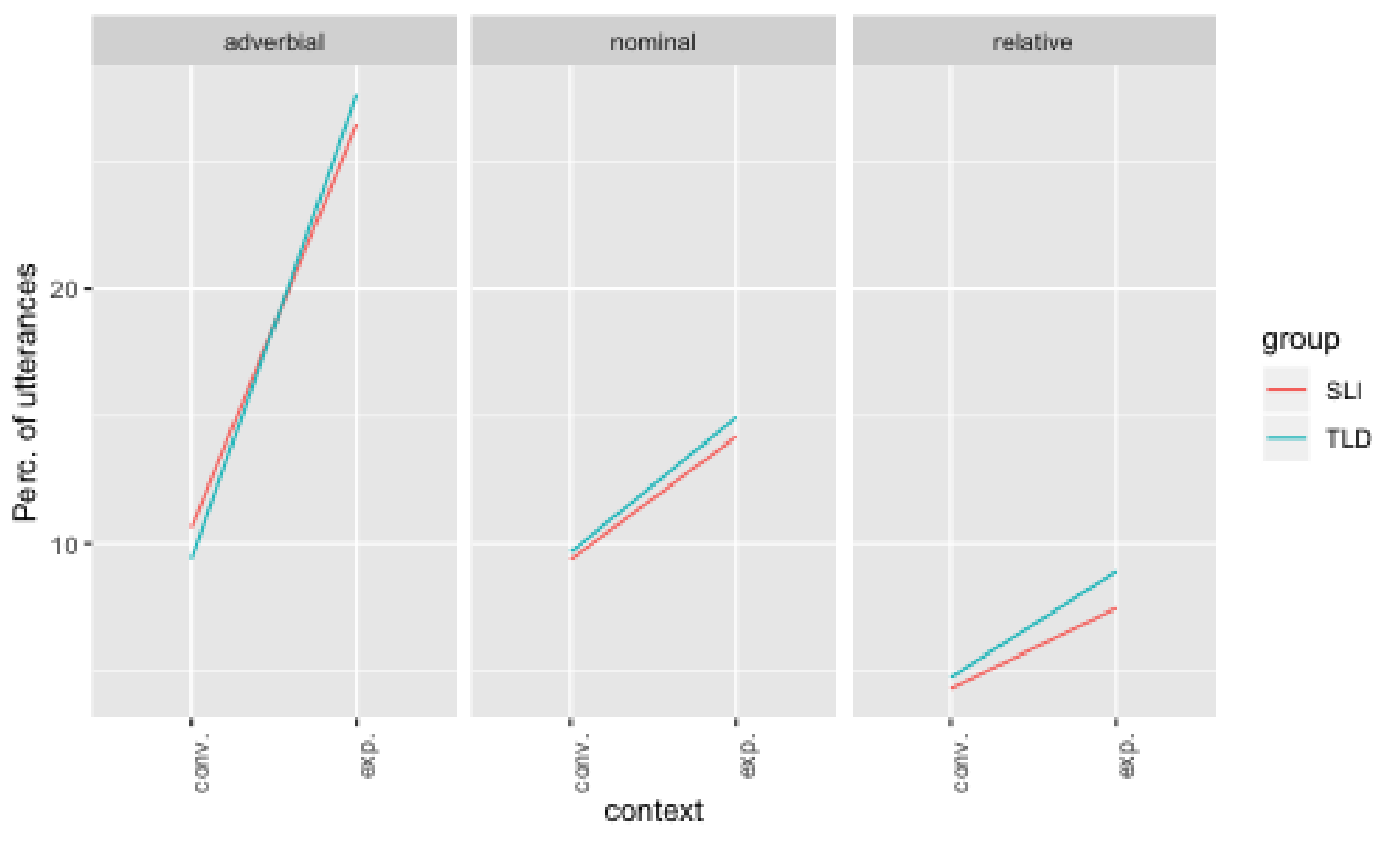
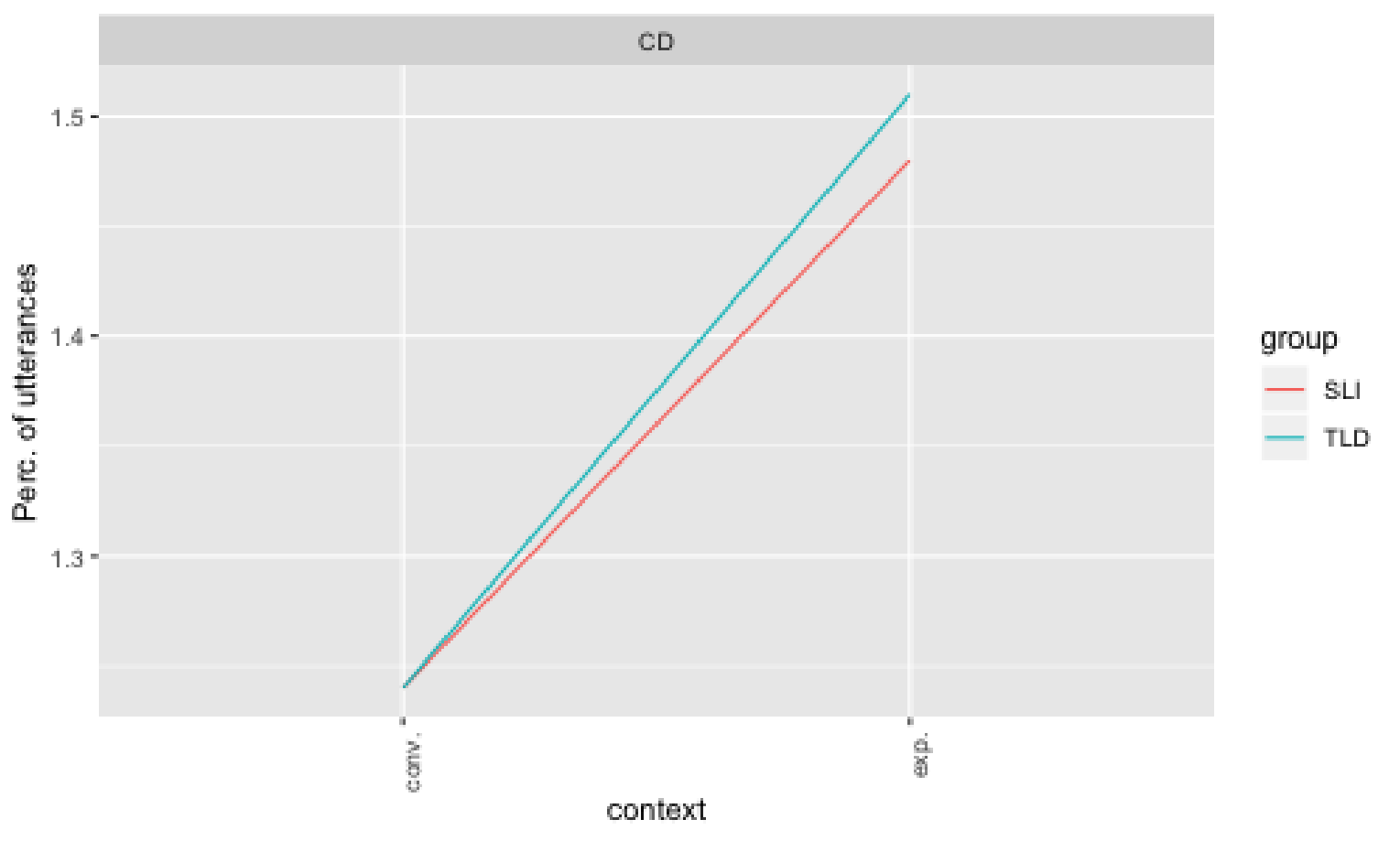
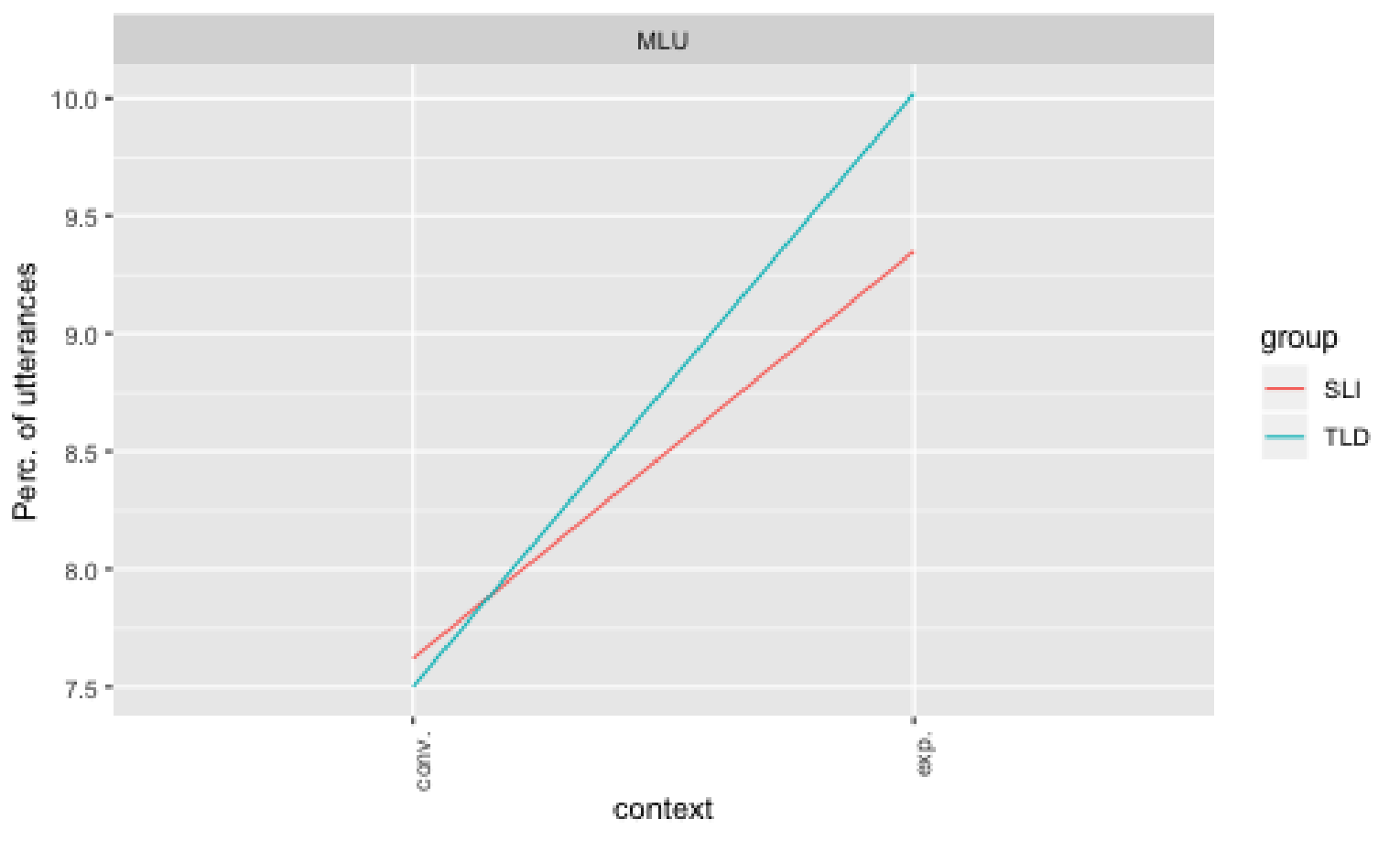
Types of dependent clause ('nominal' = clause in complement position)



Clausal Density




MLU
10.0
9.5
9.0
8.5
8.0
7.5
Perc. of utterances
conv.
exp.
context
group
SLI
TLD

Take home message:

Consider the relationship between genre and complexity

Can particular genres be used to elicit and treat complex structures?

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