

Why worry about complex syntax?

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1 What is complex syntax?

There is no single agreed-upon definition.

Can refer to complexity within phrases or complexity at the phrase level (1), or the clause level (2)

Complexity within phrases

- (1) [the big hair biker] stroked [the cute little purring kitten]
- (2) The mouse [that the cat chased] was very mischievous

Generally, the term ‘complex sentence’ is used to describe a sentence with multiple clauses.

Sentences with unusual (non-canonical) word order are often described as more complex than sentences with standard (canonical) word order because they are more difficult to process.

Complexity at the clause level

- (3) There’s the cat [Obj. rel. that the dog chased]
- (4) The cat was chased Passive by the dog.

We have seen that complex syntactic constructions occur in language assessment materials, and are therefore good items for diagnosing language difficulties. But does complex syntax bear any relation to real life communication?

2 In which contexts does complex syntax occur?

2.1 Complex syntax in school texts

Have a look at these real passages from school text books (source: presentation by Marilyn Nippold at the RCLST)

- (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)

What kind of complex sentences are used?

2.2 Complex syntax in other texts

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

3 What drives syntactic complexity?

3.1 Talking about complex things

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).

This can be compared with a ‘narrative’ discourse (telling a story)

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.

3.2 Examples of expository discourse

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.

4 Expository Discourse and Language Impairment

Language-impaired children eventually overcome grammatical errors, e.g. omission of verb endings. But they find Expository Discourse very difficult, due to difficulties with complex syntax.

Given importance of Expository Discourse, this will impact on their life opportunities.

Though expository discourse is difficult for language-impaired children, eliciting expository discourse does in fact lead to greater clausal complexity. This suggests that it may be beneficial to elicit expository discourse in clinical contexts.

5 Bibliography

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