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(joint work with Klaus Abels)

A long-standing question in syntax is how to deal with linear asymmetries observed in natural language. Given its inherently left-to-right nature, the parsing process is a plausible source of such asymmetries. Adopting this line of reasoning, we argue that rightward movement of obligatory material causes parsing difficulties that are absent with leftward movement and rightward movement of optional material. Evidence comes from heavy-XP shift. We discuss the results of eye-tracking experiments reported in Staub, Clifton and Frazier 2006 and replicate and extend these through a self-paced reading experiment and an experiment using the maze paradigm. We then show that the parsing constraints that explain why heavy XP-shift of obligatory material is problematic can be brought to bear on the linear asymmetry described in Greenberg's (1963) Universal 20, one of the most robust typological universals in existence. Cinque (2005) and Abels and Neeleman (2012) show that Universal 20 can be derived if movement of the noun within the extended nominal projection is uniformly leftward. This restriction to leftward movement can be modelled as resulting from difficulties in parsing that drastically suppress the typological frequency of rightward movement orders (as per Hawkins 1990, 2009 and Kirby 1999).