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Associations versus Propositions in Memory for Sentences

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Abstract

Propositional accounts of organization in memory have dominated theory in compositional semantics, but it is an open question whether their adoption has been necessitated by the data. We present data from a narrative comprehension experiment, designed to distinguish between a propositional account of semantic representation and an associative account based on the Syntagmatic-Paradigmatic (Dennis, 2005; SP) model. We manipulated expected propositional-interference by including distractor sentences that shared a verb with a target sentence. We manipulated paradigmatic-interference by including two distractor sentences, one of which contained a name from a target sentence. That is, we increased the second-order co-occurrence between a name in a target sentence and a distractor. Contrary to the propositional assumption, our results show that subjects are sensitive to second-order co-occurrence, hence favouring the associative account.