

## All that glitters is not syntax: On the deceptive comfort of the armchair

Armchair linguistics has long been the preferred approach to studying grammar – building linguistic theories relying on introspective data or a native speaker informant. As a result, some phenomena have been analysed in different ways without an objective, let alone reproducible investigation. Theoretical linguists are slowly warming up to the idea of conducting experiments, but this trend is fairly recent with many researchers remaining sceptical. Turkish relative clauses and German parasitic gaps are two phenomena for which various derivations have been proposed while making contradictory claims about their acceptability. For Turkish, accounts differ with respect to which targets of relativization allow for which agreement pattern under certain circumstances (Ouhalla 1993; Kornfilt 1997, 2000; Cagri 2005, 2009) while for German, the existence of parasitic gaps in general is a matter of controversy (Felix 1985, Kathol 2001, Fanselow 2001). Based on two independent studies I conducted, I show that the contradictory claims are a reflection of interspeaker variability. Variability of any kind is the exact factor we cannot capture without larger scale investigations. I claim that as a result, we conceal the divide between actual components of syntax and more general (cognitive, pragmatic, but even social or regional) influences. The findings imply that some of the constructions' traits may not tell us anything about the underlying syntax at all because of their variability – truly syntactic constraints should not vary among speakers. The key finding of my experiments is not that linguists are 'wrong' in their descriptions of the phenomena, nor the data or judgments they provide – essentially all of their viewpoints are represented in the sample. The actual mistake is to exclusively rely on individual judgments about highly accessible languages to develop theories. To keep research moving, we need to foster a culture where reliable data collection complements theoretical considerations.

**References:** Cagri, I. 2005. Minimality and Turkish Relative Clauses. PhD thesis, U. Maryland. \* Cagri, I. 2009. Arguing against subject incorporation in Turkish relative clauses. *Lingua* 109(2): 359–373. \* Fanselow, G. 2001. Features,  $\theta$ -roles and free constituent order. *Linguistic Inquiry* 32(3): 405–437. \* Felix, S. W. 1985. Parasitic Gaps in German. In Abraham (ed.): 'Erklärende Syntax des Deutschen'. Niemeyer: 173–201. \* Kathol, A. Nonexistence of Parasitic Gaps in German. In Culicover & Postal (eds.), 'Parasitic Gaps', MIT Press, Cambridge: 315–338. \* Kornfilt, J. 1997. Turkish. London, England: Routledge. \* Kornfilt, J. 2000. Some Syntactic and Morphological Properties of Relative Clauses in Turkish. In Alexiadou et al. (eds.), *The Syntax of Relative Clauses*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. 121–160. \* Ouhalla, J. 1993. Subject-extraction, negation and the Anti-agreement Effect. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 11(3). 477–518.