**MIND THE GAP (AND AVOID IT!)**

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I will first report the main findings of an eye-tracking study (Staub, Foppolo, Donati and Cecchetto 2018, *Journal of memory and language*) which investigates the processing of syntactic ambiguity in strings such as “the information that the health department provided (a cure) reassured the tour operators”, where the *that*-clause can be either a relative clause involving movement of the head noun (*the information*) from the object position after “provided” (RC: “the information that the health department provided \_\_”) or the clausal complement of the noun (CC: “the information that the health department provided a cure). Staub *et al*. showed that CC constructions were preferred and this preference was not modulated either by frequency of RCs with respect to CCs (RCs are exceedingly more frequent than CCs) or by frequency biases towards CC or RC continuation of the nouns followed by CC or RC. Staub *et al*. attribute the preference for RCs to the Minimal Chain Principle (De Vincenzi, 1991), which states that filler-gap dependencies should not be posited except when necessary.

However, a limitation of Staub et al.’s study is the fact that the two structures tested (CC vs. RCs) also differed in the attachment site of the critical clause (complement vs. adjunct in traditional terms). Thus, an explanation in terms of Minimal Attachment (Frazier 1978) is also plausible.

To further discuss this issue, I report the results of two grammaticality judgements studies on two temporarily ambiguous structures in Italian and in French that only differ with respect to the presence/absence of the filler-gap dependency.

In some regional varieties of Italian there is an ambiguous *che* corresponding either to *that* in a declarative complement clause (DC), or to *what* in an indirect question (IQ), as shown in (a-b). The verb “capire” (to understand) is compatible with both continuations:

(1) (a) Ho capito **che** fare gli esami è difficile [Ambiguous V, DC]

(I) understood CHE to-do the exams is difficult

‘I understood that taking exams is difficult’

(b) Ho capito **che** fare agli esami difficili [Ambiguous V, IQ]

(I) understood CHE to-do at the exams difficult

‘I understood what to do during difficult exams’

Minimal Attachment does not distinguish (1a) and (1b) since they both contain a complement clause. However in (b) *che* introduces an indirect question, thus it leaves a gap. To make sure that any difficulty in (1b) is created by the availability of the continuation in (1a), we also compared sentences (1a-b) with sentence (1c):

 (c) Ho chiesto **che** fare agli esami difficili [Unambiguous V, IQ]

(I) asked CHE to-do at the exams difficult

‘I asked what to do during difficult exams’

In (1c), the verb (in this case, “chiedere”, to ask) unambiguously selects an IQ: for this reason, a gap after the main verb is obligatory in (1c).

In French, a similar ambiguous involves *ce que*:

(2) (a) Yasmina s’habitue à ce que sa mère regarde la télé chaque matin. [Ambiguous V, DC]

 Yasmina gets used to that that her mother watches TV every morning

 ‘Yasmina gets used to the fact that her mother watches TV every morning’

(b) Yasmina s’habitue à ce que sa mère regarde chaque matin. [Ambiguous V, FR]

 Yasmina gets used to that that her mother watches every morning

 ‘Yasmina gets used to what her mother watches every morning’

Again, Minimal Attachment does not distinguish (2a) and (2b), as both contain a CC. The two sentences, however, differ in the role of *ce* *que*: in (2b) it introduces a free relative (FR), thus there is a gap. In (2a), instead, *ce que* is just a variant of the complementizer *que* and the sentence contains no gap. As a control, sentences (2a-b) were compared to sentence (2c), with a verb (here “voir”, to see) that unambiguously selects a free relative.

 c) Yasmina voit ce que sa mère regarde chaque matin. [Unambiguous V, RF]

 Yasmina overlook that that her mother watches every morning

‘Yasmina overlooks what her mother watches every morning’

The results both in Italian and in French show a preference for sentences (a), that include a declarative complement clause with no gap, over sentences (b), which contain a gap (as an indirect question or a free relative). An explanation in terms of Minimal Chain Principle seems to be needed as proposed by Staub et al. for English data.

I will conclude this talk by offering some more speculative remarks on whether the Minimal Chain Principle can be seen as the parsing counterpart of Merge-over-Move principle proposed by Chomsky (1998).