

# The Neural Architecture of Grammar

*Stephen E. Nadeau*



*Delphinus 18/1952*

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**Stephen E. Nadeau**

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To Sue, Nicole, Hillary, and Leslie



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## Preface

Linguists have mapped the topography of language behavior in many languages in immaculate detail. However, to understand how the brain supports language function, it is necessary to bring the principles and regularities of neural function to the table. Mechanisms of neurolinguistic function cannot be inferred solely from observations of normal and impaired language. Our understanding of principles and regularities of neural function relevant to language stems predominantly from two sources: (1) knowledge of neuroanatomy and the neural systems that are based upon this anatomy and (2) knowledge of the patterns of behavior of neural networks composed of large numbers of highly interconnected units and supporting population-based (distributed) representations.

The core neuroanatomy underlying language was largely subsumed in the Wernicke–Lichtheim model (Lichtheim 1885), and our knowledge of it has scarcely advanced beyond the principles laid out in Norman Geschwind’s famous paper “Disconnexion Syndromes in Animals and Man” (Geschwind 1965). Functional imaging studies from the outset suggested a remarkable degree of bilateral engagement of the brain in language function, particularly in the perisylvian regions, but functional imaging is generally ill equipped to distinguish regions that are essential from those that are incidental. As it turns out, studies of aphasia, looked at from the right perspective, and with particular attention to the effect of lesions on both white and gray matter, provide us with fairly powerful evidence of the extent to which various components of language function are bilaterally represented, and even the extent to which this might vary from language to language. This aspect of aphasia studies, largely overlooked to date, will constitute one of the recurring themes of this book.

The evolution of our understanding of neural systems over the past 20 years has revealed the importance of systems dedicated to “keeping order in the house” — that is, maintaining coherent patterns of activity in the brain’s 100 billion neurons such that all is not cacophony and adaptive behavior more or less consistently emerges. Key are systems underlying selective engagement of particular neural networks

in particular ways (Nadeau and Crosson 1997), which support what Patricia Goldman-Rakic (1990) termed working memory. Working memory and its hippocampal complement, episodic memory (Shrager et al. 2008), play very substantial roles in language function, roles that we are beginning to understand and that will constitute another recurring theme of this book. Much less well understood are the mechanisms by which linguistic behavior is driven by systems underlying goal representations.

Our understanding of the population dynamics of neural network systems owes almost entirely to the study of parallel distributed processing (PDP), which was thrust so dramatically onto the world's scientific stage by David Rumelhart and Jay McClelland and their collaborators in their seminal two-volume text, published 25 years ago (McClelland, Rumelhart, and PDP Research Group 1986). The science of PDP has continued to evolve at a stunning pace ever since, enhancing our understanding of constraints governing neural network systems, demonstrating how powerful these systems can be, and demonstrating new ways in which neural networks might support particular functions. Before PDP was established as a field of research, behavioral neuroscientists could only hope that one day, the complex behaviors they were systematically studying could ultimately be related in a precise way to neural structure and function. In a flash, PDP research showed how this could be done, and, repeatedly, PDP simulations have shown the power of neural networks to account in a highly detailed way for behavior in normal and damaged brains.

This book begins with the development of a comprehensive, neurally based, theoretical model of grammatic function, drawing on principles of neuroanatomy and neurophysiology and the PDP literature, together with cognitive psychological studies of normal language, functional imaging studies, and cognitive neuropsychological and psycholinguistic studies of subjects with language disorders due to stroke, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, and frontotemporal lobar degeneration. The remarkably detailed understanding of semantic function that has emerged substantially from the 20-year effort of the Addenbrookes Hospital group (Hodges, Patterson, Lambon Ralph, Rogers, and their collaborators, most notably Jay McClelland) has proven to be particularly important. From this, we have a cogent theory of semantic instantiation and breakdown. Much of grammar (that not dependent on networks instantiating sequence knowledge) turns out to be semantics. Research on the neural foundation of semantics, coupled with the studies of many other investigators, has led to a conceptualization of verbs as the product of multicomponent frontal and postcentral distributed representations that engage and modify noun representations, even as they are engaged by noun representations. Equally important has been PDP work on the capacity for instantiation of sequence knowledge by certain neural networks, coupled with work by psycholinguists, most notably Thompson and her colleagues at Northwestern

University, on sentence-level sequence breakdown in aphasia and patterns of reacquisition of this knowledge during speech–language therapy. Concept representations interfaced with sequence knowledge provide the intrinsic basis for the temporal dynamic of language.

The second half of this book reviews the aphasia literature, most importantly including cross-linguistic studies, testing the model in its ability to account for the findings of empirical studies not considered in its development. The model fully accommodates the competition model of Bates and MacWhinney (1989), which provided an enormous advance in our understanding of the neural basis of grammatic function, and it extends the competition model. It accounts for perhaps the single most trenchant finding of cross-linguistic aphasia studies—that the most powerful determinant of patterns of language breakdown in aphasia is the pre-morbid language spoken by the subject (“You can’t take the Turkish out of the Turk”). It does so by accounting for grammatic knowledge in terms of the statistical regularities of particular languages that are encoded in network connectivity. Only the most redundantly encoded regularities, or those that have significant bihemispheric representation, survive focal brain damage. The model provides a surprisingly good account for a large number of findings and unprecedented resolution of a number of controversial problems, including whether grammatic dysfunction reflects loss of knowledge or loss of access to knowledge; relative sparing of grammaticality judgment; the problem of verb past tense formation, including some of the wrinkles that have appeared in the course of cross-linguistic studies; cross-linguistic differences in patterns of syntactic breakdown; and the impact of inflectional richness on the resilience of phrase structure rules and grammatic morphology in the face of brain lesions. To the extent that the proposed model did not fully account for observed patterns of language breakdown, aphasia studies have provided the basis for elaborating the model in ways that are interesting and important, even as these elaborations are entirely consistent with the general principles of the original model and in no way involve ad hoc extensions.

Ultimately, however, the model represents but a new beginning. I have done my best, particularly in the concluding chapter, to delineate possible directions for further research.



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# 1 Introduction

The goal of this book is to develop a neurologically plausible theory of grammatic function. Given all that we now know about neuroanatomy and principles of neural network function, it is no longer possible to propose such a theory without taking this knowledge into account. Linguists have been remarkably successful in mapping the regularities of grammatic performance in exquisite detail, and any neurological theory of language must be able to offer a logical and detailed explanation for these regularities, as well as for the errors of grammatic function that occur with slips of the tongue by normal subjects and in aphasia in subjects with brain injury.

Linguists have also developed a sophisticated mathematics to account for grammatic phenomenology, normal and abnormal, in an orderly way. Unfortunately, they have not been successful in reconciling this mathematics in all its various derivations with principles of neurobiology. Linguistic theories of grammar (e.g., government and binding theory) are discrete, hierarchical, deterministic, explicitly rule defining, and essentially orthogonal to semantics. The brain supports distributed functions; these functions are hierarchical only in the Hughlings Jackson sense (higher systems supporting more complex functions inhibit lower systems, which may become “released” with damage to higher systems); brain order is chaotic rather than deterministic; rules are not defined but instead emerge from network behavior, constrained by network topography and within- and between-network connectivity, which is acquired through experience and reflects statistical regularities of experience; and grammar results from a process involving parallel constraint satisfaction in which semantic knowledge, semantic–phonologic/morphologic (lexical) knowledge, sequence knowledge, skills in concept manipulation, and recall of what has recently been said define the final product. However powerful and heuristically useful linguistic theories are, their failure to accommodate these cardinal principles of brain function constitutes a serious shortcoming.

The chapter and verse of this book consists of the enormous body of work, principally from the fields of psycholinguistics and cognitive neuropsychology, that enables us to infer how the normal brain produces language from the aberrations

in language function that follow brain damage. However, the underlying themes of the book derive from knowledge of neural systems, the well-established topography of cerebral association cortices supporting language, patterns of white matter connectivity between these cortices, the geographical and neurological impact of the vascular lesions and degenerative diseases that are the most common causes of aphasia, and the neural representation of knowledge. Because of the very serious methodological problems that have plagued functional imaging methodology, it has made but a modest contribution to our understanding of the neural architecture of grammar (see, e.g., reviews by Crepaldi et al. 2011 and Démonet, Thierry, and Cardebat 2005), and references to works in this field will be limited.<sup>1</sup>

It has become clear that the fundamental unit of cortical function is the neural network (Buonomano and Merzenich 1998), and a paradigmatic leap achieved in the 1980s, which yielded the field of parallel distributed processing (PDP; McClelland, Rumelhart, and PDP Research Group 1986), now enables us to peer deeply into the computational principles of neural network function and directly link complex behaviors to neural network function. Thus, PDP constitutes another major pillar of this book.

PDP models can incorporate a large variety of model-specific assumptions, including ones that are not neurologically plausible. However, in this book, I will argue from the simplest, most limited set of assumptions possible, all of which receive substantial if not overwhelming support from neurobiological research. These are as follows:

- The fundamental unit of cerebral function is the neural network (Buonomano and Merzenich 1998).
- A neural network is comprised of a large number of relatively simple units, each of which is heavily connected with many if not all the other units in the network, hence the term connectionist model.
- The knowledge in a network (long-term memory) consists of the pattern of connection strengths between units, corresponding to synaptic strengths between neurons (an idea that likely originated with Hebb 1949).
- The principal operational currency of a network is the activity of individual units (which corresponds to states of depolarization or firing rates of neurons). Activity in some units will naturally spread to other units, constrained by the pattern of connection strengths.
- Activation levels of units and the flow of activation between units involve non-linear functions.
- A cognitive representation consists of a specific pattern of activity of the units in a network (which defines working memory). Because this pattern involves a

substantial portion of the units, the representation is referred to as distributed or population encoded (Rolls and Treves 1998).

- Networks are linked to each other by very large numbers of connections. I will presume that the pattern of the network linkages underlying language function reflects the known topography of cortical functions, as substantially defined by information-processing models, and that there is no intrinsic incompatibility between information-processing models and the PDP conceptualizations to be discussed.
- Learning consists of altering connection strengths.
- Links between networks enable transformation of a representation in one modality in one network into a different representation, corresponding to another modality, in the connected network.

These simple properties enable a complex array of functions even as they strongly constrain the nature of processing that must occur. Much of this book will consist of elaboration of this statement in the domain of grammatic function. The surprisingly great functional capacity of networks defined by these principles has been repeatedly demonstrated in the ability of PDP simulations to account in precise quantitative fashion for a vast range of empirical phenomena in normal and brain-injured subjects. More generally, connectionist concepts are now deeply embedded in and receive enormous support from mainstream neuroscientific research (e.g., Rolls and Deco 2002; Rolls and Treves 1998).

Yusef Grodzinsky has been at once one of the scientists most knowledgeable about the aphasia literature and one of the stoutest defenders of a discrete, localized, domain-specific organ of grammar, presumably located in Broca's area. In his 2000 paper, he stated, "It is important to note that a theory is best 'refuted' not by data ... but rather by an alternative proposal" (Grodzinsky 2000, p. 56). In this book I seek to provide such an alternative proposal: a theoretical model of language function based in neuroanatomy and connectionist principles that also accommodates the accumulated empirical findings of psycholinguistic and cognitive neuropsychological studies. Before proceeding to the details, it is worth asking how the reader should judge the model presented here. MacWhinney and Bates (Bates and MacWhinney 1989, p. 36) have said it just right:

[A model] itself cannot be disconfirmed by any single experiment.... [It] must instead be evaluated in terms of (1) its overall coherence, (2) its heuristic value in inspiring further research, and (3) its performance compared with competing accounts. Components of a model are tested one at a time, and if predictions fail, modifications are made and new concepts are introduced. Ideally, these new concepts should have an independent motivation (i.e., they should not be added merely to save the model), and they should lead to new discoveries in their own right. But the framework as a whole will be rejected only if (1) it loses coherence,

weighted down by circularities and ad hoc assumptions, (2) it loses its heuristic value, and/or (3) a better account of the same phenomena comes along.

One last apology: many of the conclusions in this book will be stated with a degree of confidence that is not warranted by the limited data available. To some extent this will be inadvertent. To a large extent, however, it reflects a deliberate strategy to minimize the muddiness that would be introduced by repeated qualifications and caveats. In any event, the conclusions should always be viewed as testable hypotheses rather than accepted facts. No systematic attempt has been made to contrast theories presented in this book with existing linguistic or cognitive neuropsychological theories for the simple reason that none of these theories has been comprehensively related to neural structure.

I begin the discussion of the model with a brief review of phonology from a connectionist perspective. This review will serve to introduce the basic concepts: the organization and operating principles of the phonologic core of language, the neural basis for and the organization of distributed semantic representations, and the neural network basis of sequence knowledge. The *intrinsic* temporal dynamics of language derive from the interplay between distributed concept representations and different domains of sequence knowledge, hence the importance of a clear understanding of these core principles from the outset. The flow of concept representations corresponding to the flow of thought of course provide an external source of temporal dynamic.

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