

## “One new idea” constraint holds cross-linguistically even in “flat” expressions

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In this talk, we test the hypothesis that spoken language is shaped by the “one new idea” constraint. Chafe (1994:42) proposes that the human consciousness can only process at most one new idea at a time, where “at a time” means in one intonation unit. “Ideas” subsume mentions of entities, events or states, which are typically expressed by single content words such as nouns or verbs. Expressions with more than one content word, then, have the potential to challenge Chafe’s constraint. We focus in this talk on such multi-word expressions which have already in the past been suspected of encoding more complex semantics than the average English NP or VP: serial verb constructions (Pawley 1987, 2009; Givón 1991), and similarly “flat” nominal expressions consisting of several co-ranked nominals. We demonstrate that Chafe’s “one new idea” constraint holds even for flat expressions, based on an in-depth corpus study of four typologically-diverse languages in a first attempt to disentangle lexical from discourse activation in flat expressions.

To test the “one new idea” constraint, we examined 100 serial verb constructions in Kera’a (Trans-Himalayan, India) and Waima’a (Austronesian, Timor-Leste) and 100 “flat” nominal expressions in Sanskrit (Indo-Aryan, India) and Warlpiri (Pama-Nyungan, Australia) which occur within single intonation units. Each instance of a flat expression was annotated on two levels: the activation status of the lexical items involved, as well as the activation status of the idea(s) involved. Lexical items and ideas are coded as ‘new’ if they appear for the first time in a recording or text, with subsequent activation of the same lexical item or idea receiving a number indicating the distance between activations in intonation units. We follow Riestler and Baumann 2017 in assuming a five-intonation-unit cut-off for prior mentions of lexical items. Ideas are tracked without a cut-off point. Examples of coding can be seen in (1-4), where the “d-level” tracks discourse activation, and the “l-level” lexical activation.

Our investigation suggests that the “one new idea” constraint can be considered to be a universal principle of information packaging in a range of typologically-diverse languages. We find that the majority of cases of flat expressions include a maximum of a single new element, whether that be on the lexical item or idea level. However, a number of examples involve more than one new element on either the lexical item level or idea level (or both), posing a potential problem for the “one new idea” constraint. These challenges can largely be accounted for with reference to a number of phenomena that Chafe discusses (1994:110-119): independent activation (1), low-content elements (2), and collocations, lexicalisations and idioms (3). The remaining challenges can be accounted for by extending Chafe’s list to capture further phenomena that are due to the typologically-diverse language structures investigated in this study including near-synonym and generic-specific structures (4). As such, we find that the “one new idea” constraint holds but requires expansion to properly account for linguistic diversity as well as careful separation of lexical and discourse-based activation.

## Examples

(1) Waima'a (Amandio\_monkey.085)

	<b>aku</b>	<b>oo</b>	<b>'keti</b>	<b>hwaka</b>	<b>'keti</b>	<b>hwaka</b>
	1SG	also	jump	fly	jump	fly
d-level			new			
I-level			1-same	1-same	0-same	0-same

'I also jump'

(2) Sanskrit (adapted from ŚB 4.1.5.14)

	<b>bahu</b>		<b>mānuṣyêṣu</b>		<b>samṣṛṣṭam</b>
	much.ACC.SG.N		human.LOC.PL.M		interaction.ACC.SG.N
d-level	new				
I-level	new				new

'(As healers, you sought) much contact amongst humans.'

(3) Kera'a (dogstory\_104)

	<b>ikrip</b>	<b>to</b>	<b>a-ne</b>
	lie	speak	like_this-CV
d-level	new		
I-level	new	new	4-same

'(Ano) lied...'

(4) Warlpiri (j1-0028)

	<b>walya-jarra</b>	<b>=lpa</b>	<b>nyina-ja</b>	<b>yapa</b>	<b>nyurru-warnu-patu</b>
	ancestor	PST.IMPF	sit-PST	yapa	old_one-group-many
d-level	new				
I-level	new			new	new

'A long time ago the old people used to live (on that).'

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