



What Affects Cross-Linguistic Syntactic Priming? The Impact of Word Order Similarity, Thematic Alignment, and Typological Distance on Bilingual Structural Priming

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Abstract. This review synthesizes current findings on the key factors that influence cross-linguistic syntactic priming in bilingual speakers. It aims to assess whether shared syntactic representations underlie bilingual sentence production and how these are shaped by linguistic and cognitive factors. Specifically, it focuses on three major dimensions: word order similarity, thematic alignment and event structure, and typological distance. Findings across recent studies suggest that while surface-level syntactic overlap may facilitate priming, it is not a necessary condition. Instead, conceptual mappings such as agent–patient alignment and event-based structures appear to provide a more robust foundation for structural alignment. Typological distance, although not eliminating priming, modulates its strength and consistency depending on language pair characteristics and speaker experience. This review contributes to a more nuanced understanding of bilingual syntactic processing and highlights the need for further research on typologically distant language pairs such as Chinese and English.

Keywords: cross-linguistic syntactic priming, bilingualism, word order similarity, thematic alignment, typological distance.

1 Introduction

Syntactic priming, broadly defined as the tendency for speakers to reuse syntactic structures they have recently processed, has become a powerful tool for investigating how syntactic representations are organized and accessed in the mind [1][2][3]. Through production and comprehension tasks, this effect sheds light not only on the cognitive factors of language processing but also on how bilingual individuals represent and access syntactic structures across languages. More importantly, it reveals the nature of structural representations shared across languages by bilingual individuals [4]. Over the past two decades, research has shown that syntactic priming occurs not only in a single language, but also across languages, suggesting that bilingual speakers may have access to integrated, shared syntactic representations when switching between the two

languages [1][2][5]. Paradigms in this domain typically involve a prime–target structure: participants either produce or comprehend a syntactic form (the prime) and are then asked to produce a description or select a syntactic structure for a new event (the target), thereby allowing researchers to assess whether prior exposure influences subsequent structural choices [4]. Adopting this paradigm, a number of studies have explored whether syntactic representations are shared across languages. For example, Hartsuiker et al. demonstrated that Spanish–English bilinguals showed significant structural priming effects for passive constructions across languages, indicating that both languages might share an abstract representation of the passive structure [1]. Similarly, Schoonbaert et al. found that Dutch–English bilinguals exhibited cross-linguistic priming for both dative and transitive structures, further supporting the hypothesis of shared syntax [5]. Building on this, Bernolet et al. found that the strength of such shared syntactic representations increased with second language (L2) proficiency, emphasizing the dynamic and developmental nature of structural integration in bilinguals [2].

Despite these converging findings, the field continues to debate whether observed cross-linguistic priming effects genuinely reflect abstract syntactic convergence, or whether they are instead driven by more superficial factors rooted in structural or cognitive similarity. Among the key variables that have been proposed to account for such effects are word order similarity, thematic alignment, typological distance, and other moderating influences such as lexical repetition or speaker proficiency. A crucial question in this field is whether word order similarity is necessary for cross-language priming effects. While some early studies have shown that structural overlap of surface word order helps with priming [6], others have even found robust priming between languages with different syntactic orders, such as Spanish–English and Korean–English, challenging the need for word order consistency [7][8]. Specifically, Loebell and Bock reported that in German–English bilinguals, priming effects were present for double object and prepositional object constructions, where both languages share a similar word order, but not for passive constructions, suggesting that surface word order alignment may facilitate priming [6]. In contrast, Shin and Christianson found reliable priming of relative clause structures between Korean and English, despite the significant word order differences, providing evidence against the necessity of structural overlap [7]. More recently, van Dijk and Unsworth showed that priming effects persisted between typologically diverse languages, such as Spanish and Dutch, even without surface structural congruence, suggesting that word order is a facilitator, not a prerequisite [8].

In parallel, researchers have proposed that thematic alignment, particularly the mapping of thematic roles (e.g., agent, patient) and event structures, may serve as another driver of cross-linguistic priming. Ziegler et al. demonstrated that bilinguals could exhibit priming even when syntactic forms differed, so long as the conceptual structure of the event remained consistent—for example, when both languages expressed the agent before the patient [3]. The finding suggests that abstract event-based representations, rather than syntactic form per se, may serve as the basis for cross-language structural alignment.

In addition to word order and thematic alignment, typological distance has emerged as a further complicating factor. The majority of previous studies have focused on Indo-European language pairs, with limited investigation into structurally distant

combinations like Chinese and English. These languages differ markedly in morpho-syntactic structure, word order flexibility, and thematic role expression. While some studies have suggested that priming can still occur across such distances, the evidence remains sparse and methodologically heterogeneous [9][10]. Understanding how syntactic priming operates across typologically distant languages is crucial for testing the limits of shared structural representations and for evaluating the universality of priming effects across diverse linguistic systems.

Against this backdrop, the current review seeks to address the question: What factors influence syntactic priming across languages, and how do they interact to support shared representations in bilinguals? In particular, this review will examine three inter-related strands of evidence: (1) whether word order similarity enhances or constrains priming; (2) how thematic alignment and event structure facilitate cross-linguistic syntactic transfer; and (3) the extent to which typological distance affects the strength and reliability of priming effects. These core dimensions will be supplemented by a fourth section discussing additional moderators such as lexical repetition, L2 proficiency, and interactional context. By systematically analyzing the factors and conditions under which cross-linguistic syntactic priming occurs, this review aims to clarify whether bilinguals possess shared syntactic representations—and, if so, to delineate the specific linguistic, cognitive, and contextual conditions under which such alignment is most likely to arise, be maintained, and generalize across language pairs.

2 Factors

2.1 How Word Order Similarity Shapes Cross-Linguistic Syntactic Priming

Loebell and Bock first proposed the idea that word order similarity plays a central role in cross-linguistic syntactic priming [6]. Their foundational work was grounded in the residual activation theory, which assumes that syntactic representations recently used in one language can remain activated and influence subsequent production—even in another language—provided there is sufficient structural overlap. And they conducted an experiment to assess this hypothesis in which German–English bilinguals heard or produced prime sentences with either prepositional object (PO) or double object (DO) constructions in English and then were asked to describe pictures in German. Their results showed robust priming when both languages shared similar word order structures (e.g., in datives), but the effect diminished for passives, where the syntactic surface differed. These findings led to the hypothesis that surface component order serves as a key mediator of priming effects in bilinguals, particularly for constructs like datives and passives. This experimental paradigm has since been adopted and refined by subsequent researchers, who explored similar structural alignments across a variety of bilingual populations. Subsequent research has provided empirical support for this claim. For example, Schoonbaert et al. demonstrated that Dutch–English bilinguals exhibited stronger priming effects when the word order of the prime and target matched, particularly DO and PO constructions [5]. Similarly, Bernolet et al. found that such alignment effects were even stronger in high-proficiency bilinguals, suggesting that surface-level

alignment may serve as a gateway to more abstract syntactic integration [2]. These findings provided early confirmation that structural congruence enhances the likelihood of syntactic alignment, particularly during early stages of L2 acquisition or when processing speed is limited.

However, the need for superficial similarity has been questioned by studies of typologically distinct language pairs. One of the earliest studies to challenge the sufficiency of word order alignment was conducted by Shin and Christianson, who observed robust priming effects in Korean–English bilinguals for relative clauses, despite the two languages differing drastically in linear order [7]. They suggested that event structure and thematic roles might form the core of shared syntactic representations, rather than surface forms alone. Building on this, van Dijk and Unsworth showed that Dutch–Turkish bilingual children could be primed across mismatched structures, indicating the involvement of deeper alignment beyond linear word order [8]. Compared to earlier studies that emphasized word order similarity, these findings may reflect key differences in language combinations, task designs, and participant populations [6]. For instance, while Loebell and Bock used closely related Indo-European languages and elicited production using picture description tasks, Shin and Christianson examined typologically distant languages and tested comprehension-based priming. Furthermore, studies showing robust priming across dissimilar structures often involve highly proficient or early bilinguals, suggesting that with sufficient exposure and representational integration, bilinguals may rely less on surface forms and more on deeper semantic or structural mappings.

A shift in the theoretical perspective regarding the importance of word order similarity in cross-linguistic syntactic priming also resonated with neurocognitive findings. A notable example comes from Arnett, Chang, Michaelov, and Bergen, who used bilingual language models to simulate priming effects and observed early convergence of syntactic patterns across languages, regardless of strict surface word order [11]. Their study showed that word order agreement facilitates semantic integration (indexing by lowering N400 amplitude) rather than reflecting strict syntactic overlap. These results support a hybrid interpretation in which surface order helps process fluency, but priming is ultimately driven by a more abstract shared representation across languages.

In summary, while word order similarity was initially considered a necessary condition for cross-linguistic syntactic guidance, later evidence suggests that it functions more as a facilitator than a prerequisite. The emergence of guidance across word order mismatches suggests that abstract syntactic and semantic representations play a greater role in bilingual structural alignment than previously assumed.

2.2 The Role of Thematic Alignment and Event Structure in Cross-Linguistic Priming

Building on challenges to the word-order account, a complementary line of research has explored whether thematic alignment and shared event structure—rather than surface syntax—might be the primary basis for syntactic priming. It is generally accepted that thematic alignment and event structure are often intertwined in bilingual sentence processing, while they are conceptually distinct. Thematic alignment involves how

these roles are mapped onto syntactic positions in a sentence—whereas event structure refers to a speaker’s mental representation of an action or event—such as who is doing what to whom. In many studies on cross-linguistic priming, these two levels of representation co-occur: speakers often rely on stable event schemas to assign grammatical roles, especially when syntactic templates diverge across languages. For this reason, recent research has approached them as interconnected semantic underpinnings of structural priming.

The hypothesis that syntactic priming may be driven by underlying thematic alignment and event structure rather than surface syntax was first systematically advanced by Bock and Griffin [12]. They argued that sentence production is influenced by event conceptualization, the speaker’s mental representation of who is doing what to whom, before syntactic formation begins. To this end, they employed an immediate recall paradigm in which participants first heard a prime sentence describing a transitive event and then were shown an unrelated picture and asked to describe it. Crucially, priming effects emerged even when the prime and target used different surface forms, suggesting that speakers were reusing abstract event-based representations rather than simply mimicking surface word order. This view supports models based on conceptual structure, which predict that cross-language priming should occur when the thematic role mappings (e.g., agent–patient relations) are consistent, even if the syntactic realization differs.

Building on this, subsequent studies have further examined whether thematic alignment and event structure can account for priming effects. For instance, Ziegler and Snedeker, who found that even when English and Mandarin differed in syntactic realization (e.g., canonical passive forms), participants still exhibited priming effects when the thematic structure of the prime and target matched [3]. Similarly, Pinheiro de Angeli and Mota showed that as few as two prime exposures were sufficient to elicit passive-voice priming during comprehension in Portuguese–English late bilinguals [13]. Taken together, these findings suggest that thematic-role mapping can exert a robust influence on syntactic choices even when structural overlap is limited or input is minimal, reinforcing earlier claims about the automaticity of thematic alignment.

Lately, neurocognitive research has further supported this claim. Zaccarella and Friederici used fMRI to examine how thematic roles influence sentence production, showing that the left angular gyrus and posterior middle temporal gyrus associated with semantic processing were more active when event structure had to be computed across mismatched syntactic forms [14]. This supports the assumption that event conceptualization precedes structure building and may serve as the primary anchor for cross-linguistic alignment.

Importantly, thematic alignment and event structure are not limited to typologically similar languages. Even in asymmetrical language pairs, where syntactic realization diverges sharply, cross-linguistic priming can still occur—provided that core thematic roles are preserved. thematic alignment hypothesis also helps explain asymmetries in priming directionality and structural robustness. For instance, Wang and Zhang found that Chinese–English bilinguals were more likely to be primed in structures that maintained role continuity across languages (e.g., subject-to-agent mappings), while priming weakened when argument order violated canonical thematic expectations [15]. This

suggests that cross-linguistic alignment at the semantic level is sensitive not just to structure, but to the mapping between grammatical and conceptual roles.

In sum, thematic alignment and event structure offer a meaning-based explanation of syntactic priming that complements structural explanations. Especially in typologically distant bilinguals, the abstract conceptual layer might be more stable and influential than surface grammar.

2.3 How Typological Distance Shapes Cross-Linguistic Syntactic Priming

In addition to the above two factors, typological distance is also worth exploring. The influence of typological distance on syntactic priming was first proposed in response to conflicting findings about the reliability of priming across structurally dissimilar languages. Researchers such as Nicoladis and Velegrakis emphasized that language pairs with greater grammatical differences may rely less on shared syntactic nodes and more on conceptual or thematic mappings [16]. Based on their structural priming experiments with speakers of Dutch and French—two languages differing in morphosyntactic features—they observed reduced priming effects when structural overlap was minimal, suggesting that typological similarity plays a facilitative role in syntactic alignment. This prompted the hypothesis that the greater the typological gap, the weaker or more variable the priming effect would be—unless deeper semantic mechanisms compensate. These insights have since motivated further cross-linguistic investigations involving typologically distant languages. For example, Cai et al. compared syntactic priming in Chinese–English and Spanish–English bilinguals using relative clause structures [17]. They found significantly stronger and more consistent priming in Spanish–English speakers, whose languages share more syntactic features (e.g., SVO order, inflectional agreement), than in Chinese–English speakers, where structure realization differs more radically. This suggests that structural compatibility at the typological level may facilitate alignment. Similarly, Serratrice (2022) examined priming effects across typologically distinct language pairs and found that while alignment was observed in both, the magnitude was greater in languages with higher structural overlap [18]. Taken together, these findings underscore that the typological relatedness between a bilingual's two languages can modulate the strength and consistency of cross-linguistic priming.

However, not all findings confirm a linear relationship. In a meta-analytic synthesis, Ferreira et al. argued that typological distance interacts with learner-relater factors, especially proficiency level and amount of exposure [19]. For example, early bilinguals who acquire both languages in naturalistic settings from a young age, often develop integrated syntactic representations even for typologically distant languages. In contrast, late bilinguals tend to rely more on translation equivalents or conceptual mediation, which may bypass structural alignment. Similarly, Liao and Xu found that Chinese–English bilinguals who had studied abroad showed stronger priming effects in passive constructions than those with limited immersion experience [20]. This suggests that rich and sustained input can attenuate the influence of typological divergence, enabling more robust cross-linguistic alignment.

Neurocognitive research adds further nuance. Rodríguez-Fornells et al. found that when Spanish–Basque bilinguals (typologically divergent) engaged in priming tasks, greater activation was observed in cognitive control regions, suggesting that structural integration across distant grammars requires more executive processing [21]. In contrast, Spanish–Catalan bilinguals showed more automatized activation patterns. These findings point to the fact that there are increased processing demands when navigating syntactic mappings between typologically distant systems.

In conclusion, typological distance constitutes a critical factor in shaping cross-linguistic syntactic priming. It does not determine whether priming can occur, but rather modulates its efficiency, consistency, and underlying cognitive demands. Therefore, this factor can help explain certain patterns in cross-linguistic syntactic priming and future studies should continue to investigate how typological distance interacts with bilingual experience and cognitive adaptation mechanisms to influence structure transfer.

2.4 Other Moderating Factors in Cross-Linguistic Syntactic Priming

Beyond word order, thematic alignment, and typological similarity, researchers have identified several additional factors that significantly modulate the likelihood and strength of syntactic priming across languages. These moderators do not directly define structural alignment but interact with processing patterns to shape priming effects in nuanced ways.

One of the most widely studied of these is the lexical boost effect, first formalized in bilingual contexts by Schoonbaert et al. [5]. This effect refers to that when the prime and target sentences share the same main verb the priming will be enhanced. While initially viewed as a short-term memory artifact, newer evidence—such as that from Wei and Chen—suggests that lexical overlap may activate not only specific syntactic frames but also event structures associated with those verbs, thereby reinforcing syntactic alignment [22]. This aligns with connectionist models of bilingual production, where form–meaning pairings are reinforced through co-activation.

Another key factor is L2 proficiency, which has consistently been shown to moderate priming strength. Ye (2024) found that highly proficient bilinguals exhibit more abstract, cross-language syntactic integration, while low-proficiency speakers rely more on lexical repetition or direct transfer [23]. In recent longitudinal work, Y Heieh showed that as Chinese–English bilinguals progressed through academic immersion, their priming effects shifted from verb-driven to structure-driven, supporting the idea that proficiency modulates the representational depth of syntactic forms [24].

Task modality is another underappreciated moderator. Recent classroom-based research further supports the role of ecological context. Zhou and Zhao found that narrative-based priming tasks conducted in interactive L2 classrooms elicited stronger alignment effects than controlled picture-description tasks [25]. Moreover, dialogue-based paradigms, especially those involving confederates or naturalistic interaction, tend to yield more robust and persistent priming, possibly due to increased alignment pressure in communicative settings.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the effects of syntactic priming are shaped by a constellation of interacting variables, and that any comprehensive account must move beyond strictly structural or lexical explanations. Beyond these well-established factors, emerging research points to a number of underexplored influences on syntactic priming. For instance, speaker-related variables such as confidence, language dominance, and communicative intent may subtly modulate syntactic choices. Social identity and discourse genre—for example, whether a speaker is narrating a story or giving instructions—could also shape the extent and nature of priming. While these dimensions have received limited empirical attention, they represent promising directions for future inquiry into the broader ecology of bilingual language processing.

3 Conclusion and Future Study

This review aims to synthesize recent findings about what factors influence syntactic priming across languages, with a particular focus on bilingual speakers, involving typologically diverse language systems. Provides evidence that cross-linguistic syntactic priming is not a phenomenon driven solely by surface-level structural similarity. Instead, it is composed of a range of factors, including word order consistency, thematic role consistency, typological distance, and a range of personal and contextual moderators, such as lexical overlap, linguistic competence, and task format. These results highlight the multifaceted nature of bilingual syntactic representations, supporting models that emphasize the interplay between syntactic, semantic, and conceptual systems.

The significance of this review lies in its contribution to a more nuanced understanding of how bilingual minds process and align grammatical structures. By comparing findings across language pairs that vary in typological distance and word order, the review helps clarify the boundary conditions of structural priming and the conditions under which shared syntactic representations emerge. This has implications for broader theories of bilingualism and language learning, including those concerning transfer, language dominance, and structural integration. In applied terms, these findings may inform second language pedagogy and clinical assessments, especially in bilingual children and heritage speakers.

Nonetheless, several limitations persist in the current literature. First, a substantial portion of studies still focuses on Indo-European language pairs, limiting generalizability to typologically distinct combinations like Chinese–English or Turkish–Dutch. Second, most experiments prioritize production tasks, while comprehension, interactional dialogue, and neurophysiological correlates remain underexplored. Finally, few studies systematically compare early vs. late bilinguals within matched paradigms, making it difficult to draw developmental inferences about how shared syntax evolves over time and across proficiency levels.

Future research should address these gaps through multi-paradigm experimental designs that integrate production, comprehension, and neurocognitive measures (e.g., ERP, fMRI) in the same participant group. For instance, investigating Chinese–English bilinguals using passive constructions across modalities could reveal whether processing asymmetries are syntactic or semantic in nature. Additionally, studies could

explore how bilinguals adapt syntactic alignment in multilingual discourse contexts, where code-switching or audience design might modulate priming strength. Cross-task comparisons—e.g., picture description vs. confederate interaction—would further illuminate how social cognition interfaces with grammatical planning. Finally, corpus-informed priming models may help assess whether frequency-based constraints interact with typological expectations in shaping bilingual syntax.

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