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Constructions with crossed syntactic dependencies show elevated lexical cohesion: The compensatory collocation hypothesis

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Natural languages avoid syntactic structures with crossed syntactic dependencies. To the extent that such structures nonetheless occur, they have been explained as the result of competing motivations, such as dependency length minimization, the facilitation of incremental language processing, or the preservation of the given-before-new principle. This paper discusses a construction from English for which these explanations do not hold. In sentences such as *He has written a good enough story to attract attention*, dependency length is not minimized, incremental processing is not at issue, and alternative syntactic patterns allow the same ordering of given and new information. This paper aims to identify a different motivating factor. It advances the compensatory collocation hypothesis, which states that when speakers choose a non-projective structure, they tend to attenuate the processing costs for the hearer by choosing lexical items that are semantically cohesive. Data from the COHA substantiates this idea. Compared to alternative constructions with a projective syntactic structure, examples with crossed dependencies exhibit word combinations with relatively higher collocational strength.