Learners’ harmonic preferences in head ordering are modulated by lexical retrieval difficulty

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Cross-linguistic studies have found that some syntactic properties (co-) occur more frequently than expected by chance, referred to as language universals. Their nature is a fundamental question in linguistics as it is widely assumed that language universals originate in individual biases in language acquisition or processing. Whether these biases are linguistic-specific or domain-general remains an open question. Here, we tested a well-known cross-linguistic preference for harmonic word orders across adpositional phrases and simple transitive sentences using a miniature artificial language paradigm. We found this correlation is modulated by lexical retrieval difficulty, suggesting that it is subject to domain-general constraints.