Ling 869: Understanding and Discourse
Ellen Lau & Alexander Williams, 3 September 2015

Syllabus

Class info
Thursdays 2:00–4:30, 3416 MMH Wimbledon

Teacher info
Ellen Lau, 3416 MMH, ellenlau
Alexander Williams, 1401 Marie Mount Hall, alxndrw

Office hours
By appointment

Topic
Our topic is the process of understanding speakers and discourses, viewed from a psycho- and neurolinguistic perspective. We will focus on cases where the expression a speaker uses does not uniquely determine what she means—such as pronominal and descriptive anaphora, polysemy, so-called coercion, metonymic and deferred reference, irony, illusions—and especially in how the representation of prior discourse subserves comprehension in these cases, particularly with anaphora.

Requirements
(a) You are expected to participate very actively and do the reading assignments ahead of time, and be fully ready to discuss them in class. We want this to be a real seminar, where your questions are the flesh of the course.

(b) You will lead a 20-40 minute discussion of a set of papers, possibly singleton. Alternatively, you can do two such presentations with a partner.

(c) We will use the final session (and perhaps a bit of the penultimate session) for very brief presentations of your final project. The presentation should be similar a poster presentation, with a handout in place of the poster: 7 ± 2 minutes for exposition, followed by 7 ± 2 minutes for questions.

Paper
Full-credit students must write a paper, due by 3:00pm on December 17. It can be in any of three genres:

(a) A short paper that develops a new idea for an experiment. Such papers should explicate the question which the experiment responds, and situate that question in its broader linguistic context.

(b) An essay introducing and explicating a novel problem. Here your primary goal should be to lay out the significance and the challenge of the problem; discovery of a solution is secondary.

(c) A critical discussion (not a summary!) of points made in one or more articles pertinent to the topics covered in class. Here the focus should be on laying out an argument in such a way that it can be understood and evaluated by someone who has not read the papers you are commenting on, and on making explicit connections with the concepts and arguments we have employed in class.
Proposal

A one-page proposal for your paper due in class on November 12. This should be a brief description of the topic you have chosen and a list of titles read and to be read. You are strongly encouraged to schedule appointments throughout the semester to discuss topic ideas or your work in progress.

Readings

Readings will be in the locker here:

files.ling.umd.edu/locker/Ling869-F15-UnderstandingAndDiscourse

N.B., ‘Ling’ not “LING”. The Library subfolder will contain a great mass of papers. Assigned readings will also be in the AssignedReadings subfolder.

Overview

(a) Representing what has been said

Sometimes the interpretation of what is said depends on structural features of what has been said, either directly (e.g., in agreement for gender or voice), or via relations between syntactic structure and the structure of the discourse (e.g., in resolving a pronoun to a prior subject).

How is memory for such structure encoded, and recalled across discourse?

i. Resolution of VP Ellipsis: voice of antecedent

(1) a. John was chided by Mary for his work on our project.
   b. (The whole office was aflutter. Everybody was worrying about whether that was the end of Mary’s rage.)
   c. And then the very next day Sue was / *did too.

ii. Resolution of definite reference

SYNTACTIC CATEGORY OF ANTECEDENT

(2) Ein lustiges Bübchen / *Junge lächelte als mit seiner
   a cheerful little.guy / *boy giggled as it with his
   Mutter spielte.
   mother played
   ‘A cheerful little guy giggled as he played with his mother.’

EFFECTS OF SYNTACTIC ROLE ON ‘ACCESIBILITY’

(3) a. The city council denied the protesters a permit
   b. because they feared violence. (they=council)
   c. because they advocated violence. (they=protesters)

(4) a. The protestors were denied a permit by the city council.
   b. because they feared violence. (they=protesters)
   c. because they advocated violence. (they=protesters)

(5) a. Freddy is a jerk. He ate the whole chicken.
   He didn’t even share any with Joey. So now Joey hates him.
   b. #Still he is constantly taunting Joey. I think he plans to starve him.
OTHER EFFECTS OF SYNTAX?

(6) The guitar player drove over to main stage.  
He brought *it/the guitar with him in *it/the vehicle.

(7) A German painted a picture and sold it to an American tourist. 
A German painter made a picture and sold it to an American tourist.  
A German who painted a picture sold it to an American tourist.

(8) He made a good profit.  
The painter made a good profit.

(b) Representing what is being said

How is memory searched in the resolution of indeterminacy, in its various forms? What are the routes and timing of the various processes, from identifying the expression to assigning an interpretation to the speaker?  
(‘Depth of processing’)

RESOLUTION OF REFERENT FOR PRONOUN OR DESCRIPTION

(9) The man was smiling for coffee.  
(10) He was smiling for coffee.

RESOLUTION OF ‘SENSE’ FOR ‘POLYSEMOUS’ EXPRESSIONS

(11) After we started Kafka I realized that Bohemia is heavy.

SMILING PEANUTS, HAM SANDWICHES AND STONE LIONS

(12) A peanut and a banana had taken a seat in Plato’s, next to the guy who always orders a ham sandwich.  
The peanut was smiling for coffee, but the ham sandwich looked like the stone lion outside.

IRONY ETC.

(13) Students love semantics because it’s so easy.

MOSES AND THE FLOOD’S DEAD SURVIVORS

(14) After the Flood Moses mourned the survivors he found on shore.
Some readings


Schweppe, J. (2013). Distance Effects in Number Agreement. Discourse Processes, 50(8), 531-556.


