

Ambiguity of reference and intention: Reverse engineering speaker meaning

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This talk considers the role of Questions Under Discussion (QUDs) in connecting content and form. Taking language comprehension to center on the listener's recovery of a speaker's intention, the listener's task can be said to involve the estimation of what a speaker would choose to talk about (what content is relevant) and how the speaker would choose to express that content (what form is appropriate). A series of psycholinguistic studies are presented that test how QUD modulates ambiguity resolution.

For coreference, consider the ambiguous pronoun in a passage like (1) where the QUD connecting the two sentences is also ambiguous. Story continuation and self-paced reading data show that pronoun interpretation is sensitive to explicit adjustments of comprehenders' beliefs about the QUD.

- (1) John passed the book to Bill. He saw a chapter that looked relevant.
 - a. [Why?] He_John saw the chapter and its relevance is the reason for the transfer
 - b. [What next?] He_Bill received the book and subsequently saw the relevant chapter.

Similar coreference effects arise for QUDs that are implicitly signalled via focus marking or manipulations of word order. Focus marking can also be shown to influence the recovery of speaker intention in other ways -- namely, for scalar implicature and presupposition projection in contexts with ambiguity regarding the QUD. Accent placement may favor a QUD that makes salient a set of focus alternatives, thereby facilitating the derivation of a scalar implicature (i.e., big but not enormous in (2b)). Since different QUDs may assume different common ground, accent placement can indirectly guide listeners' decisions about presuppositions (i.e., reduced projection of Bill argued with his boss in (3b)).

- (2) a. The museum of fine art is big. [general QUD, e.g., How is the city?]
b. The museum of fine art is BIG. [specific QUD, How is the museum?]
- (3) a. Bill doesn't regret arguing with his boss. [Does Bill regret arguing with his boss?]
b. Bill doesn't regret arguing with his BOSS. [Who is it that Bill doesn't regret arguing with?]

The last part of the talk targets another aspect of speakers' choice of what to talk about and their use of certain structures that determine where new information is expected. We measure what happens when information is largely predictable from context, both in clefts and in rhetorical questions. The results highlight the need for models that distinguish between the way comprehenders estimate the plausibility of content itself (situation predictability) and the decision by a speaker to talk about that content (utterance expectedness).