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Antecedent preferences of personal pronouns and anaphoric demonstratives in German in comprehension

Mi 17.00 – 17.30

We investigate the antecedent preferences of personal pronouns and anaphoric demonstratives in German, and propose that for comprehension, antecedent preferences for personal pronouns and anaphoric demonstratives are determined by two main factors: grammatical role and topicality.

In German, two pronominal systems are used for third person reference: the “er, sie, es” series, which we will here refer to as personal pronouns, and the “der, die, das” series, homophonous with the definite article system, which we will here term anaphoric demonstratives. Previous research on German (Bosch, Katz & Umbach, in press) has suggested that while there is a preference for personal pronouns to refer to the Subject of a preceding sentence, anaphoric demonstratives are more likely to refer to a Non-Subject, regardless of whether the antecedent occurs pre- or post-verbally. However, Bosch et al’s data refer primarily to production data; here we aim to extend their work by examining comprehension using two methodologies: a judgement task and a visual world study, currently in preparation.

Cross-linguistically, it seems likely that the antecedent preferences of demonstrative and personal pronouns vary. In a visual world experiment on Finnish, Kaiser and Trueswell (in press) found that personal pronouns were most strongly influenced by grammatical role in antecedent preference, while demonstrative pronouns were affected by topicality. They interpret their data to suggest that different levels of representation, either the syntactico-semantic level, or the comprehender’s model of the discourse, are accessed when processing different anaphors.

In contrast to Bosch, Katz and Umbach (in press), results from the judgement task suggest that different factors affect antecedent preferences for anaphoric demonstratives and personal pronouns. While the topicality of the antecedent appears to be the main factor affecting anaphoric demonstratives, as the demonstratives consistently preferred a non-topical (i.e. post-verbal) antecedent, both topicality and grammatical role were relevant for personal pronouns. These results support Kaiser and Trueswell’s (in press) proposal that different levels of representation are accessed by different types of anaphor, and provide evidence that factors affecting antecedent preferences do vary cross-linguistically. A visual world experiment is in preparation which seeks to confirm the findings of the judgement task, and provide more detailed data on the time course of anaphor resolution.

Bosch, P., Katz, G., and Umbach, C. (in press). The non-subject bias of German demonstrative pronouns. To appear in Monika Schwarz-Friesel, Manfred Consten, Mareile Knees (Ed.): *Anaphors in Texts*.

Kaiser, E., and Trueswell, J.C (in press). Investigating the interpretation of pronouns and demonstratives in Finnish: Going beyond Salience. To appear in E. Gibson & N. Pearlmuter (eds), *The processing and acquisition of reference*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press