The Influence of Discourse Information on Human Syntactic Ambiguity Resolution

This talk revisits an old debate in psycholinguistics concerning the degree of separation between the syntactic and semantic/discourse modules of the human sentence processor. Using a more sensitive methodology than previous studies, we find evidence for syntax-first behaviour in reading, whereby a (possibly incorrect) structure of a temporarily ambiguous sentence is first suggested by the syntactic module, and later updated by semantic and discourse information. Unlike earlier work, which primarily concentrated on syntactic difficulties, we also manipulate the strength of the semantic inferences. Interestingly, although discourse cues requiring 'hard' semantic inferences take longer to process than those associated with 'easy' inferences, we find that readers nonetheless eagerly make use of this difficult-to-process discourse information.