On the syntax-semantics interface and the dynamics of discourse: A psycholinguistic investigation

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One of the fundamental questions underlying theories of language production and comprehension concerns referent-tracking, including (i) who speakers will talk about next and (ii) with what kind of referring expression (e.g. pronoun vs. name). According to Arnold (2008), referents’ predictability/likelihood-of-mention is connected to their cognitive accessibility and influenced by multiple factors, including both syntax and semantics. She suggests that predictability is connected to choice of referring expression, with reduced referring expressions like pronouns preferentially used for highly predictable referents. In contrast, others separate syntax and semantics: Fukumura & van Gompel (2010) suggest that (i) semantic factors influence likelihood-of-mention/predictability, whereas (ii) syntactic role determines accessibility and choice of referring expression (cf. Kehler et al. 2008). To take step towards resolving this conflict and to better understand how syntactic and semantic information modulate discourse flow and choice of referring expressions, we conducted a series of psycholinguistic experiments on English as well as French, a language with a more complex anaphoric paradigm than English. Our results reveal that likelihood-of-mention is influenced by a sophisticated interplay of syntax and semantics. It would be an oversimplification to say that a particular syntactic or thematic role is consistently correlated with increased likelihood-of-mention. Rather, what’s important is the mapping between syntax and semantics (e.g. consequences of syntactically ‘demoting’ a thematically-prominent entity by means of passivization). Further evidence against a strict separation of syntactic and semantic information in this domain comes from the French data: Rather than viewing likelihood-of-mention as a semantic phenomenon that is entirely distinct from the syntactic factors guiding choice of referring expression, we find a bidirectional relation (see also Rohde 2008) between choice of referring expression and the semantic effects that modulate likelihood of mention.