Newcastle/Northumbria Joint Linguistics and Language Sciences Research Day

Friday, 13 January 2012
Sutherland Building, Boardroom 1

9.00-9.15  Opening/Coffee

**Session 1 (Chair: Richard Waltereit)**

9.15-9.45  Ewa Dabrowska and James Street (Northumbria)
9.45-10.15 Clare Wright, Martha Young-Scholten and Walid Kahoul (Newcastle)
10.15-10.45 Paul Engelhardt (Northumbria)

10.45-11.00  Coffee

**Session 2 (Chair: Kenny Coventry)**

11.00-11.30  Enas El-Sadek Kilany (Newcastle)
11.30-12.00  Debra Griffiths and Kenny Coventry (Northumbria)
12.00-12.30  Christos Salis (Newcastle)

12.30-1.30  Lunch

**Session 3 (Chair: Ewa Dabrowska)**

1.30-2.00  Kenny Coventry (Northumbria)
2.00-2.30  Cristina Dye (Newcastle)
2.30-3.00  Paul Carley (Northumbria)

3.00-3.15  Coffee

**Session 4 (Chair: Clare Wright)**

3.15-3.45  Phillip Wallage (Northumbria) and Wim van der Wurff (Newcastle)
3.45-4.15  James Street (Northumbria)
4.15-4.45  Richard Waltereit (Newcastle)

The Sutherland Building is on the corner of College Street and Northumberland Road (number 32 on the campus map [http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/static/5007/mapJune09.pdf](http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/static/5007/mapJune09.pdf)).

Join us for a drink at the Carriage (near Jesmond Metro Station) at the end of the day.
Abstracts

9.15-9.45
Ewa Dabrowska (Linguistics, Northumbria) and James Street (Linguistics, Northumbria)
(Non)Convergence in L1 and L2 acquisition: A usage-based perspective

The conventional wisdom in language acquisition research is that first language acquisition is uniformly successful, with all learners converging relatively rapidly on the same grammar, while L2A is more variable, with most learners failing to attain native-like competence. This paper presents the results of two experimental studies which challenge this conventional wisdom, and discusses their implications from a CL perspective.

Study 1 tested the comprehension of passives and two types of sentences with quantifiers by high academic attainment (HAA) and low academic attainment (LAA) native and non-native speakers. Both HAA groups were at ceiling on all constructions. The LAA participants were also at ceiling on the control condition (active transitives), showing that they had understood the task, were cooperative, etc., but performed significantly less well than the HAA groups on passives and on quantifiers. Surprisingly, the LAA non-native speakers outperformed the LAA natives.

Study 2 used the same grammatical comprehension test and also tested vocabulary and non-verbal IQ. There were significant correlations between vocabulary size and comprehension on all three experimental sentence types; moreover, vocabulary was a much better predictor of grammatical comprehension than native v. non-native speaker status. Since vocabulary can be viewed as a proxy for language experience, this finding confirms the usage-based prediction that grammatical mastery is a function of entrenchment. It is also consistent with the constructivist view that grammatical constructions are form-meaning pairings just like lexical items, and hence similar cognitive mechanisms are responsible for the acquisition of both. Non-verbal IQ had a different effect on different constructions and interacted in interesting ways with native speaker status. This corroborates earlier research suggesting that the acquisition of different constructions may depend on a slightly different constellation of cognitive abilities.

9.45-10.15
Clare Wright, Martha Young-Scholten and Walid Kahoul (ECLS, Newcastle)
Mental representations and language processing in SLA

Our SLA research at Newcastle currently focuses on the interface between acquisition of morphosyntax and non-linguistic factors such as levels of literacy, and individual processing constraints (evidenced in memory tasks or eye-tracking tests). Young-Scholten’s work on low-literate immigrant adults explores the relationship between morphosyntactic and reading development. Wright’s work on the role of working memory in longitudinal development of oral proficiency investigates task effects on language production, highlighting differences in narrative vs question production tasks. The main focus on the presentation is a current study by Kahoul looking at how eye-tracking can provide insights
into the mental representations and processing mechanisms underlying perception of English past tense and verbal agreement morphology in SLA. Using a computerized picture-choice test, eye movements of participants were monitored to investigate their sensitivity to number, person and tense information inherent in English inflected verbs. The performance of non-native participants was then evaluated in the light of data collected from a group of English native speakers. The results show that second language learners of English do not develop a native-like sensitivity to verbal morphology.

10.15-10.45
Paul Engelhardt (CoCo, Northumbria), Ş. Barış Demiral (University of Washington), and Fernanda Ferreira (University of South Carolina)
**Over-specified referring expressions impair comprehension: An ERP study**

Speakers often include extra information when producing referring expressions, which is inconsistent with the Maxim of Quantity (Grice, 1975). In this study, we investigated how comprehension is affected by unnecessary information. The literature is mixed: some studies have found that extra information facilitates comprehension and others reported impairments. We used an attentional-cueing paradigm to assess how quickly participants could orient attention to an object upon hearing a referring expression, such as the red square. If there are two squares differing in color, then the modifier is required. However, if there is only one (red) square, then the modifier is unnecessary. We also recorded event-related potentials (ERPs) in order to investigate online processing. Reaction times were significantly longer for referring expressions that contained extra information, and ERPs revealed a centroparietal negativity (N400) that emerged approximately 200-300ms after modifier onset. We conclude that referring expressions with an unnecessary pre-nominal modifier impair comprehension performance

11.00-11.30
Enas El-Sadek Kilany (English, Newcastle)
**Explicature and Misunderstanding in Relevance Theory**

Relevance Theory is presented by Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) as an original approach to human communication and cognition which, they claimed, can account for aspects of communication in a way that previous accounts failed to do. They strongly claim that their proposed presumption of relevance is strong and powerful enough to guarantee successful communication. However, a noticeable aspect of Relevance Theory is the absence of any in-depth analysis of communicative misunderstandings.

This study questions the validity of Relevance Theory in accounting for misunderstandings. It theoretically examines whether the theory in its current formulation could account for misunderstandings and why they occur in spite of the guarantee of successful communication that Relevance Theory presents. Focusing on the inherent notions presented in the theory such as relevance and explicatures, findings of the theoretical analysis are employed to examine real-life instances of communicative misunderstandings to verify the theoretical results. The analysis reveals that Relevance Theory in its current
formulation does not properly represent misunderstanding or provide a viable framework for explaining the cognitive processes that lead to its occurrence. This study suggests the need to reformulate a number of aspects of the theory by which it can account for misunderstandings, such as adopting a more subjective perspective of relevance and all its related notions instead of the objective perspective which the theory adopts.

11.30-12.00
Debra Griffiths (CoCo, Northumbria) and Kenny Coventry (CoCo, Northumbria)
Common perceptual parameters underlying demonstrative usage across languages

Spatial demonstratives (e.g. this/that) are among the most frequent terms in all languages, philologically emerging as the earliest traceable words [1, 2]. They also appear early in child language acquisition [3], often co-occurring with deictic pointing. Given the importance of these lexical items, it is perhaps surprising that demonstrative systems exhibit considerable cross-linguistic variation. Whilst just over 50% of the world’s languages make a binary proximal/distal contrast [4] many languages make additional distinctions, including whether or not the object referred to is owned by the speaker, is visible, or familiar.

Given the diversity in the world’s demonstrative systems, one can ask if there is nevertheless a set of common perceptual parameters underlying demonstrative usage in all languages. If so, then distinctions lexicalised in other languages, should affect demonstrative use in English, where such parameters are not lexicalised. In three experiments we tested directly whether ownership, familiarity, and visibility affect demonstrative use in English.

We found that lexicalisation is not the only predictor of use of demonstratives, and that distinctions lexicalised in some languages also influence the use of demonstratives in English. The results suggest that there may be a common set of parameters that underpin demonstratives across languages.

12.00-12.30
Christos Salis (ECLS, Newcastle)
Short-term memory treatment: Patterns of learning and generalisation to sentence comprehension in a person with aphasia

Auditory-verbal short-term memory deficits (STM) are prevalent in aphasia and can contribute to sentence comprehension deficits. This study investigated the effectiveness of a novel STM treatment in improving STM (measured with span tasks) and sentence comprehension (measured with the Token Test and the Test for the Reception of Grammar, TROG) in a person with severe aphasia. STM was trained using listening span tasks of serial word recognition. No other language or sentence comprehension skills were trained.

Following treatment, STM abilities improved (listening span, forward digit span). There was also evidence of generalisation to untreated sentence comprehension (only on the TROG). Backward digit span, phonological processing and single word comprehension did not improve. Improvements in sentence comprehension may have resulted from resilience to rapid decay of linguistic representations within sentences (words and phrases). This in turn facilitated comprehension.
1.30-2.00
Kenny Coventry (CoCo, Northumbria)
Analysing Spatial Discourse: Visual Scaffolds, Attention and Spatial Language

How people describe spatial arrangements is well documented at the level of the single word and sentence, but at the level of discourse spatial description strategies are not well understood. In this talk, I describe a series of studies examining how spatial description unfolds across sentences, and how the type of language chosen for spatial description is affected by context and the visual array being described. German participants described complex scenes containing 3D doll’s house furniture across a range of array types (e.g. functional vs. non-functional arrays) and instructional contexts (e.g. “the array shows a second hand furniture showroom”; “the array is Mr. Meyer’s living room”). Knowledge about the visual scene and instructional context both had an impact on spatial descriptions, but separately, and at different levels of granularity. The influence of visual context was particularly striking, with marked differences across conditions at multiple levels of information packaging – descriptive trajectories (i.e. the order in which the objects in the spatial array were described), amount of detail, and explicit mention of atypical object orientation. The importance of visual context as a means of accessing context frames in common ground is discussed.

References


2.00-2.30
Cristina Dye (English, Newcastle)
Representation and processing of complex linguistics forms in adolescent boys vs. girls

This study investigates the storage vs. composition of inflected forms. Thirty-five children were tested on the production of regular and irregular past-tense forms. Storage (vs. composition) was examined by probing for past-tense frequency effects and imageability effects, both of which are diagnostics for storage, while controlling for several confounding factors. All children showed evidence of storage (frequency or imageability effects) for irregular inflected forms, which must depend on stored representations. In contrast, for regular forms, which could be either stored or composed, only girls showed evidence of storage. This pattern is similar to that found in previously-acquired adult data from the same task, with the notable exception that sex and age affect which factors influence storage: only in females, imageability appears to play a larger role in children and frequency in adults. Overall, the results suggest that sex (male vs. female), frequency and imageability, affect representation of these forms.
This presentation reports some of the findings from language attitudes research carried out into the perception and social evaluation of the use of the TRAP and PALM phonetic variables in words of the BATH lexical set.

Traditional descriptions of Received Pronunciation (RP), a putative pronunciation standard, have not considered the use of the TRAP vowel in BATH words to be a feature of the RP accent, a fact which reflects the accent’s southern origins. This consensus, however, has in recent years been challenged by Clive Upton, pronunciation consultant to Oxford English Dictionaries and British author of the Oxford Dictionary of Pronunciation for Current English (2003), who argues that since ‘RP is not to be considered an exclusively southern-British phenomenon’ (2000: p.79), his redefinition of the RP accent to include, among other things, the use of the TRAP vowel in BATH words represents a type of pronunciation that is ‘unmarked and therefore regarded by the majority of native speakers as unexceptionable’ (ibid. p.81). Thus one of the aims of the present research was to use the techniques of language attitudes research to discover whether it is in fact the case that the use of the TRAP vowel in BATH words is ‘unmarked’ and that therefore the use of one vowel over another in this context has no evaluative consequences.

References


In this paper, we consider the question of what kinds of explanations should be given for puzzling phenomena in language - such as cases of apparently unnatural phonological classes (e.g. the consonants undergoing voicing through *rendaku* in Japanese), morphological meaning expressed through truncation (e.g. inanimate plurals in Sinhala) or puzzling entities in TMA systems (e.g. the past tense imperative in Dutch). The existence of such oddities might be taken to suggest that languages sometimes simply do odd things, resulting in exceptional phenomena. However, for each of the specific examples mentioned here, explanations have been put forward which would make them the result of ordinary diachronic processes (Hall 2010, Nitz & Nordhoff 2010, van der Wurff 2007). We will take a
close look at yet another puzzling phenomenon and try to show that this too can be understood as having very ordinary origins. Our data come from the polarity particles of English (yeah, yep, yes, aye, uh huh, mm, mhm; and no, nope, nah, unh unh, huh uh). We will tackle one particular aspect of the set of positive polarity particles: the co-existence in it of both yeah and yes. This could be interpreted as the outcome of an exceptional process of final consonant deletion operating on the form yes. However, we show that no process of this type needs to be assumed. Instead, we propose a new account for the alternation which makes it a perfectly ordinary example of historical change. Our findings therefore contribute to the growing body of evidence suggesting that puzzling linguistic facts should not be explained by appealing to odd synchronic rules (see e.g. Blevins 2004, Devos and van der Wal 2010, Youssef 2010).

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3.45-4.15
James Street (Northumbria) and Ewa Dąbrowska (Northumbria)
Lexically specific knowledge and individual differences in adult native speakers’ processing of the English passive

This paper provides experimental evidence for the role of lexically specific representations in the processing of passive sentences and considerable education-related differences in comprehension of the passive construction. The experiment measured high academic attainment (hereafter, HAA) and low academic attainment (hereafter, LAA) participants’ response time and decision accuracy using an online task which compared processing and comprehension of active and passive sentences containing verbs strongly associated with the passive and active constructions, as determined by collostructional analysis (see e.g., Gries & Stefanowitsch, 2004; Stefanowitsch & Gries, 2003). As predicted by usage-based accounts, participants’ performance was influenced by frequency (both groups processed actives faster than passives; the LAA participants also made significantly more errors on passive sentences) and lexical specificity (i.e., processing of passives was slower with verbs strongly associated with the active). Contra to proposals made by Dąbrowska & Street (2006), the results suggest that both HAA and LAA participants have verb-specific as well as verb-general representations, but that the latter are less well entrenched in LAA participants, resulting in less reliable performance. The results also show no evidence of a speed-accuracy trade-off, making alternative accounts of the results (e.g., those of two-stage processing models such as Townsend & Bever, 2001) problematic.

4.15-4.45
Richard Waltereit (Newcastle) and Ulrich Detges, LMU Munich
Moi, je ne sais pas vs. je ne sais pas, moi: French disjoint pronouns in the left vs. right periphery

Placement of one and the same item in the left as opposed to the right periphery of a sentence can produce characteristic differences in meaning. A case in point is Modern
French *moi, je ne sais pas* ‘[As for me,] I don’t know’ vs. *je ne sais pas, moi* ‘what do I know?’. In our paper, we will study such asymmetries of function against the backdrop of a theory of the left and right periphery in a universal perspective. We assume that this asymmetry is rooted in the linear unfolding of discourse. The left periphery anchors the upcoming sentence in foregoing discourse. By contrast, the right periphery is a locus for speaker’s comments on the completed sentence, suitable for fine-tuning the latter’s impact on the audience. Hence, it would seem that the left periphery mainly hosts *discourse-coherence* constructions (topicalization constructions, turn-taking devices etc.), whereas the right periphery has, above all, *modal and/or interpersonal* functions. However, we will show that this view is too simplistic and needs to be refined. Specifically, it will be shown that the functions of the LP are not necessarily motivated by requirements of discourse coherence; rather, they have to do with *anchoring*, in a wider sense, the upcoming sentence. Similarly, not all of the functions of the RP are modal and or interpersonal in nature; rather, they have to do with *re-negotiating* some aspect of the foregoing stretch of discourse. . This hypothesis and its theoretical implications will be spelled out in more detail for French disjoint pronouns, that is, a small set of grammatical elements with important discourse functions. Even though these functions have been extensively studied in the literature (e.g., Lambrecht 1994, Morel 2007, Carton 2009, Blasco-Dulbecco 2004, Cappeau 2004), the respective contributions of the left vs. the right periphery have never been systematically acknowledged. Based on an analysis of a Modern Spoken French corpus we will show that the discourse functions of the disjoint subject pronouns directly reflect the left-right asymmetry. Another aspect of this asymmetry which our inquiry will shed light on is the fact that discourse functions of subject pronouns in the left periphery tend to be relatively similar across languages whereas in the right periphery there is a notably greater degree of (language-specific) arbitrariness.