

KANAGAWA LECTURES IN PSYCHOLINGUISTICS

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THE DEVELOPING HISTORY OF PSYCHOLINGUISTICS

There have been in fact two major eras in which psycholinguistic interests have flourished, one historical and one modern. The first took place around the turn of the century, when the Leipzig psychologist Wilhelm Wundt was prepared to demonstrate that language could be explained on the basis of psychological principles. This was also a period in the developing history of the social sciences, when the newly emerging field of linguistics was prepared to exchange its older, Romanticist evaluation of language on cultural and aesthetic principles, for a more modern, *scientific* approach to language. The new Wundtian psychology offered this possibility, with a rigor and enthusiasm that only a new scientific discipline can offer. Many younger linguists were keen to import this new rigor and scientific vision to linguistic theory and research, and for a time psychological concerns were directly reflected in the emerging field of linguistics. After the devastating first war, there was a decline in the power and consequent influence of German intellectual life, and Wundtian cognitive psychology was correspondingly weakened in the attention it commanded, giving way to the newer aspirations of the powerfully emerging behaviorism.

A more recent rapprochement between psychology and linguistics takes place in the late 1950s, through the 1960s, and continues on today. For a time, linguistic theory fueled the engines of psycholinguistic enterprise, and specifically, the form of linguistic theory was the type of linguistics founded on the theoretical pattern of generative

transformational grammar. But this unity of purpose also faded after several decades of experimentation based on Chomskyan theory, leaving us now with a more balanced, and certainly a more eclectic view of what psycholinguistic theory should pursue in attempting to offer explanations for natural language.

This most recent history reflects the changing roles of linguistics and psychology vis-à-vis one another in the developing discipline of psycholinguistics. Basically, the most recent linguistic approach is one which takes information processing constraints into account. The "correctness" of a grammatical theory is no longer argued for, for theories can all be internally "correct"; it becomes a question of usefulness or compatibility of a grammatical system that is attuned to problems of psycholinguistic research. The problem of psychological validity is of course only a problem for those linguists who wish to make psychological claims about their theories and resultant grammars, and many may not wish to. But such psychological reality is a desideratum for any linguistic theory which truly wishes explanatory power about the nature of language. Such realistic theories of language thus describe our language knowledge and linguistic abilities in a way that incorporates performance abilities that are crucial to information processing tasks.

AMBIGUITY IN NATURAL LANGUAGE

Ambiguity means that a word has more than one meaning or that a sequence of words may allow more than one interpretation of the grammatical relationships between elements in the sentence. Usually we are unaware of vagueness and ambiguity at the semantic or structural levels, and many words in a language have more than one meaning. In fact, some very common words like **thing**, **do**, **go**, **run**, and **turn** have a great many meanings, measured in the dozens. The possibility of allowing more than one meaning is also true for syntactic formats. For example, a sentence like **The duke was drowned by the**

river is ambiguous because of the possible interpretations of the phrase **by the river** as either an Agent or a Location.

There are various types of ambiguity in natural language, including at least the following:

1. Lexical ambiguity: **The visitors enjoyed the port.**
2. Surface structure ambiguity: **Old men and women are advised to apply for their benefits.**
3. Deep structure ambiguity: **Cheating students will not be tolerated.**
4. Indirect Speech Acts: **Can you say that word over again?** (Contrast this with a question which is a Direct Speech Act, as for example, **Can you speak English?**)
5. Ambiguity in the Discourse Intention: Utterances like **Oh, I see your glass is empty** and **Gee, I'm on a diet** really have the meaning of **Shall I fill your glass up again?** and **No thanks, I really don't want any more to eat.**
6. Irony and Sarcasm in utterances like **You certainly seemed to enjoy that movie!**, **You're so modest!**, and **Great weather, eh?**
7. Idioms: **The young couple decided to BREAK THE ICE with their new neighbors.**
8. Metaphors: **The astronomers discovered a new BLACK HOLE while observing a STORM in the radiation BELT close the Pleiades.**

Psycholinguistic studies of ambiguity have been interested in whether we process all potential meanings for an ambiguity, only one, or only the most likely one. The results of such studies in the comprehension and processing of ambiguity suggest that we unconsciously consider multiple readings for ambiguities as we decide upon the correct interpretation. And we do this even in the presence of context. This appears to be true both for lexical ambiguity and syntactic ambiguity, although some of the specific strategies that we use for ambiguous

words and sentences are different.

AMBIGUITY IN THE LANGUAGE OF ADVERTISING

Advertising language commonly employs ambiguity in a conscious effort to capture the attention of the potential consumer scanning an advertisement. In fact, many advertisements use an ambiguous structure as the focal point of the advertisement as a way of both establishing positive rapport and initiating informational processing for the rest of the message. Advertising language is more task-driven than other forms of natural language, because the author of an advertisement attempts sell us something. The styles and creative concepts change, but the language of advertising is always intended to attract and hold our attention. The language of advertising is supposed to involve us, and one way of doing this is to have the reader (the potential consumer) complete the advertising message. The best place to do this is in the headline, because this is the most important element in ads; and many advertising headlines use ambiguity to catch our attention, to amuse us, to lure us into reading the remainder of the ad, and ultimately, into buying the product.

Intentional ambiguity draws the reader into a situation where two meanings are possible, where both interpretations are meant to be immediately obvious. Typically, the two readings are simple and constructed in such a way that the two meanings enhance the reader's view of the product being advertised. The reader of advertising copy is taken to be an active participant, and this is what makes this format so compelling as an initial attention-getting device. If the message itself has been pleasant or provocative, the role of conspirator in this verbal interaction may have positive consequences in the establishment of appropriate consumer attitudes toward the product advertised. When used in conversation, intentional ambiguity is normally an indicator of a joke, pun, riddle, double entendre or other sort of verbal play. These sorts of verbal play are normally observed between conver-

sational partners who are in a friendly relationship to one another. The use of this gambit in advertisements automatically puts the reader into an assumed relationship of solidarity with the advertiser, thus making the reader more apt to be influenced by the message of the advertisement.

In fact, the advertising use of ambiguity often does so with a humorous intent. This not only claims the attention of the reader, but also engages the reader in the puzzlesolving activity of processing both interpretations. It also attempts to involve the reader in an exchange of pleasantries, in an essentially one-sided replica of more normal conversational exchange. The ambiguities employed are thus usually pleasantly humorous, with one reading often suggesting the product or its virtues, as a friendly attention-getter. The obvious goal of such productive pleasantries in advertising must be to have the reader identify with the product in some positive fashion.

The majority of advertising gambits employ lexical ambiguity, employing slightly different variations of lexical ambiguity based on product name, general lexical ambiguity, lexical ambiguity based on idiom, lexical ambiguity based on sexual euphemisms, and phonological or orthographic distortions of individual lexical items or entire idioms. Some recent advertising gambits have shown increasing use of ambiguity resolution by visual context, where an ambiguous headline must be referred to the accompanying picture for resolution. In contrast, syntactic ambiguities in the language of advertising are relatively rare. Lexical ambiguity appears to be the most accessible to readers, the simplest to process, and the easiest to construct.

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