

Psycholinguistic Approaches to Meaning and Understanding across Languages

STUDIES IN THEORETICAL PSYCHOLINGUISTICS

Volume 44

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 Springer

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Foreword

At the first linguistics conference I attended as a student, one of the keynote speakers held forth on the syntactic analysis of English cleft sentences. During the discussion period, members of the audience questioned the grammaticality of one of the speaker's example sentences. There ensued a polite exchange of introspective judgments, which ended when the speaker declared that, be all as it may, the sentence in question was perfectly well-formed in his idiolect of English. Much to my surprise, this settled the matter straight away, and the discussion turned to more pressing issues.

I would have been surprised in any case, but what made the incident positively surreal, at least to my mind, was the fact that the speaker was Japanese and quite audibly not a native speaker of English.

From the 1960s onwards, the accepted methodology in theoretical linguistics was brazenly autobiographical. Based on edicts emanating from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, it was taken as writ that it is the linguist's job to probe his or her personal "competence". Even as a timid student during the Reagan era, I had the uncanny feeling that this wasn't so much a methodology as a recipe for nonsense, but it was the received view, and it took a while before its influence started to wane.

Things have definitely changed, and even if the autobio approach remains alive, it's kicking a lot less than it used to. It has become widely accepted that quantitative methods can be useful even to those of us whose core business is designing theories of language, and the chapters of this volume demonstrate, both separately and collectively, how fruitful quantitative methods can be, especially when wielded by researchers who know what they're doing.

The following chapters cover an impressive variety of semantic and pragmatic topics, ranging from reference and aspect to coordination and conversational implicatures, information structure, and speech reports. The experimental methods brought to bear are no less diverse, including as they do various kinds of questionnaire and corpus studies, self-paced reading, and eye tracking.

And there's more. One of the chief dogmas of generative linguistics used to be that all human languages are essentially the same. It was claimed in all earnestness that a Martian scientist visiting our planet would have to conclude that all Earthlings

speak the same language, save for the obvious fact that their lexicons diverge. Nowadays it stretches belief that even in the recent past this view was taken seriously, but it has been extraordinarily influential both within linguistics and without, and perhaps it goes some way to account for the fact that most studies in semantics and pragmatics, theoretical as well as experimental, have been about one and the same language, that is to say, English. (Another part of the explanation, I fear, is that language researchers are as lazy as the next person.) This, too, has begun to change. There is an increasing awareness that the interpretative systems even of closely related languages like English and German are different in many fascinating ways, and every single chapter in this volume attests to the importance of the plurilingual approach.

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Bart Geurts

Preface

The idea/plan for this book evolved during a 1-year (2010/2011) research project “Meaning and Understanding across Languages”, funded by the Centre for Advanced Study (CAS) at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters (see <http://www.cas.uio.no/research/1011acrosslanguages/index.php>) and headed by Cathrine Fabricius-Hansen. The editors and four other contributors (Bergljot Behrens, Oliver Bott, Lyn Frazier, and Torgrim Solstad) participated in the project, which brought together researchers representing different interests and disciplines: theoretical semantics and pragmatics, contrastive linguistics and psycholinguistics. Half of the chapters present collaborative results from that enterprise. We want to thank CAS for the wonderful time we spent there, and for enabling the publication of this book. We are also grateful to anonymous reviewers, whose comments on earlier versions of the individual papers have been extremely useful, and we thank Stig Oppedal for his efficient and conscientious proofreading.

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