Predictability and Planning in Reference Production

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Language form allows considerable variation along multiple dimensions, one of which is reference: speakers can select either explicit expressions or pronouns (The linguist vs. he), simple vs. modified expressions (The linguist vs. the German linguist), and pronunciations (prominent vs. reduced). It is generally assumed that these choices are driven by the information status of the speaker’s message. Is the referent known to the addressee? Predictable in context? Contrasting with something else in context? However, there is no comprehensive model of information status effects on language production.

In particular, the role of predictability on speaker choices is debated. While predictability is well-known to affect acoustic prominence, the mechanisms by which it does so are not well established. Moreover, while some authors claim that predictability also affects the use of pronouns (Arnold, 2001), others claim that it has no effect on the selection of referential forms (Fukumura & van Gompel, 2010; Kehler & Rohde, 2013).

This talk examines how predictability affects the selection of referential forms (e.g., pronouns vs. names). I argue that this question must be considered from the perspective of online language production mechanisms, because predictability could potentially influence reference production through three mechanisms: 1) Predictability may contribute to the information status conditions that make reduced forms pragmatically acceptable. 2) Predictability may speed production processing and/or modulate the cognitive load associated with utterance formulation, thereby freeing up the cognitive resources necessary to represent and use the discourse context. 3) Speakers may track the predictability of information from the listener’s perspective, which may affect their production choices via audience design mechanisms.

I review recent findings from my lab about the selection of pronouns vs. other forms. These findings suggest that a) predictability affects both the accessibility of information in the discourse representation, and b) the timecourse of message planning and utterance formulation. However, evidence for audience design effects is limited. Thus, predictability in discourse leads to multiple correlated effects, including the use of reduced expressions, increased fluency and the use of discourse connectors.