Language

Syntax and semantics

- Syntax: Rules that govern how words are assembled into sentences
- Semantics: The meaning of words and sentences
- Separate, but also related
  - Semantics can depend on syntactic information

Syntax

- Consider:
  1. Colorless green ideas sleep furiously
  2. Sleep green furiously ideas colorless
- 1 is syntactically well-formed
  - Words are organized correctly, by type
  - Even if it doesn’t make much sense
- 2 is not syntactically well-formed
  - And everyone agrees
  - Even if they haven’t seen it before

Semantics

- Meaning comes from words, but also comes from syntax
  1. The leopard killed the lion
  2. The lion killed the leopard
  3. The leopard was killed by the lion
  - was and by cue the object-verb-subject rule
Aphasia

“Yes... ah... Monday er... Dad and Peter H., and Dad... er... hospital... and ah... Wednesday... Wednesday, nine o’clock... and oh Thursday... ten o’clock, ah doctors... two... an’ doctors... and er teeth” (Broca’s aphasia)

“Boy, I’m sweating, I’m awful nervous, you know, once in a while I get caught up. I can’t mention the tarripoi, a month ago, quite a little, I’ve done a lot well, I impose a lot, while on the other hand, you know what I mean, I have to run around, look it over, trebin and all that sort of stuff.” (Wernicke’s aphasia)

Tan’s brain

While the man hunted the deer ran through the woods.

• Did the man hunt the deer?
• Did the deer run through the woods?

While Anna bathed the baby spit up on the bed.

• Did Anna bathe the baby?
• Did the baby spit up on the bed?

While Anna bathed the baby spit up on the bed.

• Example of a garden path sentence
• The parser runs into a dead end at spit
  – So the eyes pause on spit
• The parser has to backtrack
  – Detach the baby from While Anna bathed, start a new clause with it, attach spit
• What happens to the initial, incorrect meaning?
Lingering misinterpretations
(Christanson et al., 2001)

• Participants read sentences 1 at a time
  – Garden-path (While Anna bathed the baby)
  – Controls (While Anna bathed, the baby)
• After each, pressed space bar
  – The sentence disappeared
  – ½-sec later, a question appeared
    • Did Anna bathe the baby?
  – Participant answered yes or no
  – Then next sentence appeared

Lingering misinterpretations

• Yes (incorrect) answers:
  – Garden path: 57%
  – Control: 12%
• What happens to the initial, incorrect meaning?
  – It can stick around in working memory

Other types of ambiguity
(Mackay, 1966)

• He was bothered by the cold
  – Lexical ambiguity: Meaning of cold
• Hannibal sent troops over a week ago
  – Surface ambiguity: Syntactic role of over
• Visiting relatives can be a nuisance
  – Underlying ambiguity: Who’s doing what to whom

Two conjectures

(1) Writing contains many more ambiguities than the writer suspects
  – You know what meaning you intended
  – Your reader doesn’t have that context
(2) Lingering misinterpretations confuse the message

Human language

• Communicative:
  – Lets individuals/groups transmit information
• Arbitrary:
  – Word-meaning relationships are mostly random
  – Chair could have been gazortnik
• Structured:
  – Governed by rules
  – Syntactic and others

Human language

• Dynamic:
  – Language evolves
  – The lexicon, but also syntax
• Generative:
  – Words can be combined in a very large number of ways into sentences
  – And sounds into words, sentences into texts
Animal communication

- Communicative?
- Arbitrary?
- Structured?
- Dynamic?
- Generative?

Animal communication

- Structured?
  - No evidence that animal communication is governed by general rules
- Generative?
  - We each know about 75,000 words
    - ± a few tens of thousands
  - Washoe the chimp learned 130 ASL signs
    - After a lot of training