I. Administration

A. Reading for next week – Piantadosi
B. Questions?

II. The Ambiguity Aporia

A. Consider these theses:
   1. Ambiguity is a problem that should be avoided (Grice)
   2. Ambiguity is everywhere, in the form of lexical ambiguity, structural ambiguity (sentential and sub-sentential), scope ambiguity, and other forms
   3. There is very little evidence that we work to avoid ambiguity (Ferreira)
B. While not expressly inconsistent, these cannot all be maintained comfortably at one time. Which of these should we reject?

III. Wasow’s Response

A. Wasow reject A.1 – Grice is wrong to think that it is a problem to be avoided
B. He canvasses the work of Ferreira and his own work to demonstrate that when it comes to various situations in which we might expect to avoid ambiguity, there is little evidence we do (e.g., garden-path sentences)

IV. The Explanation?

A. Clearly ambiguity can be a problem, but in most cases it isn’t. What explains the fact that there is so much of it?
B. One response is Chomsky’s:
   1. Thinking about ambiguity in connection with communication
motivates the idea that ambiguity is a problem, a la Grice.

2. One way out is to deny that language is primarily a vehicle of communication – this removes the sense that the problems caused by ambiguity for communication is a fundamental one that must be addressed or avoided.

C. Wasow doesn’t wish to embrace Chomsky and reject the centrality of communication; rather, he follows Piantadosi and Levinson in suggesting that there is so much ambiguity because:

1. It is more efficient to reduce the complexity of words and the number of words that do more or less the same job.

2. Instead, reduce the number of words, increase the number of meanings per word, and rely on context to sort it all out.

3. Thus, “communication is more efficient if linguistic expression conveys only part of the intended meaning, thanks to the human ability to use context to infer what the speaker intends to communicate” (13).