

Beyond the sentence: Discourse structural effects on reference resolution

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Much of the psycho- and neurolinguistic research on reference to date has used short texts consisting of a context sentence and a target sentence as the object of study. This allows for careful control of contextual factors (word order, givenness, agentivity, number of referents, etc.), which is common practice in laboratory experiments. However, the use of minimal context comes at the expense of the naturalness of information transfer and it has various negative implications for theory building: (i) contexts with only two potential referents restrict hypothesis testing; (ii) higher-level discourse structural factors such as discourse topicality or perspective cannot be taken into account; (iii) reference as a phenomenon of common ground management between speakers and addressees is reduced to an artificial communication situation (the lab experiment).

This talk will reflect upon the limitations of many previous studies on reference resolution (my own included) and present research that (gradually) moves away from mini-texts towards more naturalistic contexts involving more elaborate referential spaces. In particular, it will discuss the role of discourse topicality and perspective taking (via evaluation) on the resolution of personal and demonstrative pronouns in German.