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Chunking below the phrase level and its implications for models of online comprehension

Abstract:

This presentation deals with processing units smaller than the multi-word-units typically considered in research on language chunks (e.g., at the end of the day, I don’t know) (Carrol & Conklin 2015; Mauranen 2009). It will start with a brief overview of different ways in which the chunk status of language strings of various sizes can be assessed in online language comprehension experiments (e.g., priming, self-paced reading paradigms, etc.). Next, drawing on my own research, I will present evidence suggesting that chunks below the size of three- or four-word units are cognitively real. Particular attention will be devoted to complex words (e.g., government) and collocations (e.g., vast majority).

This, taken together with other studies on linguistic chunks, will allow me to make a number of central statements: First, chunking must be seen as a phenomenon that occurs at multiple, hierarchically nested levels (viz. from morphology via the levels of lexical combinatorics and syntax up to discourse pragmatics). Second, initial evidence suggests that different chunking levels are strongly interdependent. For example, the “chunkedness” (i.e., chunk status, taken as a gradient property) of a complex word like helpful will depend heavily on the chunkedness of its constituent parts help- and -ful. Third, the need to accommodate these interdependencies poses new challenges in terms of theoretical modelling. For example, does on-line chunking at different levels proceed in parallel or sequentially? Is chunking across different levels influenced by the same variables (e.g., usage frequency, intonation, irregularity)? These and other theoretical questions call for a new generation of experimental studies exploring the interaction of chunks at different levels of linguistic analysis.

References:
