Research Seminar Series

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Mapping Conceptual and Semantic Composition during Real-Time Comprehension: The Case of Metonymy

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Date: 13 June 2016 (Monday)
Time: 5:00 pm
Venue: GH803

Abstract:

So-called "figurative language" expressions such as *Reference transfer (RT)* "The ham sandwich in the corner wants more coffee" and *Lexical producer-for-product Metonymy (PP)* "Everyone reads Walt Whitman in college" present an interesting challenge for the modeling of the language-conceptual structure interface: on the one hand, RT and PP both demand an association between explicit and implicit associate entities: For RT *ham sandwich*$_{explicit}$ must be connected with the *person-who-ordered-the-ham-sandwich*$_{implicit}$. For PP *Walt-Whitman-the-person*$_{explicit}$ must be connected with *Walt-Whitman's-writings*$_{implicit}$. On the other hand the means by which these associations are made are taken to be different: RT is said to index an association of an individual to a *situation* (the ordering of a ham sandwich by a customer) whereas PP indexes an association from an individual to an *entity* (the writings) (e.g., Nunberg,1979/1995, Jackendoff, 1997).

Recent **processing evidence** shows a potentially converging pattern: comprehension of both kinds of metonymy triggers an N400 effect, but only reference transfer triggers *in addition* a late positivity. Altogether this pattern has been taken to suggest that reference transfer makes extra-conceptual demands during comprehension requiring the creation of a more specific, richer conceptual context (Schumacher, 2011, 2013a/b, Weiland et al., 2014 Piñango et al., 2016).

The focus of the talk will be a model of metonymy composition that characterizes these contextual differences in terms of degrees of underspecification of contextual cues; thus allowing both metonymic processes to stem from the same conceptual compositional principles. In this model then metonymy is analyzed as perspective shift in conceptual structure triggered by the assignment of an incongruent semantic role to the explicit participant. This "shift" amounts to the creation of a *situation* connecting two entities, explicit and implicit, such that the previously incongruent semantic role apply instead to the implicit/intended participant. Contextualization is thus operationalized as the induction of a generalized situation (event/state) that confers participant roles to both explicit and implicit entities. In doing so the model sheds light on the possible organizing principles of conceptual structure at play during real-time composition. Finally, from a conceptual structure perspective, differences across metonymic interpretations are thus of degree and not necessarily of kind; thus suggesting that the traditional "literal/figurative" distinction is not categorical but a matter of degree and describable in terms of context lexica-ability. The less lexicalized the context, the more "figurative" it would appear.

Speaker:

Professor Piñango is interested in how the process of integration of different linguistic information during comprehension in real-time occurs (focusing on the integration of semantic and syntactic information), and whether differences in the process of integration (i.e., differences in time-course of activation) find parallels in cortical realization and distribution. She is interested as well in the characterization of language deficits that result from brain damage, and in the interaction between linguistic processes and other cognitive capacities such as memory. To this end, she uses evidence from language deficits (aphasia), real-time processing and imaging techniques (in particular fMRI). The phenomena she focuses on fall roughly within the confines of the syntax-lexicon-semantic connection (both from the representational and processing perspective). This includes the characterization of the correspondence between argument structure and syntactic representation, establishing the connection in processing terms between the lexicon and syntactic representation, and determining the time-course of activation of syntactically opaque semantic combinatorial operations.

Registration Link:

https://myacs.polyu.edu.hk/utils/mysurvey/index.php/738786/lang-en

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