Discourse relation and referential choice

Heeju Hwang, *The University of Hong Kong*

Abstract

Real-life language use typically involves repeated references to previously mentioned referents. Every time speakers refer, they choose between explicit forms of reference, such as names (*Angela*) and reduced expressions, such as pronouns (*she*). Successful communication depends in part on the ability for speakers to choose an appropriate referring expression for intended referents, and for listeners to understand these references. When speakers have made the decision to refer to a particular referent, how do they choose among different forms of referring expression? Do they take into consideration the relation that exists between discourse segments? In a series of experiments, I will show that speakers produce more reduced expressions when there is a higher degree of discourse continuity (subject continuity, action or event continuity) between two clauses or sentences. These results provide a window into the architecture and mechanisms of discourse processing by illuminating how a theoretical construct of discourse continuity could be mapped onto referential processing and what types of discourse relations might be relevant for referential choice. The results have a potential to make significant empirical and theoretical contributions to language research in multiple fields including first and second language acquisition.

Bio

Heeju Hwang is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Linguistics in the University of Hong Kong. Her research explores how we convey information in language. To produce an utterance that effectively conveys the intended meaning, we need to make various linguistic choices regarding syntactic structure, word order, and reference form. These choices demand recruiting and deploying not only linguistic resources but also information from other sources such as our assumptions about the listener's mental state and world knowledge. Her research aims to identify what information and how it guides the speaker's choice of linguistic form at the sentence and discourse level, which sheds light on the computational architecture of human cognition. Prior to joining HKU, she did postdoctoral work at Stanford University. She received a Ph.D. in Linguistics from University of Southern California and a B.A. in Psychology from Seoul National University.