

Center for Cognitive Science

University at Buffalo, State University of New York

Wednesday, March 23, 2005

280 Park Hall

North Campus

2:00 pm –4:00 pm

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Center for Language Sciences

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"Picture of who? An experimental investigation of pronouns and reflexives in representational noun phrases"

The observation that English pronouns and reflexives have a (nearly) complementary distribution is central to standard binding theory (BT). Representational NPs (RNPs, e.g. 'picture of her/herself') are a well-known exception, as both pronouns and reflexives are acceptable (e.g. Kuno 1987, Pollard & Sag 1992, Reinhart & Reuland 1993, Tenny 2003). Thus, they may provide a useful window into the syntax/pragmatics/semantics interface. In this talk I discuss experiments we conducted on English and Finnish investigating (i) the idea that reflexives in RNPs refer to "sources-of-information" (see Kuno 1987) and (ii) Tenny's observation that pronouns in RNPs refer to "perceivers-of-information." We used the action-based visual-world paradigm, which crucially provides both time-course data and information about the referent assigned to the anaphor on each trial. The results for English picture NP constructions show that both reflexives and pronouns are influenced by source and perceiver information respectively, but that the effects are much stronger for pronouns and, crucially, arise even when binding theory is not violated. The results for Finnish, a typologically different language with greater morphological complexity, show that in postnominal RNP constructions, there is a perceiver preference for pronouns as well as a source preference for certain reflexive forms. Thus, in the Finnish reflexive system, morphological differences correspond to interpretational differences. However, prenominal RNP constructions in Finnish show no source/perceiver effects for either anaphoric option. In sum, on the basis of the English data we can conclude that discourse/semantic factors interact with BT, but affect pronouns with local antecedents more than reflexives with non-local antecedents. The Finnish data suggest that whether discourse/semantic factors interact with BT depends on the structural domain, since different domains show presence and absence of verb effects in RNPs. As a whole, the findings suggest that in order to better understand the referential properties of pronouns and reflexives, we need to take into account not only the structural configuration but also other kinds of information such as the source/perceiver distinction.

Refreshments will be available

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