

The syntax-pragmatics interface: Bridging theory and experiment

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1. Introductory remarks

According to a classical tradition, grammar is to be distinguished from language use. On the one hand, there is propositional syntax and truth-conditional semantics; on the other hand, there is pragmatics dealing with meaning in context, that is, performed language. This strict division has its methodological advantages, but it appears to be at odds with various insights that have been accumulated especially over the last two decades in syntactic theory. These insights point to the conclusion that the full interpretation of sentences and in particular its information-structure and illocutionary component is far more determined by central syntactic and semantic principles than previously thought. While hardly anyone would subscribe to the view that pragmatic meaning is unrelated to syntactic structure, it is not (yet) quite clear how close the relation is. On the one hand, models like the so-called ‘cartographic’ approach directly encode pragmatic categories in syntactic representations. On the other hand, there are many accounts that assume a more indirect interaction between syntax and pragmatics, which may be mediated via prosody or by extra-grammatical components of language use such as pragmatic inferences.

One important issue in this field of research is whether and how we can determine the closeness of this relation by means of experimental research. The number of studies that approach topics at the syntax-pragmatics interface experimentally has considerably grown over the last twenty years, and exploring this interface empirically has also become a hotly debated issue in the domain of second language acquisition (SLA). In particular, within the ‘interface debate’ in current SLA research, it is often argued that syntax is more ‘vulnerable’ (i.e., error prone, subject to incomplete acquisition, language change, language loss) when it involves interactions with pragmatics.

2. Course description

Recent years have seen a rapid development in the new field of Experimental Pragmatics, where theory and experiment cross-fertilize each other and make substantial progress. In this course, we will adopt this productive strategy of connecting theory and experiment in order to take a fresh look at core phenomena at the syntax-pragmatics interface. Topics are, among others, the syntactic expression of information structure across several languages and how common categories such as focus, topic, and information status can be investigated by studying offline- and online-sentence comprehension. Related issues are which syntactic cues guide reference resolution in an ongoing discourse and how the processor keeps track of referents. We will connect these topics to findings in the domain of second language acquisition (e.g., pronoun reference by null and overt pronominal subjects in Romance, clitic left dislocation in Romance vs. topicalization in Germanic languages, prosodic realization of givenness in German vs. Italian), and we will evaluate the hypothesis that phenomena at the interface between syntax and pragmatics are especially hard to acquire.

The following issues will be discussed:

- The status of pragmatic categories in syntactic theory
- The role of 'global' and 'local' information in the establishment of meaning in discourse
- The inventory of information structural categories and how they can be detected
- Neurocognitive models of language processing at the syntax-pragmatics interface
- The syntax-pragmatics interface in second language acquisition

3. Syllabus

The course will consist of 6 lectures from Tuesday to Thursday. Each day will have two lectures, one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

Requirements for 5ECTS

- Do readings before and during the course as assigned by the instructors.
- Attend all lectures.
- Submit one research question in writing to the instructor after each lecture.
- Write a 2000-word paper on a chosen topic following the course.

Day 1. Introducing the syntax-pragmatics interface.

MORNING: What kind of role do pragmatic categories play in syntactic theory?

AFTERNOON: How can we approach pragmatic categories experimentally?

Readings:

Fanselow, Gisbert. 2016. Syntactic and prosodic reflexes of information structure in Germanic. In Caroline Féry & Shinichiro Ishihara (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Information Structure*. 621-641. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Frey, Werner. 2010. \bar{A} -Movement and conventional implicatures: About the grammatical encoding of emphasis in German. *Lingua* 120: 1416-1435.

Kaiser, Elsi & John C. Trueswell. 2004. The role of discourse context in the processing of a flexible word-order language. *Cognition* 94: 113-147.

Sauerland, Uli & Petra B. Schumacher. 2016. Pragmatics: Theory and experiment growing together. *Linguistische Berichte* 245: 3-24.

Trotzke, Andreas. 2015. *Rethinking Syntactocentrism: Architectural Issues and Case Studies at the Syntax-Pragmatics Interface*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, Chapter 3.

Day 2. Online and offline studies on the syntax-pragmatics interface.

MORNING: Acceptability studies on the syntax of discourse meaning

AFTERNOON: Neurocognitive studies on the syntax of discourse meaning

Readings:

- Bornkessel-Schlesewsky, Ina & Petra B. Schumacher. 2016. Towards a neurobiology of information structure. In Caroline Féry & Shinichiro Ishihara (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Information Structure*. 581-598. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Burkhardt, Petra. 2006. Inferential bridging relations reveal distinct neural mechanisms: Evidence from event-related brain potentials. *Brain and Language* 98: 159-168.
- Schumacher, Petra B. & Yu-Chen Hung. 2012. Positional influences on information packaging: Insights from topological fields in German. *Journal of Memory and Language* 67: 295-310.
- Skopeteas, Stavros & Gisbert Fanselow. 2011. Focus and the exclusion of alternatives: On the interaction of syntactic structure with pragmatic inference. *Lingua* 121: 1693-1706.
- Trotzke, Andreas. 2017. German grammar and mirativity: Experimental evidence. *Review of Cognitive Linguistics* 15, 460-488.

Day 3. The syntax-pragmatics interface from an acquisition perspective.

MORNING: Syntax-pragmatics in L2 acquisition and ‘the interface debate’

AFTERNOON: Syntax-pragmatics in L2 acquisition: Some recent findings

Readings:

- Dimroth, Christine & Bhuvana Narasimhan. 2012. The acquisition of information structure. In Manfred Krifka & Renate Musan (eds.), *The Expression of Information Structure*. 319-362. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter.
- Platzack, Christer. 2001. The vulnerable C-domain. *Brain and Language* 77: 364-377.
- Slabakova, Roumyana. 2016. *Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapter 11.
- Sorace, Antonella. 2004. Native language attrition and developmental instability at the syntax-discourse interface: Data, interpretations and methods. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 7: 143-145.