Ad-hoc shifts from primary to secondary information in spontaneous speech

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Since thinking and structural planning occur in a quasi-simultaneous way in spontaneous speech, speakers are often caught in a situation in which they need to deal with two concurring tasks, such as shifting from main or 'primary' to background or 'secondary' information. An example for such shifts is provided in (1), where the speaker interrupts a quotative construction-in-progress in order to provide the addressee with background information on one of the persons talked about.

(1)   so he said San:dra **who is this woman who I'd (.) sort of been surreptitiously introduced to in London Zoo the way one is to one's father's mistress uhm (.)** was going to have a baby.

(International Corpus of English – Great Britain, S1A-075)

This talk will focus on the different strategies chosen by speakers to utter secondary information within a unit of talk-in-progress in which an already initiated syntactic structure dealing with primary information is temporarily suspended in order to provide secondary information. I will discuss the question of how speakers of English "get into" and "out" of secondary information in the course of the production of a single unit of talk, and how speakers resume the syntactic "thread" after its temporary suspension. The discussion lends support to more recent findings in syntactic processing (e.g. Phillips 2003) that real-time speech processing is based on the planning and production of smaller syntactic segments that are built incrementally in real time, and appears to be guided by the mental activation level of concepts and ideas (Ferreira 2005).

References: • Phillips, C. (2003): Linear order and constituency. In: *Linguistic Inquiry* 34(1), 37–90. • Ferreira, F. (2005): Psycholinguistics, formal grammars, and cognitive science. In: *The Linguistic Review* 22, 365–380.