
Causal and concessive relations: Typology meets cognition

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Mittwoch
08.03.2017
15:15 – 15:45
B4 1, 0.26

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This talk deals with the cognitive foundations of well-established cross-linguistic asymmetries between causal and concessive relations. The talk is organized into two major parts. Part one provides an overview of typologically recurrent asymmetries that have long been attributed to the iconicity of complexity. In particular, it will be shown that while there is a general tendency for concessive relations to be marked overtly, causal relations are more often left implicit. Likewise, compared to causal connectives, concessive connectives tend to be morphologically more complex, to be acquired later in ontogeny, and to emerge later in diachrony. Finally, unlike causal relations, concessive relations do not give rise to online interpretative augmentation or to diachronic semantic change (König & Siemund 2000; Kortmann 1991, 1997).

Part 2 is devoted to testing the claim that these asymmetries reflect differences in cognitive complexity. More specifically, we present a self-paced reading experiment comparing the processing of interclausal causal and concessive relations in native speakers of English. The experiment explores the following hypotheses:

1. Implicit concessivity is more disruptive to discourse processing than implicit causality.
2. Concessive connectors provide a larger cognitive benefit than causal ones (Xu, Jiang & Zhou 2015).
3. Concessive connectors are more informative than causal ones (in the sense of setting up stronger online expectations regarding the semantics of upcoming discourse; cf. Xiang & Kuperberg 2015).

Besides measuring reading times, we track EEG components and other physiological responses (skin conductance, pupil dilation) that have been related to the generation and satisfaction of online predictions in order to explore whether potential differences in cognitive complexity can be put down to differences in informativeness (Lewis & Bastiaansen, 2015). Overall, this talk aims to make a step towards illuminating the relationship between typological generalizations and the cognition of individual language users.

References: • König, E., & Siemund, P. (2000). Causal and concessive clauses: Formal and semantic relations. • In: E. Couper-Kuhlen & B. Kortmann (Eds.), *Cause - condition - concession - contrast* (pp. 341-360). Mouton de Gruyter. • Kortmann, B. (1991). *Free Adjuncts and Absolutes in English: Problems of Control and Interpretation*. Psychology Press. • Kortmann, B. (1997). *Adverbial Subordination: A Typology and History of Adverbial Subordinators Based on European Languages*. Walter de Gruyter. • Lewis, A. G., & Bastiaansen, M. (2015). A predictive coding framework for rapid neural dynamics during sentence-level language comprehension. *Cortex*, 68, 155-168. • Xiang, M., & Kuperberg, G. (2015). Reversing expectations during discourse comprehension. *Language, Cognition and Neuroscience*, 30(6), 648-672. • Xu, X., Jiang, X., & Zhou, X. (2015). When a causal assumption is not satisfied by reality: differential brain responses to concessive and causal relations during sentence comprehension. *Language, Cognition and Neuroscience*, 30(6), 704-715.