

ESTABLISHING CAUSAL RELATIONS IN DISCOURSE PROCESSING

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A main task in discourse comprehension is determining the relationships that hold between linguistic units. Some of these relationships are referred to as coherence in formal theories of discourse—meaningful and sometimes non-obligatory connections, not governed by syntactic or semantic constraints, but instead determined pragmatically by factors including a comprehender’s world knowledge. For example, Result (cause- effect) and Explanation (effect-cause) are two such coherence relations. This talk presents results from two recent studies exploring how comprehenders establish Explanation relations during discourse processing. While previous research has shown that implicit causality (IC) verbs can bias causal inferences, recent experimental findings reveal important constraints on this phenomenon. The results demonstrate that only at-issue IC verbs effectively bias causal inferences, indicating that linguistic prominence plays a crucial role in shaping causal reasoning. Additionally, the research shows that IC expectations are sensitive to discourse structure, especially the Right Frontier Constraint. These studies contribute to our understanding of how comprehenders use linguistic and structural cues to infer Explanation relations, highlighting the interaction between lexical semantics, linguistic prominence, and discourse structure in establishing causal relations during discourse processing.

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