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SYMPOSIUM: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches to Language Processing

Chair: Morton Ann Gernsbacher, Department of Psychology and Cognitive Science Program, University of Oregon

This symposium presents work recently completed and still in progress, conducted within the Cognitive Science Program at the University of Oregon and the Cognitive Neuropsychology Laboratory at Good Samaritan Hospital, Portland, Oregon. This body of work reflects a collective interest in a variety of issues related to identifying and pursuing areas of fruitful interaction between linguistics, cognitive psychology and cognitive neuropsychology. The focus of the research is the cognitive operations underlying language processing, and their relationship to syntactic devices proposed by various linguists.

Givon, Kellogg, Posner and Yee will describe their use of mental chronometrics for testing the psychological reality of a linguistic theory of referentiality. Friedrich will discuss what the semantic and syntactic processing capabilities of a conduction aphasic with a phonological coding deficit suggest about normal sentence processing. Gernsbacher will describe some cognitive responses (attentional, integrative and memorial) that occur after a linguistic topic change. Tomlin will describe his use of laboratory manipulations (priming and cueing) to investigate the role of attention in thematic organization and its accompanying syntactic manifestations. Following the four paper presentations, Jusczyk will comment on some of the benefits and caveats of cross-disciplinary approaches to language, and lead an open discussion of the work presented.

The cross-disciplinary efforts represented by these studies yield at least three benefits to an understanding of language and language processing.

First, each discipline offers novel methodological tools to the others, opening up new avenues for empirical investigations of linguistic problems. Second, such efforts help theoretically to develop theories of language by considering how cognitive processes influence and constrain linguistic performance. And, third, cross disciplinary efforts prove intellectually stimulating and provide a crucial opportunity to reconsider discipline dependent thinking about language processing and cognition.