

Automatic Self-monitoring

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If the best speaker strategy in the face of massive ambiguity is to go for the most probable interpretation in the context, that is not a guarantee for successful communication. The expected success rate is the probability that the speaker in selecting an expression for her meaning has hit on the form for which her meaning is the most probable reading in the context. Since the speaker is also a hearer, the speaker can pay attention to this aspect and try to select a form that has thatofproperty.

The hypothesis is that an important part of speaking is not grammar but automatic self-monitoring for the probability that the hearer will understand the utterance correctly.

The talk will discuss particle insertion, word order, NP selection and case marking. For each case, it will be shown that pure syntax cannot deal with the problem, that the descriptive problem can be captured by monitoring. Monitoring applications can be systematically distinguished from hard syntax rules.

In the second half of the talk, the relation of monitoring and language evolution will be central. Monitoring relates directly to communicative success and language evolution needs to be conditioned on communicative success: a mental entity that represents an aspect of language production is preserved to the degree that it contributes to communicative success. The entities are universally word-meaning pairs, non-universally morphological and grammatical rules.

Words are introduced by invention and associated to meanings by use. Grammaticalisation can construct functional uses. This requires both a suitable source and pull to the new use. Monitoring provides the pull. The arrival of reflexive pronouns in Dutch and emerging perfective readings of “already” in English will be discussed as examples.

Rules are more problematic. I will defend that “invincible cues” will arise in use which give invariable monitoring effects which are redundantly reexpressed as constraints on production. These redundant production constraints are themselves inherited and can atrophy in the sense that their triggering condition can become non-semantic. The result accounts for the emergence of a system of linearly ordered defeasible constraints as an expression of hard syntax and morphology from a purely stochastic base. Some English word order rules will be used as an example in this part.

Automatic self-monitoring can be seen both as evolutionary selection pressure

in action and as the driving force behind language evolution, creating expressive means.