

Experimental perspectives on event coercion

In view of the combinatorial nature of linguistic meaning, semanticists agree that some version of the Fregean Principle of Compositionality must certainly hold (e.g. Westerstahl & Pagin 2011). But there is also consensus that the richness and complexity of meaning components in natural language go far beyond what is determined by purely grammatically driven processes. When interpreting a sentence we draw on information from context and world knowledge. And within certain limits we even manage to cope with compositional conflicts that lead to meaning adjustments. Our workshop addresses coercion processes in the interpretation of natural language at the semantics-pragmatics interface, focusing on those processes that result in the introduction of covert events and event participants, or the covert shift between different subclasses of events.

Event coercion has been on the agenda in semantic theory and psycholinguistic research for more than a decade now. During the last fifteen years psycho- and neurolinguists have mainly concentrated on two types of phenomena: aspectual coercion from a punctual event into a series of events (1) (starting with Piñango & Jackendoff 1999), and complement coercion from an object into an event, (2) (starting with McElree et al. 2001).

(1) John coughed for many hours.

(2) John began the book.

However, the phenomena that have been investigated experimentally only cover a small part of what has been discussed in the semantic literature (for exceptions see e.g. Pylkkänen et al. 2011). At least three broad classes of event coercion may be distinguished: first, transitions between different ontological types resulting in an event reading, see the object-event shifts in (2) and (3); second, within the ontological category of events, transitions from one aspectual class to another, such as in (1), and the non-iterative instances of this sort in (4) and (5) (cf. Moens & Steedman 1988, for experimental evidence see Bott 2010); finally, coercion that affects covert event participants (e.g. the introduction of an initiator in (6) and an agent argument in (7)).

(3) John was sick from the terrible pizza.

(4) The architect built the house for two months. (Bott & Hamm under review)

(5) John found his keys within two hours. (adapted from Bott 2010)

(6) The building stands intentionally in contrast with its industrial environment.
(adapted from Buscher to appear)

(7) He stumbles for his audience.

All of this has to be taken with caution since the number of possible coercion types depends on the ontological distinctions/types a given theory is based on (c.f. Asher 2011). Even worse, what counts as coercion depends on the theoretical background chosen. It is thus not surprising that semantics and psycho/neurolinguistics have not influenced each other as much as they might have (see Baggio et al. 2010; Bott 2010; Pylkkänen et al. 2011 for first steps in this direction). On the other hand, multidisciplinary efforts using experimental evidence should enable us to decide between theoretical alternatives. This would be particularly important because there are often alternative proposals that derive coerced meanings in

fundamentally different ways. The proposed coercion theories vary between semantic, pragmatic and underspecification accounts (see e.g. Egg 2005). Others have even claimed that apparent (aspectual) coercion may not in reality involve any coercion at all, but instead be related to the resolution of quantificational restrictions (Deo & Piñango 2011). This situation makes it challenging for experimentalists to relate their results to theoretical work.

Our workshop addresses whether and how psycholinguistic experiments can constrain the available theoretical alternatives and how semantic and pragmatic theory can contribute a cognitively plausible model to psycho- and neurolinguistic studies. We will invite submissions of experimental studies on the following aspects, and topics related to these:

- Can psycho- and neurolinguistic methods be used to test semantic or pragmatic theories of event coercion?
- What kinds of event coercion are there and how do they relate to each other? Is coercion a uniform operation?
- Which representational levels are affected by coercion operation(s); for instance, does semantic/pragmatic repair lead to syntactic reanalysis to preserve compositionality?
- What is the role of contextual information? Is event coercion resolved at the sentence or the discourse level?
- Can experimental results impose ontological constraints? If so, what ontology (event types; types of event participants; etc.) is suggested by experimental results?
- How do coercion operations fit into psycho- and neurolinguistic models of comprehension? Which semantic/pragmatic accounts can serve as a model for compositional processes during online interpretation? Which cognitive processes subserve coercion?

The workshop will be organized by Oliver Bott, Helga Gese, Fritz Hamm and Claudia Maienborn (SFB 833, Tübingen University). Liina Pylkkänen has accepted our invitation as keynote speaker. We plan to have six additional slots for 30 minutes talks which will be filled on the basis of peer review. An extra slot of 30 minutes will be reserved for general discussion.

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