CAUSAL AND CONCESSIVE RELATIONS: TYPOLOGY MEETS COGNITION

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This talk deals with the cognitive foundations of well-established cross-linguistic asymmetries between causal and concessive relations. It 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 1997).

Part 2 is devoted to experimentally testing the claim that these asymmetries reflect differences in cognitive complexity. More specifically, we present the results of two reading experiments comparing the processing of causal and concessive interclausal relations in native speakers of English. Experiment 1 (94 participants) is a self-paced reading study focusing on reading times, whereas experiment 2 (54 participants) is a rapid serial visual presentation study tracking two ERP components (N400 and P600) that have been related to the processing of interclausal relations (cf. Xiang & Kuperberg, 2015; Xu, Jiang, Zhou, 2015).

Both experiments track reactions to the final words of compound sentences (e.g., failed the exam last January), while manipulating their first parts along two crossed dimensions: (1.) type of interclausal relation (causal vs. concessive); (2.) explicitness of interclausal relation (connective present or absent), as shown in the following examples:

a) John didn't read the essay questions properly and failed the exam last January.
b) John didn't read the essay questions properly and therefore failed the exam last January.
c) Peter studied a lot and still failed the exam last January.
d) Peter studied a lot and failed the exam last January.

Our provisional results support the following hypotheses derived from the typological and psycholinguistic literature:

1) Implicit concessivity is more disruptive to discourse processing than implicit causality.
2) Concessive connectives provide a larger cognitive benefit than causal ones.
3) Concessive connectives are more informative than causal ones (in the sense of setting up stronger online expectations regarding the semantics of upcoming discourse).
4) Both types of connectives constrain online reading in an incremental manner (i.e., their cognitive effects become apparent well before the end of the second clause of a compound sentence, cf. Traxler, Bybee, Pickering, 1997).

Overall, this talk aims to make a step towards illuminating the relationship between typological generalizations and the cognition of individual language users.

References


