

Subordination in discourse structure as a kind of dysfluency

Katja Jasinskaja (IDSL 1 sowie Emerging Group "Dynamic Structuring in Language and Communication", Universität Köln)

In this talk I would like to discuss an idea for a research project in the domain of discourse semantics/pragmatics which possibly has non-trivial consequences for the study of dysfluency in speech production. The starting point is a remarkable similarity between a number of phenomena studied in different subdisciplines of linguistics: self-repairs (cf. Levelt 1983), parentheticals (cf. Cooper & Sorensen 1981), asides and interruptions (cf. Grosz & Sidner 1986), subordinate discourse structures (Polanyi 1988) and maybe even subordinate clauses in the syntax. All these phenomena are characterised at a very abstract level by (the possibility of) linear "insertion" of one structure inside another: once that "inserted", or embedded, structure is processed, the processing of the embedding structure is resumed roughly at the point of the interruption.

In the domain of discourse coherence this property is attributed to so-called subordinating, or nucleus-satellite coherence relations Explanation, Elaboration, Background. For example, when an explanandum is followed by an explanation, there is a possibility to go back to the explanandum and attach new material to it in subsequent discourse. In contrast, in a sequence of discourse-structurally coordinate discourse segments, e.g. in a Narration, the non-final segment is closed off and inaccessible for further attachment (cf. Polanyi's Right Frontier Constraint). In this talk I will argue that in order to understand why Explanations, Elaborations, etc. behave differently from e.g. Narrations in this respect, it is necessary to understand in what sense Explanations and Elaborations, unlike Narrations, are similar to self-repairs, parentheticals, and interruptions. I will propose a tentative answer to this question and discuss its possible empirical consequences.