Lotte Hogeweg

Word in Process

On the interpretation, acquisition, and production of words

This dissertation deals with the relation between words and meanings. Word meanings are flexible. The same word may have different interpretations, dependent on the context in which it occurs. In this thesis, it is argued that a meaning is not a static property of a word but that it is the input to the process of the production of a word or it is the result of the process of interpretation. Furthermore, it is argued that these are processes of optimization. The output of the process is the candidate that best satisfies a set of ranked constraints. It is assumed that a word is linked to a set of semantic features. In interpretation, the meaning of a word is determined based on this set of features and the particular context in which the word occurs. Two Optimality Theoretic constraints play a role in the process of interpretation: STRENGTH and FIT. Furthermore, it is argued that the same constraints play a role in the acquisition of word meaning. However, the way the constraints interact gradually changes during this process. In the production of words, the speaker starts with an intention to express something. The candidate forms are compared with respect to how much of the meaning of the intention they convey. For speakers, however, not only the amount of overlapping features determines the optimal candidate. Markedness constraints cause the avoidance of complexity, sometimes at the expense of faithfulness to the input. In conclusion, this study offers a comprehensive view on the relation between form and meaning and an account for the flexibility of words in context.

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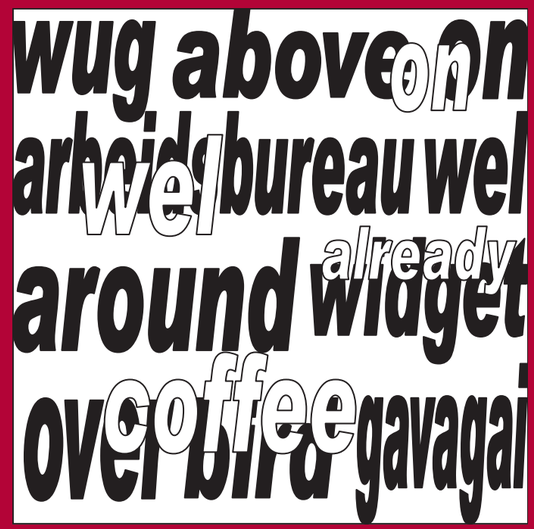

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