

Position and interpretation: a case study on ambiguous modifiers

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The interaction of lexical-semantic properties of specific modifiers and their syntactic position are widely discussed in linguistic theory. Basically, there are two major approaches. The first approach supposes that syntax imposes strict ordering conditions on adverbials. Adverbials are located in fixed syntactic positions and the different lexical-semantic properties determine these fixed positions (e.g. Alexiadou 1997; Frey & Pittner 1998; Cinque 1999; Frey 2003). The second approach assumes that adverbials are freely generated in different syntactic positions. Restrictions on placement are considered to be semantic in nature (e.g. Haider 2000, 2012; Ernst 2002).

In my talk, I will present a study that addresses the question whether the syntactic position of an ambiguous adverbial determines its interpretation. It has been shown in a number of studies that the interpretation of ambiguous lexical elements is influenced by contextual information (sentence and discourse semantics as well as the surrounding syntactic structure; for an overview, see Simpson, 1994; Morris, 2007). The role of syntactic position for the processing of ambiguous words has not attracted a lot of attention so far.

It has long been noted that manner adverbs which typically describe some manner in which the situation referred to by the verb phrase is performed can occur in different positions and receive different readings (e.g., Austin, 1961; Jackendoff, 1972, McConnell-Ginet, 1982; Ernst, 2002): (1a) represents the manner reading (“Louisa departed in a rude manner.”) whereas (1b) gets a speaker-oriented interpretation (“Louisa’s act of departing was rude, according to the speaker.”).

- (1) a. Louisa departed rudely.
b. Louisa rudely departed.

German exhibits a similar kind of ambiguity: some adjectives in their adverbial use (e.g., ‘sicher’ (‘secure’)) can either get a manner (‘confidently’) or a speaker-oriented (‘certainly’) reading. Using different experimental methods, I will show that (1) the interpretation of ambiguous adverbials correlates with syntactic position, and (2) the interplay of adverbial order and interpretation cannot be explained in purely syntactic or semantic terms, but needs a multifactorial explanation in which syntactic, semantic as well as information-structural factors are considered.