

Discourse coherence: How do speakers show and hearers decide  
what the center of attention is?

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Many investigations of local discourse coherence have shown that the entity which is considered to be the center of attention is typically realized in grammatical subject position. As such, many investigators have assumed a syntactic hierarchy in which entities realized as subjects are considered more salient in the discourse than those realized as direct objects, which in turn are considered more salient than those realized as obliques. However, in English—the language in which many of these studies have been done—grammatical subjects are often semantic agents, objects are often semantic patients, and so on. In short, syntactic position is conflated with semantic role. So, it could be that what has been perceived as an effect of the syntax of an utterance is, in fact, an effect of the semantics, or some combination of the two. In my research at Northwestern University, I have been investigating this possibility. In my talk I present evidence from two psycholinguistic experiments which demonstrate that both syntactic and semantic prominence (as I refer to these two concepts) play a significant role in determining the salience of entities in a discourse. I conclude with discussion of some implications for language teaching and learning.