

"This text is incoherent!": How people understand discourse

by Ralph L. Rose

Sentences (1)-(3) below are all fully grammatical and meaningful. However, if you read the three sentences as a single text, it sounds very strange---perhaps as if it had been written by an elementary school student. Similar observations may be made about the sequence of Japanese sentences in (4)-(6).

1. John went to the supermarket.
2. John bought two fresh fish.
3. John went home and ate dinner.
4. 太郎は買い物に行きました。
5. 太郎は新鮮な魚二匹を買いました。
6. 太郎は家に帰って、晩御飯を食べました。

Why do we regard these discourses as sub-standard---or more precisely, incoherent? The simple answer might be that people don't like to keep repeating the subject of a sentence. But the deeper question is why is that? How does our brain process discourse in a way that causes preferences like this?

In this talk, I will deal with these questions by looking at some common observations about how people process discourse and judge (in)coherence. In particular, I will discuss Kamp and Reyle's Discourse Representation Theory (1993) and relate it to the way that people understand discourse anaphora.

Presented at Gunma University, Department of Education
July 20th, 2007