

The Electrophysiology of Discourse and Conversation

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1 Introduction

What's happening in the brains of two people having a conversation? One reasonable guess is that in the fMRI scanner we'd see most of their brains light up. Another is that their EEG would be a total mess, reflecting dozens of interacting neuronal systems. Conversation recruits *all* of the basic language systems reviewed in this book. It also heavily taxes cognitive systems more likely to be found in handbooks of memory, attention and control, or social cognition (Brownell and Friedman, 2001). With most conversations going beyond the single utterance, for instance, they place a heavy load on episodic memory as well as on the systems that allow us to reallocate cognitive resources to meet the demands of a dynamically changing situation. Furthermore, conversation is a deeply social and collaborative enterprise (Clark, 1996; this volume) in which interlocutors have to keep track of each other's state of mind and coordinate on such things as taking turns, establishing common ground, and the goals of the conversation.

For somebody invited to review the neurocognition of discourse and conversation in a handful of pages, this doesn't sound too good. Fortunately, others have already recently surveyed the implications of patient research (Brownell and Friedman, 2001; Marr, 2004), as well as those of fMRI and PET (Ferstl, 2007; Ferstl et al., 2008). Here, I review the EEG research on discourse and conversation to date, to see what electrophysiology tells us about the systems involved. EEG studies on discourse and conversation have thus far practically all focused on the *comprehension of multi-sentence text*, and as such they provide a convenient operational definition of the domain. However, an important theme developed in this review is that for the processes that extract meaning from language, the classic separation between a single sentence and a whole bunch of them may not be all that relevant.

2 Why bother with EEG?

The term *neuroimaging* has come to stand for functional magnetic resonance imaging

(fMRI) or positron emission tomography (PET). Images obtained with fMRI or PET can be extremely informative, and they strongly resonate with our desire to look into our working brains. However, in the end, these are images of blood, and, for that matter, slowly responding blood. Neurons do need it, but the real work for which the brain has become famous – computation – is carried by electricity (and, at synapses, electro-chemical transduction). This is precisely what the EEG taps in to. The EEG or electro-encephalogram is a record of tiny voltage fluctuations over time, usually recorded at the scalp. Roughly speaking, these fluctuations arise when large populations of similarly oriented neurons are simultaneously (de-) activated. Because a great many such ensembles are at work at any one time, the EEG is usually a bit of a mess. However, there are ways to extract useful information from this signal. In the most common method, the EEG is recorded to many instances of some critical event (say, a word), and the associated bits of EEG are averaged to create an event-related brain potential or ERP.

Now, to a psycholinguist, this probably doesn't sound too exciting so far. However, in the late 1970s, researchers discovered that words that were semantically anomalous in their local sentence context, as in "He spread the warm bread with socks," elicited a negative ERP deflection that peaked at about 400 ms after the offending word (Kutas and Hillyard, 1980). Because this so-called N₄₀₀ effect was not elicited by a typographic anomaly, it was taken to reflect some aspect of how words are related to their semantic context. Follow-up experiments soon confirmed this, and made clear that N₄₀₀ effects actually reflected graded modulations of an underlying N₄₀₀ component, elicited by every content word, with an amplitude that increased to the extent that the word was harder to relate to its sentence-semantic context (see Kutas and Federmeier, 2000; Kutas, Van Petten, and Kluender, 2006 for review).

The significance of all this was enhanced when syntactically anomalous or

unexpected words were found to elicit a very different ERP effect, the so-called P₆₀₀ effect (Hagoort, Brown, and Groothusen, 1993; Osterhout and Holcomb, 1992; see Osterhout, Kim, and Kuperberg, this volume; Kuperberg, 2007 for review). The discovery of two very different ERP "signatures" associated with sentence-level language comprehension not only raised interesting theoretical questions about the architecture of the comprehension system and the types of representations it computed, but also implied that ERPs could be used to *selectively* keep track of specific aspects of comprehension, as a sentence unfolded in time. Of course, a process as complex as this was bound to generate more than just two ERP effects, and many other language-relevant ERP phenomena have been discovered since (cf. Newman et al., this volume; Coulson, this volume, Osterhout et al., this volume). With a steadily growing repertoire of ERP effects in hand, researchers are now examining the processes involved in comprehending single sentences.

Until quite recently, however, psycholinguists have been reluctant to use EEG to examine the comprehension of larger units of language. One reason is that psycholinguistic ERP research is for historical reasons strongly rooted in the sentence processing community. This means that (at the time of writing) most of the people with EEG expertise and easy access to EEG labs have sentence processing issues in mind, whereas those most interested in discourse and conversation are short of expertise and labs. Furthermore, combining EEG with single sentences is already difficult enough as it is, and with a text or conversation in each trial, things are just getting worse.

As testified by the work reviewed here, though, it is not impossible to use EEG to track discourse comprehension (see Van Berkum, 2004 for a methodological tutorial). Moreover, the additional work does sometimes really pay off. Later in this chapter, I take stock of the discourse-oriented EEG studies conducted so far. I begin with studies that used the N₄₀₀ to address the construction of discourse-level meaning (Section 3),

then turn to research on how people find out to what or whom certain expressions refer (Section 4), and subsequently review the evidence for discourse-based anticipation (Section 5). After this review of exclusively text-oriented research, I briefly look at initial attempts to draw the speaker into the picture (Section 6), and discuss the challenge of combining electrode caps with conversation (Section 7). Finally, I extract several general implications (Section 8), and end with where I think the field should be heading (Section 9). For related research on figurative processing, I refer to Coulson (this volume).

3 Making sense of discourse

3.1 *Initial observations*

Although prose passages had in fact already featured in several of the early landmark ERP experiments on language comprehension (Kutas and Hillyard, 1983; Van Petten et al., 1991), ERP research specifically aimed at *discourse*-level comprehension took off in 1994, with a pioneering study by St. George et al. (1994). Building on classic work in cognitive psychology, St. George et al. asked their subjects to read short stories with or without a title, such as:

- (1) The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange things into different groups depending on their makeup. Of course, one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere else due to lack of facilities that is the next step, otherwise you are pretty well set. It is important not to overdo any particular endeavor. That is, it is better to do too few things at once than too many. In the shorter run this may not seem important, but complications from doing too many can easily arise. A mistake can be expensive as well. The manipulation of the appropriate mechanisms should be self-explanatory, and we need not dwell on it here. At first the whole procedure will seem complicated. Soon, however,

it will become just another facet of life. It is difficult to foresee any end to the necessity of this task in the immediate future, but then one can never tell.

Whereas each story was locally coherent in that individual sentences were interconnected and related to a single topic, it was difficult to find out what that topic actually was without a story title (e.g., *Procedure for washing clothes*). Content words in stories without a title elicited larger N₄₀₀ deflections than the same words in titled stories, clearly indicating that the N₄₀₀ is not only sensitive to local lexical or sentential context.

In follow-up research, Van Berkum and colleagues (Van Berkum, Hagoort, and Brown, 1999; Van Berkum et al., 2003) examined the brain's response to words that were equally acceptable in their local carrier sentence but differed radically in how well they fit the wider discourse (e.g., "The dean told the lecturer that there was ample reason to promote him" in a context in which the lecturer had just been found out to be a fraud). Words not supported by the wider discourse elicited a much larger N₄₀₀ deflection than discourse-supported words, in readers and listeners alike. Furthermore, this N₄₀₀ effect collapsed when the same carrier sentences were presented in isolation. Because the discourse-dependent N₄₀₀ effect emerged for clause-final as well as clause-medial words, these findings suggested that *every* incoming word is immediately related to the wider discourse. Furthermore, with spoken words, the discourse-dependent N₄₀₀ effect had its onset as early as 150 ms after acoustic word onset, that is, only some *two to three phonemes into the word* (such early onsets are quite common for spoken-language N₄₀₀ effects). Spoken words are thus related to the wider discourse extremely rapidly, well before they have been fully pronounced, and possibly even before they have become acoustically unique. Finally, the timing, shape, and scalp distribution of the N₄₀₀ effect elicited by discourse-dependent anomalies did not differ from that of the "classic" sentence-dependent N₄₀₀ effect, indicating that

discourse- and sentence-dependent semantic constraints have a comparable impact on some aspect of semantic processing.

Three additional observations ruled out relatively trivial accounts of discourse-dependent N_{400} effects. First, like its sentence-dependent counterpart, it does not depend on anomaly but can also be elicited by somewhat less expected coherent words like *lance* in (2) (Otten and Van Berkum, 2007; see also Burkhard, 2006, 2007; Ditman and Kuperberg, 2007; St. George, Mannes, and Hoffman, 1997; Van Berkum et al., 2005).

- (2) The brave knight saw that the dragon threatened the benevolent sorcerer.
He quickly reached for a *sword/lance* and... (story continues).

Thus we can take these ERP modulations to reflect something about the normal computations involved in understanding sentences in context. Second, discourse-dependent N_{400} effects also emerge at story positions where no *particular* word is highly expected (Camblin, Gordon, and Swaab, 2007; Van Berkum et al., 2003), and thus do not critically depend on disconfirming a specific lexical prediction. Third, experiments that controlled for potential confounding effects from lexical priming have shown that at least *some* discourse-dependent N_{400} effects hinge on the precise message-level representation established for the discourse at that point. For example, whereas *lance* elicited a large standard N_{400} effect relative to *sword* in (2), it did not do so in (3), in which the message was altered while keeping the same prime words (Otten and Van Berkum, 2007; see also Ditman and Kuperberg, 2007).

- (3) The benevolent sorcerer saw that the dragon threatened the brave knight.
He quickly reached for a *sword/lance* and... (story continues).

In all, the N_{400} findings so far consistently indicate that words are related to a message-level representation of the wider discourse very rapidly, in a way that is no different

from how they are related to local sentence-level context.

3.2 *What is going on here?*

Because these are message-level discourse effects, it is tempting to take them to *directly* reflect some aspect of high-level conceptual structure building, such as (contextually modulated) sentence-level semantic composition (e.g., Jackendoff, 2007) or the incremental expansion of a discourse model (e.g., along the lines of Discourse Representation Theory; Kamp and Reyle, 1993; Geurts, 1999). This *integration account* of the N_{400} is implicitly or explicitly behind much discourse-level N_{400} research (including e.g., Van Berkum, Hagoort, and Brown, 1999), and discourse-dependent N_{400} effects are sometimes taken as strong evidence *for* the integration view. However, these effects are also fully compatible with a *memory retrieval account* (Kutas and Federmeier, 2000; Kutas et al., 2006), in which “ N_{400} amplitude is a general index of the ease or difficulty of retrieving stored conceptual knowledge associated with a word (or other meaningful stimuli), which is dependent on both the stored representation itself, and the retrieval cues provided by the preceding context” (Kutas et al., 2006, p. 669). After all, prior discourse can make for a fine retrieval cue.

These alternative accounts of discourse-level N_{400} effects are difficult to disentangle. However, as argued in detail elsewhere (Van Berkum, 2009), a long-term memory retrieval account of discourse-dependent N_{400} effects allows these findings to be much more parsimoniously unified with a wide range of other N_{400} phenomena. For example, N_{400} effects can also be obtained by semantically odd combinations that are nonlinguistic, such as an unexpected turn of events in a film clip (e.g., a guy in front of the bathroom mirror putting shaving cream on his chin, and then picking up a rolling pin; Sitnikova, Kuperberg, and Holcomb, 2003) or a cartoon-like picture sequence (West and Holcomb, 2002). Furthermore, lexical or lexico-conceptual factors such as repetition, word frequency, associative

or semantic word-word priming, the number of orthographically similar words, and concreteness also modulate the N₄₀₀ (see Kutas et al., 2006 for review, or Van Berkum, 2009, for references). Although the impact of such factors is often attenuated in richer contexts, the fact that they modulate the N₄₀₀ speaks against an account in which the N₄₀₀ *directly* reflects sophisticated conceptual structure building. Although the N₄₀₀ might be sensitive to the latter, it clearly reflects a more general mechanism.

A central idea in the so-called memory-based text processing tradition (e.g., Gerrig and McKoon, 1998; Gerrig and O'Brien, 2005) is *readiness*, the timely availability of plausibly relevant information. Firmly based in general models of human memory (e.g., Ratcliff and McKoon, 1988; Anderson, 1990), research in this tradition has shown that as we read through a text, potentially relevant additional information waxes and wanes without cost, as a function of how our content-addressable long-term memory passively resonates to currently active representations (Myers and O'Brien, 1998). What is being anticipated here is not necessarily upcoming communication – our long-term memory is simply trying to predict information that might soon be needed (cf. Anderson, 1990). However, to the extent that such cost-free memory-based anticipation is also sensitive to complex *message-level* cues, this automatic resonance may well be a critical ingredient in how discourse-dependent N₄₀₀ effects emerge. In the St. George et al. (1994) study, for instance, the presence of a story title can help retrieve the relevant meaning of content words in the story. In the Otten and Van Berkum (2007) study, the precise message-level representation of “The brave knight saw that the dragon threatened the benevolent sorcerer. He quickly reached for a...” should facilitate retrieval from memory of a relevant meaning for *sword*, more so than for *lance*. And in a story about a swindling lecturer (Van Berkum et al., 1999), the exact meaning of “The dean told the lecturer that there was ample reason to...” presumably increases the readiness of concepts involving grave consequences

(being reprimanded or fired), at the expense of happier concepts (e.g., being praised or promoted).

Like the integration account, the memory retrieval account of N₄₀₀ effects is as yet far from explicit. It also has one distinct and experimentally nasty drawback: If a message-level representation of the prior discourse is but one of a mixed bag of memory cues that can facilitate the retrieval of this word's meaning from conceptual long-term memory, next to, say, associatively and semantically related prime words, scenario-based world knowledge activated the preceding text, and aspects of the visual and auditory scene (Kutas and Federmeier, 2000; Van Berkum, 2009); scientific prediction doesn't get any easier. After all, the net N₄₀₀ amplitudes observed are then a function of some unknown (and possibly weighed) balance of high- and lower-level retrieval cues. But then again, perhaps nature just isn't any more accommodating. Below, we'll encounter several cases in which exactly this mixing of higher- and lower-level cues seems to be at hand.

3.3 *Inferencing*

The word-elicited N₄₀₀ is clearly sensitive to the level of contextual support from prior text. In principle, this makes it an attractive tool with which to study the mechanisms below various types of text-based inferences. Again, St. George et al. were the first to do so, in an experiment on bridging and elaborative inferences in text. Unfortunately, with only few texts per condition (fifteen), the ERPs were relatively noisy and hence difficult to interpret. Also, because not every item had been designed to elicit an N₄₀₀ effect at a single critical word, ERPs were pooled across *all* words in the critical sentence, a procedure that must inevitably have attenuated critical differences between conditions.

Two more recent studies on inferences avoided both of these problems. In the first (Ditman and Kuperberg, 2007), participants read sentences like (7) in the context of an explicitly supportive discourse context

(4), an inferentially supportive discourse context (5), or a nonsupportive discourse context (6):

- (4) Mark and John were having an argument. Mark began to hit John hard.
- (5) Mark and John were having an argument. Mark got more and more upset.
- (6) Mark and John were gambling at the casino. They won every game of blackjack.
- (7) The next morning John had many *bruises*.

As might be expected, a critical word like *bruises* elicited a smaller N_{400} effect in an explicitly supportive discourse context than in a nonsupportive one. However, such words also elicited a smaller N_{400} effect in the inferentially supportive discourse context, indicating that readers can rapidly work out how the sentences of an unfolding discourse are connected.

Results from the second study (Yang, Perfetti, and Schmalhofer, 2007) seem to be at odds with this conclusion. Here, participants read sentences like (12) in the context of a referentially explicit discourse context (8), a referentially paraphrased context (9), an inferentially supportive context (10), or a nonsupportive context (11):

- (8) After being dropped from the plane, the bomb hit the ground and exploded.
- (9) After being dropped from the plane, the bomb hit the ground and blew up.
- (10) After being dropped from the plane, the bomb hit the ground.
- (11) Once the bomb was stored safely on the ground, the plane dropped off its passengers and left.
- (12) The *explosion* was quickly reported to the commander.

The referentially explicit and referentially paraphrased contexts attenuated the N_{400} on critical words (e.g., *explosion*), relative to the nonsupportive context. But inferentially supportive context did *not*, suggesting that the critical word was as unexpected there as it was in the nonsupportive control context.

This could be taken to reflect that readers were not making the needed inference (i.e., a bomb hitting the ground will explode), at least not sufficiently rapidly.

Although it is not immediately clear how to reconcile these findings, the Ditman and Kuperberg study does provide an existence proof that inferences *can* be made sufficiently rapidly to support the processing of a subsequent critical word in a text. Research discussed in Sections 4 and 5 below (e.g., Burkhardt, 2006; Burkhardt and Roehm, 2007; Otten and Van Berkum, 2007; Van Berkum et al., 2005) points in the same direction. In line with the memory retrieval perspective outlined in Section 3.2, as well as with behavioral evidence for automatic memory-based inferences (Gerrig and O'Brien, 2005), I suspect that these inference-dependent N_{400} attenuations are the result of automatic anticipatory processing before the critical word comes along, afforded by how our long-term memory works (see also Section 5).

3.4 World knowledge, counterfactuals, and negation

Several recent studies use the N_{400} to explore the interaction between a dynamically configured discourse context and stable, default background knowledge about the world. In a first study (Nieuwland and Van Berkum, 2006a), a cartoon-like discourse context was pitted against default knowledge about what animate and inanimate entities tend to be like in the real world:

- (13) A woman saw a dancing peanut who had a big smile on his face. The peanut was singing about a girl he had just met. And judging from the song, the peanut was totally crazy about her. The woman thought it was really cute to see the peanut singing and dancing like that. The peanut was *salted/in love*, and by the sound of it, this was definitely mutual. He was seeing a little almond.

In texts such as (13), discourse-supported but animacy violating predicates (*in love*)

elicited a smaller N₄₀₀ effect than animacy respecting but discourse-inappropriate alternatives (*salted*), showing that in this case, discourse-contextual fit completely overruled local animacy requirements in driving the N₄₀₀. A recent follow-up (Filik and Leuthold, 2008) confirmed these results and showed that such fiction-dependent overrides of default world knowledge can be brought about with a single sentence (e.g., “The Incredible Hulk was annoyed that there was a lot of traffic in his way. He picked up the *lorry* and...”). Under some models, such results might be very surprising. However, I suspect that even the first few words of a single sentence (“The Incredible Hulk picked up the *lorry*”) can do the trick. Note that sentences are *always* interpreted against a background. In the absence of specific prior information, the interpretive background defaults to our conceptual knowledge of the real world. A prior discourse context simply customizes the interpretive background. Either way, it will always be the case that some bits of information are more expected than others (cf. Section 3.2).

This is not to say that well-known, real-world constraints cannot “leak through” and have their own independent effect on N₄₀₀ amplitude over and above what might be expected on the basis of a dynamically configured message-level representation of the discourse (e.g., see Federmeier and Kutas, 1999; Ferguson, Sanford, and Leuthold, 2008; Hald, Steenbeek-Planting, and Hagoort, 2007). In fact, if a message-level representation is but one of a mixed bag of memory cues that can facilitate the retrieval of the next word’s meaning from memory (Kutas and Federmeier, 2000; Van Berkum, 2009), this is exactly what one can expect. As discussed before, the net balance between message-level and other cues should then depend on the relative strengths of the cues. And indeed, lexical primes such as *arms* and *legs* or *moon* and *stars*, which instantiate default world knowledge in a simple associative or category-dependent way, seem to have a bigger effect on the N₄₀₀ in moderately constraining contexts (Camblin et al.,

2007) than in strongly constraining ones (Van Petten, 1993).

The balance between the dynamically configured message and simpler word- or scenario-based memory cues may also be relevant to a recent ERP study on negation in counterfactuals (Ferguson et al., 2008).

- (14) If cats were not carnivores, they would be cheaper for owners to look after. Families could feed their cat a bowl of *carrots/fish* and listen to it purr happily.

In stories such as (14), discourse-supported words like *carrots* elicited a larger N₄₀₀ effect than words like *fish*, a result taken to index the failure of discourse context to immediately affect language comprehension. However, in items like these, the precise message-level representation faces rather tough competition from other cues that reinforce real-world contingencies, such as convergent or scenario mediated priming from nearby words like *feed*, *cat*, and possibly *bowl*. In addition, the effectiveness of the message-level cue depends on how well (and how rapidly) readers have been able to incorporate the negator. At odds with early N₄₀₀ observations (Fischler et al., 1983; Kounios and Holcomb, 1992), everyday language experience suggests that people can in principle interpret negations very effectively (“I’m afraid your paper is not suitable for publication in *Science*”), and recent evidence (Nieuwland and Kuperberg, 2008) suggests that what may matter is how pragmatically felicitous the negation is. With negation “coming out of the blue” (“if cats were not carnivores,” “a robin is not a bird”), it is probably much more difficult to rapidly construct an adequate message-level representation.

In all, it seems that in pragmatically felicitous narratives, the N₄₀₀ is highly sensitive to how things fit what is being talked about right now, even if it happens to be some imaginary world or negated micro-world. Whether real-world knowledge leaks through in the amplitude of a word-elicited N₄₀₀ may well depend on how effective the

discourse is as a cue to long-term memory, relative to the (possibly convergent and/or scenario-mediated) word cues that provide access to default knowledge.

3.5 *Semantic illusions and information structure*

Behavioral research has shown that people sometimes overlook quite severe semantic anomalies in language, even when asked to look for them (see Sanford and Sturt, 2002 for review). For example, after having been told about a plane crash right on the border between France and Italy, many people miss the anomaly in “The authorities were trying to decide where to bury the survivors” (Barton and Sanford, 1993). What seems critical here is that (a) the context activates a strong scenario, (b) the impostor word – *survivors* – fits the scenario, (c) the impostor word is semantically related to the acceptable word – *victims* – it replaces, and (d) the impostor word is not marked as particularly noteworthy by linguistic focus, such as prosodic stress, italics, or cleft constructions (“It was the survivors that...”). The ERP studies reviewed before all indicate that semantically unexpected or anomalous words immediately generate an N₄₀₀ effect. However, when embedded in spoken stories that obeyed the previously mentioned illusion-inducing conditions, such as (15), the severe anomaly at *suitcase* did *not* elicit an N₄₀₀ effect (Nieuwland and Van Berkum, 2005; see Bohan, 2008 for a similar finding).

- (15) A tourist wanted to bring his huge suitcase onto the airplane. However, because the suitcase was so heavy, the woman behind the check-in counter decided to charge the tourist extra. In response, the tourist opened his suitcase and threw some stuff out. So now the suitcase of the resourceful tourist weighed less than the maximum twenty kilos. Next, the woman told the *tourist/suitcase* that... (story continues).

The precise interpretation of this remains to be established, and again depends in

part on what the N₄₀₀ can be assumed to reflect. On the integration assumption, the absence of an N₄₀₀ effect to anomalous words suggests that the comprehension system suffers from a temporary semantic illusion (Nieuwland and Van Berkum, 2005; cf. Hoeks, Stowe, and Doedens, 2004 for a similar result in sentences). However, the memory retrieval account of the N₄₀₀ pursued in this review may open up other possibilities. In the Nieuwland and Van Berkum study, for example, a relevant factor might be that *suitcase* has been mentioned several times before and is highly salient, eliminating the need for long-term memory retrieval. For both studies, the impostor word’s strong association to the scenario as well as to the coherent word may also facilitate retrieval.

The behavioral literature on semantic illusions has revealed that they are more likely to occur in situations in which the word is deaccented or otherwise marked as business as usual (e.g., Sanford et al., 2006). This predicts that if the anomaly is brought into focus, an N₄₀₀ effect should resurface, and studies investigating this are currently underway. Also, there is initial evidence that words brought into focus by accentuation elicit a larger N₄₀₀ component than a deaccented word, irrespective of anomaly (Li, Hagoort, and Yang, 2008). The story for how such phenomena mesh with the memory retrieval account is far from complete (but see Van Berkum, 2009 for an attempt in terms of attention controlled intensified memory retrieval, along lines suggested by Sanford and Garrod, 2005). But I suspect that a closer examination of these surprising phenomena will help us make important progress in unraveling the architecture of interpretation and its link to the N₄₀₀.

In all, I have argued (see Van Berkum, 2009, for details) that the many discourse-dependent modulations of a word-elicited N₄₀₀ probably do *not directly* reflect the ease or difficulty with which the word’s meaning is integrated in a structured (e.g., Jackendoffian or DRT-style) conceptual representation of the unfolding message. In the face of many other N₄₀₀ phenomena, a more parsimonious account is that

the N_{400} directly reflects whatever sense making is achieved through a more primitive resonance-based “analysis-by-retrieval” in long-term memory (i.e., pattern recognition and pattern completion). Message-dependent N_{400} effects can then simply come about because the structured conceptual representations involved – if sufficiently rapidly computed – can act as retrieval cues (or primes) to semantic long-term memory. Of course, parsimony only takes you that far. But if the proposal holds up, more direct ERP reflections of message-level structure building must be sought elsewhere.

4 Establishing reference in discourse

In “The deadline for my chapter was ten days ago. If I don’t finish it soon, the editor will start bugging me,” determining the referent of *it* seems quite trivial. However, in “The deadline for my chapter was ten days ago. If I keep on ignoring it, the editor will start bugging me,” things are not so clear, for *it* can now refer to the chapter or the deadline. Moreover, upon closer examination, in the original example the neuter pronoun *it* can formally also refer to either, and the ambiguity is removed by the meaning of other words in its vicinity. These examples reveal that establishing reference in discourse is a nontrivial job.

4.1 *Ambiguous referential expressions*

In an ERP study that examined the nature and time course of such discourse-level referential analysis (Van Berkum, Brown, and Hagoort, 1999a), participants were presented with short passages that contained a referentially unambiguous or ambiguous expression in the last sentence, such as *the lecturer* in (16).

(16) In dismay, the faculty dean called the lecturer and the professor (the two lecturers) to his office. This was because the lecturer (one of the lecturers) had committed plagiarism, and the professor (the other one) had faked some of

his research data. The dean told the lecturer that there was ample reason to sack him.

Relative to their referentially successful counterparts, referentially ambiguous expressions elicited a sustained negative ERP shift right at the ambiguous written noun, emerging at about 300–400 ms over the front of the head. A similar effect was obtained with spoken nouns (Van Berkum et al., 2003), as well as with spoken and written pronouns in single sentences (“David shot at Michael as he jumped over the fence”; Nieuwland and Van Berkum, 2006b; see Van Berkum et al., 2007, for review and Hammer et al., 2005 for a possible exception). Also, the mechanism involved is relatively smart: In a context in which, say, one of the two lecturers has just fled from the building, “The dean told the lecturer” does not elicit the effect, even though the episodic memory of the discourse does contain *two* lecturers (Nieuwland, Otten, and Van Berkum, 2007).

Thus, based on the unfolding sentence as well as prior text, people rapidly work out which are the conceptually *suitable* referents. Also, because the effect of referential ambiguity is largest over the front of the head, clearly different from the N_{400} effect, we can infer that different aspects of interpretation are handled by at least partly different networks in the brain (see Nieuwland, Petersson, and Van Berkum, 2007 for convergent evidence from fMRI). What the network at hand is doing exactly remains to be established, but plausible options include computationally intensive inferencing as people are trying to resolve the ambiguity and, possibly related, a higher load on frontal working memory systems (cf. Baggio, Van Lambalgen, and Hagoort, 2008; Müller, King, and Kutas, 1997; Münte, Schiltz, and Kutas, 1998; Pylkkänen, 2008; Streb, Rösler, and Hennighausen, 1999; see Van Berkum, 2009; Van Berkum et al., 2007; Nieuwland and Van Berkum, 2008a for discussion).

Interestingly, if people do not know who or what is being referred to, this can immediately affect their word-by-word *syntactic*

analysis of the sentence (Van Berkum et al., 1999a). For instance, when *the lecturer* in “The dean told the lecturer that...” is referentially ambiguous, people are lured into analyzing the subsequent word *that* as starting a relative clause that will tell them which lecturer was meant (e.g., “...the lecturer that had committed plagiarism”) rather than as starting some other syntactic structure (e.g., “...that there was ample reason to sack him”). If the sentence then continues with the latter after all, we see a P600 effect, an effect reliably elicited by words at which the currently pursued syntactic analysis runs into problems (Osterhout et al., this volume). Thus, referential factors can lead readers to momentarily perceive a syntactic error when there is none (see Van Berkum et al., 2007 for a comparable phenomenon in single sentences; and Bornkessel, Schlesewsky, and Friederici, 2003 for related findings with question–answer pairs).

Even more striking, the conceptual pull of referential ambiguity can sometimes briefly lure people into pursuing a syntactic analysis that is *ungrammatical*. In a Dutch version of “The dean told the lecturer that...” for example, referential ambiguity can lead people to momentarily read *that* as a relative pronoun *even if* a relative pronoun of this form does not agree in gender marking with the gender of the preceding noun (Van Berkum et al., 1999b). Such observations are important, because they suggest that when interpreting language, people don’t just slavishly follow the syntax. Other recent ERP findings also suggest that good sense can sometimes outweigh good syntax (Kuperberg, 2007). Against so-called syntax-first or “syntactocentric” models of processing, this indicates that comprehenders are trying to deal with multiple levels of linguistic structure simultaneously, without giving one of them absolute priority.

In a recent ERP study on how referential processing interacts with semantic composition (Nieuwland and Van Berkum, 2008b), nouns embedded in a short story could be semantically anomalous, referentially ambiguous, or both (e.g., “The dean ate the lecturer” in a story about two equally

salient lecturers). These doubly problematic nouns elicited a clear N400 effect, indicating a problem with how the words’ meaning fit the story context. However, they did not elicit the sustained frontal negativity typically observed with referentially ambiguous nouns, presumably indicating that people did not engage in additional work to disambiguate reference. This is in line with a standard story in which sense-dependent processing precedes – and sometimes preempts – referential computations (but see Nieuwland and Van Berkum, 2008b for a catch involving P600 effects in a subset of the participants).

4.2 *Unambiguous referential expressions*

Referential ambiguity is not the only way to tap into aspects of establishing reference. Several studies have compared the effects of using a repeated, inferable, or new nominal NP in text. In one of these (Anderson and Holcomb, 2005), participants read mini-stories like:

- (17) In dismay, Kathy sat nervously in the *cab/taxi* on her way to the airport.
The/A cab came very close to hitting a car.

Relative to newly introduced nouns (e.g., *cab* in the first sentence), synonyms in the second sentence (*cab* after *taxi*) elicited a smaller N400 effect, and literally repeated nouns (e.g., *cab* after *cab*) elicited the smallest N400 effect. Although now crossing a sentence boundary, these effects echo other N400 repetition and semantic priming effects, and are easily explained as a result of facilitated long-term memory retrieval (literally repeated NPs do sometimes elicit a *larger* N400 effect than newly introduced NPs but this has been shown to depend on whether the discourse status of the antecedent makes repeated reference felicitous or not; Camblin et al., 2007; Ledoux et al., 2007; Swaab, Camblin and Gordon, 2004).

The N400 effects in the Anderson and Holcomb study did not depend on whether

the article suggested a previously introduced (“The...”) or new (“A...”) discourse entity, a null result that was speculatively explained as resulting from weak information structure effects of definiteness being washed out by much stronger effects of repetition and (synonym-)semantic priming in this particular set of materials. Such an explanation is in line with the memory retrieval account of the N₄₀₀ discussed before. However, and this is important, this should *not* be taken as evidence that readers entirely failed to pick up on the semantic and pragmatic difference between *The cab* and *A cab* – on the memory retrieval account, all one can infer here is that the distinction did not differentially affect memory retrieval at the subsequent noun. The stronger inference that the distinction was somehow not represented in conceptual structure only follows from the stronger assumption that the N₄₀₀ directly reflects core semantic and pragmatic integration operations.

A second study on repeated, inferable, and new nominal NPs (Burkhardt, 2006; see also Burkhardt, 2007; Burkhardt and Roehm, 2007) examined ERPs to the NP in the second sentence in:

- (18) Tobias was having a chat with Nina.
He said that the *conductor* was very impressive.
- (19) Tobias visited a concert in Berlin.
He said that the *conductor* was very impressive.
- (20) Tobias visited a conductor in Berlin.
He said that the *conductor* was very impressive.

Relative to newly introduced nouns (e.g., *conductor* in [18]), repeated nouns (“*conductor*” in [20]) elicited a smaller N₄₀₀ effect. “Bridged” nouns that were inferentially related to the antecedent (e.g., *conductor* after *concert* in [19]) also elicited a smaller N₄₀₀ effect, of equal amplitude as that to the repeated noun. The latter is interesting, as it seems to suggest that in coherent discourse, words like *concert* prepare the reader for *conductor* to the same extent as *conductor* itself does.

Relative to repeated nouns, new and bridged nouns also both elicited an enhanced positivity between 600 and 900 ms, which was interpreted as a P₆₀₀ effect indexing anaphoric integration cost due to the establishment of an independent, new discourse referent (see Burkhardt, 2007 for a related result). Whether this positivity is indeed an instance of the P₆₀₀ effect elicited by unexpected structure remains to be established. However, the findings do suggest that late positivities can sometimes index discourse-referential operations. A possibly related finding involving bare quantifiers (Kaan, Dallas, and Barkley, 2007) was obtained in a very repetitive and possibly quite transparent design, and should therefore be interpreted with caution.

Two ERP studies have examined the implications of changing the referential status of pronouns across the sentence boundary. One of them (Streb, Hennighausen, and Rösler, 2004) systematically varied the distance between a pronoun and its antecedent:

- (21) Beate has a small “boardy home” for animals.
Everywhere in the house are animals.
Tom is an old cat.
Today *it* scratched the door of the woman. [near]
- (22) The weather is beautiful today.
Gerhart is an experienced mountaineer.
Anna wants to go on a walking tour.
Then *he* shows the ascent to the tourist. [intermediate]
- (23) *Lisa* strolls across a bazaar.
Peter sells gems to tourists.
The gems are cut excellently.
Then *she* will buy a diamond from the trader. [far]

In line with the notion that pronouns tend to prefer highly salient antecedents (Garnham, 2001), more distant pronouns elicited larger N₄₀₀ components. Because pronouns have relatively shallow semantic content, this could be taken as a challenge to the memory retrieval account of the N₄₀₀. However,

they do have *some* meaning, and retrieving this can still be more difficult. A conceptual mismatch between context and word might also lead to intensified retrieval of information related to the *context*. Why such mismatch results in an N₄₀₀ effect here and in a P₆₀₀ effect in other studies (e.g., Hammer et al., 2005; Osterhout and Mobley, 1995; Van Berkum et al., 2007) is not yet clear.

Elevated N₄₀₀ components have also been observed to text-embedded singular definite pronouns *he* or *she* as compared to plural *they* (Filik, Sanford, and Leuthold, 2008):

- (24) The in-flight meal I got was more impressive than usual.
In fact, *she/they* courteously presented the food as well.
- (25) The in-flight meal I got from the stewardess was more impressive than usual.
In fact, *she/they* courteously presented the food as well.

Because *they* can more easily be used without an explicit antecedent (e.g., “They’re digging up the road again”), this N₄₀₀ effect has been proposed to reflect a difference in the referential demands structurally imposed by *he* or *she*, as compared to *they*. However, note that it is not the case that *they* can *always* leave its referent relatively unspecified (e.g., “At the UN meeting, the Chinese felt increasingly uncomfortable because of the human rights issues continuously raised by other delegates. So they left.”). Important, the pronoun *itself* does not signal which situation is at hand. This N₄₀₀ effect may thus be in need of another explanation.

In the same study, singular definite pronouns without an explicit antecedent, like *she* in (24), also elicited a frontocentral positivity that peaked around 750 ms, relative to all other three conditions. Analogous to the late positivity to new and bridged nominals (Burkhardt, 2006; 2007), this – more anterior – late positivity was taken to reflect the discourse complexity involved in inferring and adding an additional entity to the discourse

model. Of course, this convergence does not imply that *all* referentially induced late positivities reflect discourse-model expansion. For example, the P₆₀₀ effect to the pronoun in sentences like “David praised Linda because *he...*” (in which verb meaning sets up a referential expectation; Van Berkum et al., 2007) is difficult to explain in terms of the need to set up a new discourse entity, as in this case, the required entity is already there. Whether this means that we’re dealing with a single late positivity with an as yet ill-understood functional interpretation, or with two distinct positivities that happen to look the same, remains to be established (and may require other techniques, e.g., MEG).

So what does all this tell us? Although the diverse ERP findings on establishing reference in discourse resist a simple interpretation, several general observations can be made. First, these findings testify to the speed with which comprehenders try to bind incoming words to entities in the discourse or situation model. Furthermore, although contingent upon some form of compositional semantics, referential processing is not fully constrained by the syntax. Third, whereas the processing consequences of referential ambiguity consistently show up as sustained frontal negativities, the various computations that occur in the absence of such ambiguity show up in several very different ERP effects. The late positivity reported by Burkhardt (2006) and Filik et al. (2008) may genuinely reflect the establishing of a new discourse entity. Other late positivities (Van Berkum et al., 1999b; Van Berkum et al., 2007) are more plausibly explained by a strong referential attractor leading the system to at least momentarily put the blame on syntax. And many of the N₄₀₀ effects to referring nouns and pronouns (Anderson and Holcomb, 2005; Burkhardt, 2006; possibly Streb et al., 2004) may well reflect simple (word priming) or complex (information-structural) modulations of the ease with which the critical word’s meaning is retrieved from memory, making these effects rather indirect – possibly sometimes even poor – indices of

establishing a referential dependency. In all, there is clearly no unique ERP signature of referential processing, and the signatures that we get need not all *directly* reflect the processes that link an expression to its discourse-model referent.

5 Anticipation in discourse

To what extent does the speed with which readers and listeners relate the syntactic, semantic, and referential implications of incoming words to their knowledge of the wider discourse depend on expectations? This is a difficult question to answer, and we won't get very far unless we ask an additional question: expectations of *what*? After all, language users are continuously analyzing the unfolding discourse at many different levels (such as phonology, syntax, semantics, and reference). Furthermore, listeners and readers not only keep a record of *what is being talked about*, that is, the "situation model" (Kintsch, 1998; Zwaan and Singer, 2003) or "situational representation" (Clark, 1996), but they also keep track of *how the communicative enterprise itself is getting along*, encompassing the "textbase" (Kintsch, 1998) or "discourse record" (Clark, 1996) as well as, for example, inferences about what the speaker may or may not know, and about why this conversation is being held in the first place. In discourse, people might in principle develop expectations at *any* of these levels, based on information supplied by any other level.

Some of the first N₄₀₀ experiments on interpretation in language comprehension were already framed as revealing the effects of word expectancy, in a way not deemed limited to single sentences (e.g., Kutas and Hillyard, 1984). The attenuated N₄₀₀ elicited by discourse-predictable words (e.g., *sword* in example [2]) relative to coherent but somewhat less predictable control words (*lance*; Otten and Van Berkum, 2007) is compatible with the idea that readers and listeners actually anticipate such predictable words as the discourse unfolds. More ERP evidence for discourse-based anticipation

of features has come from studies (e.g., Federmeier and Kutas, 1999; see Federmeier, 2007 for review) in which highly predictive stories were continued with the expected critical word, a semantically related but anomalous alternative, or an unrelated anomalous alternative, as in (26):

(26) They wanted to make the hotel look more like a tropical resort.

So, along the driveway, they planted rows of *palms/pines/tulips*.

Relative to unrelated anomalous words like *tulips*, expected words like *palms* elicited an attenuated N₄₀₀. However, anomalous words like *pin*es that were semantically related to the expected word *also* elicited an attenuated N₄₀₀. Based on several control results, the most plausible interpretation is that people were preactivating *palms* to such an extent that semantically related concepts were also preactivated. Note that the attenuated N₄₀₀ to anomalous *pin*es relative to equally anomalous *tulips* is not easy to account for if the N₄₀₀ directly indexes high-level conceptual integration. But it is readily interpreted under a memory-based account of the N₄₀₀; in fact, one can see this as another case of undesirable real-world knowledge leaking through (cf. Section 3.4).

Stronger evidence that people predict upcoming words was obtained in an ERP study that probed for traces of lexical anticipation *before* the discourse-predictable word came along (Van Berkum et al., 2005). Participants listened to (Dutch) mini-stories such as (27), which in a paper-and-pencil cloze test were predominantly completed with one particular critical noun (in this case, *painting*, the Dutch translation of which is a neuter-gender word). To test whether such discourse-based lexical prediction would also occur online as part of real-time language comprehension, the EEG participants at this point first heard a gender-inflected adjective, whose syntactic gender either agreed with the anticipated noun, as in (28), or did not agree with this expected noun, as in (29).

- (27) The burglar had no trouble locating the secret family safe.
Of course, it was situated behind a...
- (28) ...big_{neu} but rather unobtrusive painting_{neu}
- (29) ...big_{com} but rather unobtrusive bookcase_{com}.

Relative to the gender-congruent prenominal adjective in (28), the gender-incongruent adjective in (29) elicited a small but reliable ERP effect right at the inflection. Because this prediction effect hinged on the idiosyncratic (hence memorized) syntactic gender of an expected but not yet presented noun, and because the effect collapsed when the prior context sentence was removed, it suggested that discourse-level information can indeed lead people to anticipate specific upcoming words as the text unfolds. In addition, the fact that such prediction could be probed via syntactic gender agreement suggested that the syntactic properties of those anticipated “ghost” words can immediately begin to interact with locally unfolding syntactic constraints, such as the gender inflection on a prenominal adjective. Follow-up experiments have revealed that, at least when probed in this gender-sensitive paradigm, such discourse-based lexical predictions cannot be reduced to the effects of simple or convergent lexical priming (Otten and Van Berkum, 2008; Otten, Nieuwland, and Van Berkum, 2007). Also, comparable prediction has been observed in constraining single sentences (e.g., Wicha, Moreno, and Kutas, 2004).

These findings suggest that people predict specific upcoming words as syntactic entities (lemmas), that is, a representation of the word in terms of its syntactic category and the associated syntactic features (e.g., gender). However, consistent with the idea that opportunities for discourse-based prediction exist at many levels of analysis, there is also ERP evidence for the anticipation of upcoming referents (Nieuwland and Van Berkum, 2006a; Van Berkum et al., 2007) and, in a sentence paradigm, upcoming phonological word forms (DeLong, Urbach, and Kutas, 2005). The mechanisms behind all

this anticipation remain to be established. One currently debated idea is that comprehenders need to run a sophisticated forward model at various levels of analysis as part of their basic comprehension strategy (see e.g., Pickering and Garrod, 2007). However, as argued elsewhere (Van Berkum, 2009), much of it may actually come for free as a function of how human memory works (Gerrig and O’Brien, 2005).

6 Getting the speaker into the picture

In EEG research with spoken language materials, the need for a speaker is often seen as an unavoidable complication, the price to be paid for having naturally unfolding spoken input instead of word-by-word presentation on the screen. In line with this, speakers are usually chosen on how well they produce text without drawing any attention to themselves (by, say, hesitations, or a highly salient accent). However, pragmatic analyses of language meaning (e.g., Carston, 2002; Clark, 1996; Grice, 1957; Kempson, 2001; Levinson, 1983; Sperber and Wilson, 1995; Wilson and Sperber, 2004) reveal that listeners can only really make sense of language if they take the speaker and his or her perspective into account. Thus, to understand the neurocognition of interpretation in full, we need to bring the speaker into the picture.

One immediate reminder of the speaker’s existence is when he or she hesitates in delivering a message. In a refreshing ERP study (Corley, MacGregor, and Donaldson, 2007), the impact of such hesitations on the listener has recently been examined with materials such as:

- (30) Everyone’s got bad habits, and mine is biting my *nails/tongue*.
- (31) Everyone’s got bad habits, and mine is biting my...er...*nails/tongue*.

In a fluently delivered utterance like (30), highly expected words elicited a much reduced N₄₀₀ effect relative to their less expected counterparts, in line with other observations of predictability effects (e.g.,

Federmeier and Kutas, 1999; Hagoort and Brown, 1994; Otten and Van Berkum, 2007). But after a disfluency such as in (31), predictable words were much less effective in attenuating the N₄₀₀. On an N₄₀₀ integration account, this suggests that hesitation can interfere with integrating the meaning of a subsequent word. On a memory retrieval account, it suggests that implicit text-based anticipation is sensitive to speaker performance, possibly mediated by implicit knowledge about when (and when not) to expect fluent delivery. Either way, a marked delivery matters. More generally, the study is a good example of how to address at least some issues relevant to conversation without actually having one.

Another ERP study (Van Berkum et al., 2008), recently examined when and how listeners make use of voice-based inferences about who the speaker is. As revealed by the fact that “I need to see my gynecologist” is really odd for a man to say (unless he’s Arnold Schwarzenegger in that absurd Hollywood product), inferences about the speaker are directly relevant to interpretation. There is debate, however, on how and precisely when such knowledge is used (cf. Lattner and Friederici, 2003). In the EEG experiment, people heard utterances whose content did or did not match probabilistic inferences supported by the speaker’s voice, as in (32) delivered with a male or female voice, (33) with the voice of a young kid or an adult, and (34) delivered with a stereotypically “common” or “upper class” accent.

- (32) I always rent movies with lots of *violence* in them.
 (33) On Saturday I spent the whole afternoon playing *marbles* on the street.
 (34) I have a big *tattoo* on my back.

Speaker-inconsistent critical words elicited a small but reliable N₄₀₀ effect, beginning at 200–300 ms from acoustic word onset. This reveals that listeners rapidly classify speakers on the basis of their voices and anchor the utterance to the speaker immediately, somehow using their knowledge of the speaker’s probable sex, age, and social

stratum to evaluate the plausibility of what is being asserted. Again, the most parsimonious account for this is that, after, for example, having heard “I have a big” in a stereotypically “upper class” accent (instead of a more “common” accent), listeners find it more difficult to retrieve the meaning of *tattoo* from long-term memory.

Finally, recent work on concurrent speech–gesture comprehension (Özyürek et al., 2007) has shown that a mismatch between a spoken word (e.g., “He slips on the roof and *rolls* down”) and a simultaneous iconic co-speech gesture (e.g., finger-gestured *walking*) also elicits an increased N₄₀₀. Because such gestures probably have little to no context-independent meaning stored in long-term memory, this result is sometimes taken as strong evidence for an integration account of the N₄₀₀. However, because mismatching gestures can hinder the retrieval of a relevant meaning for concurrently presented words, this result is also easily accommodated in a memory retrieval account of that component. Either way, the findings testify to the speed with which extra-sentential information picked up from the speaker can affect the processes involved in making sense of an utterance.

7 How about conversation?

Whereas the electrophysiology of text comprehension is now gradually picking up speed, the electrophysiology of conversation is as yet nonexistent. To some extent, this simply echoes the fact that most psycholinguistic theories and experiments are, implicitly or explicitly, about monologue. Furthermore, the various reasons that have caused many EEG experimenters to think twice before entering the domain of text comprehension will surely also have caused them to stay away from conversation. In addition, real two-person conversation brings with it an entirely new set of methodological problems. One of them is that in contrast to text, conversation cannot be fully predesigned. As in eyetracking research on conversation (see Trueswell and Tanenhaus,

2005), probably the best way to make sure that EEG participants encounter the critical input at the right time is to have them interact with a confederate of the experimenter in a collaborative setting that can be scripted in relatively natural ways. Unfortunately, fitting many lengthy conversational trials into an EEG experiment is not easy. Also, people tend to speak, gesture, and otherwise move a lot in conversation, which gives rise to large EEG artifacts. In all, we're currently facing the enormous challenge to come up with conversational settings that minimize movement, supply lots of critical trials, and are yet sufficiently natural to be worth our while. Whether a virtual reality setup can help attenuate some of these problems is currently being explored.

Some researchers have recently turned to other ways to get a handle on conversationally relevant phenomena. One, as we have seen, is to modify the classic monologue paradigm in ways that bring the speaker into the picture. Another promising avenue is to use an "overhearing" paradigm, in which the participant listens to predesigned conversational exchanges (e.g., Magne et al., 2005; Toepel, Pannekamp, and Alter, 2007). In an ERP experiment on the role of prosody in discourse context (Magne et al., 2005), participants listened to relatively natural question–answer exchanges between male and female speakers, designed such that a contrastive accent in the answer did or did not match expectations raised by the question, as in (35) versus (36):

- (35) Q: Did he give his fiancée a ring or a bracelet? A: He gave a *RING* to his fiancée.
 (36) Q: Did he give a ring to his fiancée or his sister? A: He gave a *RING* to his fiancée.

Surprisingly, whether a noun did or did not carry a contrastive accent by itself did not affect the ERPs, in spite of the fact that accent substantially altered the physical realization of the spoken noun (contra Li et al., 2008). The only thing that mattered was whether the prosody matched expectations raised

by the question: Relative to pragmatically congruous counterparts, the pragmatically incongruous NPs consistently elicited very rapid differential ERP effects. However, the results of this innovative experiment may have been compromised by the fact that at every trial, participants were asked to decide whether the intonation of the answer was coherent or not in relation to the question. Because secondary tasks recruit their own brain activity, and because the instruction to only respond after the linguistic input does not guarantee that the task-related *evaluation* will also be delayed that long, an additional task like this carries the risk that language-related ERP effects become confounded with task-related ERP effects (see also Van Berkum, 2004).

The possibility of task-related confounds should not in general deter people from studying language comprehension (and production) in a task environment. Most EEG research to date falls squarely within the *language-as-product* tradition (Clark, 1996; 1997), in which readers and listeners are faced with bits of text they essentially don't care about (but see Van Berkum et al., 2009, for an exception). Of course, to the extent that the processes under study do their job in the same way regardless of what the linguistic input is for – as is commonly and perhaps reasonably assumed for syntactic parsing – this isn't too much of a problem. However, with *interpretation*, things are not so clear. Again, some processes may well turn out to do their job regardless of whether the input serves a bigger purpose. Also, if the stimuli themselves are sufficiently engaging, the experiment will be relevant to what language users do when they pick up a novel, or, say, a tabloid in a commuter train. Nevertheless, it seems critical to also record EEG in experiments where language truly matters to *getting things done* (*language-as-action*; Clark, 1996), such as building a Lego construction or baking a cake (see Trueswell and Tanenhaus, 2005, for examples). Such paradigms can help examine the generality of results obtained with snippets of text, as well as address specific issues associated with goal-oriented conversation. Moreover,

Discourse-dependent referential, syntactic, and semantic ERP effects

*In dismay, the faculty dean called the lecturer and the professor (the two lecturers) to his office. This was because the lecturer (one of the lecturers) had committed plagiarism, and the professor (the other one) had faked some of his research data. The dean told the lecturer that **there** was ample reason to **sack/promote** him.*

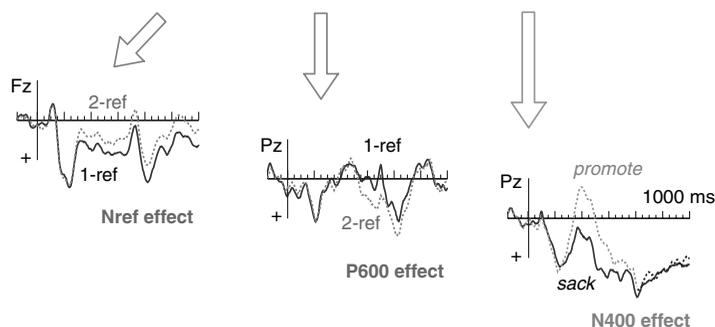


Figure 30.1. From left to right: A sustained frontal negative shift or “Nref effect” to a discourse-induced referential problem (in the two-referent version of the story, *lecturer* is ambiguous), a P600 effect to a discourse-induced syntactic problem (the provisional relative-clause analysis temporarily pursued at *that* in the two-referent context is subsequently ruled out by *there*), and an N400 effect to a discourse-induced semantic problem (*promote* does not fit the wider story context). The example item is shown here in several variants (one- and two-referent contexts, coherent/anomalous ending), but any one participant saw just a single version. ERP waveforms are time-locked to the presentation of the written critical word (zero ms) and are shown for 1200 ms each. Negative voltage is up. All data were obtained in a single reading experiment.

and particularly relevant here, they would have the enormous advantage of getting *naturally motivated* language comprehension for free.¹

8 So what kind of system is this?

Stepping back from all the details, we can discern several general operating principles at work in discourse comprehension.

- (1) *Rapidly contextualized processing.* First of all, the words of an unfolding spoken or written sentence are very rapidly related to what the wider discourse is about, as soon as they come in. Because

¹ Note that what matters is not so much whether the collaborative task at hand is a natural one, but whether the relevant utterances are a natural part of whatever is needed to get the job done.

words encode information at various levels of linguistic analysis (phonology, syntax, meaning, and reference, Jackendoff, 2002), such discourse-sensitive incremental processing can show up in various ways, some of which have been summarized in Figure 30.1.

Illustrated here is, from left to right, the harvest of a *single* EEG experiment, designed to obtain three different discourse-relevant effects in the same participants: a rapid ERP effect of discourse-level referential ambiguity, a downstream P600 garden-path effect associated with the discourse-dependent modulation of how the parser analyzes a subsequent syntactic ambiguity, and the N400 effect elicited by a discourse-dependent semantic anomaly. The impact of discourse-level factors does not only show up at the first relevant word in each of the three

cases, but also shows up extremely rapidly *at* that particular word. Furthermore, studies that contrasted discourse-level factors with convergent lexical priming or other more superficial mechanisms confirm that what is at work here is more than just a lexical priming or repetition confound. Unfolding words make very rapid contact with a deep representation of the wider discourse, at the level of *what's being talked about*, as well as *how* and *by whom*.

- (2) *Discourse-based "presonance" at multiple levels.* The evidence discussed in Section 5 suggests that readers and listeners go beyond incremental processing and can use discourse-level information to make predictions about what information might be needed soon, as well as about upcoming communication. Such predictions need not involve costly conscious deliberation. Instead, many of them may virtually come for free, as a result of how information in our content-addressable long-term memory resonates with low- and high-level aspects of currently processed information. This idea of predictive resonance has nicely been captured in the term *presonance* coined by Zwaan and Kaschak (2009). What the EEG records suggest is that such presonance can be driven by simple primes in prior discourse as well as by much more complex message-level representations of that prior discourse. Furthermore, the targets of anticipation can involve such things as the semantic, syntactic, and phonological features of specific upcoming words, whom or what will be referred to soon, and upcoming syntactic structure. In all, it seems that people can extrapolate unfolding discourse at a variety of levels in a relatively cost-free way. Of course, that doesn't make presonance (or more sophisticated forward modeling) a complete model of discourse comprehension – much of the work there *must* be about building precisely structured and dynamically evolving representations of what is said and meant, as well
- as of the situation being talked about. However, such complex representations do also drive simple long-term memory retrieval, and thereby prepare the system to a greater or lesser extent for the next bit of linguistic information coming up.
- (3) *Simultaneous multiple constraint satisfaction.* In line with evidence from other methodologies, the ERP data are not in line with a classic feedforward model of comprehension in which different levels of language analysis – phonology/orthography, syntax, compositional sentence semantics, reference, and other discourse-level pragmatics – only constrain each other in an ordered left-to-right fashion. Syntax does constrain interpretation, and specific combinations of word meanings do help define a referential target. But at the same time, the evidence that discourse-level constraints can briefly override locally unambiguous syntactic information, and that a suitable cartoon-like wider discourse can completely override a severe real-world anomaly, attests to the power that discourse-level representations can have over more local lower-level constraints. In all, the picture painted here is that of a system trying to simultaneously satisfy constraints at multiple levels of representation (Trueswell and Tanenhaus, 2005; Jackendoff, 2002, 2007), without giving strict priority to any one level.
- (4) *Discourse is not so special.* Nothing in the ERP evidence reviewed here supports the idea that the processes involved in discourse-dependent conceptual interpretation are any different from those involved in sentence-internal conceptual interpretation. For example, discourse- and sentence-dependent N₄₀₀ effects are identical for anomalies, for more subtle manipulations of contextual fit, and, as a special case of absence, for semantic illusions. The ERP effect of referential ambiguity reported in Section 4 can be elicited in texts and single sentences alike. And people predict

upcoming words in discourse and single sentences alike. The sentence domain is of course highly relevant for syntax, as well as for the compositional semantics involved in determining *sentence* meaning. However, for much of the interpretation beyond that, the sentence boundary is irrelevant. Interpretation is fundamentally contextualized, and it doesn't seem to matter to the brain whether this context is defined by, say, the first few words of a single unfolding sentence, a 500-page Russian novel, or who the speaker is.

9 Where to go next?

9.1 *From discourse-unit to discourse-level processing*

To get this review started, I provisionally defined *discourse comprehension* as the processes involved in digesting *units of language* bigger than a single sentence, that is, a fragment of text or conversation. Within neurocognitive research on language comprehension, this reflects current practice in thinking about discourse. But *discourse* has an important second meaning, that of a *level of mental representation and processing*. This is evident in psycholinguistic research on situation models (e.g., Garnham, 2001; Johnson-Laird, 1983; Kintsch, 1998; Zwaan, 2004; Zwaan and Radvansky, 1998; see Clark, this volume), and in linguistic research on discourse-level representations (e.g., DRT; Geurts and Beaver, 2007; Kamp and Reyle, 1993). Discourse-level representation and processing is in principle orthogonal to whether the exchange consists of a single sentence or more, because even a single isolated sentence is analyzed at the discourse level (hence explaining the similarity of sentence- and discourse-dependent ERP effects). It just happens to be the case that prior discourse context is often a convenient way to modulate discourse-level processing.

This has three important implications. First, we need not *always* go beyond the single sentence to study interpretive

phenomena associated with discourse and conversation. Research on, say, discourse connectives or turn taking obviously requires a bigger unit. But research on establishing reference or updating situation models can in principle be conducted with texts, conversations, and single sentences alike – good news for the cognitive neuroscientist. An important second implication, and the other side of the coin, is that “the neural substrate of discourse and conversation” cannot simply be isolated by comparing the processing of connected text to that of single sentences (a relatively standard working assumption in fMRI research on text comprehension). The comparison may well reveal various systems that are being taxed *more* by a long piece of discourse, as well as some of the processes that by necessity require text (e.g., those sensitive to discourse connectives). But if much of the really interesting discourse-level stuff occurs in *every* sentence regardless of whether or not it is embedded in a larger text, the subtraction is going to partial out the very stuff that one is after. The third and related implication is that in developing new research on the electrophysiology of discourse and conversation, researchers may want to think twice about what they are really after. Studying the neurocognition of discourse and conversation by examining language comprehension embedded in a big and rich *unit* of language use looks immediately relevant (and for a reason discussed later, it is). At the same time, I think the deeper thing we should be after is the neurocognition of discourse-level processing, as formalized in pragmatics and some corners of semantics (cf. Van Berkum, 2009). If a big unit helps, that's fine. But in this particular enterprise, size is not the issue.

9.2 *Other directions*

One of the strengths of ERPs is that their multidimensional nature (polarity, distribution, shape, and timing) can inform us about the identity of the processes engaged. However, this is difficult to benefit from when, instead of having two crisp ERP effects (say, N₄₀₀ and P₆₀₀) with clearly

separable descriptions and well-understood functional significance, our inferential benchmark in the literature is a large set of many rather similar and many very different ERP effects, with multiple competing functional accounts for each. Unfortunately, it looks like we are steadily moving towards the latter situation. This doesn't mean that the electrophysiology of discourse and conversation is doomed. It does suggest that whenever one can design ERP experiments such that the logic does not solely rely on the *nature* of the effect, this is the safer way to go (Van Berkum, 2004). It also points to the growing importance of linking specific ERP effects to their neural sources, by whatever available means (constrained source modeling, using evidence from hemifield studies, MEG, and fMRI, etc.)

Another way out of the increasing mess of ERP effects is to make a serious start with relating ERP research to detailed linguistic (e.g., DRT-style) and computational (Graesser, McNamara, and Rus, this volume) models of discourse-level interpretation, and to derive further studies from that (see Baggio et al., 2008 for a good example). Neuroimagers are sometimes inclined to think that, now that we can “look under the hood of the car,” we can pin down the architecture of comprehension by simply running more EEG, fMRI, and TMS experiments. I think this is a mistake. Language interpretation is complex business, and we can only seriously move forward if we ground our neural research in more precise theories that also take the relevant semantic, pragmatic, and behavioral findings into account.

Finally, we must take EEG, MEG, and other neuroimaging measures a little further into the arena of real language use (Clark, 1996). As mentioned before, not all discourse-level issues necessarily require a big chunk of language to be investigated. However, language is first and foremost an instrument by which people coordinate with each other (Clark, this volume). Thus, as with any system designed for a purpose, it is not unlikely that at least some of the features of our language comprehension and production system will be customized to operate in this

particular cognitive and social niche. Ignoring that niche in our neurocognitive research would be a capital mistake. In the words of Small and Nussbaum (2004, p. 301; see also Clark, 1997; Kutas, 2006), it is high time to “examine cortical activity during language behavior that most closely matches conditions of evolution: language use by people at a time and place, aiming to understand and to be understood, fulfilling a purpose.”

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