

Priming Effects on the Interpretation of Ambiguous Discourse Relations

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Abstract

Many theories of discourse structure rely on the idea that the segments comprising the discourse are linked through inferred relations such as causality and temporal contiguity. These theories often suggest that the information needed to determine the relation can be found when the discourse is interpreted through the application of world knowledge. However, Sanders (1997) found that the interpretation of ambiguous relations can be affected by the discourse genre. Similarly, Sagi (2006) reported that participants were faster to interpret discourse relations when they were preceded by the same discourse relation. The present study demonstrates that exposure to discourse relations such as result (e.g., John passed Mark in a marathon. He won.) or explanation (e.g., John ... He was in great shape.) can affect the interpretation of subsequent ambiguous relations encountered in an unrelated context. This result suggests that discourse relations are represented independently of the context in which they appear.