

Predicting Coreference: the role of alternative constructions

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Abstract: Expectations about alternative constructions play a crucial role in anaphora resolution.

In a self-paced reading experiment, we presented Portuguese sentences, consisting of a main clause with two referents, followed by a subclause with a pronoun referring unambiguously to one of the referents. The sentences varied in the kind of subordinating conjunction: 'antes que' (before) vs. 'quando' (when).

On the pronoun and the spill-over, there is a clear decrease in reading times for the conjunction 'antes que' in the object coreference condition, whereas no difference was not found for 'quando'.

These results can be explained by comprehenders using an expectation-based strategy: in Portuguese, for sentences with 'antes que' there is a frequent alternative infinitive construction (antes de abrir: before opening), which allows coreference only with the subject of the preceding clause. Upon seeing the subordinate construction, comprehenders may assume that the speaker intended coreference with an antecedent other than the subject.