

Processing Temporality: Position, Tense & Aspect
Britta Stolterfoht (University of Tübingen)

The study I will present investigates the interaction of tense, aspect and syntactic position of temporal adverbials in the interpretation of sentences that are ambiguous with regard to their temporal interpretation. Sentences with specific time-frame adverbials in German and English (e.g., *in three hours*”; see example in (1)) are ambiguous between a durative reading, given in (1a), in which the event takes place in the time interval specified by the adverbial, and an inceptive reading, given in (1b), in which the event will start after this time interval. A series of experiments on German showed that the syntactic position of a temporal adverbial as well as verbal tense influences sentence interpretation. The experimental results will be discussed in the light of different semantic analyses of the ambiguity (underspecification vs. separate semantic representations).

The interaction with tense in a closely related language, namely English that additionally offers verbal aspect as a potentially relevant factor for disambiguating temporal interpretation was investigated in a further series of experiments. The results support the idea that the semantics of the progressive does not provide a resultant state, but that a resultant state is pragmatically implicated in specific environments like past tense (Altshuler & Schwarzschild, 2013; Altshuler, 2016; see also Tonhauser, 2007).

(1) Der Chefkoch kocht die Tomatensuppe in dreißig Minuten.

The chef prepares the tomato soup in thirty minutes.

a. Preparing the tomato soup takes thirty minutes.

durative reading

b. Preparing the tomato soup will start in thirty minutes.

inceptive reading