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First project report of the meeting held on November 11 and 12 in Utrecht

This project aims to provide a cross-linguistic comparison of the use of epistemic vs. content relations across three different populations: adults, normally-developing children and autistic children. In this first project meeting, the modalities of future empirical work were discussed and a preliminary version of the empirical dataset was elaborated.

Processing by adult speakers: three eye-tracking experiments will be conducted, one in Utrecht (in Dutch) and two in Leuven (in French). The first experiment consists in a French adaptation of an existing experiment already conducted with Dutch speakers in Utrecht. This experiment measured reading times for content and epistemic relations, with the two connectives used to express them: *omdat* (content) and *want* (epistemic). The Dutch experiment contained three conditions: (1) sentences with each connective used to express its own type of relation (2) *want* used for content relations in addition to epistemic relations and (3) addition of linguistic markers to the *want*-sentences in order to place subjects in an epistemic context (*according to X, X thinks that Y*). In French, the connectives that stand as natural equivalents to *omdat* and *want* will be used, namely *parce que* and *car*. One notable difference between these two experiments is that the two French connectives can also be used (less prototypically) to express the other kind of relation. Therefore, condition (2) will be expanded to include content sentences with *car* and epistemic sentences with *parce que*. Two additional experiments will focus on the *car/puisque* and *want/aangezien* pairs. The hypothesis under investigation is that in both languages, the use of *puisque/aangezien* implies that the cause segment is treated as part of the common ground whereas *car/want* introduce new information. This hypothesis will be tested using four conditions: sentences where the two connectives comply with this requirement and others that violate this constraint. A delay is expected in reading times in the latter case.

Acquisition by normally-developing children: a comprehension experiment will be used to assess the acquisition of connectives as a means to understand content and epistemic relations. The experiment will consist in two short stories (presented as videos) with 5 occurrences of each relation followed by *why*-questions. Every child will hear a story with connectives and another one without connectives. In Dutch both *want* and *omdat* will be used whereas only *parce que* will be used in French (due to the near absence of *car* in speech leading to an absence of input for young children). This experiment will assess the role of connectives for comprehension. The cross-linguistic comparison will provide answers to additional questions: do children acquire relations earlier when their language provide them with a specific connective in each case (in Dutch) compared to languages where one single connective is used (French)? If an advantage exists for Dutch children, does it persist in the absence of connectives?

Acquisition by autistic children: a comprehension experiment will be conducted to assess the comprehension of both kinds of relations in the absence of connectives. Comprehension will be assessed by asking children to point to a picture presented in a book. The experiment will consist in an off-line replication of an eye-tracking experiment conducted in Utrecht. In a second phase, the acquisition experiment described above will also be used with this population.

Next meeting planned for April 2011.