

Disfluency as Metacommunication

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Research on spoken language comprehension has challenged the traditional view that disfluencies are mere performance errors that disrupt comprehension. By now, there is a range of evidence that disfluencies often facilitate language comprehension by supporting predictive inferences about upcoming speech. What is less well-understood is the exact nature of this benefit. How do listeners derive meaning from disfluency? To what extent are the benefits of hearing a disfluency dependent on potentially "signaled" elements, such as the fillers *um* and *uh*, versus more symptomatic elements, such as the length of a silent pause? Do disfluencies benefit comprehension through low-level mechanisms such as priming, or do they call upon more high-level inferences? How sensitive are listeners to different possible sources of disfluency?

In this talk, I will review results from a research program investigating the nature and processing of utterance-initial disfluencies during referential communication. In these studies, the form of a speaker's disfluency was experimentally manipulated to discern its impact on the listener. The results generally support the view that the primary meaning of disfluencies is metacommunicative [1]: a disfluency signals that the speaker is experiencing trouble, and the form of the disfluency provides information about the severity of the trouble. The impact of a disfluency on listeners is to cause them to attend to the speaker and to attempt to diagnose the cause of the trouble. Moreover, listeners appear to do this in a flexible and largely speaker-specific, rather than "egocentric", manner. This model gives good coverage of the phenomena, and suggests important avenues for future investigation.

References

- [1] H. H. Clark and J. E. Fox Tree, "Using *uh* and *um* in spontaneous speaking." *Cognition*, vol. 84, no. 1, pp. 73–111, May 2002.