Focusing in Hindi and the dynamics of left to right parsing in context

This paper explores leftward and rightward scrambling in Hindi and the range of interpretive effects associated with pre-posing and post-posing context-reflecting and context-updating material. It takes the perspective of the Dynamic Syntax (Cann et al. 2005, Kempson et al. 2001, Kempson et al. 2011) framework and seeks to provide explanations for different interpretive effects in the peripheries as arising out of the interaction of contextual information and mechanisms of grammar within the incremental process of interpretation built-up.

Hindi is a head-final language with relatively free word order. It is generally accepted that topics occupy the clause-initial position and foci – the immediately pre-verbal position (Kidwai 1999). The right periphery, however, has been harder to characterize and the post-verbal position has been associated with diverse interpretive effects such as emphasis, de-emphasis, afterthoughts, contrast (Gambhir 1981). This paper argues that no syntactic position in the Hindi clause can be identified as marking a single discourse function such as topic or focus. It seeks to explain differing interpretive effects in the peripheries with directionality (before or after building a predicate node) and the context-dependence of interpretation.

The role of the context in the interpretation process is further emphasized with data which shows that subject-object ambiguity in Hindi can be resolved contextually. This is in contrast to previous observations (Lee 2001) that Hindi looses word order flexibility in the absence of case marking and when agreement morphology fails to disambiguate the subject.

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