PARSING-MODULATED ANTECEDENT-SELECTION IN PROPOSITION-CONTROLLED FREE ADJUNCTS

This talk is concerned with the modulation of antecedent-selection by pragmatic and parsing-driven factors of proposition-controlled free adjuncts (PCFAs, underlined below).

(1) Rob heard [that Geoff lost his keys, forcing him to spend the night in his shed].
(2) [Rob heard that Geoff lost his keys], [causing him to suspect that his friend's Alzheimer's was worsening].

The default antecedent for sentence-final instances of such constructions is the most recently processed clause, as in (1), but this can be overridden if selecting an antecedent with content from a higher clause results in a pragmatically preferred interpretation, as in (2). The availability of such multiple antecedents is constrained, however, by linear ordering, such that PCFAs selecting embedded antecedents are unable to be preposed 'past' subordinating content without this inducing a change in interpretation (though preposing is possible for PCFAs taking wide scope with respect to the content of the matrix clause):

(3) #Making his night even worse, Rob heard [that Geoff lost his keys, ~~making his night even worse~~].
(4) Making his night even worse, Geoff lost his keys, ~~making his night even worse~~.

It also appears obligatory for coordinated PCFAs to share a common antecedent:

(4) Rob heard that Geoff lost his keys, forcing him to spend the night in his shed and causing him to suspect that his friend's Alzheimer's was worsening.

(4) must be interpreted such that ***heard*** outscopes the propositions expressed by its complement and the two coordinated PCFAs, even though there is conflict between the antecedents that these particular PCFAs most naturally select when not coordinated, as in (1, 2). Moreover, it appears that the antecedent-selection in (4) is modulated by the first PCFA to be parsed (i.e. ***forcing him…***), as reversing the order of the coordinated constructions in (4) forces the content of the PCFAs to instead take wide scope with respect to the content of the matrix clause (as determined by ***causing him…***, cf. the interpretation of (2)):

(5) Rob heard that Geoff lost his keys, causing him to suspect that his friend's Alzheimer's was worsening and forcing him to spend the night in his shed.

Here, I outline an analysis of these constructions framed within Dynamic Syntax (DS, Cann et al. 2005), making use of the framework's word-by-word update mechanism to articulate a fine-grained account of how parsing constrains the availability of antecedents. This enables the articulation of semantic structures that are weak enough to permit the range of interpretations able to be yielded by final PCFAs, but strong enough to explain why sentence-initial PCFAs are more constrained in terms of what they can select as an antecedent. Specifically, PCFAs are analysed as projecting an underspecified metavariable with a requirement that the PCFA select its antecedent from immediately adjacent content, whether this content is picked up cataphorically (as for initial PCFAs), or anaphorically (as for final PCFAs). As a result of this, the content of an initial PCFA is predicted to uniformly take wide scope with respect to that of the matrix clause, as falling under the scope of a matrix clause operator would require that the PCFA's antecedent be parsed only after such an operator had itself been parsed. This demarcates PCFAs from unbounded dependency constructions treated within DS such as e.g. preposed complements (***John, Mary knows that Bill detests***). Final PCFAs, on the other hand, are able to select as an antecedent the content of the most recently processed clause (e.g. ***that Geoff lost his keys*** in (1, 2)), or this plus the content of a higher clause (e.g. ***Rob heard that Geoff lost his keys***), as modulated by pragmatic considerations.

The constraint on the need for a common antecedent to coordinated PCFAs is articulated through drawing on Cann et al.'s (2005) analysis of Right Node Raising (e.g. ***Mary wrote, and I reviewed, a paper on resumptive pronouns***). As with the shared term in instances of Right Node Raising, coordination of PCFAs is taken to trigger the projection of a second metavariable (for the second PCFA) whose value is taken from that of the metavariable projected by the first, with the fine-grained word-by-word update mechanism used in DS allowing for an explanation to be put forward as to why it is the antecedent-selection preferences of the first PCFA that should modulate the antecedent-selection of the second.

Cann, R., R. Kempson and L. Marten, 2005. ***The Dynamics of Language − An Introduction***. Amsterdam: Elsevier.