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Title: Coercion and predicate integration in the dynamic composition of event structure

Date: Friday, April 27, 2007  
Time: 12:00pm  
Place: LingSem (370 Temple St. Room 201)

Abstract:

Interpreting the sentence "John began the letter" requires two operations at the level of event structure: coercion, in which the event-selecting predicate "begin" shifts the semantic type of its NP complement to denote an event (e.g. [X WRITE THE LETTER]) and predicate integration, in which the output of coercion is incorporated into the sentence-level event structure (e.g. [BEGAN [JOHN WRITE THE LETTER]]). Previous experimental research has demonstrated that this sentence type is computationally costly but has not dissociated the effects of coercion from those of predicate integration.

The present study addresses the question of whether both processes are psychologically real, i.e. executed during on-line sentence interpretation. In a cross-modal interference experiment, sentences like "John began the letter" are compared to sentences like "John began the lecture", which are selectionally transparent but require integration of the event structures of "begin" and "lecture" (e.g. [BEGAN [JOHN LECTURE]]). The results reveal the independent effects of coercion and predicate integration: "John began the lecture" is more costly than "John began the letter", indicating that 1) predicate integration imposes an independent computational cost and 2) coercion facilitates predicate integration, an analysis that is also supported by distributional evidence. This study demonstrates that evidence from sentence processing can inform representational models of the composition of sentence-level event structures.