

Why do we say what we say the way we say it?

Istvan Kecskes

School of Education, State University of New York, Albany, NY 12222, United States

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Abstract

This paper seeks answer to the question why exactly we say what we say the way we say it. Although Giora (1997, 2003) argued that cognitively prominent salient meanings, rather than literal meanings, play the most important role both in production and comprehension of language, most attention in pragmatics research has been focused on comprehension rather than production. This paper claims that salience plays as important a role in language production as in comprehension, and discusses how salience of an entity can be interpreted as a measure of how well an entity stands out from other entities and biases the preference of the individual in selecting words, expressions, and complex constructs in the process of communication. It is argued that there is a unique interplay between linguistic salience and perceptual salience both in production and comprehension. The role of perceptual and linguistic salience involves a relation between prominence of entities in a ranking, and preference of a choice among alternatives.

From the perspective of interlocutors, three theoretically significant categories are distinguished: inherent salience, collective salience, and emergent situational salience. *Inherent salience* is largely equivalent to cognitive status. It is characterized as a natural built-in preference in the general conceptual and linguistic knowledge of the speaker, which has developed as a result of prior experience with the use of lexical items and situations, and changes both diachronically and synchronically. Inherent salience is affected by collective salience and emergent situational salience. *Collective salience* is shared with the members of a speech community, and changes diachronically. *Emergent situational salience* that changes synchronically refers to the salience of specific objects or linguistic elements in the context of language production and comprehension, and may accrue through such determinants as vividness, speaker motivation and recency of mention. In an actual situational context inherent, individual salience is affected and shaped both by collective and situational salience. When the speaker is faced with the choice of a word or an expression, a ranking of the available choices is obtained on the basis of the degree of salience of entities in the generation context. The word or phrase then is selected for utterance on the basis of maximum salience. This paper argues that inherent salience is dominated by linguistic salience, while emergent situational salience is usually governed by perceptual salience.

As stated above salience is equally important both in production and comprehension. However, the focus of this paper will mainly be on speaker production because this issue has received less attention so far.

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1. Introduction

As a semiotic notion, salience refers to the relative importance or prominence of signs. The relative salience of a particular sign when considered in the context of others helps an individual to quickly rank large amounts of information by importance and thus give attention to that which is most important. We tend to overestimate the causal role (salience) of information we have available to us both perceptually and linguistically.

E-mail address: ikecskes@albany.edu.

1.1. Linguistic salience and perceptual salience

Linguistic salience describes the accessibility of entities in a speaker's or hearer's memory and how this accessibility affects the production and interpretation of language. Several theories of linguistic salience have been developed to explain how the salience of entities affects the form of referring expressions, as in the givenness hierarchy (Chafe, 1976; Givon, 1992; Gundel et al., 1993), or how it affects the local coherence of discourse, as in Centering Theory (Grosz and Sidner, 1986; Grosz et al., 1995), which was further developed into a Meta-informative Centering by Włodarczyk and Włodarczyk (2006) or in Giora's Graded Salience Hypothesis (1997, 2003) just to mention a few. I also include Jaszczołt's (2005) concepts of "primary meaning" and "pragmatic default" in this list, because the latter also deals with salience, albeit from a somewhat different perspective.

Perceptual salience refers to information that is the focus of people's attention. Perceptual salience is about how the state or quality of information stands out relative to neighboring items. This paper argues that there is a bidirectional influence between linguistic salience and perceptual salience. This claim differs from the traditional view. There are two approaches to the issue of how language interacts with perceptual processing. According to the traditional view, language is "merely the formal and expressive medium that is [used] to describe mental representations" (Li and Gleitman, 2002:290). Language is just a tool for reporting perceptual or conceptual representations, rather than shaping and modulating them (Bloom and Keil, 2001; Gleitman and Papafragou, 2005; Pinker, 1994). According to this view, linguistic-perceptual interactions are seen in terms of recoding perceptual experiences into verbal ones (e.g., Dessalegn and Landau, 2008; Munnich and Landau, 2003). Lupyan and Spivey's work (2010) represents an opposing view, which argues that language dynamically modulates visual processing. Although they focused only on one aspect of this interaction—the degree to which processing spoken labels facilitates the visual processing of the named items—I agree with their claim and speculate further that there is a bidirectional influence between linguistic salience and perceptual salience, which will be discussed later.

1.2. Need for research on how salience affects production

Giora (1997, 2003) claimed that cognitively prominent salient meanings, rather than literal meanings, play the most important role both in production and comprehension of language. There are numerous works analyzing how salience affects comprehension, but only a little number of studies have focused on production. The main reason is that production is simply inherently more difficult to study. It is quite hard to design appropriate tests for the effects of salience on language production because we have access only to what is actually produced, not all the options that were left out. Despite this difficulty, some studies have made efforts to investigate the subject. For instance, the paper of Givoni et al. (in this issue) explores how speakers use linguistic markers to explicitly cue addressees to multiple meanings of concepts.

2. Former research¹

Clark Hull (1943:229) was likely to be the first to have tackled salience in production with his principles of behavior. He argued that in both comprehension and production, more salient meanings would be processed first. In their studies Osgood and Bock (1977) and MacWhinney (1977) entertained the idea that the attentional processing of the cognized world may somehow be reflected in how people organize their production and comprehension of sentences. Osgood and Bock's study (1977) explicitly suggested that the referents' salience status acting as an exogenous determinant of the distribution of a speaker's attention should promote the referents currently in focus to the prominent positions in a spoken sentence. MacWhinney (1977) presented the "Starting Point" hypothesis. Although it is not specifically geared toward sentence production, the hypothesis predicts that one of the main factors determining the assignment of the prominent positions in a sentence is the interlocutor's perspective or attentional focus.

Osgood and Bock (1977) distinguished three principles of salience: naturalness, vividness, and motivation of the speaker. All three principles are based on the assumption that more prominent or more salient items appear earlier in a sentence. Osgood and Bock argued that *naturalness* is exhibited in the fact that subjects almost always come before objects in languages around the world because the subject is more prominent than the object. This prominence often arises naturally from a series of relations. It should be noted here that there are subject-prominent and topic-prominent languages. Li (1976) distinguished topic-prominent languages, like Chinese and Japanese, from subject-prominent languages, like English. Topic-prominent languages have morphology or syntax that highlights the distinction between the

¹ I owe sincere thanks to my student Matthew Parker, who helped me collect information about former research. A significant part of this information was already published in Kecskes (2011).

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