How do we compute predictions for an upcoming verb? Evidence from Mandarin Chinese and English

Wing-Yee Chow (University College London)

Previous evidence has shown that comprehenders use rich contextual information to anticipate upcoming input on the fly, but less is known about how different sources of information are integrated to generate predictions in real time. In this talk I will discuss recent work on the time course with which information about preverbal arguments is used to compute predictions about an upcoming verb. Recent event-related potential (ERP) evidence suggests that early stages of verb prediction are insensitive to the structural roles of the arguments. The N400, a negative-going ERP component linked to lexical semantic processing, is known to be smaller for more predictable words. However, recent studies across different languages have found that reversing pre-verbal arguments in a verb-final clause (e.g., cop_{SUB} thief_{OB} arrest vs. thief_{SUB} cop_{OB} arrest), despite clearly affecting the verb's offline predictability (cloze probability), fails to modulate the N400 at the verb. I will present evidence from a series of ERP experiments in Mandarin Chinese that suggests that the structural roles of pre-verbal arguments have a delayed impact on verb predictions. Further, recent ERP and online cloze data from English that suggest that the meaning of the arguments can impact verb predictions more quickly. I will argue that verb predictions initially engage a 'bag-of-arguments' mechanism, which specifically relies on the lexical meaning, but not the structural roles, of the arguments in a clause.