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Investigating the consequences of focus on the production and comprehension of referring expressions

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This talk investigates issues related to referent tracking in discourse, in particular how the presence of contrastive focus or additive focus influences comprehenders' and speakers' expectations about what will be referred to/mentioned in upcoming discourse. I will discuss the results of a series of psycholinguistic experiments that investigated (i) how the notion of 'focus' contributes to how prominently entities are represented in speakers' and comprehenders' mental representations, and (ii) what role focus-induced alternatives play in subsequent discourse. On the one hand, it has been suggested that focus increases the prominence/salience of the focused constituent. On the other hand, existing work also suggests that the presence of competitors/alternatives can lower the salience of the intended referent. The experiments I will talk about address focus-related effects on referring expressions from two angles: (i) The perspective of the *comprehender*: When faced with a pronoun, how does a comprehender resolve it? (ii) The perspective of the *speaker*: When continuing a discourse fragment, what entities are speakers most likely to refer to, and with what kind of referring expressions (see also Kehler et al. 2008)? Looking at the discourse-level consequences of focus from these two angles allows us to better understand the effects of focus as well as the discourse-status of focus-induced alternatives, and highlights (potentially unexpected) asymmetries between likelihood of upcoming mention and likelihood of pronominalization. Broadly speaking, this research aims to contribute to our understanding of the notion of accessibility/salience by looking at an entity's likelihood of pronominalization and likelihood of subsequent mention, and how they are affected by the entity's focus status and its connections to other previously-mentioned entities.