

On the distributed nature of mutual understanding

Dale Barr

University of Glasgow

Abstract

Mutual understanding is one of the most important topics in the study of language use; it is also one of the most perplexing. How is it that people understand one another given the fundamentally ambiguous nature of communication? Why do language users find conversation so effortless and unproblematic, while theories of language use suggest that it requires inordinately complex processes and representations? I will suggest that such paradoxes arise out of a tendency to localize processes of mutual understanding in the minds of individual language users. Instead, I will suggest that the work of mutual understanding is distributed more broadly, over individual, interactional, and cultural levels of language use. This approach offers a new way of understanding of the functional significance of certain psycholinguistic phenomena, such as apparent failures of perspective taking in referential communication.