

Moving beyond *Next Wednesday*: Interpreting ambiguous statements about time

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What factors contribute to perceived temporal ambiguity? In English, two contrasting perspectives in deictic temporal expressions have attracted a lot of attention: the Moving Time metaphor conceptualizes time as moving forward towards the ego and the Moving Ego metaphor conceptualizes the ego as moving forward towards the future (Clark 1973). Using an ambiguous temporal question—namely, *Next Wednesday's meeting has been moved forward by two days*—earlier research has demonstrated that people may draw on either perspective to disambiguate the statement (e.g. Boroditsky 2000; McGlone and Harding 1998). The source of the ambiguity has been argued to be the adverb *forward*, which can be interpreted either as indicating the direction of motion of the ego through time or as indicating the direction of motion of time towards the ego (Boroditsky 2000; Kranjec and McDonough 2011). This conclusion seems premature, however, given that it is based on interpretations of a single ambiguous question.

In this paper, we ask whether the locus of the ambiguity is centered on the adverb, as suggested by previous researchers, or is distributed across the utterance. To find out, we looked at responses to the ambiguous *Next Wednesday's meeting* question using nine verbs (*move, pull, bring, rush, draw, push, shift, take, and carry*) and two adverbs (*forward and backward*). Our results suggest that the verb and adverb constrain the interpretation both individually (verbs, $p < .0001$; adverbs, $p < .0001$) and together, with variation in the strength of effect of the adverb across the verbs ($p < .002$).

Keywords: Moving Time; Moving Ego; Ambiguity

References

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