



When language takes us down the garden path



Paul Warren
WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

THANK goodness children aren't breaking the speed limits. However, I surely remember something in the road code about driving too slowly also being a potential hazard.

I spotted the sign in the picture during a stay at a camp site last summer, and I wasn't the only one chuckling at what it seemed to say. The problem here is that the sign-writers have chosen the same colour for the second to fourth lines, contrasting with the first line. Even the slightly larger font size for the word "children" does not seem to set it apart from what follows.

Combined with this, there is a common tendency, well known to researchers who look at how we understand language, to group words together into one phrase or sentence, if the grammar allows. So, based at least on our initial reading of the sign, we expect children to be doing the driving.

In a similar manner, when we first read "After Pat drank the water was discovered to be polluted," we expect Pat to

have drunk the water. As a psycholinguist, I spend some of my time working with so-called garden path sentences like this, where readers get led down the garden path and make the wrong analysis. They then have to backtrack and do some careful re-reading. Garden path sentences show us that the human language comprehension system prefers certain analyses over others.

One claim is that this makes the system more efficient, less demanding on memory, and so on. Undoubtedly it also occasionally backfires.

Sometimes it backfires because we do not have all the information we need. In the example of Pat and the water, a comma after "drank" would undoubtedly be helpful. In speech, intonation patterns and phrasing do an equivalent job.

Occasionally punctuation conventions will not help – consider a sentence like "The woman left the house was looking forward to moving in". At first blush, we might think that the woman was leaving



The Dominion Post
07-Oct-2009
Page: 5
Features
Region: Wellington
Circulation: 91500
Type: Metro
Size: 466.66 sq.cms
Frequency: MTWTF--

the house. The continuation of the sentence beyond “left” shows us that this is the wrong interpretation and we need to backtrack. The sentence is, in fact, a condensed version of “The woman who was left the house was looking forward to moving in”.

CONDENSING sentences can lead to difficulty in interpretation in other contexts too. A few years ago we were approached by Transit NZ, which was interested in how differences in presentation format might affect drivers’ understanding of emergency and safety messages on illuminated motorway signs. One issue was where line-breaks were placed, since many of the messages were split over more than one text line.

Our advice included keeping the main components of messages together on one line wherever possible. Some of our informants reported an ambiguity in “Slow Vehicles / Keep Left” (where / indicates the line break). Should slow vehicles keep left (the intended message)? Or is it a warning that there are slow vehicles ahead, so that other drivers should keep left?

This second interpretation is understandable when you remember that the message system also uses warning messages like “Accident Ahead / Slow Down”, where the first line gives a situ-

ation and the second presents a desired response to that situation. Putting the “Slow Vehicles Keep Left” message on to one line, or making the meaning more explicit by adding “must” before “keep,” may make a difference.

Newspaper headlines also provide fertile ground for anyone looking for the effects of condensing sentences. Take, for example, *Eye Drops Off Shelf, Squad Helps Dog Bite Victim* or *Grandmother Of Eight Makes Hole In One*. The first two might be clearer with a hyphen in the right place (“Eye-Drops,” “Dog-Bite”), although hyphens might not ordinarily be found in these sequences.

The third headline needs something to tell us if the grandmother made a hole in one of her eight grandchildren, or made a “hole-in-one” while playing golf. It seems that very often with such headlines we initially prefer what turns out to be the “wrong” interpretation, often with amusing, unintended consequences – *Drunk Gets Nine Months In Prison Case, Police Begin Campaign To Run Down Jaywalkers*.

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■ Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz



Beware child drivers: Misleading language can often confuse the reader by suggesting an entirely different message to what is intended.

Photo: PAUL WARREN