
The discourse of befuddlement

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This talk concerns real-life language related problems identified by both professional linguists and lay language users. Confusion in discourse is one of these problems. I give evidence for the existence of this problem and address what I see as two important reasons for it: (1) our limited awareness and mixing of the various levels of abstraction involved in producing discourse, and (2) our frequent disregard for the natural order of abstraction and the experiential roots of meaning. As for (1), the mixing (e.g., mixing physical objects and words) is most salient when non-typical, borderline cases are talked about. To illustrate the mixing of words with non-verbal reality, I discuss in some detail the question of whether Pluto is a planet. As for (2), I discuss examples from professional linguists' disputes and political discourse.