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TOWARD A COHERENCE-DRIVEN MODEL OF LANGUAGE: AMBIGUITY, PRAGMATICS, AND THE NULLIFICATION PRINCIPLE

Research article

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Abstract

This article proposes the Model of Adaptive Simplification (MAS) as a descriptive framework explaining how linguistic systems maintain communicative viability under conditions of structural reduction and epistemic limitation. The model argues that language users continuously balance structural simplification, ambiguity, interpretative coherence, and cognitive cost, operating within a coherence threshold that preserves interactional stability. Through practical linguistic examples classified as high, medium, and low simplification, the study illustrates that ambiguity is not a communicative failure but an adaptive resource enabling efficient coordination among interlocutors. The paper further explores a theoretical connection between MAS and the Theory of Non-Knowledge (TNK), interpreting linguistic utterances as provisional stabilization units (X(NS)) that allow action without requiring epistemic completeness. By integrating pragmatic theory with epistemological considerations, the article reframes language not as a system aiming at maximal semantic precision, but as an adaptive mechanism that organizes communication around controlled indeterminacy. While MAS can be understood and evaluated as a pragmatic-linguistic model in its own right, TNK is presented as a broader epistemological perspective that helps explain why coherence-based stabilization may be a general feature of finite cognition and communication.

Keywords: linguistic simplification, pragmatics, ambiguity, interpretative coherence, Theory of Non-Knowledge.

HACIA UN MODELO DEL LENGUAJE BASADO EN LA COHERENCIA: AMBIGÜEDAD, PRAGMÁTICA Y EL PRINCIPIO DE NULIFICACIÓN

Artículo de investigación

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Resumen

Este artículo propone el Modelo de Simplificación Adaptativa (MAS) como un marco descriptivo para explicar cómo los sistemas lingüísticos mantienen la viabilidad comunicativa bajo condiciones de reducción estructural y limitación epistémica. El modelo sostiene que los hablantes equilibran continuamente simplificación estructural, ambigüedad, coherencia interpretativa y costo cognitivo, operando dentro de un umbral de coherencia que preserva la estabilidad interactiva. Mediante ejemplos lingüísticos prácticos clasificados como simplificación alta, media y baja, el estudio muestra que la ambigüedad no constituye un fallo comunicativo, sino un recurso adaptativo que permite la coordinación eficiente entre interlocutores. El trabajo explora además una conexión teórica entre MAS y la Teoría del No-Conocimiento (TNC), interpretando los enunciados lingüísticos como unidades provisionales de estabilización (X(NS)) que posibilitan la acción sin requerir completitud epistémica. Al integrar teoría pragmática y consideraciones epistemológicas, el artículo replantea el lenguaje no como un sistema orientado a la máxima precisión semántica, sino como un mecanismo adaptativo que organiza la comunicación en torno a la indeterminación controlada. Aunque MAS puede comprenderse y evaluarse de manera independiente como un modelo pragmático-lingüístico, la TNC se presenta como una perspectiva epistemológica más amplia que ayuda a explicar por qué la estabilización basada en la coherencia puede constituir una característica general de la cognición y la comunicación humanas.

Palabras clave: simplificación lingüística, pragmática, ambigüedad, coherencia interpretativa, Teoría del No-Conocimiento.

Introduction

Human languages display a persistent tendency toward structural simplification. Speakers routinely omit grammatical elements, reduce morphological marking, and compress syntactic structures while maintaining successful communication. Expressions such as *Coming?*, *Want coffee?*, or reduced future forms like *gonna* illustrate that linguistic interaction often privileges economy over formal completeness. The central question raised by such phenomena is not whether simplification occurs, but how far it can proceed without compromising interpretability.

Classical pragmatic theory has provided important tools for explaining communication under conditions of partial expression. The cooperative framework proposed by Paul Grice explains how interlocutors recover implicit meaning through shared rational expectations (Grice, 1975). Subsequent developments, including neo-Gricean approaches associated with Laurence Horn and Stephen Levinson, emphasize communicative economy and heuristic inference as central mechanisms of interpretation (Horn, 198), (Levinson, 2000). Dialogical perspectives inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin likewise stress the interactive and context-dependent character of linguistic meaning (Bakhtin, 1981).

Complementary explanations emerge from functional and statistical approaches. The principle of least effort formulated by George Kingsley Zipf proposes that linguistic systems tend toward reductions in articulatory and cognitive expenditure (Zipf, 1949). Together, these traditions explain how communication remains effective despite structural reduction.

Yet an important question remains insufficiently specified: what constrains simplification before communication becomes unstable? Existing theories account for inferential recovery, contextual support, and pressures toward efficiency, but they do not explicitly model the conditions under which simplification ceases to remain communicatively viable.

This article proposes the Model of Adaptive Simplification (MAS) as a heuristic framework for addressing this problem. MAS describes linguistic simplification as a process regulated by the interaction among structural reduction, ambiguity, interpretative coherence, and cognitive cost. Its central claim is that speakers simplify linguistic form only while interpretation remains sufficiently stable for successful communication.

The model does not seek to establish a mathematical law of language. Rather, it offers a conceptual framework capable of organizing observations already recognized across pragmatics, dialogical theory, and usage-based approaches. Its specific contribution lies in treating simplification as a coherence-bounded process rather than as the isolated consequence of economy or inference alone.

The discussion is also situated within the broader epistemological perspective of the Theory of Non-Knowledge (TNK) (Souza, 2025). Although MAS can be evaluated independently as a pragmatic-linguistic model, TNK provides a philosophical framework for interpreting communicative practices that operate under conditions of incomplete information and controlled indeterminacy. From this perspective, linguistic ambiguity appears not merely as a limitation of communication, but as a condition that can remain operationally manageable through contextual stabilization.

The objectives of this study are fourfold:

(1) to define the components of the MAS model with conceptual precision;

(2) to compare MAS explicitly with established pragmatic and economy-based frameworks;

(3) to illustrate how coherence-regulated simplification helps explain recurrent patterns of spoken English reduction; and

(4) to examine how TNK may provide a broader epistemological interpretation of coherence-regulated communication while recognizing that MAS remains independently applicable within linguistic analysis.

By examining simplification as the interaction among economy, ambiguity, and interpretative stability, the article seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions in pragmatics and philosophy of language. It further explores how epistemological considerations may deepen the understanding of communicative practices that remain effective despite the absence of exhaustive semantic determination.

The Theoretical Problem: The Limits of Linguistic Simplification

The tendency toward linguistic economy has long been recognized across philosophy of language, pragmatics, and linguistic theory. Speakers frequently communicate through incomplete or reduced expressions while preserving successful understanding. Although this phenomenon is widely acknowledged, the conditions that constrain simplification remain insufficiently specified.

Pragmatic theory, beginning with Paul Grice, demonstrates that communication relies on inferential cooperation rather than literal completeness. Conversational implicature explains how hearers recover intended meanings from underdetermined utterances through shared expectations of rational interaction (Grice, 1975). Within this framework, apparent linguistic deficiency becomes compatible with communicative success because interlocutors actively reconstruct meaning.

Neo-Gricean developments refine this perspective by emphasizing communicative economy. Laurence Horn proposes principles governing the balance between informational sufficiency and effort reduction, while Stephen Levinson formulates pragmatic heuristics that guide interpretation under conditions of partial expression (Horn, 1984), (Levinson, 2000). These approaches clarify how reduced forms remain interpretable, but they do not directly address the conditions under which simplification remains sustainable.

Dialogical approaches further illuminate the interactive nature of linguistic meaning. Inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin, language is understood as inherently situated within social interaction, where utterances rely on shared contextual horizons and anticipated responses (Bakhtin, 1981). From this perspective, simplification becomes possible because interlocutors can recover information that need not be explicitly expressed.

Functional and statistical linguistics offer a complementary explanation through principles of efficiency. The principle of least effort formulated by George Kingsley Zipf describes language as shaped by tendencies that reduce articulatory and cognitive cost (Zipf, 1949). Corpus-based studies of spoken English likewise show that highly frequent expressions often undergo phonological and grammatical reduction while remaining fully interpretable. Processes such as contraction, erosion, ellipsis, and structural compression appear systematically associated with frequency, communicative efficiency, and contextual predictability rather than with random irregularity (Bybee, 2006), (Biber et al., 1999).

Taken together, these traditions explain how meaning remains recoverable despite structural reduction, how context supports interpretation, and why linguistic systems tend toward economical forms. Yet a fundamental question remains unresolved: what prevents simplification from progressing indefinitely?

If economy alone governed language, continued reduction should eventually compromise intelligibility. If clarity alone dominated communication, substantial simplification would rarely occur. Natural languages instead exhibit a persistent balance between reduction and interpretability.

This observation suggests the existence of a regulatory constraint operating between economy and stability. Existing frameworks successfully describe mechanisms of inference, contextual recovery, and efficiency, but they do not explicitly model the boundary at which simplification ceases to remain communicatively viable.

The MAS model proposed in this study seeks to address this issue by describing how structural reduction is constrained by interpretative coherence and cognitive cost. Rather than replacing existing approaches, MAS functions as an integrative framework connecting pragmatic inference, dialogical interaction, and economy-driven reduction.

The following section defines the components of the model and operationalizes the relations among structural simplification, ambiguity, coherence, and cognitive cost.

Components and Operationalization of the MAS Model

The Model of Adaptive Simplification (MAS) is proposed as a heuristic framework describing how linguistic simplification operates under constraints of interpretative stability and cognitive processing. Rather than treating economy, ambiguity, inference, and context as separate explanatory mechanisms, MAS conceives communication as a dynamic balance among these interrelated factors. The model is not intended as a formal mathematical system, but as a conceptual tool for describing recurrent patterns in natural language use.

Structural simplification refers to the reduction of morphosyntactic or phonological material relative to a more explicit linguistic alternative. Such reduction generally increases interpretative indeterminacy, since fewer linguistic cues are available to guide comprehension. Expressions such as *Coming?* omit tense marking, subject reference, and modality while remaining intelligible within appropriate contexts. In MAS, ambiguity is therefore understood as a normal consequence of reduced encoding rather than as a communicative defect. It becomes problematic only when interlocutors can no longer converge on a sufficiently stable interpretation.

The central regulating factor of the model is interpretative coherence. Drawing on dialogical perspectives associated with Mikhail Bakhtin, coherence is understood as an interactional achievement sustained by shared background knowledge, discourse history, pragmatic expectations, and conversational alignment. These resources allow speakers and hearers to compensate for structural reduction and maintain communicative stability.

A complementary component is cognitive cost. Although simplification reduces articulatory effort, interpretation requires inferential reasoning, contextual integration, and predictive processing. When ambiguity imposes excessive processing demands, speakers tend to restore explicitness through clarification, repair, or more complete linguistic forms. MAS therefore assumes that communicative systems seek to minimize overall interactional effort rather than speaker effort alone.

The central hypothesis of the model is that linguistic simplification advances only while interpretative coherence remains capable of regulating the ambiguity generated by reduction. This relationship may be represented conceptually as:

$$MAS \approx S / A^{c}$$

The symbol MAS designates the general tendency of linguistic systems to reduce structural complexity while preserving communicative viability. The approximation sign (≈) indicates that the expression represents a conceptual equilibrium rather than a measurable formula.

The variable S refers to structural simplification, encompassing processes such as ellipsis, contraction, abbreviation, phonological erosion, and syntactic compression. It represents adaptive reduction supported by contextual recoverability rather than linguistic deficiency.

The denominator A represents ambiguity, understood as the interpretative indeterminacy associated with reduced linguistic encoding. Ambiguity is not inherently detrimental; it becomes communicatively significant only insofar as it increases inferential demands on interlocutors.

The exponent c symbolizes coherence preservation. Rather than functioning as a mathematical power, it represents the moderating role of contextual and interactional consistency. Strong coherence allows ambiguity to remain manageable, whereas weakened coherence increases the risk of communicative instability.

The model predicts that communication tends toward an intermediate equilibrium. Simplification increases when coherence can absorb the ambiguity generated by reduction, whereas excessive ambiguity encourages the restoration of more explicit linguistic structure. Natural language therefore balances efficiency and interpretability rather than pursuing either maximal reduction or maximal explicitness.

For descriptive purposes, MAS distinguishes three broad levels of simplification:

High simplification, involving the omission of grammatical material recoverable through immediate context;

Medium simplification, involving contractions and partial reductions that require limited inferential effort;

Low simplification, involving largely explicit forms with minimal structural reduction.

MAS is explicitly descriptive rather than normative. Its objective is not to prescribe linguistic usage, but to account for recurring tendencies observed in natural language interaction, particularly the continuous adjustment between economy, ambiguity, cognitive effort, and interpretative stability.

The following section situates the model in relation to existing theoretical frameworks and clarifies its specific contribution to discussions of linguistic simplification and communicative efficiency.

MAS in Relation to Existing Frameworks

The Model of Adaptive Simplification (MAS) does not seek to replace established theories of language. Rather, it proposes an integrative perspective on a recurrent phenomenon identified across pragmatics, functional linguistics, sociolinguistics, and philosophy of language: the tendency of linguistic systems to simplify expression while preserving communicative effectiveness. The purpose of this section is to situate MAS within these traditions and clarify its specific contribution.

MAS and Pragmatic Approaches

Gricean pragmatics explains how interlocutors recover intended meanings from underdetermined utterances through inferential cooperation (Grice, 1975, p. 41). Neo-Gricean developments further emphasize communicative economy and heuristic interpretation, showing how speakers balance informativeness and efficiency (Horn, 1984, p. 11), (Levinson, 2000). MAS builds on these insights but focuses on a different issue: the conditions under which simplification remains communicatively viable. Rather than explaining the inferential recovery of meaning itself, the model seeks to account for the stability of linguistic reduction as a recurring feature of communication.

A related perspective is provided by Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986), according to which communication is guided by expectations of optimal relevance, balancing cognitive effort and interpretative benefit. MAS shares this concern with efficiency but emphasizes the role of interpretative coherence as the factor regulating how far simplification can proceed before communicative stability is threatened.

MAS and Interactional Perspectives

Dialogical approaches associated with Bakhtin stress that meaning emerges through interaction and shared discourse history (Bakhtin, 1981). Similarly, Clark (1996) highlights the role of common ground, while Tomasello (2008) emphasizes shared intentionality as a basis for human communication. MAS converges with these approaches by treating coherence as an interactional achievement sustained by contextual alignment and cooperative expectations. Within this framework, structural reduction becomes possible because interlocutors rely on resources extending beyond explicit linguistic form.

This interactional dimension also resonates with sociolinguistic perspectives. Gumperz (1982) demonstrated the importance of contextualization cues in interpretation, while Labov (1972) showed that linguistic variation and reduction are systematic features of actual language use. MAS incorporates these observations by proposing that simplification remains functional insofar as communicative communities maintain sufficient coherence to stabilize interpretation.

MAS and Economy-Based Explanations

Functional approaches inspired by Zipf's principle of least effort describe language as shaped by pressures toward articulatory and cognitive efficiency (Zipf, 1949). Corpus-based research further indicates that highly frequent expressions often undergo contraction, erosion, and grammatical compression while remaining readily interpretable *(Bybee, 2006; Biber et al., 1999)*. These findings help explain why simplification occurs, but they do not fully explain why it stabilizes rather than progressing indefinitely. MAS addresses this question by proposing that coherence operates as a limiting condition on economy-driven reduction. Linguistic systems tend toward efficiency, but only within bounds compatible with successful interpretation.

Taken together, these theoretical traditions illuminate different aspects of linguistic simplification. MAS does not replace them; instead, it proposes a unifying perspective in which simplification, ambiguity, cognitive effort, and coherence are treated as interconnected dimensions of communicative adaptation.

Possible Objections and Limitations of MAS

A possible objection to the MAS model is that the phenomena described here are already sufficiently explained by existing pragmatic frameworks. From this perspective, Gricean inference, Relevance Theory, and usage-based approaches may appear capable of accounting for linguistic reduction without the need for an additional model. In response, MAS does not seek to replace these theories or introduce new empirical phenomena. Its contribution lies in providing a unifying conceptual framework that explicitly relates simplification, ambiguity, coherence, and cognitive cost within a single explanatory structure.

A second objection concerns the notion of a coherence threshold. Critics may argue that coherence is difficult to measure objectively and therefore cannot function as a rigorous explanatory variable. This concern is legitimate. The present study does not propose a quantitative metric of coherence, but a heuristic concept intended to describe observable communicative behavior. Future corpus-based and experimental research may contribute to the operationalization of coherence and to the empirical evaluation of the model's predictions.

A third limitation involves the scope of the proposal itself. MAS is primarily a descriptive framework and should not be interpreted as a universal law governing all linguistic interaction. Different languages, communicative environments, and social contexts may exhibit distinct patterns of simplification and ambiguity management. The model therefore aims to identify a general tendency rather than a deterministic mechanism applicable in identical form across all cases.

The following section illustrates this proposal through examples of high, medium, and low simplification, demonstrating how communicative stability is maintained under varying degrees of structural reduction.

Practical Examples of High, Medium, and Low Simplification

High Simplification

A clear example of high simplification appears in spontaneous conversational English when interlocutors share an immediate situational context. Imagine two colleagues at the end of the workday. One notices the other putting on a jacket and asks: *Coming?* The fully explicit form would be *Are you coming with us now?* The reduced utterance omits the subject, auxiliary verb, temporal marking, and complement phrase, representing a high degree of structural simplification (S).

Despite its reduced form, communication usually succeeds because contextual information compensates for the missing linguistic material. Shared perception, prior interaction, and situational cues provide sufficient coherence (C) for interpretation. Although the utterance is potentially ambiguous, interlocutors normally converge on a stable meaning without difficulty.

The importance of coherence becomes evident when the same expression is removed from a shared context. If a stranger at a train station asks *Coming?*, interpretation becomes uncertain because the contextual resources supporting coherence are absent. Clarification is then required, often leading speakers to restore grammatical explicitness. This illustrates a central prediction of MAS: highly reduced forms remain viable only when coherence sufficiently regulates the ambiguity generated by simplification.

Medium Simplification

Medium simplification can be observed in conversational contractions such as *You're gonna love this*, whose more explicit form is *You are going to love this*. Unlike extreme ellipsis, most grammatical structure remains intact, while contraction and phonological compression reduce articulatory effort.

The ambiguity introduced by *gonna* is relatively limited because essential grammatical relations remain overtly expressed. Interpretation depends less on immediate situational context and more on shared linguistic conventions. Native speakers generally process such forms effortlessly because they are highly conventionalized within spoken English.

The role of coherence becomes more apparent when these conventions are absent. Language learners unfamiliar with informal contractions may require additional processing or clarification, prompting speakers to shift toward more explicit forms. Medium simplification therefore illustrates a situation in which moderate ambiguity remains manageable because it is supported by strong linguistic and contextual expectations.

Low Simplification

Low simplification is represented by highly explicit utterances such as *I will meet you at the main entrance at three o'clock*. Here, grammatical relations, temporal reference, and spatial information are fully specified, leaving little interpretative work for the hearer.

Because ambiguity is minimal, communication depends less heavily on contextual support. Such forms remain intelligible even when interlocutors share little background knowledge, making them common in formal, instructional, or institutional settings.

This explicitness, however, comes at the cost of reduced economy. In casual interaction, speakers often replace such forms with shorter alternatives such as *See you at three*, relying on contextual coherence to preserve interpretation. The choice between these alternatives illustrates the adaptive nature of linguistic simplification: speakers continuously adjust structural complexity according to communicative circumstances.

These examples illustrate different points along a continuum rather than discrete linguistic categories. High simplification relies heavily on contextual coherence, medium simplification depends largely on shared linguistic conventions, and low simplification places most of the interpretative burden on explicit linguistic structure itself.

The examples are intended as heuristic illustrations rather than corpus-statistical evidence. Their purpose is to operationalize the MAS framework by showing how varying degrees of simplification remain communicatively viable through different configurations of ambiguity, coherence, and inferential effort.

Theoretical Implications for Pragmatics and Epistemology

The examples discussed in the previous section suggest that communicative efficiency emerges from a dynamic balance between structural reduction and interpretative stability. Linguistic systems do not maximize either explicitness or economy. Instead, they operate through adaptive adjustments that preserve coherence while reducing unnecessary communicative effort.

At this point, MAS may be related to the broader epistemological perspective proposed by the TNK (Souza, 2025, p. 5). TNK argues that human cognition operates under conditions of unavoidable *epistemic incompleteness*. Rather than relying on exhaustive certainty, practical activity depends on operational stabilizations that remain sufficiently coherent for action. Knowledge, from this perspective, functions through usable and non-contradictory structures rather than through complete access to reality.

Within TNK and the New Science, such stabilizations are represented by the notion of X(NS). The symbol X functions as a *variable* capable of representing any inherited claim, concept, proposition, theory, or practical reference drawn from previous systems of knowledge by the *Nullifcation* process. What characterizes X(NS) is not its specific content, but its epistemological status. Once incorporated into the New Science, X is no longer treated as possessing ultimate, exhaustive, or final justification. Instead, it operates as a stabilized and non-contradictory reference that remains available for practical use while abstaining from claims of complete knowledge. In this sense, any scientific, philosophical, mathematical, linguistic, or everyday proposition may function as an X(NS), provided it is understood as an operational unit rather than as an absolutely justified truth.

MAS may be interpreted as a linguistic manifestation of this broader dynamic. Reduced utterances often remain communicatively effective despite their informational incompleteness because interlocutors rely on contextual and inferential resources to maintain coherence. Expressions such as *Coming?*, *Got it*, or *ASAP* function successfully not because they encode exhaustive meaning, but because they remain *sufficiently stable* for practical interaction.

From this perspective, MAS and TNK address different analytical levels. MAS describes *how* communication remains viable through the interaction of simplification, ambiguity, coherence, and cognitive effort. TNK, in turn, offers a philosophical interpretation of *why* stabilization mechanisms become necessary for finite cognitive agents. The relationship is therefore explanatory rather than constitutive: MAS can be analyzed and applied independently as a pragmatic-linguistic model, while TNK provides a broader epistemological framework within which its dynamics may be interpreted.

This distinction is important because the descriptive validity of MAS does not depend upon acceptance of TNK. The model may be evaluated entirely within pragmatics, philosophy of language, or usage-based linguistics. Nevertheless, TNK raises a *further* philosophical question: *why do communication, inference, and contextual stabilization play such a central role in human linguistic activity?* Rather than treating these features as merely characteristic of language, TNK interprets them as consequences of a more general condition of epistemic incompleteness.

A complete defense of this stronger claim would require demonstrating that alternative explanations of ambiguity, inference, and coherence either presuppose comparable epistemic limitations or encounter unresolved justificatory difficulties. Such a task exceeds the scope of the present study. Accordingly, TNK is presented here not as a prerequisite for the practical application of MAS, but as a philosophical framework that seeks to explain the *deeper epistemological conditions* under which the communicative dynamics described by MAS emerge.

Conclusion

This article proposed the Model of Adaptive Simplification (MAS) as a descriptive framework for understanding how linguistic systems maintain communicative viability under conditions of structural reduction. Simplification therefore emerges not as a deficiency of language, but as an adaptive strategy that allows efficient interaction while preserving sufficient communicative stability.

The MAS model contributes to existing discussions in pragmatics and philosophy of language by explicitly identifying coherence as the factor that constrains linguistic reduction. The model complements pragmatic, dialogical, and economy-based approaches by providing a conceptual account of why linguistic systems simplify extensively without becoming unintelligible.

The study also explored the relationship between MAS and the Theory of Non-Knowledge (TNK). While MAS can be understood and evaluated independently as a pragmatic-linguistic model, TNK offers a broader epistemological perspective from which its dynamics may be interpreted. From this viewpoint, communicative success depends not on exhaustive semantic determination, but on the maintenance of sufficient coherence for practical coordination among finite cognitive agents.

Future research may examine the empirical applicability of MAS through corpus-based studies, experimental pragmatics, and cross-linguistic comparison. Such investigations may help determine the extent to which coherence-regulated simplification represents a general principle underlying linguistic interaction across communicative environments.

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