

Cause/Effect vs. Effect/Cause
Daniel Altshuler, Oxford University
COCOA meeting 6 April 2022

The goal of this talk is to discuss the theoretical implications of causal asymmetries in natural language. Consider:

- (1) a. A mouse was dead. A cat bit into it while the mouse was wiggling its tail.
b. A cat bit into a mouse while the mouse was wiggling its tail. The mouse was dead.

The only plausible reading of (1a) is one in which we understand that the mouse's death was caused by the cat biting into it. It would equally make most sense to interpret (1b) in this way. Yet, it is impossible to do so. Assuming that dead mice don't wiggle their tails, there is no pragmatic context that could save (1b) from infelicity. Why should this be?

Now consider (2):

- (2) a. My drenched neighbor was hit by a water balloon.
b. I threw a water balloon at my drenched neighbor.

(2a) can be understood in casual terms: the neighbor was drenched because a water balloon hit them. However, (1b) cannot be understood in this way. Why should this be?