same time," explains Levelt. It is al-
though the listener. Too many details or an ill-conceived plan can be confusing. In simple cases, the order of events to be related dic-
tates the linguistic order of mention, as in the sentence "I opened the door and went out of the house." However, de-
scribing things that have no intrinsic linear structure, such as places, apartments or rooms, is more difficult.

How do humans deal with this problem? In their quest to answer this question, Willem Levelt and his colleagues came up with the idea of procuring a dollhouse for their laboratory. The toy house spans three dimensions; how would these get mapped onto a one-dimensional linguistic order? Experiments using the dollhouse could also be con-
trolled precisely. This unconventional experiment really did prove worthwhile since, as it turned out, those who took part in the experiment made very similar linguistic choices when describing the house. "Most of them went on a tour through the house," remembers Levelt. "Just like in real life, they started at the front door and described the rooms they saw, like a visitor in a real house. They took the tour in small steps, mentioning relevant objects and features as they went along.

After this initial success, the psycholinguists refined their methods and developed a new linguistic task: a two-dimensional matrix through which they sent their subjects on imaginary walks. "That also func-
tioned brilliantly," says Levelt, now Founding Director Emeritus of the in-
stitute: "I still use it in presentations today." He also supplemented the lab-
atory tests with descriptions of walks the subjects went on outside the institute. "It was as important to us then as it is now to always com-
bine our laboratory work with field work," stresses Levelt. "So we also sent our subjects into town, into the village or to the zoo."

These virtual and real research walks provided the Max Planck researchers with new insights into the nature of lan-
guage. For the first time, they developed a theory of lineariza-
tion based on simple principles – a theory that remains valid today. In those first pioneering years of research, the scien-
tists discovered that speakers combine various strategies to solve the linearization problem. "First, we have maximum connectivity," says Levelt. "That simply means that things that are spatially linked also follow one another in a de-
torsion. For example in the statement: ‘There is a cup-
board in the corner.’"

The problem-solving strategy that Levelt and his colleagues observed was the speakers’ attempts to branch off their route as little as possible. They constructed their description plans so that they would notice and remem-
bered remembering only the bare minimum of choice nodes – that is, points where they branched off from the main de-
scription and to which they thus had to return. The reason behind this strategy was to not cram the memory with too much information. Similarly, the subjects avoided taking the same route twice. "When they were forced to do so, they would go back only as far as the last choice node," says Lev-
el. The speakers thus reassured themselves that they were being thorough in their descriptions and would be sure they had not forgotten anything.

Yet the experiments in the ini-
tial years proved that this belief is an illusion: "Most of the time, the speakers still fugured things in their descriptions," explains Levelt.

However, these findings still did not fully uncover the mystery of language known to linguists as the “speaker’s linearization problem.” The Max Planck researchers wanted to discover how a speaker deals linguis-
tically with the three-dimen-
sionality of a room, including the things in it, since describing such a room is not as easy as it first ap-
pears. This is due to the linear struc-
ture of language: "We are unable to utter two words or sentences at the same time," explains Levelt. It is al-
ready hard for speakers to describe events that follow each other in time. They must decide on an order that will convey their message in such a way that it makes sense, because after all, the idea is that the message be comprehensible to the listener. Too many details or an ill-conceived plan can be confusing. In simple cases, the order of events to be related dic-
tates the linguistic order of mention, as in the sentence "I opened the door and went out of the house." However, de-
scribing things that have no intrinsic linear structure, such as places, apartments or rooms, is more difficult.

The psychologist’s experiments with the dollhouse showed how it’s not that easy to find the right words to clearly describe what a room looks like.