

Proposed project

A sentence like “John was at the door” usually implies the *exhaustivity inference* (EI) that nobody else was at the door. At least three accounts have been developed to explain these EIs: (i) Gricean reasoning, (ii) syntactic ambiguity, and (iii) pragmatic enrichment. These three accounts make different predictions in the case of embedded contexts. We plan to test these predictions by means of an act-out experiment.

Purpose of the visit

We have conducted the proposed act-out experiment using sentences with “some” embedded under monotone increasing, monotone decreasing, and non-monotone quantifiers. While our results seem to indicate the presence of local readings---in support of theories (ii) and (iii) above---there are other response types suggesting that the apparent local readings are instead the result of a particular response strategy adopted by participants. This potential confound prevents us from drawing definite conclusions from our preliminary results.

The purpose of this visit is to discuss if the presence of local readings can entirely be explained on the basis of this response strategy, and if so, to conceptualise and construct a follow-up experiment that allows us to determine if this confound was indeed responsible for the apparent local readings. This will mainly involve creating new materials, as we will adopt the methodology we used in the previous experiment. Furthermore, we will discuss whether and where to publish our results, which will necessitate thinking carefully about the precise scope of our results and how to analyse them statistically.

Main results, future collaboration, projected publications

We have devised a follow-up experiment to tease apart the two potential explanations for our current results. In this experiment, participants are predicted to respond differently depending on whether they adopted the aforementioned response strategy, or whether they arrived at a genuine local reading. We aim to run this follow-up experiment before September 2013, when we intend to have another meeting to discuss the results and to prepare an article that provides an overview of the results of our experiments.

Where to publish this article will depend in part on the results of the follow-up experiment. If it is found that participants arrived at a local reading, this finding will be an important piece of evidence in the current debate between proponents of various theories of EIs, in favour of the theories (ii) and (iii) above. If, on the contrary, the results of this experiment suggest that the apparently local readings are caused by a response strategy, our results are less unambiguous, but they be construed as indirect evidence for (i), given that theories (ii) and (iii) appear to predict that at least some participants arrive at a local reading. In either case, our results merit publication since they provide a novel perspective on the debate about the provenance of EIs, but also on the mechanisms underlying act-out tasks in general.