

EXPERIMENTAL PRAGMATICS IN EUROPE
(EURO-XPRAG)

Standing Committee for the Humanities (SCH)



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Introduction

Research in pragmatics has seen accelerated growth over the last ten years for two main reasons. One is that the field has engaged semanticists and the other is that it has continued to encourage collaboration with experimentalists who have generated data by specifically testing between theories. Taken together, both semantics and pragmatics are in a better position to resolve theoretical disputes, to advance beyond arm-chair theory-making and to make their theories more accessible to the cognitive science community at large. Conversely, those who take an experimental approach to the investigation of pragmatic phenomena have benefited from having multiple theories at their disposal as provided by semantics and pragmatics. The upshot has been the emergence of an interdisciplinary field known as *Experimental Pragmatics*. Although this field has advanced considerably due to multiple individual efforts, these evolving collaborations have sought a more permanent platform. This led to the birth of the present network.

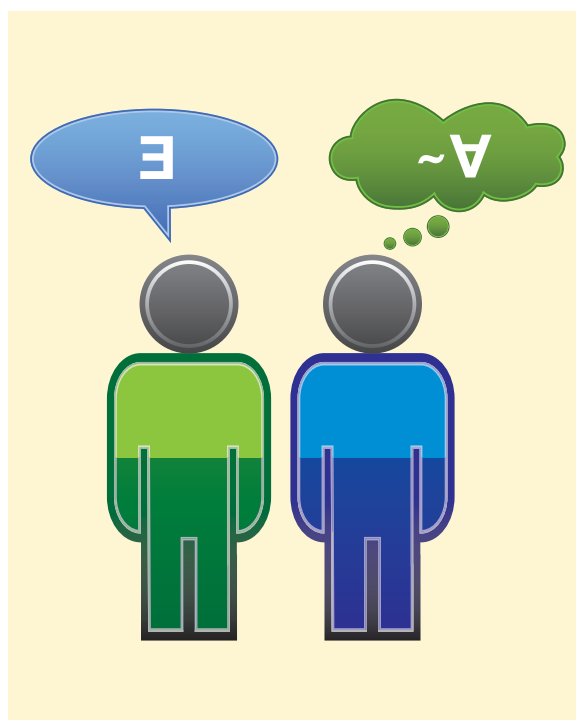
The EURO-XPRAG Research Networking Programme aims to support experimental pragmatic research through collaborations, workshops and conferences in order to provide leadership for this field worldwide. Many collaborations were begun through spontaneous workshops as well as through a series of Experimental Pragmatics conferences that have taken place biennially since 2003. The first workshop and one recent conference have led to edited volumes (Noveck and Sperber, 2004; Sauerland and Yatsushiro, 2009). The Research Networking Programme is supported by 12 countries and includes researchers who are recognised independently for their work in semantics, pragmatics and psychology.

The EURO-XPRAG network draws on first-rate expertise and access to advanced facilities. Linguistic expertise from diverse perspectives is directly present through its many members who are located in important centres for linguistic research throughout Europe. Given the experimental aspects, it is important to have facilities in the form of software, equipment and, in some cases, access to patients or other particular sorts of participants as well as the expertise to utilise these resources. This, too, is satisfied in each of the countries. The organisation of the EURO-XPRAG network will lead to consistent interaction between theoretical researchers and those who have experimental expertise. Our aims are fourfold:

- to get linguists more invested in experimentation and experimentalists in semantics and pragmatics;
- to demonstrate how collaboration can energise a field;
- to make Europe the recognised innovator and continuing leader of experimental pragmatics worldwide; and, of course,
- to disseminate our findings and techniques.

The organisation of the network aims to allow for a mixture of top-down and bottom-up processes. It is top-down in the sense that the steering committee aims to maintain the general rhythm that has already been instituted over the last decade. This means conferences every two years and workshops in the intervening years. We are also introducing a summer school at the end of the fourth year. The network is bottom-up in the sense that travel grant programmes will continue to encourage collaborations, especially among younger researchers, in order to keep the field vibrant. These innovative collaborations are expected to provide new material for the workshops and international conferences for years to come.

The running period of the ESF EURO-XPRAG Research Networking Programme is for four years from June 2009 to June 2013.



Aims and Objectives

Theoretical background:

Analysing communication exchanges

Communication exchanges can often appear straightforward. For example, a dinner invitation or a request for the time can seem to follow a script. On closer inspection, however, human communication reveals itself as a deceptively complicated act. One central consideration is the intention behind the utterance. The receiver of a message has to take into account the message-sender's intention and the message-sender has to take into account the capacities and interpretational abilities of the receiver. An invitation to dinner from a colleague would not have the same import as the same invitation from a stranger. Given the central role of language in most forms of communication, the words and their syntactic structure are extremely important to communication as well, but these are not completely determinative either. For example, while conventional meanings of the words "the", "boys", "are" and "here" can be easily stated and while the structural composition of sentence (1) is straightforward, as an utterance it could still be used to communicate many different messages depending on the context.

(1) *"The boys are here!"*

Uttered by a father who's been looking for his two lost sons, it could be an expression of relief intended for his companion; uttered by a gangster, it could be the signal to engage in a fight or to flee. Countless other examples similarly reveal that understanding utterances requires not only knowing the semantics of words and the syntax that structures them but an understanding of pragmatics. Given the thorough context dependence of natural language meaning it becomes apparent that to provide the full picture of utterance interpretation one needs a theory of extra-linguistic processes such as inference, memory, attention and so forth. This leads to the study of pragmatics which takes into account such factors while intersecting with linguistics.

Adversarial Collaboration Workshops

One innovative aspect of this network is to bring together opposing points of view around the investigation of specific phenomena. By creating groups consisting of, e.g., two theorists with opposing points of view and an experimentalist, the members of such a group would be in the position to work out – in detail – specific predictions that would follow from two (or more) given approaches as they elaborate on an experimental paradigm. This has been practiced among cognitive scientists in the past outside of this area (see Mellers, Hertwig and Kahneman, 2001) and to some extent within experimental pragmatics (see Noveck, Chierchia et al., 2002). Such workshops represent an ideal way for a young researcher or an advanced student to be given responsibility while working alongside more senior researchers.

Topic Areas

Scalar implicatures

If a waiter asks a group of diners whether they enjoyed their meal and the reply comes, “Some of us did”, then there is a clear implication that not all members of the group enjoyed the meal. The implication from ‘some’ to ‘not all’ is an example of the general phenomenon known as scalar implicature. In the past few years scalar implicature has been studied using several experimental methodologies: language processing, language acquisition and development, as well as from neurological studies (Breheny, Katsos and Williams, 2006; Chierchia et al., 2001; Noveck, 2001; Papafragou and Musolino, 2003). These studies consistently point toward a distinctive cognitive profile for scalar implicatures: they are acquired relatively late in child development, they are costly in terms of cognitive effort, they do not seem to be available by default, and yet they are generated on-line along with the normal incremental semantic interpretation — albeit with a slight delay.

For example, in one study five-year-old children and adults were shown three toy horses. Later, all of them were shown to jump over a fence. Interestingly, the five-year-olds were more likely than adults to agree with a puppet claiming:

(2) *Some of the horses jumped over the fence.*

Adults are more likely to disagree, however, and reaction time studies show that adults require additional processing for scalar implicatures. Other reading-time and eye-tracking studies have since confirmed this result, which has proved important because it distinguishes between different theoretical approaches (for discussion, see Noveck and Sperber, 2004).

Presuppositions

Presupposition is one of the central phenomena of pragmatics but, except for some work on definite descriptions, there has been no formal experimental work on presuppositions. However, many of the experimental techniques developed for conversational implicatures can be applied to presuppositions as well and this research shows exciting promise.

Referential terms

Although at first sight the functioning of referential terms might seem a straightforward matter, it turns out that the interpretation of such terms involves intricate processes, in which a large number of linguistic and non-linguistic factors interact. Referential terms have been studied extensively in linguistics, psychology and philosophy, but each discipline has concentrated on different aspects of the subject. For example, while syntactic and semantic constraints on co-reference have received considerable

attention, little is known about how these two classes of constraints relate to each other. EURO-XPRAG aims to develop a comprehensive and integrated processing theory of referential terms.

Metaphor and figurative uses

According to the so-called Standard Pragmatic Model of metaphor comprehension, a metaphor is first understood literally, leading to a reading that is false or at least very odd, and then understood with its intended meaning as the hearer carries out a second computation. For example, the following utterances would be rejected initially as being literally false, prompting a listener to ‘try again’ and infer the metaphorical interpretation:

(3) *That boxer is a creampuff.*

Existing psycholinguistic work on metaphor has generally debunked the Standard Pragmatic Model (Glucksberg, 2001), giving rise to a different question: are metaphoric readings as easy to integrate as literal readings? This issue is more controversial. EURO-XPRAG provides a path for the resolution for these apparent contradictions by bringing together theoretical and experimental researchers from various traditions.

Lexical pragmatics

Lexical pragmatics is a rapidly developing branch of linguistics which investigates the processes by which linguistically-specified (‘literal’) word meanings are modified in use. Well-studied examples include lexical narrowing (e.g., ‘drink’ used to mean ‘alcoholic drink’), approximation (e.g., ‘square’ used to mean ‘squarish’) and metaphorical extension (e.g., ‘battleaxe’ used to mean ‘frightening person’). There is evidence that such processes apply automatically. However, there is little interaction between formal pragmaticists (who are mainly interested in simplifying semantic description) and cognitive pragmaticists (who are interested in the mechanisms underlying verbal comprehension). EURO-XPRAG creates the foundations for interdisciplinary research by developing a framework in which the results of different approaches may be integrated.

With scalar implicatures as a kind of template, we have four main objectives:

- Systematically investigate the range of linguistic-pragmatic phenomena;
- Verify that experimental paradigms test semantic and pragmatic theory;
- Take measures from a variety of groups – normally developing children, healthy adults and those affected by pathologies that touch language;
- Determine the on-line generation for each phenomenon as well as the neurophysiological activity that each inference evokes.

Activities

Calls for proposals

Travel grant proposals aim to bring together teams of at least two researchers to conduct collaborative research in experimental pragmatics. EURO-XPRAg kicked off its first call in July 2009. Projects will be presented and discussed at a workshop to be held at the University of Leuven, Belgium, on 10-12 June 2010. The workshop's objectives will be to provide feedback on the experimental paradigms and their testing of semantic and pragmatic theory.

Events

Conferences

Conferences are crucial for the scientific success of our programme. Much like the prior conferences, submitted presentations will be selected by an anonymous abstract review (by the steering committee members and other qualified researchers). The first conference will take place in Barcelona in April 2011. Further details will be available on the EURO-XPRAg website (www.EURO-XPRAg.org) as a date is confirmed and the conference approaches. At that time, you will find information on how to submit an abstract and on practical aspects of the meeting.

Summer school

The summer school on Experimental Pragmatics (which will take place in 2013) will disseminate the results of EURO-XPRAg to graduate students and advanced undergraduate students. The lecturers will be selected by the steering committee. Each lecturer will offer an introductory and an advanced course for one week each of the two-week school.

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For the latest information on this Research
Networking Programme consult the EURO-XPRAG
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