

The only one strategy in context

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Abstract

This paper investigates domain restriction in the resolution of privative ambiguities of sentences like *The orange parakeet is the only one that is hiding itself*, which is ambiguous between an anaphoric and an exophoric interpretation. Previous work by Crain et al. (1994) argued for a built-in parsing preference for weak readings of privative ambiguities. Manipulating the amount of the contextual information available, we present results that challenge Crain et al.'s conclusion: in our study, we show that context takes precedence over truth-conditional considerations in the resolution of privative ambiguities in adults.

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1. Introduction

In this paper we investigate how adults resolve a special case of semantic ambiguity, i.e. privative ambiguity (Horn, 1989; Zwicky and Sadock, 1975). We start from the pioneering study by Crain et al. (1994), who tested the phenomenon of “one-substitution” in children and adults by investigating sentences like (1):

(1) The big elephant is the only one that is playing guitar.

Sentence (1) contains the expression “the only one”, which needs a referent to be interpreted. This gives rise to an ambiguity. The ambiguity derives from the fact that *one* can be interpreted anaphorically, as in (2a), or exophorically, as in (2b):

(2)

a. The big elephant is the only elephant that is playing guitar. (*anaphoric interpretation*)

b. The big elephant is the only animal that is playing guitar. (*exophoric interpretation*)

In (2a), *one* receives its reference from the linguistic antecedent that is found in the head noun of the subject Determiner Phrase (DP henceforth), i.e. *elephant* in this case. In (2b), *one* is interpreted by making reference to a wider

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discourse domain that, besides elephants, might include other animals or individuals. Crucially, an entailment relation occurs between the alternative readings in (2), and this is what makes the present ambiguity a privative one. In our example, the exophoric interpretation (2b) asymmetrically entails the anaphoric interpretation (2a). This means that, whenever (1) is true under interpretation (2a), it would also be true under interpretation (2b), but not vice versa. To illustrate, if it is true that there is only one animal in the discourse domain that is doing P (exophoric interpretation, (2b)), then it follows that no other elephant (except for the big one) is doing P as well. By contrast, if it is true that there is no other elephant (except for the big one), that is doing P (anaphoric interpretation, (2a)), then there might be an animal of a different species in the discourse domain that is doing P as well. Consistent with the semantic literature, we can say that (2a) is the weak interpretation, i.e. the one that requires fewer commitments about the status of the world in which a sentence like (1) is uttered: by interpreting (1) as (2a) one will only commit to the fact that no other elephant, except for the big one, is playing the guitar, without making any claim about any other animal that might be present in the discourse domain.

Other linguistic phenomena exhibit the same pattern of entailment between alternative readings and have been the source of intense semantic theorizing. For example, the sentence “The girls know each other” might be interpreted as “Every girl knows every other girl” or “Some girls know some other girls”, the former reading being generally preferred (subject to the lexical properties of the items it combines with). Analogously to what happens in case of “the only one”, the alternative interpretations of “each other” spelled out above are not truth-conditionally independent, in that one reading entails the other. Our alleged preference for the strong interpretation of reciprocals has been accounted for in terms of the Strongest Meaning Hypothesis proposed by Dalrymple et al. (1998) and subsequently extended to plural predication by Winter (2001). In a similar vein, Krifka (1998) proposed the Principle of Pragmatic Strengthening to account for our preferences in the resolution of plural predication and the so-called *donkey sentences* (i.e. sentences like “Every farmer who owns a donkey beats it”) in which, analogously, an entailment relation occurs between alternative readings (every farmer who owns a donkey beats all/some of the donkeys he owns). This principle assumes that, whenever alternative readings are allowed by the grammar, we should favour the stronger over the weaker one (if consistent with general background assumptions). A similar argument is also implemented in Chierchia (2006) to account for the interpretation of sentences involving scalar terms like *some* and polarity sensitive items like *ever* and *any*, whose interpretation involves considerations about informativeness (see also Chierchia et al., 2013). For example, the interpretation “Lyn ate some but not all of the cookies” is more informative than “Lyn ate some cookies” in upward entailing contexts (Ladusaw, 1980) and thus a sentence such as “Lyn ate some cookies” is pragmatically enriched and most often interpreted as “Lyn ate some but not all of the cookies”. This *some-but-not all* inference does not arise in downward entailing contexts, in which the *at-least-some* meaning is the strongest interpretation and thus the one generally preferred (e.g., consider the conditional sentence “If Lyn ate some of the cookies, she’ll feel sick”, that does not convey the inference that Lyn will not feel sick if she eats all of the cookies). Analogously, considerations about the informativeness of alternative representations are central in theoretical accounts of presupposition projection (cf. Geurts, 2000 for a criticism and references therein) and in the analysis of scope interactions (cf. Gualmini et al., 2008 and references therein).

In this paper, we restrict our attention to the case of sentences like (1) that were investigated by Crain et al. (1994) in two experiments. In a first experiment, Crain and colleagues tested 3–5 year-old English speaking children with a Truth Value Judgement task (Crain and McKee, 1985; Crain and Thornton, 1998). They asked children to evaluate sentences like (1) in a context in which (1) was true under the anaphoric interpretation (2a) but false under the exophoric interpretation (2b). In the scenarios used for the evaluation, the big elephant was the only elephant playing a guitar, but not the only animal that was doing it, since an octopus and a bird were also playing a guitar. The authors found that children consistently rejected the target sentences in this scenario. To motivate their answer, children pointed to the other animal (s) that were doing the same action as the subject DP in the target sentences. Crain and colleagues interpreted children’s behaviour by appealing to a Maximal Commitment strategy: when interpreting ambiguous sentences, children would initially select the interpretation that has more chances of being falsified. In the case at hand, children would interpret (1) by selecting the strong, exophoric, interpretation (2b). This result was explained by appealing to the Semantic Subset Principle (Crain, 1992, 1993; Crain and Philip, 1993), according to which, in order to converge on the target grammar, the first hypothesis that children make in solving semantic ambiguities is the one that can be falsified on the basis of positive evidence from the input (for a criticism, see also Gualmini and Schwarz, 2009; Musolino, 2006).

In a second experiment, Crain et al. tested a group of adults with a sentence falsification task in which participants were given sentences like (1) and were asked to imagine a scenario that made those sentences false. What they found is that adults tended to mention an animal of the same individual-level category as the head noun of the subject DP. In the case of (1), for example, adults imagined a situation in which there was another elephant that was playing a guitar too (besides the big elephant), thereby suggesting that (1) was disambiguated anaphorically, as in (2a). Crain et al. interpreted adults’ results in terms of the Principle of Parsimony: “if there is a reading that carries fewer unsatisfied presuppositions or entailments than any other, then, other criteria of plausibility being equal, that reading will be adopted as most plausible by

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