

Discussion Points

Moss, Djalali & Potts, Perry & Shan

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Inference and Grammar

What inferences do interlocutors draw?

How do these inferences arise?

Starting point (Djalali & Potts)

A: Is that a huge gap in the system?

B: It is a gap.

Scalar Implicature

- Normally explained via reasoning about speaker

Problem: characterizing this

Novick and Sperber (2007)

- Need to factor out background world knowledge

He is a bachelor **or** he is divorced.

Jane is in Paris **or** in Madrid.

Bill will arrive Monday **or** Tuesday.

My own favorite example:

I **tried** to kill myself.

Problem: characterizing this

Novick and Sperber (2007)

- Not a general default

She wears sunglasses **or** a cap.

Our employees speak French **or** Spanish.

Bill will sing **or** play the piano.

Problem: characterizing this

Meaning signaled by intonation/coherence.

A: The handkerchief was red.

B: It looked red.

(after Kripke 1978)

I **tried** to log in, **but** I got an error.

Problem: characterizing this

Meaning signaled by intonation/coherence.

A: The handkerchief was yellow.

B: It looked red.

(after Kripke 1978)

Opportunity

RTE as Experimental Pragmatics

- Elicit judgments carefully and in theoretically-informed terms.
- Recognize that research requires science as well as engineering.
- Competing explanations: logic, psychology, grammar.

Similar issues with entailments

Soundness for monotonicity inference

- Instrumenting grammar to do inference (Moss)
- Enriching grammar with meaningful distinctions

Lots of sound systems

- Program invites singling out some as “natural”

Key issue

Variability in NPI licensing (cf Chierchia 2004).

- Strong vs. weak NPIs

Weak NPIs OK in downward entailing contexts

No/Few students said anything.

Strong NPIs require actual negation

No/*Few students have attended class in weeks.

Key issue

Variability in NPI licensing (Linebarger 1987).

– Intervention effects

Nobody has given John a red cent.

*Nobody has given most people a red cent.

Suspicion

Natural monotonicity inferences
(and NPI licensing)

a conspiracy between

- information structure – what's at issue
- coherence – what are you saying about it
- lexical meaning – “perspective” of NP items

Research program

Crosslinguistic investigation

- Universals of natural inference.
- Lots of variation in licensing and the inferences and meanings it draws on.

Closing Thoughts

Language, inference and the world

– Katz vs. Kripke

Truth is just as useful as inference

(e.g., Perry & Shan)

Good reason to think that truth is prior

as when we discover Zinfandel is Primitivo