



THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE



Patrícia Amaral

Napoleon Katsos

Chris Cummins

Backgrounding and accommodation
of presuppositions:
an experimental approach

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Presupposition research in experimental semantics/pragmatics

- Following trend in SI research, but more complex?
- Various concepts can be presupposed:
 - Existence of an entity (“the N”)
 - Existence of a prior state of affairs (“stop”)
 - Truth of a proposition (“know”)
 - Occurrence of a past event (“again”)
 - etc.
- Any psychological equivalence?

Line 1: Information packaging

- Ps. triggers share the property of *backgrounding* some information, or making it *not at issue* (Roberts 1996)
- Backgrounded content
 - Does not contribute to context update
 - Cannot be directly addressed/challenged in ongoing discourse

e.g. (Roberts and Tonhauser)

“in polar questions, the at issue content determines the relevant set of alternatives”

Does Juan live in Maria's house?

Yes, he does.

?Yes, Maria has a house.

Strength of backgrounding

- Do different ps. triggers background content to the same degree?
 - e.g. resolutional vs. lexical triggers (Zeevat 1992)
 - Resolutional triggers “collect entities from the environment in order to say something about them”
 - Lexical triggers “encode preconditions for their main declarative content”
- “Stop” is lexical, as in “Mary stopped smoking”
“Again” is resolutional, as in “Mary met John again today”
- Could lexical triggers background their ps. less strongly?

Line 2: Projection and accommodation

- Presuppositions customarily *project* from e.g. under the scope of negation
 - Loaded questions project ps. to a global level: “Have you stopped beating your wife yet?”
- Presuppositions can be used to introduce new material to the discourse, which will be accommodated
 - “I just found out that p” presupposes p, which could be new

Explaining inconsistent projection

“Mary didn’t realise that whales are mammals”

“Mary didn’t realise that whales are fish, because they’re not fish”

- Latter requires *local accommodation* (on semantic account)
- But given a choice:
 - How do hearers establish where ultimately to accommodate ps?
 - What’s the nature of the process – i.e. default or contextual?
 - Does local accommodation proceed via global accommodation and cancellation?
- Possible role for psycholinguistic methods

Synthesising information packaging and projection behaviour

- **Hypothesis:** extent to which information is backgrounded influences its projection behaviour
- To explore this, aim to measure backgrounding in terms of addressability of content
 - “Has Tom stopped watching old films?”
 - “No, he watches old films” – foreground
 - “No, he didn’t use to watch old films” – background
- General prediction: foreground > background (acceptability)
- Following Zeevat (1992), expect background responses to be generally more acceptable for lexical triggers than resolitional

Synthesising information packaging and projection behaviour

- **Hypothesis:** extent to which information is backgrounded influences its projection behaviour
- Additionally, take background responses of this kind to be cases of (implicit) local accommodation
 - “Has Tom stopped watching old films?”
 - “No, he watches old films” – foreground
 - “No, he didn’t use to watch old films” – background
 - = “No (it is not the case that he has stopped watching old films)...”
- Prediction then about accommodation too:
Information not fully backgrounded admits local accommodation

Experiment: rating yes/no continuations in foreground/background conditions

Sample item:

Did Brian lose his wallet again?

Yes, he did lose his wallet again

Pos + ps

No, he didn't lose his wallet this time

Neg + ps

Yes, although he didn't lose his wallet before

Pos – ps

No, because he didn't lose his wallet before

Neg – ps

Experiment: rating yes/no continuations in foreground/background conditions

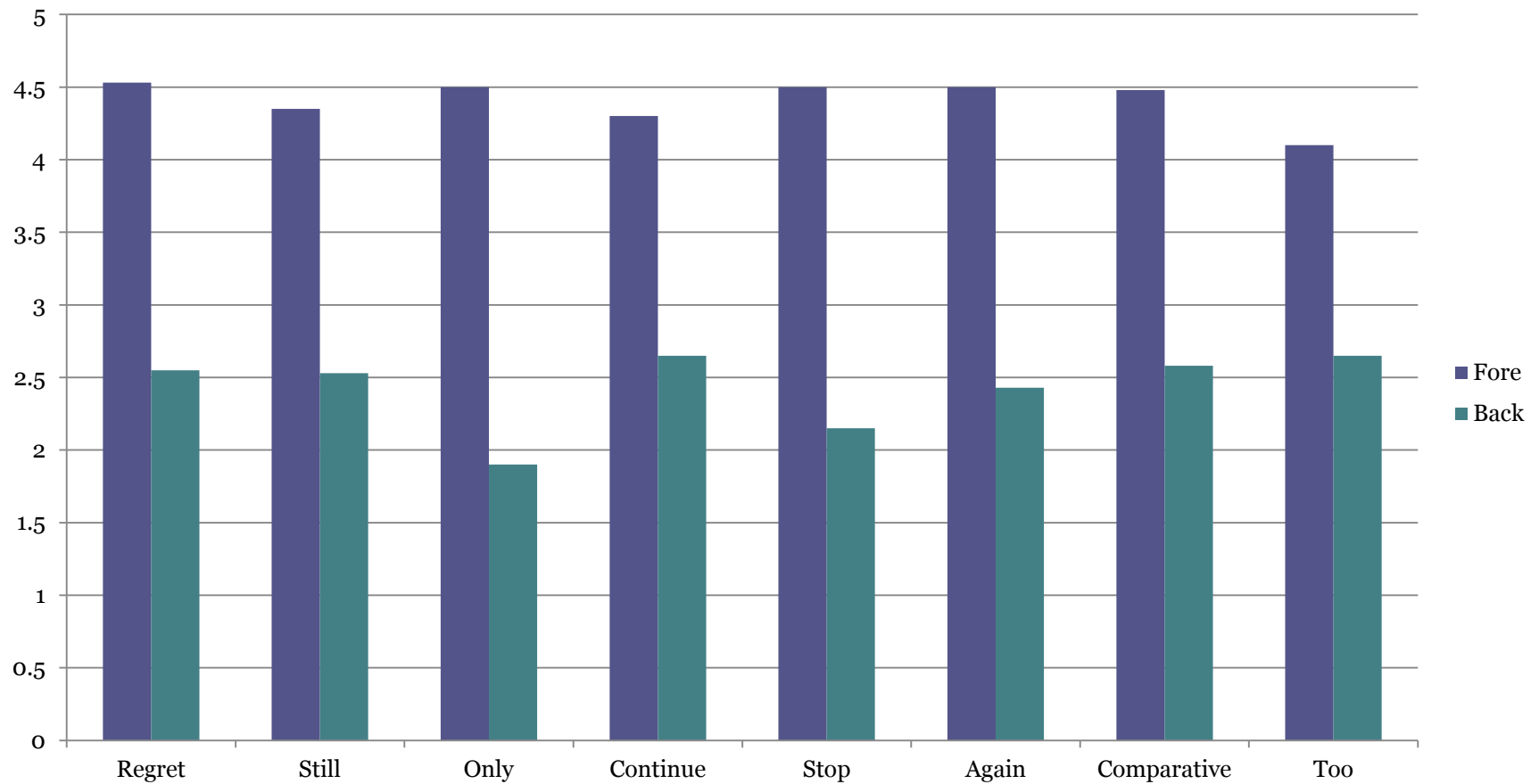
- **Predictions:**

- Negative continuation denying presupposition relatively better in lexical than resolitional case
- Positive continuation denying presupposition relatively better in resolitional than in lexical case

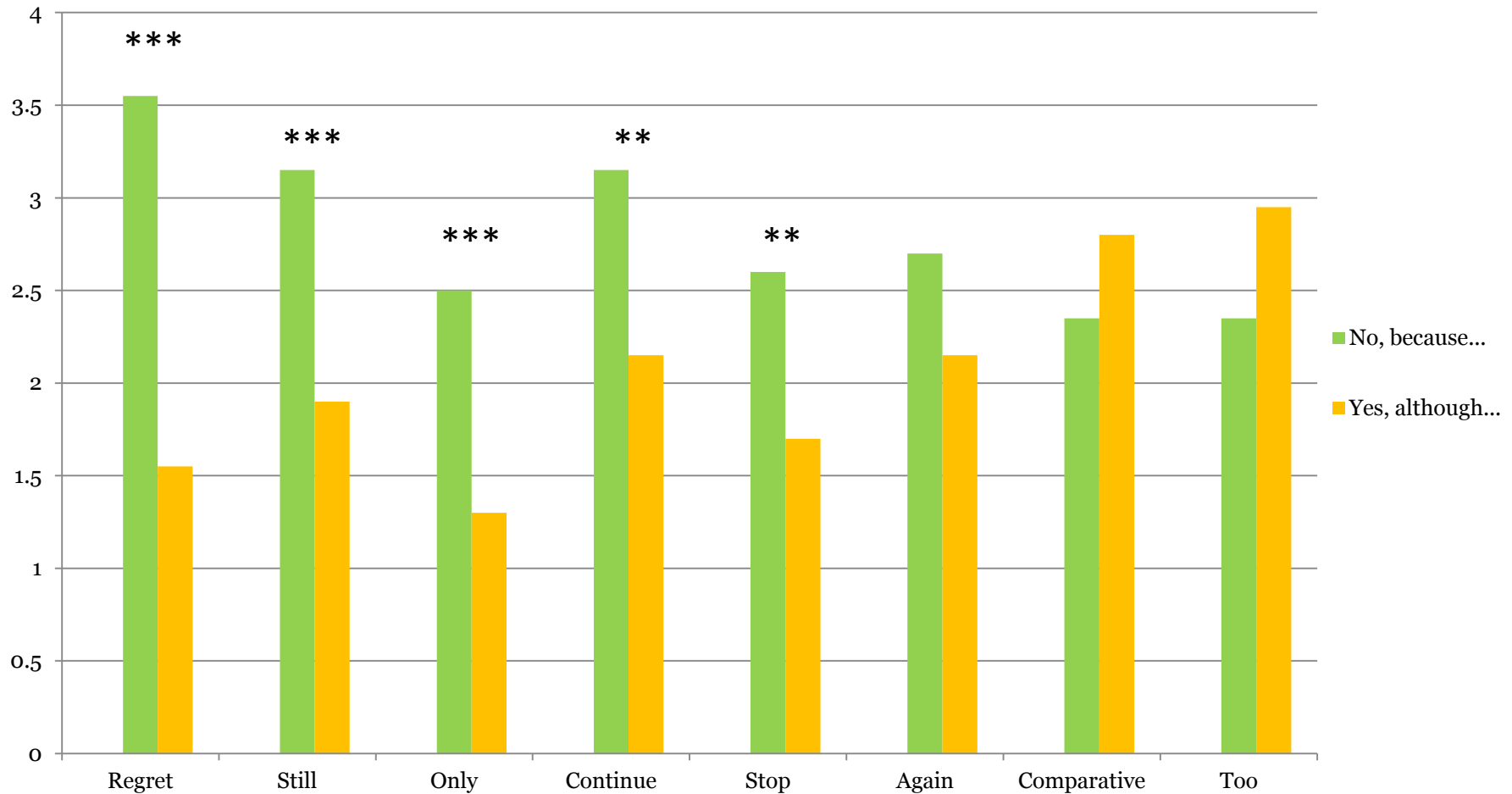
8 triggers, 4 items for each trigger.

Rated on 5-point scale for 'naturalness'.

Results: foreground vs. background



Results: preferred responses for presupposition denial



Discussion

- Evidence in support of Zeevat's distinction between lexical and resolutional triggers
- Denying the presupposition coheres with rejecting the sentence as a whole, in the case of lexical triggers
- Interpretable in terms of lexical triggers yielding 'less backgrounded' pss. and (we argue) these admitting local accommodation

Implications for projection

- Different types of trigger differing in strength of tendency towards projection
- Bears upon analysis of projection, which is usually either
 - ‘Dynamic semantic’, following Heim (1983)
 - Pragmatic, following Stalnaker (1976)and depends upon e.g. whether there’s an observable preference for global accommodation, etc.
- Suggests that distinct subgroups of triggers might admit distinct semantic/pragmatic analyses

Implications for projection

- Suggestion of gradience among triggers (cf. Kadmon 2001)
 - transferring from backgrounding to projection, on this analysis
- Extent to which a trigger backgrounds information seems intuitively also to be contextually determined
 - “I just found out that Mary is seeing Dave” vs.
 - “If John finds out that Mary is seeing Dave, he’ll be furious”
- If this pattern goes across to projection, it argues for a strong contextual role in determining projective behaviour

Conclusion so far...

- Experimental evidence in support of psychological reality of (at least one aspect of) presupposition taxonomy
- Indications that presupposition is a heterogeneous phenomenon (perhaps even within trigger classes)
- Some justification of the application of experimental methods to the domain of presupposition

Thank you!

References

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