

# How not to trigger a presupposition

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Alignment in Communication



# Presupposition projection

- Presuppositions characterised by projection behaviour
- Triggers convey some additional non-declarative meaning
  - “I’m **still** standing”
  - “I saw her **again** last night”
  - “I **know** it’s over”
- This projects from under the scope of negation (etc.)
  - “**Won’t** get fooled **again**”

# Presupposition accommodation

- We can use presupposition triggers to convey new content
  - Presupposed material need not be common ground (although it can be)  
“I just found out that  $p$ ”
  - Presuppositions are often easily recoverable and can be added into our discourse model  
“Once upon a time, there lived a prince, and his name was John. He was an honest man and all the people loved him”  
vs. “Prince John was honest and all the people loved him”

# “Local accommodation”

- Problem: presuppositions do not always project
  - “Mary doesn’t regret leaving her job; she didn’t leave it”
  - “The talk was not cancelled; it was never planned”
- Sentences of this type are not judged incoherent
  - Speaker is not judged to commit to the ps. of the first clause
- Explanation depends on account of presupposition
  - Dynamic semantic (following Heim 1983): ps. is bound locally
  - Pragmatic (following Stalnaker 1976): contextual considerations do not license projection in these cases

# “Local accommodation”

- Also wish to explain why there’s an apparent general preference for global accommodation
  - Semantically, can stipulate this
  - Pragmatically, could appeal to idea of a default inference (Levinson 2000)
- Parallels with the case of scalar implicature
  - Apparent preference for one, informationally richer, reading
  - Richer reading is not always available
  - Consensus about ultimate interpretation but disagreement about how this is reached
  - Possibility of exploring the processing experimentally

# Experimental progress

- Chemla and Bott (2013): examining RTs for embedded ps. triggers with false complements  
The Martian geologists did not realise that elephants are reptiles.
- True on *local*, false on *global* reading
- Elicits faster rejections than acceptances
- Argued as support for dynamic semantic approach

# Some matters arising

- Are these findings robust to other triggers?
- How tolerant are participants to false presuppositions?
- *Are participants drawing inferences about prior context?*

# Accounting for the “speaker”

- Why is the word “realise” used in these experimental items?
  - Unhelpful of the speaker, if the presupposition is not intended
  - Assuming cooperativity, defensible only if there is some reason to use this specific item
  - Contextual possibilities: priming, or relevance to QUD



# Hearer's possible inference

- Hearer might imagine a context that makes the critical item felicitous (cf. Breheny et al. 2006)
- This context might naturally be one in which the notion of “realising” is already under discussion
  - cf. numerical domain: “Will Tiger win more than 18 majors?”
- Perhaps hearers respond to an unexpected ps. trigger by imagining such a context
  - If so, projection/accommodation is not happening just in the test sentences...

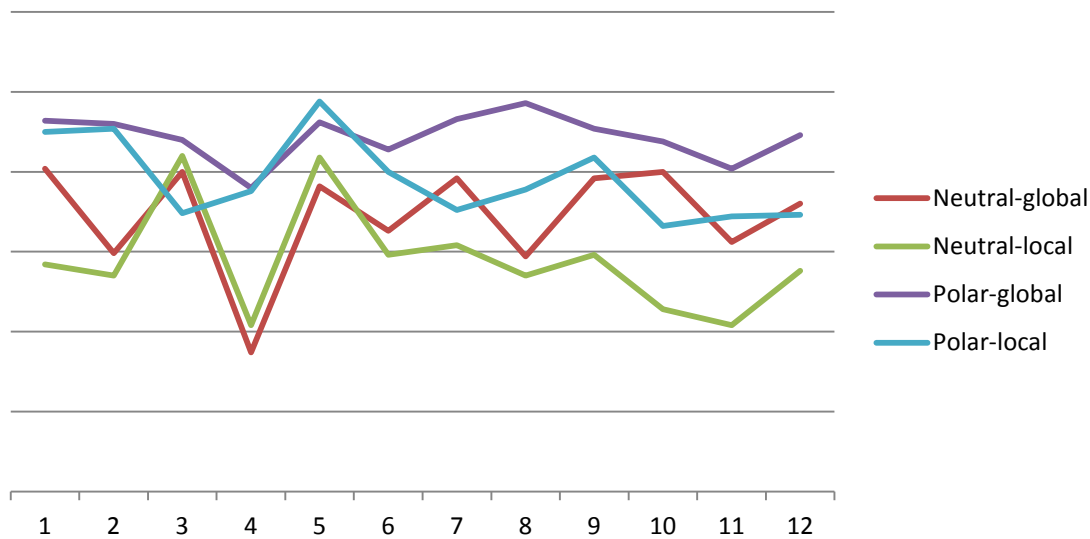
# Experimental check

- Presupposition-triggering sentences placed as responses in mini-dialogues
- Four conditions
  - A: “What about Mary?” / “Did Mary manage to solve the problem?”
  - B: “Mary didn’t manage to solve the problem/(; she did it easily).”
- MTurk, 4 versions, 25 participants per condition
- Magnitude estimation (numerical): 10 set as baseline
- Naturalness rating

# Summary results

	Global response	Local response
Neutral question	6.89	5.80
Polar question	8.88	7.81

9.06 felicitous control  
3.01 infelicitous control



# Possible interpretations

- General question/local accommodation condition falls below some threshold of acceptability?
- But: looks like two main effects
  - In particular, local accommodation is disfavoured both times
  - Would need considerably more work to be confident about the robustness of this finding
  - However, this does chime with some in-progress results from Breheny et al.'s Euro-XPrag project

# Possible implications

- Hearers appear to have (moderately strong?) views on the kind of preceding context that is required here
- Suggests that hearers might infer the presence of more specific QUDs in the prior context
- Perhaps conceivable that participants
  1. Infer the presence of a ps. trigger in the (tacit) prior context
  2. Deal with this presupposition
  3. Process the test sentence as negating a previously established ps.
- in which case part of the ‘accommodation’ process is happening outside the sentence; we need to control for this

# Summary

- Apparent preference for global projection of presuppositions
- However, not clear whether this reflects
  - the additional difficulty of local accommodation, as a semantic or pragmatic process taking place at a sentence-level
  - or additional difficulty associated with imagining a licensing context with richer presuppositional content present in it
- Further work required to disentangle these possibilities

# References

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