

The Illocutionary Profile of Subjective Predicates. An Experimental Study

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The phenomenon

- We sometimes make statements to discuss subjective matters (in 2), as opposed to facts (in 1)

(1) Paris is *in France*. Objective Assertion (OA)

(2) Paris is *beautiful*. Subjective Assertion (SA)

- Debate on the semantic representation of subjective predicates (Lasersohn 2005, Saebo 2009, Stephenson 2007, Stojanovic 2007, Pearson 2013, Barker 2013, Umbach 2016);

- **How do (1) and (2) differ at the illocutionary level?**

The discourse profile of SAs: Three options

Null Hyp.: $SAs = OAs$ - SAs are regular proposals to add p to the Common Ground, just like OAs (Stalnaker 1978);

Alternative Hyp. : $SAs \neq OAs$ - Two possibilities:

Hyp. A) SAs do not target the CG, but just update the speaker's private commitments (Dechaine et al. 2014)

Hyp. B) SAs also target the CG, but are *weaker* (Steph. 2007):
OAs: p added to the CG if participants have no objections.
SAs: p added only if all participants judge it as true

Experiment 1: the effect of silent responses

OAs: updating CG with p is default. Both confirmatory and silent responses add p to the CG (Farkas & Bruce 2010)

Null Hyp.: silence following SAs should lead to adding p to the CG. **Hyp. A/B:** silence shouldn't lead to adding p to the CG

Design: 3 (move types) x 3 (response types)

Greg: {OA: Paris is in France/SA: Paris is beautiful/PQ: Is Paris in France?}

Mary: {Conf: Yes, indeed!/ Den: "No, not really!/ Silence: [Says nothing, keeps listening.]}

It is now part of G and M's mutual knowledge that {P. is beautiful / P. is in France}

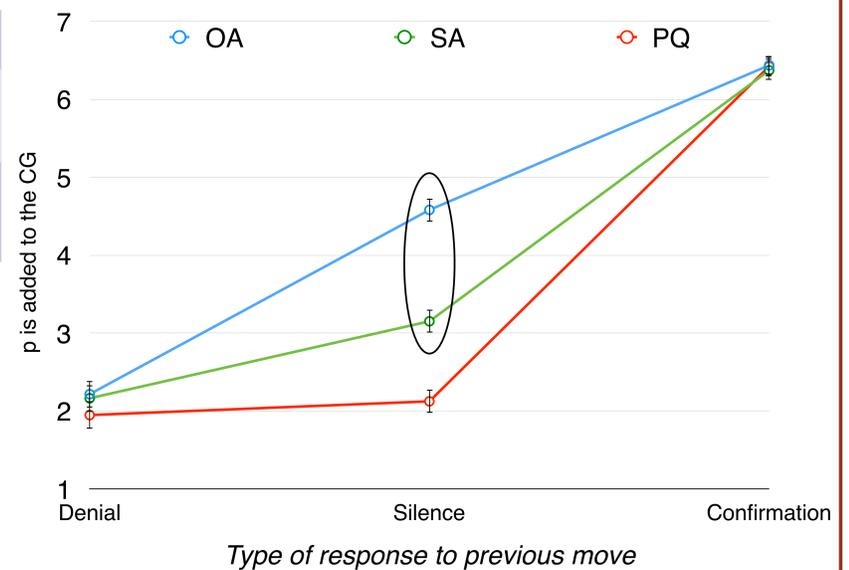
Prompt: Do you agree with this statement? (1=max disagree; 7=max. agree)

Methods

- 27 items distributed in 9 lists
- 54 subjects recruited on MTurk
- Ordinal Mixed Effects Models: Move and Response type as fixed effects, plus random intercepts for Subjects and Items

Results

- Confirm. and denials lead to high and low scores across conditions ($p < .001$)
- Interaction Move: Resp. Silence following SAs leads to lower scores than OAs ($ps < .001$)
- SAs are less biased than OAs towards adding p to the CG



Experiment 2: the aftermath of denials

Because OAs project acceptance of p , denials are highly disruptive moves, which lead the exchange into a state of crisis (F&B 2010)

Null Hyp.: Denials following SAs should also be highly disruptive, pushing the speaker to fight disagreement.

Hyp.A: Denials shouldn't be disruptive. **Hyp.B:** Den. should be less disruptive, allowing the speaker to fight or welcome disagreement

Design: 3 (move types) x 2 (post-denial response types)

Greg: {OA: Paris is in France / SA: Paris is beautiful / PQ: Is Paris in France?}

Mary: No, it's not!

Greg: {Welcoming: Ah! Interesting to hear this!/ Fighting: No way! That can't be true!}

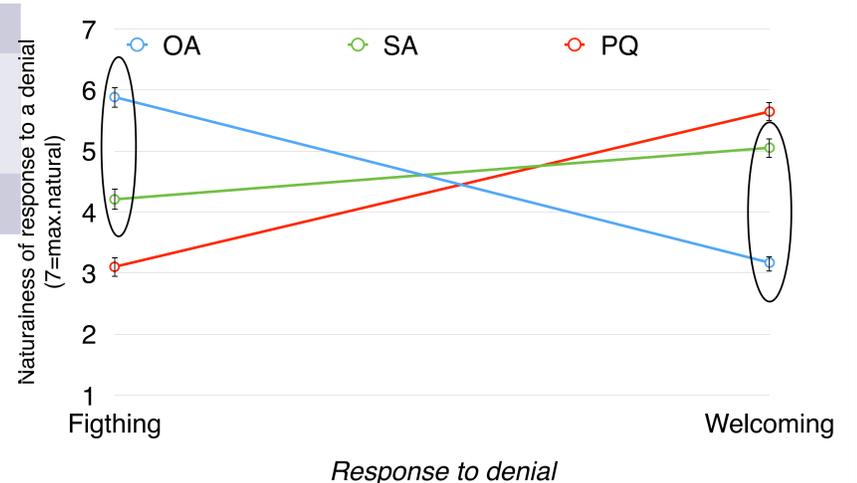
Prompt: How natural is Greg's reaction? (1=max unnatural; 7=max. natural)

Methods

- 18 items distributed in 6 lists (20 fillers)
- 54 subjects recruited on MTurk
- Ordinal Mixed Effects Models: Move and Response type as fixed effects, plus random intercepts for Subjects and Items

Results

- After OAs, combative responses rated higher than welcoming ones ($p < .001$);
- After SAs, welcoming responses rated higher than combative ones ($ps < .001$)
- For both response types, SAs pattern in between OAs and PQs



General discussion

- The illocutionary behavior of SAs differ from the one of OAs:
 - When followed by a silent response, SAs do not lead to update the CG as systematically as OAs
 - In the aftermath of denials, it is more natural for authors of SAs to welcome disagreement than it is for authors of OAs
- The illocutionary behavior of SAs also differ from the one of PQs:
 - When followed by a silent response, SAs still lead to update the CG to a higher extent than PQs
 - In the aftermath of denials, it is more natural for authors of SAs to defend the proposition than it is for authors of PQs
- A model of the discourse profile of SAs should capture the following properties:
 - Contrary to OAs, SAs do not project adding p as a default and do not engender a crisis if denied (**contra Null Hyp.**)
 - Contrary to PQs, SAs *do* put forward a proposal to add p to the CG (**contra Hyp.A**)
 - SAs' illocutionary force must project disagreement as an equally unmarked outcome, explaining the failure of silent responses to default to CG update, and the less disruptive nature of denials
 - The idea that SAs rely on a weaker norm of assertion (**Hyp. B**) appears to be the best suited to capture such facts

Further research

- Providing an explicit model of the illocutionary profile of SAs (e.g., in F&B 2010 framework)
- Exploring how the discourse behavior of SAs argues in favor/against extant theories on the lexical representation of subjective predicates

References: Barker, Chris (2013) Negotiating Taste. *Inquiry* - Dechaine, R.-M., C. Cook, J. Muehlbauer, and R. Waldie (2014). (de)-constructing evidentiality. Under review - Farkas, D. and Bruce (2010). On reacting to assertions and polar questions. *JoS* - Lasersohn, P. (2005). Context dependence, disagreement, and predicates of personal taste. *L&P* - Pearson, H. (2012). A judge-free semantics for predicates of personal taste. *JoS* - Saebo, KJ (2009) Judgment Ascriptions. *L&P* - Stalnaker, R. (1978). Assertion. In *Syntax and Semantics* - Stephenson, T. (2007). Judge dependence, epistemic modals, and predicates of personal taste. *L&P* - Stojanovic, T. Talking about taste: disagreement, implicit arguments, and relative truth. *L&P* - Umbach, C. (2016). Evaluative propositions and subjective judgments. Subjective meaning: Alternatives to Relativism.