snippets

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Contents

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Editorial Statement

1. Purpose

The aim of *Snippets* is to publish specific remarks that motivate research or that make theoretical points germane to current work. The ideal contribution is brief, self-contained and explicit. One encounters short comments of this kind in earlier literature in linguistics. We feel that there no longer is a forum for them. We want *Snippets* to help fill that gap.

2. Content

We will publish notes that contribute to the study of syntax and semantics in generative grammar. The notes are to be brief, self-contained and explicit. They may do any of the following things:

- point out an empirical phenomenon that challenges accepted generalizations or influential theoretical proposals;

- point out unnoticed minimal pairs that fall outside the scope of any existing theory;

- point out an empirical phenomenon that confirms the predictions of a theory in an area where the theory has not been tested;

- explicitly describe technical inconsistencies in a theory or in a set of frequently adopted assumptions;

- explicitly describe unnoticed assumptions that underlie a theory or assumptions that a theory needs to be supplemented with in order to make desired predictions;

- call attention to little-known or forgotten literature in which issues of immediate relevance are discussed.

We also encourage submissions that connect psycholinguistic data to theoretical issues. A proposal for a pilot experiment in language acquisition or language processing could make for an excellent snippet.

The earliest *Linguistic Inquiry* squibs exemplify the kind of remark we would like to publish. Some of them posed unobserved puzzles. For instance, a squib by Postal and Ross in *Linguistic Inquiry* 1:1 ("A Problem of Adverb Preposing") noted that whether or not we can construe a sentence-initial temporal adverb with an embedded verb depends on the tense of the matrix verb. A squib by Perlmutter and Ross in *LI* 1:3 ("Relative Clauses with Split Antecedents"), challenging the prevailing analyses of coordination and extraposition, noted that conjoined clauses, neither of which contains a plural noun phrase, can appear next to an "extraposed" relative that can only describe groups. Other squibs drew attention to particular theoretical assumptions. For instance, a squib by Bresnan in *LI* 1:2 ("A Grammatical Fiction") outlined an alternative account of the derivation of sentences containing *believe* and *force*, and asked whether there were principled reasons for dismissing any of the underlying assumptions (among them that semantic interpretation is sensitive to details of a syntactic derivation). A squib by Zwicky in *LI* 1:2 ("Class Complements in Phonology") asked to what extent phonological rules refer to complements of classes. None of these squibs was more than a couple of paragraphs; all of them limited themselves to a precise question or observation.

3. Submission details

Snippets is an electronic journal. We will solicit submissions twice a year. The submissions that we accept will be posted on the journal website approximately 3 months after each deadline, and all accepted submissions will remain permanently on the website. *Snippets* is intended as a service to the linguistics community. Consequently, authors are advised that, when they submit to *Snippets*, we understand them as allowing their submission to be reproduced if published. At the same time, the rights for the published snippets themselves will remain with the authors. As a result, citation of *Snippets* material will have to indicate the author's name and the specific source of the material.

We will accept electronic submissions at the address snippetsjournal@gmail.com. Electronic submissions may take the form of (a) the text of an e-mail message, or (b) an attached file. The attached file should be a simple text file, a Word file (Mac or Windows), a Rich Text Format (RTF) file, or a PDF. The files must be anonymous, but must be accompanied with information about the authors: name, affiliation, and (postal or electronic) address. Submissions can be of any length below 500 words (including examples), with an additional half page allowed for diagrams, tables, and references. The submissions may not contain footnotes or general acknowledgments, except acknowledgements of funding sources, which must be credited in a line following the references. Authors who wish to acknowledge language consultants are allowed but not required to do so. We will not consider abstracts.

4. Editorial policy

Submissions will be reviewed by our editorial board and review board, and review will be name-blind both ways. While we guarantee a response within 3 months of the submission deadline, we will not necessarily provide more than a yes/no response to the submitter. We allow resubmission (once) of the same piece.

This statement reproduces with minor modifications the editorial statement in Issue 1 of Snippets (January 2000), edited by Carlo Cecchetto, Caterina Donati and Orin Percus.

Ignorance is a problem

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According to the structural approach to alternatives (Katzir 2007; Fox and Katzir 2011), *Mary had a coffee* has [α_1 *Mary had a cappuccino*] and [α_2 *Mary had an espresso*] as alternatives (among many others). Thus, in a context where it is common ground that Mary, if she had a coffee at all, had either a cappuccino or an espresso, and furthermore $\alpha 1$ and $\alpha 2$ are relevant, an utterance of *Mary had a coffee* will be expected to trigger the following inference: the speaker is ignorant as to whether Mary had a cappuccino and as to whether she had an espresso—the same inference that an utterance of *Mary had a cappuccino or an espresso* would be expected to trigger.

But can *Mary had a coffee* be used to convey ignorance? Consider the following dialogues:

(1) [*Context*: *It is common ground that Mary had either a cappuccino, an espresso, or a cup of tea, and that there is nothing else that she had.*]

    A: Did Mary have a cappuccino, an espresso, or a cup of tea?

    B: She had a cappuccino or an espresso.

    A: ??OK, but was it a cappuccino that she had, or was it an espresso?

(2) [*Context*: *Same as in (1).*]

    A: Did Mary have a cappuccino, an espresso, or a cup of tea?

    B: She had a coffee.

    A: ✓OK, but was it a cappuccino that she had, or was it an espresso?

Under standard assumptions, (1B) and (2B) are contextually equivalent: for every $w \in C$, $[\![(1B)]\!]^w = [\![(2B)]\!]^w$. It is thus legitimate to pose the following question: why is it that they differ in terms of the replies that they admit?

Notice that, because B's utterances are contextually equivalent, they both provide a partial answer to A's initial question. It is therefore not clear that the contrast is due to any under-informativity on B's part. What seems to be going on is that in (1), but not in (2), B communicates that she does not know whether Mary had a cappuccino, and that she does not know whether she had an espresso. In (1), A's follow-up is odd because it disregards this part of B's message. In (2), on the other hand, B is not intuitively understood to communicate ignorance, so A's follow-up is felicitous (it makes sense for A to inquire further).

The following manipulation suggests that the account just given is correct:

(3) [*Context*: *Same as in (1).*]

    A: Did Mary have a cappuccino, an espresso, or a cup of tea?

    B: She had a cappuccino or an espresso. *That's all I know.*

    A: ??OK, but was it a cappuccino that she had, or was it an espresso?

(4) [*Context*: *Same as in (1).*]

    A: Did Mary have a cappuccino, an espresso, or a cup of tea?

    B: She had a coffee. *That's all I know.*

    A: ??OK, but was it a cappuccino that she had, or was it an espresso?

In both (3) and (4), B (explicitly) communicates her ignorance as to whether Mary had a cappuccino and as to whether she had an espresso. As expected under the proposed interpretation, A's follow-up is odd in both examples.

    Thus (2B) does not appear to convey ignorance. This observation is compatible with (at least) two possibilities: (i) $\alpha 1$ and $\alpha 2$ are alternatives of (1B) but not of (2B) — if (i) is correct, then the structural approach is in trouble; (ii) (2B) does have $\alpha 1$ and $\alpha 2$ as alternatives, and despite this, it fails to convey ignorance — in particular, an advocate of the structural approach could claim that alternatives generated via deletion have to be used, while those generated via lexical substitution need not be. Whether this idea generalizes is not clear; see for example Marty et al. 2024, p. 59.

References

Fox, Danny, and Roni Katzir. 2011. On the characterization of alternatives. *Natural Language Semantics* 19:87–107.

Katzir, Roni. 2007. Structurally-defined alternatives. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30:669–690.

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Passives and *from*-phrases in English

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English passives are generally thought to be compatible with by-phrases, but incompatible with *from*-phrases that specify a non-agentive cause (Kallulli 2007, Alexiadou et al. 2015, among others). English inchoative change-of-state verbs display the opposite distribution: they are incompatible with *by*-phrases and compatible with *from*-phrases:

(1) a. The surface was slowly cracked by the contractors / *from the pressure.
     b. The surface slowly cracked *by the contractors / from the pressure.

In this snippet I challenge the claim that cause-specifying *from*-phrases are uniformly incompatible with passives. The examples in (2) and (3) were all found on the internet (some are slightly adapted). I and three other native speakers of British English also find them quite acceptable, though the judgments throughout are subtle, and are contingent on the choice of lexical items. For (2a-c), the manner adverb excludes the stative reading of the passive.

(2) a. My will **was** slowly **broken from** all the pain I had to endure.
     b. A low-temperature solder joint on the safety prop **is** quickly **melted from** the heat of a fire.
     c. The visibility afforded to crime victims **was** slowly **eroded from** the increasingly formalized system of justice.
     d. Lab tests from the case concluded that he **was killed from** a single gunshot by a National Guard soldier.
     e. After just 16 days of opening the Palace **was destroyed from** a fire.

Interestingly, the progressive further improves the acceptability of the *from*-phrase:

(3) a. My heart **was being broken from** the constant arguments with my husband about how I discipline the children.
     b. His stomach lining **was being destroyed from** the pills and booze.
     c. She also testified about a trend of young teenagers **being killed from** the illicit drug.

Active-voice equivalents of the examples in (2) and (3) are not compatible with the *from*-phrase (though as with (3), progressive aspect may ameliorate the sentences for some speakers):

(4) a. The villain broke my will (*from all the pain).   (cf. (2a))
     b. A National Guard solder killed him (*from a single gunshot).   (cf. (2d))
     c. My husband was breaking my heart (*/??from constant arguments)   (cf. (3a))
     d. He was destroying his stomach lining (*/??from pills and booze)   (cf. (3b))

It appears that passives and *from*-phrases are compatible, in the right circumstances. The *from*-phrase itself appears to be doing the same thing in passives as it does in inchoatives: introducing a non-agentive cause. Further work is required to determine whether it replaces a *by*-phrase in examples like (2) and (3), or whether it may be added in addition to a *by*-phrase. Examples like (5), which feature a passive with both a *from*-phrase and a *by*-phrase, do not (in my informal investigation) present a clear picture. They seem to be hard to judge (with variation in within-speaker reported judgments), and they require more rigorous study.

(5)　%He was killed by a National Guard soldier from a single gunshot.

References

Alexiadou, Artemis, Elena Anagnostopoulou, and Florian Schäfer. 2015. *External arguments in transitivity alternatioons: A layering approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Kallulli, Dalina. 2007. Rethinking the passive/antiacausative distinction. *Linguistic Inquiry* 38:770–780.

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