snippets

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Contents

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 [$_{\alpha 1}$ *Mary had a cappuccino*] and [$_{\alpha 2}$ *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

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