snippets

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Where does the Strongest Meaning Hypothesis apply?

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The Strongest Meaning Hypothesis (SMH henceforth), a pragmatic principle motivated in Dalrymple et al.'s (1998) study of reciprocals, has recently been applied to problems in implicatures (Chierchia et al. to appear) and Vagueness (Cobreros et al. 2011). In this snippet, I argue that the SMH can apply to embedded sentences, which is perhaps unusual for a pragmatic principle.

Dalrymple et al. (1998) argue that reciprocal sentences possess a variety of potential readings, for example the universal and existential reciprocal readings given for (2). (These two are often called the *strong* and *(oneway) weak* reading, but this terminology would be confusing for my present purposes). Furthermore a potential reading must be compatible with general world knowledge and the non-linguistic information available in the context. Dalrymple at al.'s SMH states that a sentence with a reciprocal allows only the logically strongest of its potential readings (if there is a unique, strongest potential reading):

(1) a. universal reciprocal reading for R and D: $\forall x, y \in D: x \neq y \rightarrow R(x,y)$
b. existential reciprocal reading for R and D: $\forall x \in D \exists y \in D . x \neq y \,\&\, R(x,y)$

For example, Dalrymple et al.'s (1998) account predicts that (2) only allows the universal reciprocal reading because the universal reading entails the existential reading and both readings are possible with the relationship *know* given general world knowledge. Only examples like (3) with the relationship *hold hands with* allow the existential reading. This follows because the universal reading cannot be true for groups with four or more members given our knowledge that people generally have only two hands.

(2) The team members knew each other in advance.
(D = the team members, R = $\lambda x, y$. x knew y in advance)

(3) The team members are holding hands with each other.
(D = the team members, R = $\lambda x, y$. x is holding hands with y)

Now consider examples (4), (5), and (6) where a reciprocal occurs in the scope of a downward entailing operator. In this case, the application of SMH at the matrix level predicts that only the existential reading should be available: both readings are possibly true and the existential reading is now stronger than the universal reading.

(4) If the team members knew each other in advance, they won.

(5) Every team where the team members knew each other in advance was victorious.

(6) No team whose members knew each other in advance lost.

But the prediction does not correspond to speaker intuitions. Let's assume we are

talking about volleyball teams with six members each. Some of these teams have played together in the past, so their members knew each other in the universal sense of (1a). One other team, team X, however, was started by player 1 who invited her friend, player 2, to the team. Player 2 then invited his friend, player 3, who had never met with player 1 before the first match. The other members of the team were gathered up in a similar manner, so the members of team X didn't know each other in the universal sense of (1a) before starting to play together. But, the members of team satisfy the existential reading (1b) of *know each other*. Therefore, sentences (4), (5) and (6) should have to false if team X lost if the SMH can only be applied at the utterance level. This prediction is not borne out. One possible explanation for the data in (4), (5) and (6) is to assume that the SMH can also be applied to embedded clauses -- i.e. to the content of the conditional clause in (4) and the relative clauses in (5) and (6). Such an embedded application of the SMH predicts that the universal reading is available for (4), (5), and (6).

References

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