Contents

1. Andreea C. Nicolae, Patrick D. Elliott, and Yasutada Sudo
   Introduction ................................................................. [1]

2. Dorothy Ahn
   ASL IX to locus as a modifier ............................................ [2]

3. Artemis Alexiadou
   Decomposing scalar approximatives in Greek .......................... [4]

4. Anna Alsop, Lucas Champollion, and Ioana Grosu

5. Anton Benz and Nicole Gotzner
   Quantifier irgendein and local implicature ............................ [10]

6. Jonathan David Bobaljik and Susi Wurmbrand
   Fake indexicals, binding, and the PCC ................................. [13]

7. Brian Buccola and Emmanuel Chemla
   Alternatives of disjunctions: when a disjunct contains the antecedent of a pronoun .... [16]

8. Luka Crnić and Brian Buccola
   Scoping NPIs out of DPs .................................................... [19]

9. Chris Cummins
   Some contexts requiring precise number meanings .................... [22]

10. Patrick D. Elliott and Paul Marty
    Exactly one theory of multiplicity inferences ........................ [24]
11. Anamaria Fălaşuş and Andreea C. Nicolae
   Two coordinating particles are better than one: free choice items in Romanian  
   27
12. Danny Fox
   Individual concepts and narrow scope illusions  
   30
13. Danny Fox
   Degree concepts and narrow scope illusions  
   33
14. Nicole Gotzner
   Disjunction, conjunction, and exhaustivity  
   35
15. Martin Hackl
   On Haddock’s puzzle and the role of presupposition in reference resolution  
   37
16. Andreas Haida
   Symmetry, density, and formal alternatives  
   40
17. Nina Haslinger and Viola Schmitt
   Strengthened disjunction or non-classical conjunction?  
   43
18. Fabian Heck and Anke Himmelreich
   Two observations about reconstruction  
   46
19. Aron Hirsch
   Modal adverbs and constraints on type-flexibility  
   49
20. Natalia Ivliieva and Alexander Podobryaev
   On variable agreement and scope reconstruction in Russian  
   52
21. Hadil Karawani
   The past is rewritten  
   54
22. Manfred Krifka and Fereshteh Modarresi
   Persian ezafes and proportional quantifiers  
   56
23. Paul Marty
   Maximize Presupposition! and presupposition satisfaction  
   59
24. Lisa Matthewson, Sihwei Chen, Marianne Huijsmans, Marcin Morzycki, Daniel Reisinger, and Hotze Rullmann
   Restricting the English past tense  
   61
25. Clemens Mayr
   On a seemingly nonexistent cumulative reading  
   65
26. Marie-Christine Meyer
   Scalar Implicatures in complex contexts  
   67
27. Moreno Mitrović
   Null disjunction in disguise  
   70
28. Andreea C. Nicolae and Yasutada Sudo
   The exhaustive relevance of complex conjunctions  
   72
29. Rick Nouwen
   Scalar vagueness regulation and locative reference  
   75
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Robert Pasternak</td>
<td><em>Unifying partitive and adjective-modifying percent</em></td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Hazel Pearson and Frank Sode</td>
<td>‘Not in my wildest dreams’: a part time minimizer?</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>Orin Percus</td>
<td><em>Uli and our generation: some reminiscences</em></td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>Jacopo Romoli</td>
<td><em>Why</em></td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>Fabienne Salfner</td>
<td><em>The rise and fall of non-conservatives</em></td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>Petra B. Schumacher</td>
<td><em>Vagueness and context-sensitivity of absolute gradable adjectives</em></td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>Stephanie Solt</td>
<td><em>More or less an approximator</em></td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>Giorgos Spathas</td>
<td><em>Plural anaphoric reference and non-conservativity</em></td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>Benjamin Spector</td>
<td><em>An argument for the trivalent approach to presupposition projection</em></td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>Bob van Tiel</td>
<td>‘The case against fuzzy logic revisited’ revisited</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td>Lyn Tieu</td>
<td><em>A developmental asymmetry between the singular and plural</em></td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td>Tue Trinh</td>
<td><em>A tense question</em></td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42.</td>
<td>Hubert Truckenbrodt</td>
<td><em>On remind-me presuppositions and embedded question acts</em></td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td>Michael Wagner</td>
<td><em>Disjuncts must be mutually excludable</em></td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>E. Cameron Wilson</td>
<td><em>Constraints on non-conservative readings in English</em></td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.</td>
<td>Susi Wurmbrand</td>
<td><em>Indexical shift meets ECM</em></td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Alternatives of disjunctions: when a disjunct contains the antecedent of a pronoun

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For disjunctive sentences of the form “\(f(X \text{ or } Y)\)”, classical theories of exhaustification crucially rely on the co-existence of the alternatives “\(f(X)\)” and “\(f(Y)\)” (see Bar-Lev and Fox 2017). Abstractly, this co-existence prevents disjunctive sentences from implying that “\(f(X)\)” and “\(f(Y)\)” have different truth values (see Klinedinst 2005; Chemla 2009).

Now, consider (1). It contains a disjunction and, accordingly, implies the negation of two propositions that resemble the usual “\(f(X)\)” and “\(f(Y)\)” alternatives: “Every dad called his daughter” and “Every dad called his daughter’s dog”. In the former, we recognize the usual, first-disjunct alternative “\(f(X)\)” = (2a). But the latter is harder to find. Keeping only the second disjunct creates “\(f(Y)\)” = (2b), which does not mean “Every dad called his daughter’s dog”.

(1) Every dad called [his \(_i\) daughter] \(_j\) or her \(_j\) dog. \[= f(X \text{ or } Y)\]

(2) a. Every dad called his \(_i\) daughter. \[= f(X)\]
b. Every dad called her \(_j\) dog. \[= f(Y)\]

A first option is to take these cases as showing that more involved semantic binding solutions are needed (see Charlow 2019b). In this view, one can argue that a (2b)-like alternative can do the trick: although it does not seem feasible on the surface, at LF “her \(_j\) dog” may receive what is called a paycheck interpretation “his daughter’s dog” (Geach 1962; Karttunen 1969). We further note that a continuation of (1) with (3) cannot mean that no mother looked for her own dog. This would be the case if the LF were as in (4), with \(i = j\). Instead, the continuation means that no mother looked for her daughter’s dog. This can be explained if the pronoun \(xj\) in (4) is constrained to receive a paycheck interpretation and refer to \(xi\)’s daughter, just like one would say about “her \(_j\)” in (2b) then.

(3) But no mother did the latter.
(4) But no mother \(_i\) did ⟨call \(xj\)’s dog⟩.

A second option, however, is to abandon the attractive idea that the disjunct alternatives are obtained by deletion of one disjunct (as formalized and motivated in Katzir 2007; see also the potential importance of replacement alternatives for acquisition facts in Barner et al. 2011 and for processing facts in Chemla and Bott 2014). Instead, Uli Sauerland (2004) proposed early on and provocatively (as “more of a technical trick, than a real solution”, he then wrote) that these alternatives could be obtained via the replacement à la Horn (1972) of the disjunction “or” with operators \(L\) and \(R\), which retain both disjuncts structurally, and assert the truth of the Left disjunct
and of the Right disjunct, respectively. This has the potential to make both alternatives structurally acceptable, as we would obtain:

\[(5)\]
\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a. Every dad}_i \text{ called } [\text{his}_i \text{ daughter}]_j \text{ L her}_j \text{ dog.} &= f(X \text{ L } Y) \\
\text{b. Every dad}_i \text{ called } [\text{his}_i \text{ daughter}]_j \text{ R her}_j \text{ dog.} &= f(X \text{ R } Y)
\end{align*}
\]

The L/R operators have the advantage that they retain all the structure of the initial disjunction. Concerning (3) then, it would not be necessary to resort to paycheck pronouns. The continuation could be rendered as in (6), as if “the latter” provided some trace of R in the lexicon after all (and likewise for “the former” and L).

\[(6)\] But no mother\(_i\) did \langle call [x_i’s daughter]_j \text{ R } x_j’s \text{ dog} \rangle.

In conclusion, whatever option above is adopted, alternatives are best understood at the level of LF because neither (2b) nor (5b) is a helpful English sentence. This provides a new argument for views expressed clearly by Katzir (2007), for which Charlow (2019a) and Chemla (2007) provide some empirical arguments, and for which Buccola et al. (2018) provide conceptual discussion. More generally, we must derive alternatives for disjunctions, whether these structures are obtained by deletion or L/R replacements. Studying the interpretations of these structures can provide information about the derivation of alternatives, as well as about the range of abstract semantic processes available for logical forms.

References


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