

snippets

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Contents

1.	Andreea C. Nicolae, Patrick D. Elliott, and Yasutada Sudo <i>Introduction</i>	1
2.	Dorothy Ahn <i>ASL IX to locus as a modifier</i>	2
3.	Artemis Alexiadou <i>Decomposing scalar approximatives in Greek</i>	4
4.	Anna Alsop, Lucas Champollion, and Ioana Grosu <i>A problem for Fox's (2007) account of free choice disjunction</i>	7
5.	Anton Benz and Nicole Gotzner <i>Quantifier irgendein and local implicature</i>	10
6.	Jonathan David Bobaljik and Susi Wurmbrand <i>Fake indexicals, binding, and the PCC</i>	13
7.	Brian Buccola and Emmanuel Chemla <i>Alternatives of disjunctions: when a disjunct contains the antecedent of a pronoun</i>	16
8.	Luka Crnić and Brian Buccola <i>Scoping NPIs out of DPs</i>	19
9.	Chris Cummins <i>Some contexts requiring precise number meanings</i>	22
10.	Patrick D. Elliott and Paul Marty <i>Exactly one theory of multiplicity inferences</i>	24

11.	Anamaria Fălăuș and Andreea C. Nicolae	
	<i>Two coordinating particles are better than one: free choice items in Romanian</i>	27
12.	Danny Fox	
	<i>Individual concepts and narrow scope illusions</i>	30
13.	Danny Fox	
	<i>Degree concepts and narrow scope illusions</i>	33
14.	Nicole Gotzner	
	<i>Disjunction, conjunction, and exhaustivity</i>	35
15.	Martin Hackl	
	<i>On Haddock's puzzle and the role of presupposition in reference resolution</i>	37
16.	Andreas Haida	
	<i>Symmetry, density, and formal alternatives</i>	40
17.	Nina Haslinger and Viola Schmitt	
	<i>Strengthened disjunction or non-classical conjunction?</i>	43
18.	Fabian Heck and Anke Himmelreich	
	<i>Two observations about reconstruction</i>	46
19.	Aron Hirsch	
	<i>Modal adverbs and constraints on type-flexibility</i>	49
20.	Natalia Ivlieva and Alexander Podobryaev	
	<i>On variable agreement and scope reconstruction in Russian</i>	52
21.	Hadil Karawani	
	<i>The past is rewritten</i>	54
22.	Manfred Krifka and Fereshteh Modarresi	
	<i>Persian ezafe and proportional quantifiers</i>	56
23.	Paul Marty	
	<i>Maximize Presupposition! and presupposition satisfaction</i>	59
24.	Lisa Matthewson, Sihwei Chen, Marianne Huijismans, Marcin Morzycki, Daniel Reisinger, and Hotze Rullmann	
	<i>Restricting the English past tense</i>	61
25.	Clemens Mayr	
	<i>On a seemingly nonexistent cumulative reading</i>	65
26.	Marie-Christine Meyer	
	<i>Scalar Implicatures in complex contexts</i>	67
27.	Moreno Mitrović	
	<i>Null disjunction in disguise</i>	70
28.	Andreea C. Nicolae and Yasutada Sudo	
	<i>The exhaustive relevance of complex conjunctions</i>	72
29.	Rick Nouwen	
	<i>Scalar vagueness regulation and locative reference</i>	75

30.	Robert Pasternak	
	<i>Unifying partitive and adjective-modifying percent</i>	77
31.	Hazel Pearson and Frank Sode	
	<i>'Not in my wildest dreams': a part time minimizer?</i>	80
32.	Orin Percus	
	<i>Uli and our generation: some reminiscences</i>	82
33.	Jacopo Romoli	
	<i>Why them?</i>	84
34.	Fabienne Salfner	
	<i>The rise and fall of non-conservatives</i>	87
35.	Petra B. Schumacher	
	<i>Vagueness and context-sensitivity of absolute gradable adjectives</i>	90
36.	Stephanie Solt	
	<i>More or less an approximator</i>	93
37.	Giorgos Spathas	
	<i>Plural anaphoric reference and non-conservativity</i>	95
38.	Benjamin Spector	
	<i>An argument for the trivalent approach to presupposition projection</i>	97
39.	Bob van Tiel	
	<i>'The case against fuzzy logic revisited' revisited</i>	100
40.	Lyn Tieu	
	<i>A developmental asymmetry between the singular and plural</i>	103
41.	Tue Trinh	
	<i>A tense question</i>	106
42.	Hubert Truckenbrodt	
	<i>On remind-me presuppositions and embedded question acts</i>	108
43.	Michael Wagner	
	<i>Disjuncts must be mutually excludable</i>	111
44.	E. Cameron Wilson	
	<i>Constraints on non-conservative readings in English</i>	114
45.	Susi Wurmbrand	
	<i>Indexical shift meets ECM</i>	117

Maximize Presupposition! and presupposition satisfaction

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Percus (2010) discusses a challenge for classical formulations of *Maximize Presupposition!* (MP): a sentence like (1a) is infelicitous in the suggested context even though the stronger presupposition of its competitor, (1b), is not assumed to be true.

- (1) *Context: As a rule, Uli takes two students on at a time. The interlocutors have not established whether Uli currently has any students.*
- a. #Uli invited all his students to the party.
 - b. Uli invited both his students to the party.

Percus (2010) suggest reformulating MP by weakening the condition on presupposition satisfaction as follows: a sentence S is infelicitous at a context c if S has a presuppositional competitor S' that is contextually entailed by S . This suggestion, taken up in recent work like Anvari (2018), accounts for the case above while preserving the classical MP-cases.

I note that the empirical success of this move depends on one's assumptions regarding how MP is evaluated. To see this, consider first the well-known MP effects in (2):

- (2) a. Uli arrived at noon, and Kazuko {#believes/✓ knows} it.
b. Every professor with exactly two students told {#all/✓ both} his students to quit.

One way to account for these data is to let MP be evaluated globally and assume that the comparison mechanisms apply at the level of lexical items (Percus, 2006). While this account of (2) is compatible with the above account of (1), note that combining them leads however to undesirable results for cases like (3): their combination incorrectly predicts the presuppositionally weaker sentences in (3) to be infelicitous – locally, the same lexical items are competing, and globally, these sentences contextually entail their presuppositional competitors.

- (3) a. Kazuko {✓ believes/✓ knows} that Uli arrived, and indeed Uli arrived at noon.
b. Every student who talked to {✓ all/✓ both} his German advisors has only two advisors.

These observations leave us with two options. One is to maintain the above account of (1) but reject the possibility that MP is ever checked globally. This option would be compatible with the proposal in Singh (2011) that MP is to be evaluated locally, i.e. relative to local contexts. The resulting combination would account for cases like (1) and capture the contrasts between (2) and (3) on the assumption that local contexts in conjunctions and universal sentences are asymmetric.

Another option is to offer an alternative analysis of (1) that maintains the classical MP-condition on presupposition satisfaction and thus remains compatible with a global or local account of the contrasts in (2) and (3). This analysis could start from the observation that (1a) and (1b) both carry an informative presupposition (noted as p and p^+) in the global context c , as schematized below:

- (4) $c \subseteq$ *If Uli has any student, he has exactly two.*
- a. Uli invited all his students to the party.
 $p :=$ *Uli has students.*
 - b. Uli invited both his students to the party.
 $p^+ :=$ *Uli has exactly two students.*
- FACT: For any $c' \subseteq c$, if $c' \subseteq p$, then $c' \subseteq p^+$ by Modus Ponens

For (4a) to be felicitous, two requirements must thus be met: (i) for presupposition satisfaction, c must be adjusted to obtain a context c' such that $c' \subseteq p$, and (ii) by MP, the context to which (4a) is added should not entail p^+ . However, these requirements can never be met together in this case: if (i) is met (i.e., $c' \subseteq p$), then (ii) isn't, since $c' \subseteq p^+$, and so infelicity ensues by MP; and if (ii) is met (e.g., $c' = c$), then (i) isn't, since $c \not\subseteq p$, and so infelicity ensues due to presupposition failure. If this explanation is on the right track, then the infelicity of (1a) could simply reflect the interplay of two pressures already familiar to us, the pressure that the context be or become one in which the presuppositions encoded in the semantics are satisfied and the extra pressure from MP that those presuppositions be as strong as possible in that (possibly adjusted) context.

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