

Implying exhaustivity and ignorance in partial answers

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Speakers often respond to polar (yes/no) questions as if the information request was the same as an alternative question (Farkas & Bruce, 2009; Krifka, 2009). For example, in responding to the question “*Did Mark and Sandy come to party?*”, speakers often provide answers such as “*only Mark came*” (=yes Mark was there, but Sandy was not) instead of a simple yes/no answer followed by subsequent elaboration. One reason for this might be that using implicatures such as “*Mark came*” are a more economical and efficient response choice in dialogue, but like all implicatures, the derivation of the intended meaning is optional and highly context dependent.

With alternative questions, speakers can either assert exhaustivity (“*only Mark came*”) or imply it (“*Mark came*”). Less is known, however, about how speakers communicate incomplete or ignorant answers, e.g. “*Mark came, but I don’t know about Sandy*”. When deriving exhaustivity in asserted cases, listeners rely on focus particles such as *only* as well as pitch accenting (Götzner & Spalek, 2014). With implied cases, however, it is an open question as to whether listeners initially understand partial answers as incomplete or whether they automatically exhaustify alternatives given the question-answer context. The first part of our investigation examines how speakers communicate partial answers by assessing which cues speakers use to assert and/or imply exhaustive or ignorant meanings. If speakers choose to reduce ambiguity in partial answers, then they should use lexical means for asserting exhaustivity or ignorance. On the other hand, speakers could produce shorter and more efficient responses, albeit more ambiguous options, by using more indirect means such as prosody.

An interactive production task tested how German speakers communicate exhaustive and ignorance information. In this experiment, conversational dyads discussed who attended several friends’ parties. One speaker would ask a question (A) and the other speaker (B) would answer according to information given to him/her on a computer screen. Responders answered across two different contexts: *complete knowledge* (they attended the entire party and saw all of the guest) or *incomplete knowledge* (they stayed only a short while, not seeing all the guests).

Twelve speakers’ responses (N=213) were analyzed to assess how they expressed exhaustivity or ignorance across contexts and whether certain productions were more effortful than others. Overall, speakers rarely used lexical means to mark exhaustivity or ignorance (13%), suggesting that speakers preferred implying as opposed to asserting in our task. Furthermore, for implied partial answers (“*Manu was there*”, 80% of overall responses), speakers took longer to produce exhaustive responses in the incomplete knowledge conditions and vice versa when producing ignorant conditions in complete knowledge conditions ($t = 3.74$, $p < 0.001$), but overall speakers were slowest to produce responses in the incomplete knowledge condition. Last, speakers reliably use prosody to mark exhaustivity and ignorance in partial answers: exhaustive partial answers had more prosodic prominence on the first syllable of proper names (MANu), whereas ignorant partial answers had more prominence on the second syllable of proper names (maNU) and/or on the verb (WAS). We interpret these findings across several theories and models of pragmatic inference. A comprehension study is currently being conducted to assess listeners’ sensitivity to these cues during processing.

References

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