

Conceptual alternatives: Motivations, prospects, and caveats

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(Based on joint work with Manuel Križ and Emmanuel Chemla)

A theory of implicature involves two fundamental components: (i) a specification of which alternatives are generated by a sentence, and (ii) a specification of which inferences are generated by a sentence and its alternatives. The second component has received a great deal of attention over the years (see Horn 1972; Gazdar 1979; Gamut 1991; Chierchia, Fox, and Spector 2012, among many others). This talk will focus on the first component.

Horn (1972) famously introduced the notion of a scale into the theory of implicature: the alternatives of a sentence S are generated by replacing scalar items with their scalemates in S . Under this view, scales are a core part of the theory, not just a metatheoretic device for describing implicature data.

More recently, Katzir (2007) has argued that scales can and should be dispensed with, and that the alternatives of a sentence S are generated instead by a series of structural operations applied to S (e.g., deletions and replacements of material by structurally less complex material).

Under both the scale-based and the structural-operation-based views, alternatives are conceived as properly linguistic objects. In this talk, I will present a different view: alternatives may be conceptual objects (Buccola, Križ, and Chemla 2021). The proposal can be cashed out in a ‘neo-Katzirian’ way, by updating Katzir’s structural operations to apply to conceptual representations; as in Katzir’s original theory, scales play no important theoretical role.

Some of the motivations for this move are empirical: there are cases where the alternative needed to derive an attested implicature is not actually grammatical or expressible in the given language. Other motivations are broader: the view of alternatives as conceptual may give us a handle on why the lexicons (hence also structures) of languages have the shapes they do, hence yield the implicatures they do, in a mostly cross-linguistically stable way.

I will try to discuss some general prospects for the view of conceptual alternatives, in the domain of quantity implicature and elsewhere. And I will also mention some caveats to bear in mind: most crucially, the move to conceptual alternatives risks undermining the predictive power that the traditional linguistic theories hold. I will discuss some ways in which independent evidence can be sought for any claims made about conceptual alternatives.

References

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