Conflicting presuppositions and alternatives

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In this talk, I propose an analysis to intervention effects in (German) wh-questions, arguing that intervention effects are semantic in nature, following Beck (2006). The proposal is motivated by data showing that not all potential interveners lead to actual degradedness, which casts doubts on those previous approaches in which all interveners of a given semantic class, in particular quantifiers and focus-sensitive operators, are taken to induce intervention effects. It is argued that the empirical generalization characterizing intervention effects best should be: assuming that a question denotes a set of propositions – its potential answers (cf. Hamblin (1973), Karttunen (1977)) – one can show that intervention effects arise whenever the disjunction of those propositions is not equivalent to the proposition resulting when the wh-expressions are interpreted as existential quantifiers in their surface scope positions. This has the desirable consequence, as I hope to show, that not all members of the class of potential interveners are predicted to behave the same. As a rationale for why this generalization should hold, the following is suggested: wh-questions come with an existential presupposition calculated by interpreting the wh-expressions in the position where they are pronounced, which is thought of as presenting a set of worlds to the addressee of a question, i.e., possible states of affairs. It is shown that in questions without problematic interveners, the exhaustification of an alternative in the question denotation (following Groenendijk and Stokhof's 1984 notion of complete answer) picks out exactly one state of affairs. In other words, the question can be answered completely. In all cases of problematic intervention, it will be seen that complete answers cannot be given. The reason is that the existential presupposition and the alternatives do not match, i.e., the disjunction of the latter is not equivalent to the proposition used for deriving the former (cf. our generalization discussed above). This makes certain predictions, which I then will investigate. I propose to model the suggested generalization by making use of Kratzer's 1991 version of Rooth's 1985 alternative semantics. In particular, I will argue that wh-expressions are generally interpreted as existential quantifiers in the position where they are pronounced, and that they introduce domain alternatives following Chierchia (2004, 2006).

References

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