

The prosody of projection

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In *Some observations on factivity*, Karttunen (1971) coined the term ‘semi-factive’ to describe a class of verbs that allow both projecting and non-projecting interpretations of the contents of their clausal complements. Thus, the example in (1), which features the semi-factive verb *discover* embedded under the modal adverb *perhaps*, may be uttered by a speaker who is committed to the truth of the content of the complement, i.e., believes that Masha’s bike was stolen (a projecting interpretation), but it may also be uttered by a speaker who is not committed to the truth of the content of the complement (a non-projecting interpretation).

(1) Perhaps Masha discovered that her bike was stolen.

How does the content of the complement of a semi-factive verb come to have both projecting and non-projecting interpretations? On one view, semi-factive verbs are presupposition triggers (e.g., Heim 1983; van der Sandt 1992): such verbs conventionally specify that the content of the complement must be entailed by or satisfied in the common ground of the interlocutors, as a consequence of which said content is a commitment of the speaker. On this view, the non-projecting interpretation is due to local accommodation.

On an alternative view, semi-factive verbs do not specify that the content of their complement is a presupposition but, rather, the content of the complement is taken to be a commitment of the speaker if and only if it does not address the question that the utterance with the semi-factive verb is taken to address (e.g., Simons et al. 2010, to appear). An assumption made in this work is that the question is constrained by the information structure of the utterance, indicated in part through its prosodic realization (see also Beaver 2010). This talk provides empirical support for this assumption through a production experiment designed to identify the prosodic realizations of utterances with semi-factive verbs that receive projecting and non-projecting interpretations and perception experiments that show that listeners rely on prosodic information in assessing whether the speaker is committed to the content of the complement. Ultimately, these empirical findings lend support to the proposal that some projective inferences do not emerge through conventionalized triggering, but as a result of pragmatic reasoning.

[Based on joint work with David Beaver, Marie-Catherine de Marneffe, Craige Roberts and Mandy Simons]

References

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