

Putting secondary propositional meanings back on the table

Elena Castroviejo

Spanish National
Research Council

elena.castroviejo@cchs.csic.es

Laia Mayol

Universitat Pompeu Fabra
laia.mayol@upf.edu

E. Allyn Smith

Université du Québec à Montréal
smith.eallyn@uqam.ca

1 Introduction¹

This contribution examines the felicity of various two-turn dialogues of non-acceptance (DNA), where an initial sentence is followed by a direct *No* or *No that's not true* response. We present experimental results for three languages as well as a modified discourse model and theory accounting for these results.

2 Background

Refutation is often used as a diagnostic, including the direct form as a diagnostic for at-issueness (Simons et al., 2011) and indirect forms as a diagnostic for projective meanings or presuppositions (cf. the *Hey, wait a minute!* test in von Stechow 2004). The motivation behind each of these is that *No* is felicitous with primary asserted content and infelicitous with secondary content (either presuppositions or/and various kinds of implicature). Thus, we would expect to see a pattern like the following, where direct refutation of the not-at-issue presupposition of *again* is not acceptable.

A. John is at the zoo again.

B. No, he's home sick.

B. #No, he's never been to the zoo until now.

A number of theoretical discourse models make the same prediction and/or attempt to explain why we see this pattern, such as Anderbois et al. (2011), Farkas and Bruce (2010), and Schlenker (2012). Farkas and Bruce (and others, following them), posit that primary or at-issue meanings propose a proposition, which leaves room for negotiation, while secondary appositive meanings impose a meaning directly onto the common ground, not allowing for a traditional direct refutation. (Here, appositives, along with ex-

pressives, are considered Conventional Implicatures: CIs). And since presuppositions are supposed to already be in the common ground prior to utterance, it is only the primary meaning that ends up on what they call *the Table* to be accepted or refuted. The Table is similar to the stack of topics or questions under discussion, but differs in ways that are not pertinent here. Another model, that of van der Sandt and Maier (2003), makes the opposite prediction that every meaning type should be able to be denied at least in some contexts, and their theory elegantly derives the different possible intended negations of the primary assertion, presupposition, etc. Neither of these approaches can account for data showing that some secondary meanings are more easily denied than others, which is what we find in each language we test (below).

3 Experiments

200+ participants who were native speakers of English, Spanish or Catalan listened to 88 two-turn dialogues (majority fillers) across 4 conditions depending on the type of direct refutation:

1. No, that's not true. $\neg p$. [NTNT-neg.]
2. No, $\neg p$. [NO-negation]
3. No, that's not true; q. [NTNT-alt.]
4. No, q. [NO-alternative]

In the first turn of each DNA, a statement was made that crucially contained one of 6 meaning types or subtypes: primary assertion, presupposition: lexical trigger (iterative), presupposition: cleft, CI: appositive, CI: referential expressive, or CI: emotive expressive. The experiment was a Likert judgment task, where participants needed to rate how strange would it be – if strange at all – to overhear someone utter a specific response to the initial sentence. In the figures that follow, the y-axis shows the felicity rating (higher = more felicitous) of the refutation of the meaning type on

¹ Authors appear alphabetically, having made equal contributions.

the x-axis; the 6 (sub)types are in the order listed above, as are the four bars for each subtype representing the four types of direct negation.

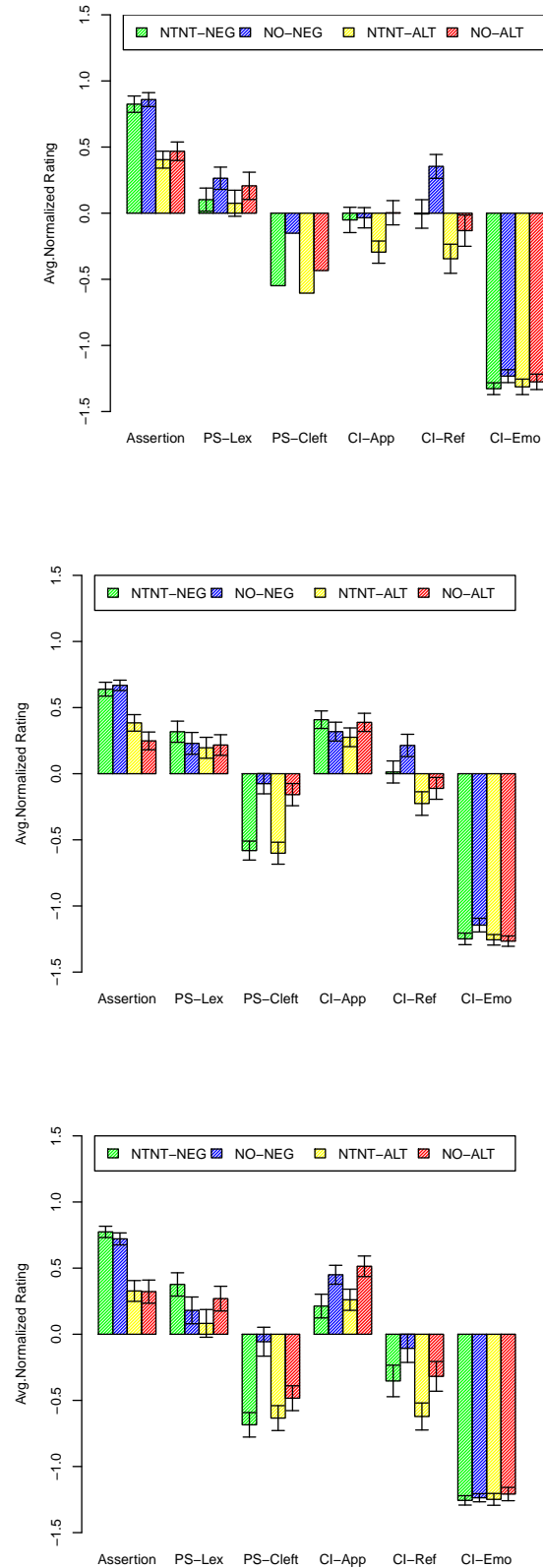


Figure 1: English, Catalan and Spanish results

4 Proposal

What we see across these languages is that, despite a few differences, there is a consistent ranking as follows:

assertions > referential expressives, appositives > iterative lexical triggers > clefts > emotive expressives

Generally, then, assertions, referential expressives and appositives can be denied more or less felicitously, while clefts and emotive expressives cannot, with lexical triggers somewhere in between. Thus, we need to account for significant differences between different CI types (appositive and ref. v. emotive expressives) and different presupposition types (iteratives v. clefts) as well as explaining why any of them can be directly denied.

What property determines when a secondary meaning will be put on the Table for negotiation (and thus, become a target for direct refutation)? We propose that only those presuppositions or CIs that are propositional and whose propositional content predicates something of an individual are capable of being put back on the Table. By propositional, we mean something of type $\langle s, t \rangle$ and not the ‘expressive propositions’ of, e.g. Gutzmann (2011). This accounts for all of the data above and makes additional predictions as well. Emotive expressives are infelicitous because they are non-propositional. In a cleft sentence like *It was John who broke the vase*, the presupposition is either ‘someone broke the vase’ or ‘there is a broken vase’, but either way, we don’t have something predicated of a specific individual. This predicts that existence presuppositions in general will be infelicitous with direct refutation, which matches our intuition for the case of the definite article (not tested here). Assertions are not subject to this condition since they are already on the Table to begin with, but referential expressives like ‘the idiot’ and appositives like ‘John, an American, ...’ both retrieve a referent and predicate something of it, making them deniable. They are also propositional (e.g. ‘John is an idiot’), fulfilling both conditions. This theory also hints at a reason iterative triggers may be intermediate in that they are somewhat existential, but it is the existence of an event, which is then predicated of an individual, borrowing something from each side. Thus, our results highlight another variable important for modelling discourses involving varied meaning types.

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