Projection inferences: On the relation between prior beliefs, at-issueness, and lexical meaning

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Abstract

Interpreters frequently draw projection inferences, that is, inferences that the speaker believes utterance content contributed in the scope of an entailment-canceling operator. These inferences are modulated by a number of factors, including interpreters' *prior beliefs* about the content, the extent to which the content is *at-issue* with respect to the Question Under Discussion, as well as the *lexical meaning* of expressions associated with the content. This paper addresses open questions and disagreements in the literature about how these factors interact in modulating projection inferences. The paper reports the result of two experiments designed to investigate the relation between prior beliefs, at-issueness, and lexical meaning for projection inferences in American English. The contents under investigation are contributed by the clausal complements of clause-embedding predicates (e.g., *know, discover*), which differ in lexical meaning. The experiments suggest that (I) the effect of prior beliefs on projection persists across predicates, (II) the effect of at-issueness on projection varies by predicate, (IIIa) prior beliefs and at-issueness do not interact in modulating projection, and (IIIb) there is no effect of prior beliefs on at-issueness. We show that there is no projection analysis on the market that is able to capture these results, and point out important areas for future research on projection inferences.