

Comments on Cariani & Rips

Kai von Fintel
MIT

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1 Initial remarks

1. Splendid behind-the-scenes look at a psychological lab investigation.
2. Opportunity to revisit topic I once thought hard about.

2 Conditional perfection

2.1 What is CP?

The inference from a speaker having asserted *if p, q* to (the speaker having conveyed that) *if not p, not q*.¹ CP is a natural inferences in many cases:

- (1) If you mow the lawn, I'll give you five dollars.
- (2) If you touch that wire, you'll get an electric shock.
- (3) If you don't pay the rent, I'll throw you out.

In other cases, CP does not arise:

- (4) If this cactus grows native to Idaho, then it's not an *Astrophytum*.

¹ This is what we'll focus on. There's also the inference to *only if p, q* and possibly the inference to *only if not p, not q*. See van Canegem-Ardijns & van Belle 2008, van Canegem-Ardijns 2010 for discussion of the subtle distinction in meaning and distribution of these inferences.

2.2 Two theories of the nature of CP

1. Pragmatic reasoning about why the speaker said what s/he said.
2. Covert exhaustification (ambiguity, resolved by reasoning about what meaning the speaker intended).

2.3 When does CP happen?

The general idea: the speaker wouldn't have said *if p, q* if (s/he thought that) there were other conditions under which *q* would/could be true, in particular if *q* would/could be true if *not-p* were true.

Two specific ways in which this could be the case: (i) the speaker would have mentioned the other conditions (presumption of exhaustivity), (ii) the speaker would have chosen an entirely different utterance (their conditional wouldn't achieve its strategic goal if *p* wasn't the sole condition under which *q*).²

2.4 How do we know CP happens?

Well, we infer that there won't be five dollars forthcoming if the lawn doesn't get mowed, that we won't get a shock if we don't touch the wire, and that paying the rent will mean that we won't get thrown out. And we don't infer that if the cactus is not native to Idaho but somewhere else, it is an *Astrophytum*.

2.5 von Stechow 2001's conjecture

CP will occur when the context is such that an exhaustive answer to the question "Under what conditions, *q*?" is required.

² The latter is presumably what goes on in many cases: a speaker who wants to get his lawn mowed will choose a *q* such that *q* is an attractive incentive to the hearer and not one that the hearer can expect to get without doing some work for it. Similar considerations apply in conditional threats.

3 CP in the lab

3.1 How can we test for CP?

- Ask subjects directly: given what was said, do you think that (the speaker has invited the inference that) *if not p, not q*?
- C&R: test whether the subject will infer *not q* from *not-p* (DA) or *p* from *q* (AC).

3.2 C&R's experiments

- (5) John has taken a test on Chapters 4-6 that has not been graded yet. You ask Mary, “**What are all the ways John could manage to do well on the test?**” Mary responds, “**If John understood Chapter 5, then John did well on the test**”. Assume that Mary’s response is true and that John did well on the test. Given this information, does Mary’s statement imply that John understood Chapter 5?

C&R show that the DA/AC methodology does not show elevated CP rates even though the question “you” asked Mary is supposed to create a context in which her answer is expected to be exhaustive. Brute force exhaustification (in Experiments 4 and 6) does increase DA/AC rates.

3.3 Baselines & Comparisons

- What are the DA/AC rates in cases where we think CP is not happening, such as the *Astrophytum* case?
- What are the rates in cases where we think CP is happening (conditional promises, warnings, threats)?
- Is there experimental evidence that explicit questions can influence the frequency of exhaustive readings in non-conditional cases? (*Who all brought beer? Alice and Barbara brought beer.* vs. *What all did Alice and Barbara bring? Alice and Barbara brought beer.*)

- What are the CP rates when there is no explicit question?
 - (6) John has taken a test on Chapters 4-6 that has not been graded yet. Mary says, “If John understood Chapter 5, then John did well on the test.” John did in fact do well. Given this, does Mary’s statement imply that John understood Chapter 5?
- Would we get elevated CP rates if we used more natural contexts that create a presumption of exhaustivity (cf. Nadathur 2015)?
 - (7) Q: Will Robin come to the party?
A: If there is vegetarian food, Robin will come to the party.
 - (8) Q: Will John do well on the test?
A: If he understands Chapter 5, he will do well.

3.4 Upshot

- A negative result: questions of the type “what are all the ways John could manage to do well?” do not boost CP rates for conditionals of the type “if John understood Chapter 5, he did well”.
- Is this a problem with the materials or with the design or the tested theory?
- Alternative theories? (i) Particularized pragmatic reasoning. (ii) Grammatical covert exhaustification (but predicts lots of CP)

References

- van Canegem-Ardijns, Ingrid. 2010. The infeasibility of the inference that *if not-A, then not-C*. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42. 1-15. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2009.05.005>.
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- Nadathur, Prerna. 2015. Towards an explanatory account of conditional perfection. Handout from a talk given at the Annual Meeting of the LSA 2015, Portland, Oregon. Jan 8-11. <http://web.stanford.edu/~pnadath/pdfs/LSA-cphandout.pdf>.