

Every configuration is not ambiguous: Experimental investigations into quantifier scope in native and non-native grammars

Tania Ionin

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

In this talk, I will give an overview of several studies that use experimental methods to study the scope interpretation of both “double-quantifier” sentences such as “One girl stroked every kitten” and “quantifier-negation” sentences such as “Every kitten didn’t drink the milk”. There is cross-linguistic variation with regard to the availability of the surface-scope readings of such sentences (paraphrased as, respectively, “One specific girl stroked all of the kittens” and “Each kitten failed to drink the milk”) vs. their inverse-scope readings (paraphrased as, respectively, “For every kitten, one girl stroked it” and “It is not the case that all the kittens drank the milk.”). In English, both sentence types are ambiguous between surface-scope and inverse-scope readings, though the surface-scope reading is usually found to be preferred to the inverse-scope one by native speakers (especially in the case of double-quantifier sentences). In Mandarin Chinese, these sentence types have only the surface-scope reading available to them. In Russian, as in English, there is scope ambiguity, but the surface-scope preference appears to be stronger than in English. Our studies ask what affects scope preferences in the grammars of native speakers, investigating questions such as: What leads to the surface-scope preferences in English and in Russian? How are these preferences related to such factors as determiner type, information structure, prosodic contour, and, in the case of Russian, a free word-order language, availability of scrambling? Can the inverse-scope scope reading be made more accessible through priming? Furthermore, in light of cross-linguistic differences in inverse-scope availability, we ask: How do adult second language learners (and adult heritage speakers) interpret scopally ambiguous sentences, are they sensitive to the same factors as native speakers, and can the status of scope ambiguity in non-native grammars be affected by instruction?

The studies discussed in this talk (time permitting) may include: Ionin & Luchkina (2018) on quantifier scope in native Russian; Ionin & Luchkina (2019) on quantifier scope in the Russian of second language learners and heritage speakers, and a comparison between scope in English and Russian; Wu & Ionin (2020, 2023) on factors that affect quantifier scope in native English; and Wu & Ionin (2022) on an intervention study of English scope with Mandarin-speaking learners of English.