

Alternative constructions and scope ambiguities: What counts as an alternative?

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The availability of alternative constructions has been suggested to underlie processing biases across languages for a variety of ambiguous constructions (Hemforth & Konieczny, 2019; Schulz et al., submitted). If an unambiguous alternative for one interpretation exists in a language, a cooperative speaker will be more likely to use the other interpretation for the ambiguous construction, according to the Gricean conversational maxim of *manner* (*be clear and unambiguous*; Grice 1975). We hypothesized that the existence of an accessible alternative plays a role in crosslinguistic differences in the interpretation of “all...not” constructions, such as (1). If the wide scope interpretation of the negation can be obtained by simply fronting the negation (“not all my friends went to the Marvel movie”), the narrow scope interpretation corresponding to linear scope will be preferred for the “all...not” construction. This preference should increase with the accessibility of the “not all” construction. The “not all” construction exists in English and German but is to the very least highly stigmatized in standard French. This predicts a narrow scope interpretation preference of the negation in English and German (linear scope interpretation) and a wide scope preference in French (inverse scope interpretation).

- (1) All my friends did not go to see the movie.
 - a. linear scope: None of my friends went to see the movie.
 - b. inverse scope: Some of my friends went to see the movie.
- (2) Tous mes amis ne sont pas allés voir le dernier film de Marvel.
 - a. linear scope : Aucun de mes amis n'est allé voir le film.
 - b. inverse scope : Certains de mes amis sont allés voir le film.
- (3) Alle meine Freunde sind nicht in den letzten Marvel-Film gegangen.
 - a. linear scope: Keiner meiner Freunde ist in den letzten Marvel-Film gegangen.
 - b. inverse scope: Manche meiner Freunde sind in den letzten Marvel-Film gegangen.

These preferences were confirmed in a crosslinguistic experiment where participants (57 German, 57 English, 49 French) had to judge the acceptability of two continuations such as (1,2,3a,b) on a 5-point scale (see Fig. 1; mixed linear model analyses showed significant language*interpretation interactions, $p < .001$).

However, all three languages have another syntactic alternative (4-6) that unambiguously signals the interpretation in (1,2,3b). While this should only strengthen the wide scope preference for German and English, it is not clear why this alternative does not trigger the wide scope reading for the “All...not” construction in French.

- (4) My Friends did not all go to see the movie.
- (5) Mes amis ne sont pas tous allés voir le dernier film de Marvel.
- (6) Meine Freunde sind nicht alle in den letzten Marvel-Film gegangen.

We suggest that at least for French, (2) and (5) have not the same interpretation and are thus not alternatives. The two constructions refer to different subset sizes, i.e. more friends went to the movies in (2) than in (5). To test this assumption, we ran an experiment with 40 French participants who had to judge continuations like

- (7) a. Beaucoup de mes amis sont allés au cinéma./Many of my friends went to the movies.
- b. Certains de mes amis sont allés au cinéma. / Some of my friends ...

Figure 2 shows that our hypothesis was confirmed. A significant construction*interpretation interaction shows that the two constructions are not interpreted in the same way. While the “many” interpretation is generally less preferred, it is more acceptable for (2), while the “certain” interpretation is more acceptable for (5). At least for French, constructions like (5) are thus not a clear alternative.

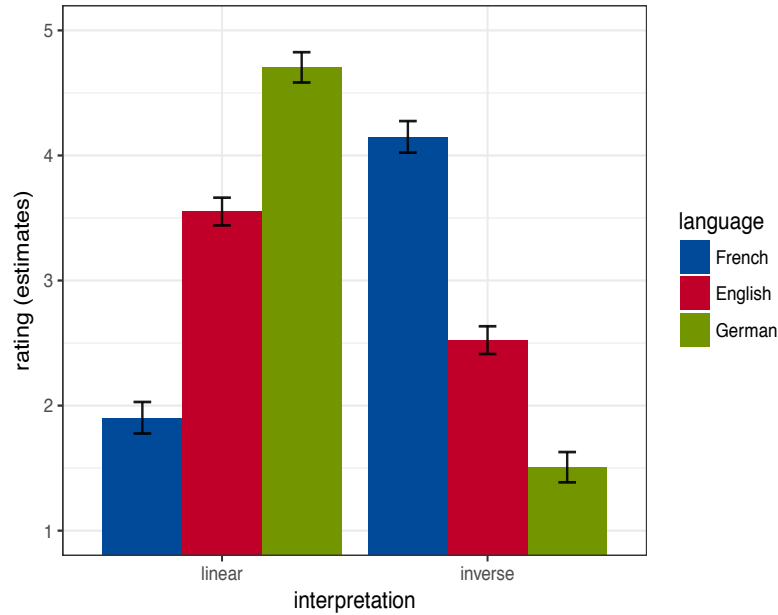


Figure 1: Acceptability judgments for linear scope and inverse scope

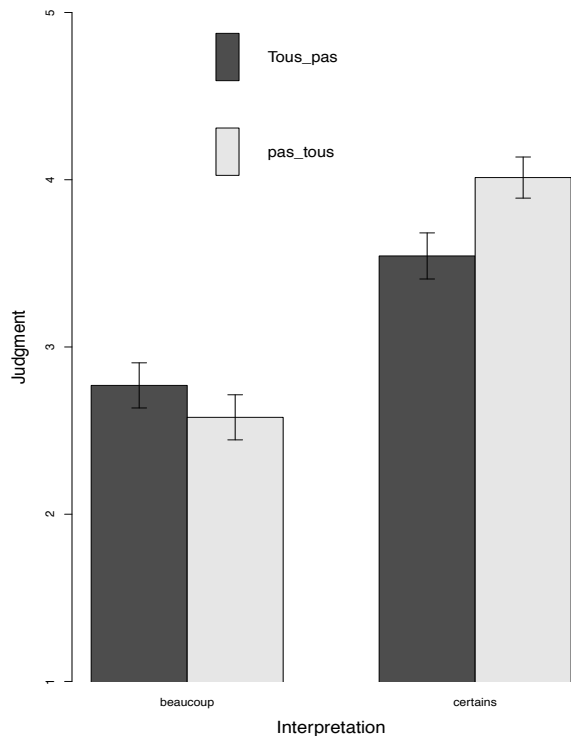


Figure 2: Acceptability judgments for different subsets of the reference set

Hemforth, B., & Konieczny, L. (2019). When all linguists did not go to the workshop, none of the Germans but some of the French did: The role of alternative constructions for quantifier scope. In *Grammatical Approaches to Language Processing Essays in Honor of Lyn Frazier*. Katy Carlson, Charles Clifton jr., & Janet Dean Fodor ed. Dordrecht: Springer.

Schulz, M., Burnett, H., & Hemforth, B. (submitted). Corpus, Experimental and Modelling Investigations of Cross-linguistic Differences in Pronoun Resolution Preferences.

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