

Semantics Group
11/1/24

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Title. Lexicalization, compositionality, and communicative efficiency: The case of deontic priority (Joint work with Anne Mucha and James Engels)

Abstract. A number of cross-linguistic patterns in semantics have been given accounts in terms of the notion of communicative efficiency, i.e., optimal trade-offs between cognitive cost and communicative accuracy (Kemp & Regier 2012; Regier et al. 2015; Kemp et al. 2018; Imel & Steinert-Threlkeld 2021; Steinert-Threlkeld 2021; Denić et al. 2022; Uegaki 2024). In this talk, we extend the analysis to a new empirical generalization concerning the lexicalization of impossibility modality, which we refer to as Deontic Priority (DP) (Uegaki, Mucha et al. 2024). The generalization can be stated as follows:

Deontic Priority: if a modal lexical item can express any impossibility, then it can express deontic impossibility.

We hypothesise an account of DP in terms of communicative efficiency. In particular, we suggest that the effect comes from optimising the pressure to reduce the cognitive cost of using the system (by conveying more impossibility flavours using lexical forms as opposed to compositional forms) and the pressure to communicate the flavours accurately (by reducing flavour ambiguity), crucially in the presence of a utility bias for deontic flavours. We report on experiments that are aimed to support this hypothesis: a rating experiment to ground the utility bias; and a series of dyadic/interactive artificial-language learning experiments (Kanwal et al. 2017) to examine whether the DP effect arises in the presence of the combined pressure from cognitive cost and communicative accuracy.