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To cite this version:
Arthur Capelier-Mourguy, Philippe Blache, Christian Retoré, Laurent Prevot. Quantifier scope: a formal and experimental study. CJC-SC: Colloque des Jeunes Chercheurs en Sciences Cognitives, Jun 2015, Compiègne, France. hal-01194934

HAL Id: hal-01194934
https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01194934
Submitted on 21 Sep 2015

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Quantifier scope: a formal and experimental study

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This work is part of a general research program, whose aim is to confront the predictions of linguistic formalisation to actual human processing mainly for lexical, syntactic and above all semantic issues, excluding as much as possible the interference with pragmatics. Examples of questions to be address are the following: Are there preferred readings? Is a sentence complex to interpret? Which linguistic ingredients are responsible for its complexity?

We present here a semantic claim about quantifier scope taking, together with an experiment (described below) that we designed to test this claim, and which actually justifies our claim.

On the formal side, we view quantification with Hilbert’s epsilon terms as in the type-theoretical computational semantic framework that we introduced recently [1]. Epsilon terms, that can be compared with choice functions and opposed to generalised quantifiers, denote generic individuals: they provide a logical structure with in situ quantification that follow the syntactic structure and thus naturally express underspecification. This is quite adequate to our study which involves variants and reformulations of sentences with two quantifiers.

As opposed to apparently related work like [2] we clearly focus on the interpretation of the utterance: the choice of the lexical items, the syntactic structure, and the semantic interpretation itself. As such, we tried to minimise the influence of reasoning tasks, computational issues and world knowledge — although the observation of the semantic interpretation requires some of these.

The precise task to which we applied our view in this paper is quantifier scope disambiguation in universal-existential double-quantified sentences. These are sentences such as “An identification number is given to every student”. It has two readings, and common knowledge, syntax and the choice of the quantifying determiners influence its disambiguation. Here we focus on the determiners expressing universal quantification chaque and tous les, and we observed they do not perfectly match English quantifiers: tous les resembles all and every, while chaque rather corresponds to each (although chacun corresponds to everyone). For the existential quantifier, its simplest expression un(e) — the indefinite article (a) — is homonymous with the numeral un(e) (one). Even though work on such sentences has been done in English like [3], the equivalent constructions remain understudied in French and furthermore our view on the issue is slightly different.

Our aim is to look at the comprehension of sentences in terms of visual situations. To prevent any effect of pragmatic inference on sentence comprehension, items are made as neutral as possible: squares and circles. The computational aspects are also minimized by giving a very little number of items (3 of each), and asking a response time as short as possible. We also tried to prevent any natural left-to-right lecture of images by positioning the items horizontally. We observed the reaction time, and recorded eye gaze to have a look at internal comprehension processes.

Our material thus resulted in figure combinations as the one presented in Fig. 1 paired with auditory-presented sentences of the form “[U/E] carré est relié à [E/U] rond” ([U/E] square is connected to [E/U] circle), existential (E) quantifier always being un and universal (U) quantifier being either chaque (Uchaque) or tous les (Utous les). Each of the four figures shown on the stimulus represents a lecture (here, from left to right and top to bottom, Utous les ≻ E, E ≻ U, a lure item, and Uchaque ≻ E)1.

Then we collect interpretation (figure choice), reaction time, and eye gaze. All this give us information on the computed meaning of the sentence, its complexity, and possible distractors from target.

Our results (see Fig. 2) confirm some theoretical assumptions about general phenomena influencing quantifier scope disambiguation, such as linear order in sentence or lexical

1We use here the convention symbol ≻ as corresponding to “takes wide scope on”
realization of quantifiers, confirming part of the scale of [4]. Indeed, *chaque* has been shown to be a stronger quantifier than *tous les*, with respect to taking scope — this is probably related to their different meanings see e.g. [3].

Furthermore, our results suggest that *un* should take wide scope on *tous les* but not on *chaque*, as it is suggested by the end of [4]. More precisely, *un* interferes more with *chaque* than with *tous les*. It thus seems to be the case that *un* is closer to *chaque* with respect to taking scope over different quantifiers than to *tous les*, giving a greater precision to binary relations between quantifiers.

These results are concordant with Default theory see e.g. [5] and Grice’s Maxims of Quantity, and opposed to Relevance theory [6]. Indeed, while Relevance theory expect a logical reading, thus no difference between the logically equivalent universal terms (*chaque* and *tous les*), they interact significantly differently depending on the context. This suggest that the use of one rather than the other is informative for the addressee.

Finally, our study presents a good start in this domain, providing precise knowledge about quantifier scoping. It also paves the way to further investigations to test the relation between formal semantics and actual human processing, in particular as regards reading preferences and the complexity of ambiguous sentences.

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