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The Comprehension of Broad Focus: Probing Roothian Alternatives

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Abstract

Research has shown that comprehenders represent alternative meanings to single focused words online, consistent with Rooth's (1992) formal semantic account. However, focus can also take a broader scope over whole phrases ('read the manuscript'). We examined whether in these cases, alternatives are represented by testing for an interference effect of the particle only. Using probe recognition, we first tested unmentioned alternatives to the constituent parts of VPs, to object nouns (Exp 1, 'letter' for 'manuscript') and verbs (Exp 2, 'wrote' for 'read'). In Exp 3, we tested alternatives to whole phrases ('wrote the letter'). In all experiments, alternative probes were processed slower than unrelated ones. We found varying evidence of the interference effects of only with noun, verb and whole-phrase alternatives. Overall, this study does not provide support for the generalisation of the effects of only to broad focus. Additionally, we discuss the methodological implications of probing whole phrases.