

Researching Missing-Link Conditionals

Methodological Obstacles and how (We Could at Least Try) to Avoid Them

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Sentences like “If Hilary Clinton is running for the president of the US, I ate a banana at least once in my life” strike us as odd, yet, according to those accounts of conditionals that validate the principle of centering, they should be evaluated as true or highly acceptable, provided that Hilary Clinton is actually running in the elections and I have tried a banana. Since centering is valid on the majority of the currently influential accounts, the intuition that antecedents and consequents need to be somehow connected is often dismissed as a pragmatic rather than a semantic phenomenon. However, no one has offered a satisfactory explanation of how pragmatics of conversation is supposed to account for this intuition. The few psychological studies that introduced relevance manipulations in the design do not help to resolve the debate either, not only because they obtained different results, but also because it is not entirely clear to what extent people’s responses in conditional reasoning tasks allow us to draw a line between semantic and pragmatic aspects of meaning. I will discuss the difficulties in investigating reasoning with missing-link conditionals, and, consequently, I will propose a possible way to overcome these difficulties at least in the context of empirical research on centering.