Introduction

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The extent to which speakers and hearers tolerate ambiguity in natural languages has long been discussed in linguistics, as has the question whether and to what extent they will use grammatical means to eliminate or reduce it. Empirically-based answers to the latter question run from Temperley's (2003, 483) view that there is mounting evidence to suggest that "ambiguity avoidance as an important determinant of syntactic structure and behavior" to Wasow's (2015, 32) conclusion that "[t]here are a number of reasons [...] to doubt that ambiguity avoidance plays a major role in language use". The contributions to this special issue, too, disagree in the answers they provide.

Looking at the classic case of the *that*-vs- $\emptyset$ alternation in complement clauses and relative clauses, ROHDENBURG shows that the presence of, respectively, an overt complementizer or relativizer is not influenced by whether or not it could help to prevent a potential ambiguity. He suggests that the Complexity Principle postulated in his earlier work (Rohdenburg 1996) is better suited to account for this alternation overall and that any role that the alternation may have in ambiguity avoidance must be investigated within the constraints of this more overarching principle.

In her study of pronoun use, HERNÁNDEZ reaches a different conclusion. Building on her earlier work (Hernández 2012), she shows that uncertainty concerning the reference of pronouns rarely arise in natural discourse because speakers appear to employ both syntactic and contextual means to minimize potential ambiguity. As in her earlier work, she argues that an 'Avoid Ambiguity' principle is at work in natural language conversation.

In a large-scale quantitative study of verb-noun conversion, RAUHUT investigates the possibility that speakers use inflection to remove or reduce word-class ambiguity. He concludes that inflection does not seem to play a major role in this respect (or that such a role is masked by other, stronger factors) and identifies a number of methodological desiderata for a more principled quantitative approach to the issue.

Investigating differences in the use of the past perfect in British and American English, KLEPPEL, EITELMANN and MONDORF show that there is an ongoing reduction of

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the present perfect in favor of the simple past, which actually leads to an increase in ambiguity. This tendency is stronger in American than in British English, adding evidence to earlier work by Rohdenburg and Schlüter (2009) that American English may require less explicitness (i.e., tolerate more ambiguity) than British English in general.

In her discussion note on what she calls the “affective” construction, JOHANNSEN argues that the ambiguity of the sequence [*have* NP Vpp] between agentive-causative readings (*John had his car washed*) and passive-like readings (*John had his savings wiped out*) is not due to the existence of two homonymous grammatical constructions, as is traditionally assumed. Instead, she argues that, where such an ambiguity appears to exist, it is the result of the analyst disregarding contextual factors. In natural conversation, such ambiguities do not usually arise.

Thus, the papers in this special issue do not provide evidence that would allow us to answer questions about ambiguity avoidance definitively one way or the other. Instead, taken together, they show that this question must be approached in a differentiated fashion – the degree to which ambiguity avoidance by grammatical means occurs may depend on the specific phenomenon under investigation, on the presence of other factors influencing the choice of a potentially disambiguating structure, on the presence of discourse-contextual cues and even on the language (or language variety) in question.

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