Language reports

☞ Reading for Wednesday: George (2011), p. 1-17.

1   Doing semantic fieldwork (Matthewson, 2004)

When we work with native speakers, we ask for two things:

(1)   **translations** of complete sentences (and sometimes open class items)
Note: Meta-language (English) sentences can be ambiguous or vague; if possible, change it to be unambiguous, or else explain what you have in mind.

(2)   **judgments**, of three kinds:

- grammaticality judgments

- truth value judgments

- felicity judgments

(3)   Use **discourse contexts** with translations...   (Matthewson, 2004, p. 393)
   a. When the sentence will seem infelicitous to the consultant unless a discourse context is provided.
   b. When the sentence being offered to the consultant is ambiguous.
   c. When dealing with context-sensitive phenomena such as presupposition.
                (...which applies to the majority of the language report)

Contexts should always be used for truth value and felicity judgments. Give the discourse context first, and then ask for the translation or judgment. (Matthewson argues) context can be in English.

Section 4.3, on "interpreting rejection and acceptance of sentences in context," is useful.

(4)   Matthewson (2004, p. 401):
   a. If a speaker accepts a sentence S in a discourse context C, S is true in C.
   b. If a sentence S is false in a discourse context C, speakers will reject S in C.

A couple corollaries of (4):

(5) Sentences which are contradictory will necessarily be rejected.

(6) A false sentence will be rejected, but if a sentence is rejected, it does not necessarily mean it is false in the context.

- To distinguish falsity and infelicity, one can ask "Does it sound like I am lying or mistaken about the facts, or just that I am saying something funny?" This and other suggestions in section 4.3.

2 Resources

The Interdisciplinary Studies on Information Structure series provides detailed questionnaires and experimental tasks designed for fieldwork on information structure (Skopeteas et al., 2006; Renans et al., 2011). Chapter 4 of Skopeteas et al. (2006) provides helpful advice on how to use a translation task to study, among other things, questions and focus constructions. Additional tasks, specifically on the semantics of *only*, are given in Renans et al. (2011), section 6.

References

George, Benjamin Ross. 2011. Question embedding and the semantics of answers. Doctoral Dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles.

Matthewson, Lisa. 2004. On the methodology of semantic fieldwork. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 70:369–415.

Renans, Agata, Malte Zimmermann, and Markus Greif. 2011. *Questionnaire on focus semantics*, volume 15 of *Interdisciplinary Studies on Information Structure: Working Papers of the SFB 632*. Universitätsverlag Potsdam.

Skopeteas, Stavros, Ines Fiedler, Sam Hellmuth, Anne Schwarz, Ruben Stoel, Gisbert Fanselow, Caroline Féry, and Manfred Krifka. 2006. *Questionnaire on information structure: Reference manual*, volume 4 of *Interdisciplinary Studies on Information Structure: Working Papers of the SFB 632*.