Imprecision, structural complexity and the Gricean Maxim of Manner

Cross-linguistic evidence supports a structural complexity asymmetry between *all*-QPs and plural definites ((1), see e.g. Matthewson 2001), and an analogous asymmetry between distributive conjunctions and plural-like conjunctions ((2), see e.g. Flor et al. 2017). In both cases, the expressions that give rise to homogeneity effects (at least in those languages where this phenomenon has been studied) seem to be structurally less complex than their non-homogeneous counterparts. For instance, if Ann and Claire went to the meeting and Beatrice did not, (1-a) and (2-a) are not true, but do not seem completely false either (see e.g. Schwarzschild 1994, Löbner 2000, Križ 2015). In contrast, (1-b) and (2-b) are straightforwardly false in such situations.

(1)
a. The girls went to the meeting.
b. All the girls went to the meeting.

(2) German
a. Ann und Beatrice waren bei dem Treffen.
Ann and Beatrice were at the meeting
`Ann and Beatrice were at the meeting.'
b. Sowohl Ann als auch Beatrice war bei dem Treffen.
as.well Ann as also Beatrice was at the meeting
`Both Ann and Beatrice were at the meeting.'

My talk explores the idea that these complexity asymmetries derive from a pragmatic preference for utterances that are `precise', in the sense that they do not exhibit homogeneity gaps. This preference can be viewed as part of a grammatical implementation of the Maxim of Manner (Grice 1975). The idea is that expressions that are `less precise' than a contextually equivalent alternative, such as (1-a) and (2-a), can be used only if they have an advantage over that alternative on some other dimension relevant to the Maxim of Manner. In the case of (1) and (2) this other dimension is structural complexity in the sense of Katzir (2007): the less precise of two competing contextually equivalent expressions can be used only if it has the advantage of being less complex.

I will start by implementing this idea as a global, utterance-level principle within the supervaluationist approach to imprecision developed by Križ & Spector (2021). This principle accounts for the asymmetries exemplified in (1) and (2) as well as several seemingly unrelated puzzles from the plural semantics literature. I also discuss two potential counterexamples involving *approximately* and weak necessity modals. A closer look at the semantics of the putative precise competitors of these expressions suggests they are not real counterexamples.

I conclude by discussing a potential problem for my approach: precise expressions with a narrower distribution than their imprecise counterparts. For instance, the conjunction strategy in (2-b) is incompatible with collective predication, so that variants of (2-a) with collective predicates lack a precise competitor at the utterance level. Such cases seem to require competition between a subsentential expression and its contextually equivalent alternatives, but it is unclear how contextual equivalence can be generalized to the subsentential case without making wrong predictions.