

Evaluating truth: Experimental evidence from appositives and conjunctions

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Introduction This project explores the link between speaker evaluations of sentential truth and the sentential truth values provided by our formal semantic system. While we may believe a priori that speaker judgments of truth should inform our semantic representations of truth, the road from speaker representations to semantic representations is not a clear one. We operationalize this question by experimentally investigating the truth conditional contributions of conjunctions and appositives. Our experiments explore whether these two constructions behave similarly in contributing a truth value to their containing sentences, or whether the behavior of the two types of clauses pulls apart in interesting ways. While the theoretical literature is split on this question (Frege 1892, Murray 2010, Chierchia & McConnell-Ginet 2000, Potts 2005, a.o.), previous experimental work (Syrett & Koev 2015) has suggested that appositive relative clauses contribute the truth conditional status of their proposition to their containing sentence in the same manner as conjunctions. We follow up on these interesting results with four experiments that expand upon previous findings and raise questions for further research. We show that in truth value judgments appositives pattern like conjunctions, supporting a theoretical view in which appositives contribute a truth value to their containing sentence at some level of analysis. We tentatively argue from these findings that the appropriate level of analysis at which to place this truth value judgment is at the discourse level.

Background Appositives contribute what is canonically known as *not-at-issue* content. Not-at-issue content consists of new information that projects and does not contribute to resolving the Question under Discussion (Simons et al. 2010). Potts (2005) influentially proposed that appositives are composed semantically separately from their containing sentence, and therefore do not contribute a semantic truth value to the containing sentence. Recent experimental evidence (Syrett & Koev 2015) has contributed to a growing theoretical view in which appositives contribute a truth value similar to a conjunction, but with a different update potential on the context (AnderBois et al. 2010, Murray 2010).

Data Our experiments build on previous experimental work by directly comparing medial appositive relative clauses and conjunctions, and by using visual stimuli instead of real-world knowledge for experimental items. Four experiments were conducted in which participants judged items as either being true or false, and rated their confidence in their decisions. Experiments manipulated clause type, *appositive* or *conjunction*; clause truth status, *true*, *false*, or *inflammatorily false*; and clause relevance, operationalized as relevance to an explicit Question under Discussion (Kroll & Wagers 2017).

Conclusion Our findings suggest that appositives contribute a truth value to their containing sentence in the same manner as conjunctions. We additionally find that, counter to the predictions of existing theoretical approaches to the truth conditional status of appositives, the truth conditional contribution of appositives and conjunctions are discarded at an equivalent rate when given a non-relevant status. We show that this finding is robust and cannot be attributed to a simple task effect. We argue both that the findings provide a note of caution for researchers arguing from experimental data to conclusions regarding semantic truth values, and that the results suggest that appositives contribute a truth value to their containing utterance at the level of discourse meaning and not necessarily at the level of semantic meaning.