

# Is *Only* Special?

Jacques Jayez (primary contact)	Bob van Tiel
ENS de Lyon and L2C2, CNRS	Radboud University
<a href="mailto:jjayez@isc.cnrs.fr">jjayez@isc.cnrs.fr</a>	<a href="mailto:b.vantiel@phil.ru.nl">b.vantiel@phil.ru.nl</a>

## 1 The trouble with *only*

Classic presentations of presuppositions (PP's) [1, 3, 4] highlight their *projective* character. A piece of information is said to *project* whenever its truth persists across different environments, including for instance sentential negation and interrogation. When a PP trigger is used in a sentence it is customary to distinguish the main content (MC) and the PP. For instance, *Paul has stopped smoking* asserts that Paul does not smoke (MC) and presupposes that he has been smoking (PP). Under one of the standard analyses (see [6] a.o.), *only p*, where *p* is called the *prejacent*, presupposes that *p* and asserts that all alternatives to *p* are false. For instance, *Only Paul likes linguistics* presupposes that Paul likes linguistics and asserts that nobody else does. *Not only Paul likes linguistics* and *Does only Paul like linguistics?* preserve the truth of the prejacent. Variants to this basic approach include the *existential* theory [8], where the PP is 'somebody likes linguistics' and the *implicational* theory of Ippolito [9], where the PP is 'If somebody likes linguistics, Paul does'.

A recent set of observations by Beaver and Clark (B&C) in [2] leads them to cast doubt on the central assumption that *only* is a standard PP trigger. In particular, B&C report survey results that suggest that the prejacent is not always preserved under negation with *only*, unlike other triggers.

The goal of this project is to evaluate the import of these new observations on an experimental basis and to help determine whether and in what respect(s), if any, *only* is special. More precisely, the question we address is whether the PP of *only p* is different from the prejacent, *p*, or whether the problematic observations result from an interaction between the context and the standard semantics of *only*. In the former case, it is necessary to redefine *only*, in the latter, the standard theory is sufficient but it is necessary to understand in more detail the pragmatic sensitivity of *only*. The target languages for our study are Dutch and French, which both have equivalents for *only*.

## 2 The tequila survey

The survey test described in [2] (the 'tequila survey') is as follows. Subjects are asked to assess the following situation: from a group of 90 students, 30 have drunk only tequila (group A), 30 only non-alcoholic drinks (group B), and 30 have drunk both (group C). To the question *How many students didn't drink only tequila?*, 76% of the subjects answered '60', which entails that they considered the B and C groups together. If *only* is a standard PP trigger, the prejacent (= the PP in the standard theory) survives negation. So people who didn't drink only tequila are people who drank tequila and something else (group C). Therefore, the B group should *not* be considered in the sum and subjects should answer '30', that is, the number of people in group C. A complementary test using other PP triggers<sup>1</sup> suggests that *only* is really particular in this respect [2, pp. 240-241].

---

<sup>1</sup>That is, possessives (*my, his*), factive verbs like *know* or *realise* or aspectual verbs (*to stop, to begin*).

### 3 Redesigning the survey

The main question is whether these differences are due to the semantic nature of *only*, to contextual effects or both. In order to evaluate the role of context, it is necessary to take into account two parameters in an experimental design.

1. The role of contrast. B&C's observations use sets in contrasts (e.g. those that drank tequila and those that didn't). We don't know what happens when there is no salient contrast.
2. The role of metalinguistic negation (ML). Since [7], it's been assumed that negation is ambiguous between an ordinary (1-a) and a marked (1-b) meaning:
  - (1) a. The king of France isn't bald, he's wearing a wig.
  - b. The king of France isn't bald, because there is no king of France.

In the former case, the negation simply reverses the truth value of the sentence. In the latter, it targets the (in this case existential) presupposition of the utterance. Similarly, the target sentence *how many students didn't drink only tequila* has two readings. According to the ordinary meaning, the answer to the question is the number of students who drank tequila and something else. On its metalinguistic reading, the answer is the number of students who didn't drink tequila. One possible explanation for the finding that the prejacent doesn't survive negation is that the sentence gets a metalinguistic reading.

This shows that a tighter survey should compare *only* and other triggers under a contrast versus non-contrast condition, but also manipulate the interpretation of the negation. A possible way to make the ML reading less salient, suggested by [7, p. 146], is to replace the standard negation with a phrase like *it's false that...* Such negations preserve PP's (*it's false that Paul stopped smoking* presupposes that Paul used to smoke) and seem to block the metalinguistic reading (the previous sentence doesn't allow the continuation *...because he never smoked*).