
Thinking about: possessive interpretation

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It is well known that English possessive NPs such as *John's car* are open to numerous different interpretations (e.g. the car John owns/drives/crashed), the precise nature of which depends on the utterance context (i.a. Recanati 2004, Carston 2009, Peters & Westerståhl 2013). Despite the almost trivial nature of this observation, no single account exists which explicates the underlying interpretive mechanisms involved in possessive interpretation.

The aim of my paper is to rectify this status quo by outlining a way of thinking about possessive interpretation which is both theoretically parsimonious and does the empirical data justice. I will discuss the results of a large-scale corpus study of 3,000 possessive NPs which investigated the role of the linguistic context (Kolkmann & Falkum, ms) in their interpretation. The results of our study go against the currently dominant account (Vikner & Jensen 2002) which suggests that most possessive interpretations are generated lexicon-internally. Throughout, I will make reference to theoretical issues at the semantics-pragmatics interface that may be informed by the study of attributive possessive constructions. I conclude by outlining some open questions that a full account of possessive interpretation ought to answer.

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