
The ups and downs of ignorance

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Abstract

Disjunctive sentences like *the mystery box contains a blue ball or a yellow ball* suggest that the speaker doesn't know which of the two disjuncts is true. This is called an 'ignorance' inference. We distinguish between two aspects: the negated universal part (i.e., the speaker is uncertain about each disjunct) and the existential part (i.e., the speaker considers each disjunct possible). The traditional implicature approach derives POSSIBILITY from UNCERTAINTY and thus predicts that POSSIBILITY can only arise in combination with UNCERTAINTY. We report on two experiments showing that POSSIBILITY can in fact arise without UNCERTAINTY, challenging the traditional implicature account.

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