How the symmetry problem solves the symmetry problem

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The Symmetry Problem

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   B: *John* was.  
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- cf. Horn’s (1989) \textit{Asymmetry Thesis}.

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- but what about (2)?

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Central insight:
- the Symmetry Problem solves itself once we acknowledge that no piece of pragmatics yields predictions in isolation.
Outline

1. Framework

2. Solving the symmetry problem

3. Discussion
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3. Discussion
1.1. Speaker-level vs. discourse-level pragmatics

(3) (It’s common knowledge that J+M never attend rainy parties.)

a. A: Were John and Mary at the party?
b. B: It was raining.
1.1. Speaker-level vs. discourse-level pragmatics

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1.1. Speaker-level vs. discourse-level pragmatics

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2. hence speaker B believes that it was raining;
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   2. hence speaker B believes that it was raining;
   3. this entails believing that John and Mary weren’t at the party;
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2. hence speaker B believes that it was raining;
3. this entails believing that John and Mary weren’t at the party;
4. given (3a), it is a goal to establish whether they were at the party;
5. the foregoing is commonly known;
6. so B can be taken to implicate that J+M weren’t there.
1.2. Speaker-level pragmatics

goals   beliefs

what is uttered
1.2. Speaker-level pragmatics

cognitive science

goals beliefs

what is uttered

syntax, phonology, etc.

observable reality

models
1.2. Speaker-level pragmatics

goals  beliefs

what is uttered
1.2. Speaker-level pragmatics

goals

beliefs

what is uttered
1.2. Speaker-level pragmatics

goals

what is meant

beliefs

what is said

what is uttered
1.2. Speaker-level pragmatics
1.2. Speaker-level pragmatics

Diagram:

- **goals**
- **beliefs**
- **intents**
- **contents**
- **what is uttered**
1.2. Speaker-level pragmatics

![Diagram showing the relationship between goals, QUDS, beliefs, intents, contents, and what is uttered.]

- Goals
- QUDS
- Beliefs
- Intents
- Contents
- What is uttered
1.2. Speaker-level pragmatics

- Goals
- QUDS
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- Intents
- Contents
- What is uttered

Semantics
1.2. Speaker-level pragmatics

- Goals
- QUDs
- Beliefs
- Intents
- Contents
- Manner
- Semantics
- What is uttered
1.2. Speaker-level pragmatics

- what is uttered
  - contents
    - QUUDs
    - QUDs
      - intents
        - goals
          - beliefs
            - QUALITY
            - QUANTITY
            - RELATION
            - MANNER
            - Semantics
              - what is uttered
1.2. Speaker-level pragmatics

- what is uttered
  - contents
    - Semantics
    - MANNER
    - QUALITY
    - QUANTITY
    - RELATION
  - intents
    - QUDs
    - beliefs
    - strategies, etc.
  - goals
1.2. Speaker-level pragmatics

```
goals

QUDs

beliefs

QUALITY

QUANTITY

RELATION

intents

strategies, etc.
(rhetorical relations?)

(MANNER)

contents

Semantics

what is uttered
```
Part IV: Bridging QUD~coherence

- **Coherence Relations:** Comprehenders use general inferencing to identify relationships between propositions (Mann & Thompson, 1988; Webber & Joshi, 1998; Hobbs, 1990; Kehler, 2002; Asher & Lascarides, 2003; Webber, 2006; reviews in Knott, 1996 and Hutchinson, 2005)

  Mary scolded John. She did so loudly. Mary scolded John. He was late again.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elaboration</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
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- **Question-Under-Discussion models:** An utterance is coherent insofar as it answers a question relevant to the proceeding discourse (Roberts, 1996; Van Kuppevelt, 1995; Büring, 2003; Larsson, 1998; Ginzburg & Sag, 2000)

  Mary scolded John. She did so loudly. Mary scolded John. He was late again.

  | How? | Why? |
1.2. Speaker-level pragmatics

- contents
- intents
- beliefs
- goals
- strategies, etc.
  (rhetorical relations?)

Semantics
- QUALITY
- QUANTITY
- RELATION
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what is uttered

Semantics
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3. Discussion
2.1. The symmetry problem

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    B: John was there.  
    (implied: not Mary, not Bill)
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2. How an audience can detect it (and accommodate the new QUdS);
   ▶ accent/focus reflects the QUd that is explicitly addressed.
   ▶ a symmetrical QUd would predict a contradiction;
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At best, "scales" may help explain how an audience figures out which QUDs to accommodate.
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3.2. Existing brevity-based accounts

Some challenges:

- Brevity seems as context-dependent as relevance itself (Matsumoto, 1995);
- It may seem plausible for "all" vs. "some but not all," but:
- What about "was" vs. "wasn't"?
- What about "present" vs. "absent"?
- What about the mirror image:

(A) Who (of J, M, B) was present, and who was absent?
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(implies: Mary & Bill were present.)
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3.3. Take-home messages

▶ The symmetry problem solves itself once we realize that:
▶ it is a (superficial) problem only
▶ splitting a symmetrical Qud is a rational discourse strategy.

▶ Remain aware of the full pragmatic tree – no piece of pragmatics yields predictions in isolation;
▶ Remain aware of the distinction between discourse-level and speaker-level pragmatics.
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Thank you to the organizers!

Anke Holler, Katja Suckow, Barbara Hemforth, Israel de la Fuente
References

▶ Chierchia, G., Fox, D., & Spector, B. (2012). The grammatical view [...]. In Maienborn et al. (Eds.), *Semantics: An international handbook* [...].


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