
Exploring negative events: An experimental approach to a philosophical dilemma

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Despite the pervasive use of negation in everyday communication, there is little consensus in philosophy and semantics about the nature and properties of the events expressed by negative sentences. While affirmative sentences are generally assumed to express events, it remains unclear whether negative sentences refer to the absence of events, to intrinsically negative events, or to positive events that are expressed through linguistic negation. From a psychological perspective, events tap into four core aspects of human cognition, such as perception, action, language and thought. Together, these dimensions shape how people interpret, act upon, express and reason about the world. Applying these dimensions to the events expressed by negative sentences can help clarify their linguistic and cognitive properties.

In this talk, I will present a series of studies examining the referential status of the events expressed by negative sentences, the mental representations they activate, and how grammatical aspect influences their interpretation. Overall, these findings shed light on how negation interacts with cognitive processes in shaping the way people conceptualize and express events.

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