Linguistic meaning is traditionally thought to relate to states of affairs in the world, or the mental representations thereof, an utterance's 'literal meaning'. Recent research in linguistics has expanded to include aspects of speech which primarily relate to the conversation itself, marking what speakers take to be mentioned previously, agreed upon already, quietly agreeable on, or controversial.

One of these is prominence, conveying contrasts, or emphasizing an utterance’s relation to a previous one. In English-like languages, this is mainly accomplished by intonation ('inflection')—changing the sentence’s melody or the location of its main stress. This can have dramatic effects on meaning. A parent who replies to ‘I am going to marry Kim’ by ‘I thought you’d marry that IDIOT' (capital letters mark emphasis), may express approval and relief, while ‘I THOUGHT you’d marry that idiot’ spells trouble in the family.

Among the world’s languages, stress is only one of many ways to convey grammatical emphasis. Other language achieve the same effect by reordering words, adding endings or particles, putting pauses, and so on.

The project Unalternative Constraints Cross-Linguistically investigates these different strategies in English and other languages and develops a formalism which can capture their effects on interpretation. Its title partly references the (generally accepted) idea that emphasis points towards alternatives, seen against the non-emphasized background. Thus ‘I thought you’d marry that IDIOT’ relates to alternatives like ‘I thought you’d marry Kim’, whereas ‘I THOUGHT you’d marry that idiot’ may relate to ‘Now you are marrying that idiot’.

In different situations, e.g. answering ‘You hoped I would marry that idiot’, the same sentence more narrowly relates ‘thought’ to its alternative ‘hoped’. Both versions have in common that there can be no alternatives to ‘marry that idiot’, only to ‘I thought’ /’thought’. So perhaps it is more appropriate to characterize the effect of emphasis saying what, one way or another, cannot be an alternative than what all can; whence ‘unalternative’.

Researchers in the project investigate the various means of emphasizing in languages as different as English, Czech, Hausa (a language spoken in and around Nigeria) and Chickasaw (an American-Indian language) in detail and, using tools from formal logic, information theory and ordinary language philosophy, work on describing the essential commonalities behind the variation in a precise and unambiguous manner, further contributing to linguistic’s Big Question: What makes language such a unique and essential tool for humans?