Anaphoric presupposition triggers such as again are thought to establish a dependency relation between the trigger and its presupposed content [1]. Like other dependencies, establishing presuppositional dependencies relies on memory processes. While discourse content may be actively maintained in working memory, previous experimental work suggests that the processing of presuppositions exhibits a locality bias, favoring linearly and hierarchically closer discourse content that can satisfy the presupposition [2], suggesting a serial search retrieval mechanism. However, presupposition triggers like again have been reported to be rapidly sensitive to presupposition violations [3], suggesting a direct access retrieval mechanism. These three possibilities may be distinguished by differences in the availability and retrieval speed of presupposed content. If presupposed content is not actively maintained, then it must be retrieved, in which case availability should be reduced as dependency length increases. If the retrieval process is not via direct access, the speed of this retrieval should be slowed as dependency length increases, indicating serial search [4].

We examined two types of presupposed content, Explicit vs. Inferred (i vs. ii), in a speeded acceptability judgement study (N = 34). Dependency length between again and this presupposed content was manipulated with Zero, One, or Two intervening clauses, and the presupposition of again was either Satisfied or Violated.

(i) Beth went diving/*swimming yesterday. (…)₁ (…)₂ Today, she went diving again.
(ii) Beth got divorced/*fired ten years ago. (…)₁ (…)₂ This year, she got married again.

In a d’ analysis, participants were more accurate at resolving the presuppositional dependency with Explicit content compared to Inferred content (t=2.661, p<.010), but the critical factor of dependency length played no role, suggesting no availability differences. This lack of dependency length effect was confirmed in a diffusion analysis. No differences in availability (Explicit: pᵣ=.811; Inferred: pᵣ=.402) or retrieval speed (Explicit: pᵣ=.092, pₛ=.777; Inferred: pᵣ=.598, pₛ=.899) were found.

These results suggest that during the processing of anaphoric presupposition triggers, the presupposed content was available with no retrieval process required, suggesting an active maintenance theory of presupposition resolution. Only when the presupposed content must be inferred is there additional cost associated with resolving the dependency. A follow-up investigation involving the anaphoric trigger too is now underway.

References: