

Positive polarity items: A case for a heterogeneous etiology

Despite their varied morphosyntactic composition [1], [2], positive polarity items (PPIs) are unified by their anti-licensing property that they cannot be interpreted in well-defined “negative” contexts. There is currently no consensus, however, regarding the explanation for their special distributional restrictions. Some accounts appear to be specific to certain types of PPIs and cannot be generalized to others [3], [4], [5]. Indeed, agreement is lacking regarding whether a unified treatment should be given [6], or rather, the source of PPI behavior is heterogeneous [7].

Despite the challenge posed by this theoretical impasse, the behavior of positive polarity items, and especially their (un)acceptability when anti-licensed, is experimentally understudied. Here we report an acceptability rating study of three lexical items previously identified as PPIs in Hungarian [6]: the singular indefinite article *egy* ‘a(n)’, the indefinite pronoun *valaki* ‘something/somebody’, and the disjunction *vagy* ‘or’. These items belong to the same prototypical subclass of PPIs, anti-licensed only by local anti-additive operators like negation [8].

Adult participants (n=36) had to rate the acceptability of fifty sentences composed of a main clause and a complement clause, using a 5-point scale. In critical items the embedded object had one of the three types of PPI interpreted either in the scope of local, embedded clause negation (where they were supposed to be anti-licensed) or in the scope of non-local, main clause negation (where they were not supposed to be anti-licensed). In each item the target interpretation was fixed by an unambiguous paraphrase. A glm analysis of the responses yields the following findings. Each item exhibits PPI behavior in that it is less acceptable in the scope of local negation than in the scope of non-local negation. However, the indefinite article differs from the other two items in that its acceptability is also reduced in the scope of non-local negation. Further, disjunction differs from the other two items in that its degradation in the scope of local negation is relatively mild (a result partly reminiscent of [9]). We argue that this strikingly differential pattern favors an approach in terms of a heterogeneous, rather than a uniform, etiology of PPIs. In the presentation we discuss the different factors that may underlie the divergent patterns of degradation, including specificity/referentiality [4] and blocking by alternative forms [3] in the case of the singular indefinite article and indefinite pronouns, and scalarity in the interpretation of plain disjunction [10].

References

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