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NPI Licensing: A Puzzle for Semantic Theories of the Comparative

There is general agreement in the literature on the status of comparative clauses as NPI licensing environments (Hoeksema 1983, Schwarzschild & Wilkinson 2002 a.o.), but this is as far as the agreement goes. Opinions differ when it comes to how exactly NPI licensing occurs in comparative clauses, whether *-er* is a possible licenser and if it is not, what the licenser is. While NPIs are widely accepted to be particles which can only occur in downward entailing contexts, recent work on the comparative (S&W 2002, Heim 2006) has compellingly argued that, in order to explain entailment patterns and truth value intuitions for sentences with generalized quantifiers, the comparative clause needs to be at least partially upward entailing. My goal is to find a semantic model of the comparative which can account for the inference patterns and generalized quantifier data, but is also compatible with the NPI licensing facts.

I argue that the accounts proposed by Heim (2006) and Gajewski (to appear), in which the comparative clause is essentially split into an upward entailing upper part and a downward entailing lower part, fare better than others in this regard, but that they are not without problems of their own. In a number of cases, quantifiers which are either modified by NPIs or are NPIs themselves must take scope in the upward entailing portion of the clause in order to derive truth conditions compatible with speaker intuitions. To isolate the problems, I look at three types of quantification occurring in comparative clauses with NPIs: DP quantifiers, quantificational adverbs and quantification over possible worlds (modals and attitude verbs). Using data mainly from English and German, I will argue that the problematic cases for Heim and Gajewski's models are limited to those involving quantification over possible worlds. Based on this evidence, I suggest that the best solution to this problem lies in a re-evaluation of the semantics of attitude verbs and modals, rather than an amendment to Heim's theory of the comparative or Ladusaw's (1979) widely accepted theory of NPI licensing in downward entailing contexts.

References

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- Heim, I. (2006). Remarks on Comparative Clauses as Generalized Quantifiers, Manuscript, MIT.
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- Ladusaw, W. (1979). *Polarity Sensitivity as Inherent Scope Relations*, PhD thesis, University of Texas, Austin.
- Schwarzschild, R. & Wilkison K. (2002). Quantifiers in Comparative Clauses: A Semantics of Degree Based on Interval. *Natural Language Semantics* 10 : 1-41.