

Numerals and Conjunctive DPs as cues for Processing of “only”

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Abstract:

Sentences with a focus-sensitive particle “only” can generate surface ambiguous sentences such as in (1), with possible interpretations in (1a-b).

(1) John has only given water to the exhausted traveler.

a. John has only given [water]_F to the exhausted traveler, (not anything else).

b. John has only given water to [the exhausted traveler]_F, (not the vigorous traveler).

The ambiguity is yielded since “only” could locate its associate F(ocus) at multiple positions. How is the locating process governed? One idea concerns the nature of the scalar presupposition of “only” (Beaver & Clark '08, a.o.) – that is, the prejacent is a relatively low-ranked alternative among Alt(S). For (1a), suppose a set of alternatives {water, food, feast}. Since the alternative {water} is low-ranked, (1a) satisfies the scalar presupposition and is a valid sentence. In contrast, in the sentence (2), the alternative {feast} is *not* low-ranked, so the only possible interpretation is (2b).

(2) John has only given feast to the exhausted traveler.

a. *John has only given [feast]_F to the exhausted traveler.

b. John has only given feast to [the exhausted traveler]_F.

This suggests that “easily scalable” constituents (given the notion of the scalar presupposition) tend to attract F. Another idea on how to locate F concerns the Alt(S) generation algorithm. Building on the analysis proposed by Fox & Katzir (2011), it is expected that a conjunction could also attract F (details omitted here due to the space limitation).

If the two ideas above are on the right track, the truth condition of ambiguous sentences will be manipulated by (i) placing an “easily scalable” constituent such as numeral, and (ii) placing a conjunction, on one of the object positions.

For the experiments to be reported, I recruited 64 English speakers and 138 Japanese college students, who have studied English for at least 6 years at school. The counterpart of “only” in Japanese is a bound morpheme (“-sika ... nai” and “-dake”), and thus when they process English ambiguous sentences (with “only” and F far apart), they cannot use their transferred knowledge from L1.

The participants read stories with stimulus sentences to judge if they match the contexts (True/False). The target sentences vary in three factors as in (3a-c). From the responses, we can deduce which object the participants associated “only” with. E.g., if one answers False to (3a), (s)he associated “only” with the 1st object, while if True to (3a), (s)he associated it with the 2nd object.

(3) [Context A: Patricia is a nurse in a children’s ward at a hospital. After her night shift, she reported how the patients were doing to their doctors. This is what happened: Patricia told Dr. Myers about Jackie and about Nick. She told Dr. Sheehan about Nick. She told Dr. Beck and Dr. Sheldon about Marley.]

a. **Baseline condition:** Patricia has only told Dr. Sheehan about Nick.

b. **Numeral on the 1st object condition:** Patricia has only told one of the doctors about Nick.

c. **Numeral on the 2nd object condition:** Patricia has only told Dr. Sheehan about one of the patients.

The results to be discussed show, in a nutshell, (i) there exists a mild preference to assign F on the 1st object on the Baseline condition, (ii) the focus association is indeed modulated by the position of a numeral, (iii) both trends are found in Japanese speakers as well – which suggests that they do not transfer their knowledge about the properties of “only” in Japanese, and furthermore, (iv) conjunctive DPs have a potential being an “easily scalable” constituent.

References.

- Beaver, David and Brady Clark. 2008. *Sense and sensitivity: How focus determines meaning*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Fox, Danny and Roni Katzir. 2011. On the characterization of alternatives. *Natural Language Semantics* 19 (1).