

The interpretation of disjunction in negative sentences

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The interpretation of negated disjunctive sentences is potentially logically ambiguous, because both negation and disjunction may interact by taking scope over the other. This results in two possible interpretations: (1) “not one or not the other” and (2) “neither”. In the case of the “not one or not the other” interpretation, disjunction scopes over negation, and the wide scope interpretation of disjunction (OR>NEG) emerges. In the case of the “neither” interpretation, negation scopes over disjunction, giving rise to the narrow scope of interpretation of disjunction (NEG>OR). According to the hypothesis of Szabolcsi (2002) disjunction is a Positive Polarity Item (+PPI) in languages like Hungarian, which results in only the wide scope interpretation of disjunction being available to speakers. In contrast, in languages like English, disjunction is not a Positive Polarity Item (-PPI). In this case, the narrow scope of disjunction will be the surface level interpretation (the “neither” reading), but logically the “not the one or not the other” reading should still be available under certain conditions, leading to principled ambiguity. Many languages have been categorized as either -PPI or +PPI by previous literature based on the theory of parametric crosslinguistic variation regarding disjunction. However, recent empirical results contradicted the previously accepted PPI status of disjunction in several languages, with some studies going as far as questioning the validity of the distinction between PPI disjunction languages and non-PPI disjunction languages. In view of this, my presentation aims at investigating the availability of the two possible scope readings in English. The experiment was designed in a way, that allowed the data to be compared with previous Hungarian findings. Hungarian is currently thought to be a PPI disjunction language, while English is classified as a non-PPI disjunction language, and this comparison allows for further insights regarding the robustness of the PPI parameter. The judgements collected in the acceptability test yielded ambiguous results. The narrow scope interpretation of disjunction was favoured by English speakers, as expected, but the reverse scope reading was less available, then previously theorized. The results suggest that other factors (e.g. prosody) may play a role in the availability of different scope readings.

Keywords: PPI, disjunction, scope, negation, polarity

Literature

Szabolcsi, A. (2002). Hungarian disjunctions and positive polarity. In István Kenesei, & Péter Siptár (Eds.), *Approaches to Hungarian 8*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.