

snippets

Issue 37 - December 2019
Special issue in honor of Uli Sauerland

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Constraints on non-conservative readings in English

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7358/snip-2019-037-wils>

Recently, Ahn and Sauerland (2015, 2017) and Romero (2015) have observed that quantity expressions including percents, fractions and variants of *many* and *few* appear to violate Keenan and Stavi (1986)'s condition that natural language determiners are always conservative. While Romero (2015) has an account for 'reverse proportional' readings of bare *many* that preserves its basic conservativity, the more complex expressions considered here still present a challenge.

In Ahn and Sauerland (2017)'s example (1), *75 percent* is non-conservative because its truth conditions do not depend only on the quantity of the intersection of *women* and people *the company hired*.

- (1) The company hired [75 percent WOMEN].
'75 percent of people hired by the company were women'

Wilson (2016, 2018) and Pancheva and Tomaszewicz (2012) discuss constructions in which a relative reading of the quantity superlatives, *most*, *least* and *fewest* is triggered by NP-internal focus. For English, Wilson (2018) has argued that *the most* in an expression like (2) forms a constituent. As a phrasal determiner, this would also violate the Conservativity Condition. Quantities of students accepted who were not *American students* are essential to the truth conditions of (2).

- (2) The program accepted [the most AMERICAN students].
'The program accepted more Americans than students of any other nationality.'

Covert movement of the quantity expression out of the DP has been independently hypothesized to be responsible for generating such readings by Ahn and Sauerland (2015, 2017) for proportional measures and by Wilson (2016, 2018) for quantity superlatives. In English, extraction out of subjects is often barred, so we might expect these readings to be blocked in subject position. Indeed, Ahn and Sauerland (2015, 2017) observe that the non-conservative uses of *percent* (and its ilk) are degraded in sentences like (3a). I corroborate this judgement, but note that it is only true for sentences in the active voice. The passive example in (3b) is acceptable and has a non-conservative meaning.

- (3) a. ??75 percent WOMEN work at this company.
b. 75 percent WOMEN were hired by the company.

This aligns with Chomsky's (2008) observation that extraction is easier out of passive subjects. The reverse proportional reading of uninflected *many/few* discussed by Romero (2015) does not exhibit subject/object asymmetry, but the definite-marked superlatives pattern with (3). The DP is only felicitous as a subject with focus inside the NP in passive sentences:

- (4) a. ??The most AMERICAN students attend the program.

- b. The most AMERICAN students were admitted to the program.

The importance of NP-internal focus varies between the two constructions. Focus on an element outside of the measured NP in (5) forces a conservative reading. But it does not have this effect in (6) which still compares numbers of women to non-women.

- (5) THIS program accepted [the most American students].
'This program accepted more American students than any other program did.'
- (6) THIS company hired [75 percent women].
'75 percent of people hired by this company were women'

The fact that the two quantity expressions compared here exhibit similar subject/object asymmetries in English supports the hypothesis that extraction of the quantity expression from the DP is required for the appearance of non-conservativity in general. However, the different effects of focus in the two types of constructions suggest that the mechanisms by which this movement gives rise to the readings are nevertheless distinct.

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