Contents

1. Andreea C. Nicolae, Patrick D. Elliott, and Yasutada Sudo  
   Introduction ........................................................................................................ [1]

2. Dorothy Ahn  
   ASL IX to locus as a modifier ................................................................. [2]

3. Artemis Alexiadou  
   Decomposing scalar approximatives in Greek ............................... [3]

4. Anna Alsop, Lucas Champollion, and Ioana Grosu  

5. Anton Benz and Nicole Gotzner  
   Quantifier irgendein and local implicature ........................................ [10]

6. Jonathan David Bobaljik and Susi Wurmbrand  
   Fake indexicals, binding, and the PCC .............................................. [13]

7. Brian Buccola and Emmanuel Chemla  
   Alternatives of disjunctions: when a disjunct contains the antecedent of a pronoun ...... [16]

8. Luka Crnič and Brian Buccola  
   Scoping NPIs out of DPs ................................................................. [19]

9. Chris Cummins  
   Some contexts requiring precise number meanings ............................ [22]

10. Patrick D. Elliott and Paul Marty  
    Exactly one theory of multiplicity inferences ...................................... [24]
11. Anamaria Fălaşu and Andreea C. Nicolae
   Two coordinating particles are better than one: free choice items in Romanian

12. Danny Fox
   Individual concepts and narrow scope illusions

13. Danny Fox
   Degree concepts and narrow scope illusions

14. Nicole Gotzner
   Disjunction, conjunction, and exhaustivity

15. Martin Hackl
   On Haddock’s puzzle and the role of presupposition in reference resolution

16. Andreas Haida
   Symmetry, density, and formal alternatives

17. Nina Haslinger and Viola Schmitt
   Strengthened disjunction or non-classical conjunction?

18. Fabian Heck and Anke Himmelreich
   Two observations about reconstruction

19. Aron Hirsch
   Modal adverbs and constraints on type-flexibility

20. Natalia Ivlieva and Alexander Podobryaev
   On variable agreement and scope reconstruction in Russian

21. Hadil Karawani
   The past is rewritten

22. Manfred Krifka and Fereshteh Modarresi
   Persian ezafe and proportional quantifiers

23. Paul Marty
   Maximize Presupposition! and presupposition satisfaction

24. Lisa Matthewson, Sihwei Chen, Marianne Huijsmans, Marcin Morzycki, Daniel Reisinger, and Hotze Rullmann
   Restricting the English past tense

25. Clemens Mayr
   On a seemingly nonexistent cumulative reading

26. Marie-Christine Meyer
   Scalar Implicatures in complex contexts

27. Moreno Mitrović
   Null disjunction in disguise

28. Andreea C. Nicolae and Yasutada Sudo
   The exhaustive relevance of complex conjunctions

29. Rick Nouwen
   Scalar vagueness regulation and locative reference
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Robert Pasternak</td>
<td><em>Unifying partitive and adjective-modifying percent</em></td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Hazel Pearson and Frank Sode</td>
<td>‘Not in my wildest dreams’: a part time minimizer?</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Orin Percus</td>
<td><em>Uli and our generation: some reminiscences</em></td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Jacopo Romoli</td>
<td><em>Why them?</em></td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Fabienne Salfner</td>
<td><em>The rise and fall of non-conservatives</em></td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Petra B. Schumacher</td>
<td><em>Vagueness and context-sensitivity of absolute gradable adjectives</em></td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Stephanie Solt</td>
<td><em>More or less an approximator</em></td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Giorgos Spathas</td>
<td><em>Plural anaphoric reference and non-conservativity</em></td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Benjamin Spector</td>
<td><em>An argument for the trivalent approach to presupposition projection</em></td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Bob van Tiel</td>
<td>‘The case against fuzzy logic revisited’ revisited</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Lyn Tieu</td>
<td><em>A developmental asymmetry between the singular and plural</em></td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Tue Trinh</td>
<td><em>A tense question</em></td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Hubert Truckenbrodt</td>
<td><em>On remind-me presuppositions and embedded question acts</em></td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Michael Wagner</td>
<td><em>Disjuncts must be mutually excludable</em></td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>E. Cameron Wilson</td>
<td><em>Constraints on non-conservative readings in English</em></td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Susi Wurmbrand</td>
<td><em>Indexical shift meets ECM</em></td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Constraints on non-conservative readings in English

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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.

References


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