snippets

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Alternative interrogatives and Negative Polarity Items

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It is claimed in Higginbotham 1993, based on examples like (1), that alternative interrogatives do not admit NPIs. Yet according to Roelofsen (2018), (2) does license NPIs. Importantly, (2) is structurally and intonationally similar to (1): both contain a disjunction and are pronounced with the canonical alternative intonation (see Pruitt and Roelofsen 2013).

(1) Did John (*ever) go to Paris↑ or London↓   (↑= rising intonation; ↓= falling intonation)

(2) Would you like anything else↑ or are you all set↓

Since the disjuncts of (2) conflict with each other, there is reason to suspect that (2) is not a genuine alternative interrogative. (3), whose disjuncts are compatible with each other, is a clearer counterexample to Higginbotham 1993 (though it admits an NPI only in one of its disjuncts).

(3) Did John ever go to Paris↑ or did he (*ever) go to London↓

The contrast in (4) clarifies why (3) is a clearer case. The presupposition of (3)$^{\text{-sans-2nd-}ever}$, which requires at least one member of its answer set — {*John went to Paris*, *John went to London*} — to be true, may be rejected by an answerer (similarly for (1)$^{\text{-sans-}ever}$). If (2) were a genuine alternative interrogative, its answer set would be {*I'd like something else*, *I'm all set*}, and the presupposition that at least one of them is true could be rejected just as easily.

(4) Q1: (3)$^{\text{-sans-2nd-}ever}$
     A1: Oh, you're wrong. He didn't go to Paris and/#but he didn't go to London.

     Q2: (2)
     A2: Oh, you're wrong. I don't want anything but/#and I'm not all set.

That (3)$^{\text{-sans-2nd-}ever}$ is, like (1)$^{\text{-sans-}ever}$, an alternative interrogative is confirmed by the fact that their pronunciation contrasts with that of the polar (5) (which ends with rising intonation and admits NPIs) and that of (6), where each disjunct ends with rising intonation (and both disjuncts admit NPIs). Crucially, (7) is a complete reply to (1)$^{\text{-sans-}ever}$ and to (3)$^{\text{-sans-2nd-}ever}$: by Answerhood (Dayal 1996), exactly one of the possible answers to (1)$^{\text{-sans-}ever}$ and (3)$^{\text{-sans-2nd-}ever}$ is true (when answerer agrees with asker). By contrast, the truth of (7) does not suffice to settle (5) (answer set: {*John went to Paris or London*, *John went to neither*}) or (6) (answer set: {*John went to Paris*, *John went to London*, *John went to neither*}; see Hoeks and Roelofsen 2019).

(5) Did John (ever) go to Paris or London↑

(6) Did John (ever) go to Paris↑ or (did he ever go to) London↑

(7) John didn't go to Paris.

To our knowledge, no theory of NPI-licensing in interrogatives can explain why adding material to (1)'s second disjunct licenses the NPI in the first, as in (3)$^{\text{-sans-2nd-}ever}$, or why (3) forbids an NPI in its second disjunct. For example, Nicolae (2013) and Guerzoni and Sharvit (2014) propose that certain interrogatives license NPIs because they contain a downward entailing environment, thus reducing NPI-licensing in interrogatives to the commonly assumed licensing mechanisms in declaratives. Neither proposal obviously predicts the "size" of an alternative interrogative's disjuncts or the number of NPIs it contains to matter. Schwarz (2017) and Roelofsen (2018) propose that whether an NPI is acceptable in an interrogative depends on the relation between the interrogative's answer set and alternative answer sets computed by restricting the NPI's domain of quantification. To the extent that we have characterized the answer sets for (1)$^{\text{-sans-}ever}$ and (3)$^{\text{-sans-2nd-}ever}$ correctly, the syntactic structures from which these answer sets are derived — a clausal disjunction in (3) with two instances of subject-auxiliary inversion vs. a noun phrase disjunction in (1) — are not predicted to affect NPI-licensing.

Regarding (6), it is conceivable — given its non-alternative intonation and meaning — that each of its disjuncts is semantically polar (for relevant discussion, see Krifka 2001, Hirsch 2018).

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