

5.

Benjamin Spector - (Univ. de Paris 7/ Ecole Normale Supérieure) ***Indefinites in subject position are positive polarity items***

Benjamin.Spector@ens.fr

Indefinites in subject position generally take scope over negation :

- (1) Three students didn't come to Peter's class
 - (a) available reading : there are three students who didn't come
 - (b) unavailable reading : it is false that three students came
- (2) Many students didn't come to Peter's class
 - (a) available : there are many students who didn't come
 - (b) unavailable : it is false that many students came

(Some speakers find the “unavailable” readings above to be merely dispreferred. This is the case for all “unavailable” readings cited in this snippet.)

Consider however the following examples :

- (3) If three students had not come to Peter's class, it would have been a failure
 - (4) If many students had not come to Peter's class, it would have been a failure
- (3) and (4) both have a reading (given in (5) and (6)) where negation takes scope over the subject:
- (5) If it had not been the case that three students came to Peter's class, it would have been a failure.
 - (6) If it had not been the case that many students came to Peter's class, it would have been a failure.

In fact, at least some indefinites obey the following generalization: in non-decreasing contexts, they must take scope over negation when they occur in subject position, while in decreasing contexts, they can take scope either above or below negation. In order to substantiate this claim, let me also mention the following two-sentence example:

- (7) Peter will be surprised if many people don't go to the demonstration. Even though he thinks that there are a lot of people who won't go to the demonstration, he also believes that many others will.

(7) is a coherent discourse, and it can be so only if *many people*, in the first sentence, takes scope below negation.

This behaviour is reminiscent of that of positive polarity items (PPIs): PPIs must scope over negation in simple negative sentences, but can take scope below negation when the negation itself occurs in an NPI-licensing, i.e. downward-entailing, context (Szabolcsi 2004):

- (8) John hasn't read some books
√ some books >> Negation
* Negation >> Some books
- (9) If John had not read some books, he would be ignorant
possible reading: Negation >> Some books

Yet *many students* or *three students* are not PPIs in the usual sense, since, in object position, they can take scope below negation with no restriction.

Therefore there appear to exist indefinites that are PPIs in subject position only. While this fact is quite mysterious, it suggests that

a) there is no syntactic constraint that forces indefinite subjects to occur higher than negation at LF (otherwise indefinite subjects would *always* take scope over negation, even in decreasing contexts), and

b) polarity sensitivity, and more specifically PPI-like behaviour, cannot always be explained only in terms of the lexical properties of the sensitive item, since no subject-object asymmetry is expected on such grounds.

Reference

Szabolcsi, A. (2004) "Positive polarity-negative polarity", *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 22:2.