Polarity Sensitivity and the Heart of Logic

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There is by now a broad consensus that polarity items are sensitive to the logical properties of grammatical contexts, though controversy remains both on how to represent these sensitivities and where they come from. Since the constraints on polarity items are abstract and not clearly functional, Crain & Pietroski (2002) suggest that they must be part of an innate universal grammar. In previous work (Israel 1996, 2011), I have argued on the contrary that sensitivity reflects the expressive and rhetorical functions these constructions conventionally serve. In particular, I hold that polarity items are scalar operators encode an informative value: they are thus obligatorily construed as either emphatic or attenuating, and so restricted to contexts where this construal is felicitous. This approach crucially assumes that "informative value" is a natural semantic feature, and that language users will readily associate it with linguistic constructions that they learn.

This paper builds on the "scalar model of sensitivity" with a construction-based, mental spaces account of polarity licensing, and presents two kinds of evidence that scalar construal and informative value play a salient role in ordinary language comprehension. The first line of evidence comes from observations of the use of logical operators in two kinds of persuasive discourse, love poetry and fund-raising letters, where the non-veridical operators that license polarity items often seem to serve a basically affective and evaluative function on their own, even without the use of polarity items or other scalar operators. I argue that it is precisely this kind of evaluative meaning that gets encoded as informative value in fully grammaticalized polarity items.

Further evidence for the account comes from a previously unobserved pattern in the grammaticalization of two polarity sensitive verb phrase constructions in English. Both the care to V and the mind Ving constructions begin with a semantic reanalysis that arises under negation and then spreads to other non-veridical contexts. Thus care shifts under negation from a sense of, roughly, ‘worry, trouble oneself’ first to uses denoting indifference (e.g. I care not what you do) or desire (e.g. I don’t care to go). Similarly, mind has an early sense of ‘pay heed to’ (as in mind your business) which shifts under negation to ‘worry about’ (e.g. don’t mind me) and ‘dislike’ (e.g. I don’t mind saying...). In each case, the verbs undergo a kind of subjectification (Traugott 1989) leading to new constructions which serve a mitigating function by expressing relatively weak (i.e. low informative value) propositions. Once entrenched under negation, these new senses have spread to other polarity contexts — e.g. questions, conditionals and comparatives — where the original reanalysis would not be supported, but where the newly established mitigating function is in full effect.

Thus both in ordinary discourse and in the process of grammaticalization, informative value, or something very much like it, plays an important role not just in licensing polarity items but in explaining the sorts of expressive and rhetorical effects speakers regularly achieve through the use of logical operators.

References