The Licensing of Polarity Items

חניכה: שירה הניג, ירושלים

מנחה-עמיתה: אילונה ספקטור שירץ, האוניברסיטה העברית, ירושלים

Theoretical Background

My paper is written in the framework of Generative linguistics. Our linguistic knowledge includes a finite set of rules which enables us to produce an infinite set of sentences. Some of these rules are specific to individual languages, and some of them hold in all human languages. This linguistic knowledge constitutes a Universal Grammar (UG). Thus, even though there are differences between languages, all human languages share the same abstract structure, stemming from our mutual cognitive capacities as human beings.

The goal of a linguist is to discover the nature of UG. The linguistic does so by tracing the rules of a particular language and determine which of them pertain to all languages. Since UG is a part of the language faculty (the inherent ability to speak and understand a language) in the human brain, it is unique to human species and discovering its nature will give us an insight on the workings of the human mind.

In my paper I discuss the case of polarity items, a phenomenon which holds across a vast array of language and seems to be subject to universal constraints on the language faculty, it being a part of UG.

Data

Polarity Items

Polarity Items (PIs) are elements which are associated with the grammatical polarity of the environment (which is usually taken as the sentence) in which they appear, i.e. whether the environment is negative or positive in meaning. Elements which seem to be found only in negative contexts are referred to as Negative Polarity Items (NPIs).

The most well-known NPI is the English *any*:

(1) a. He didn't read *any* books.
    b. *He read *any* books.

However, we can find NPIs which are licensed also in non-negative contexts, such as questions and conditionals:

(2) a. Did John miss *anything*?
    b. If she wants *any* help she will come to me.

Thus it seems that NPIs are not licensed only in negative contexts.

On the other hand, elements which can be found only in affirmative (positive) contexts are referred to as Positive Polarity Items (PPIs). An example for English PPI is *as hell*:

(3) a. John was rude *as hell* to Mary.
    b. *John wasn't rude *as hell* to Mary.

Giannakidou's Proposal

In her proposal, Giannakidou discusses the distribution of polarity items with respect to the veridicality of the context in which they occur.

Veridicality is associated with the truth of a sentence. For example, if the sentence *John saw a dog* is true then it must be true that there is such a thing as a dog, i.e. that a dog exists, and the sentence is referred to as veridical. On the other hand, if the sentence *John is looking for a dog* is true, it doesn't necessarily mean that there is such a thing as a dog, and the sentence is referred to as nonveridical.

According to Giannakidou, NPIs are licensed only in nonveridical contexts. Thus, the NPIs are not only licensed in negative contexts, which are nonveridical, but rather in other nonveridical contexts as well, such as questions and conditionals.

Giannakidou also claims that PPIs are licensed only in veridical contexts and she considers the licensing of the PPI *some*. According to her, there are two varieties of *some* and only one of them is a PPI.

(4) A doctor who knew *something* about cancer wasn't available.

In (4) *something* is a PPI and the sentence is veridical. However, (5) complicates things a little since it is veridical, just like (4), yet it licenses the NPI *anything*:

(5)   A doctor who knew *anything* about cancer wasn't available.

The Research Question

The question which arises from this contradiction is what licenses NPIs and PPIs when they appear at exactly the same distribution in veridical contexts.

Methodology

When we attempt to trace a language's rules we try to elicit judgments from native speakers, by considering the (un)grammaticality of given sentences. When a sentence is judged as well-formed by the native speakers it is considered grammatical, and when a sentence is judged as ill-formed it is considered ungrammatical. With this method we considered the (un)grammaticality and (non)veridicality of (4) and (5).

Conclusion

Since none of the theories concerning polarity items account for the distribution represented above in (4) and (5), in order to treat the licenser question sufficiently we need a new theory of the licensing of polarity items. I hope to investigate this question in the future.