
We present the results of an acceptability judgment study designed to test the status of yori-constituents in Japanese comparatives. On the basis of these results, we argue in favor of a strictly compositional semantic approach to the comparative in Japanese and thus against an analysis as pragmatically anchored orphan constituents.

Background

The Original Observation

Varying Acceptability of Comparatives

Japanese

Kenji bought a longer / more expensive umbrella.

English

Mary bought a longer / more expensive umbrella.

Yori-constituents as Syntactic Orphans

The Proposal in Beck, Oda & Sugisaki (2004) cf. also Oda (2008), Beck et al. (2009, Beck, Hohaus & Tiemann (2012) in Japanese comparatives, the first argument of the comparative operator is a free degree variable. The yori-constituent is a syntactic orphan that provides material which helps infer a value for the variable.

\[
\text{Yori-constituent: } \begin{cases} \text{ if } [\text{MAX} \text{ (Marko bought t_1 >,yori )}] \Rightarrow \text{MAX (Marko bought t_2,yori )} \\ \text{ plausible value for contextual degree: } \text{g} (t_2 <d>) = \text{LENGTH (MARKO bought(y_2 Marko))} \end{cases}
\]

Explaining the Variation in Acceptability

The inference from the maximal item in the set of items Marko bought to their length as a value for the degree variable is considerably less straightforward than the inference of their price. Speakers are successful to varying degrees when it comes to inferring less plausible comparative values.

Criticism against a Contextual Analysis

Kennedy (2009), Shimoyama (2012), Suio (in press): 47

"To conclude, I believe that the empirical status of the data is still quite nebulous."

The Acceptability Rating Study

Investigating the Yori-constituent in Japanese Comparative Constructions

Methodology

We tested the predictions of the contextual analysis of yori-constituents in an on-line acceptability judgment study with 61 native speakers of Japanese. Subjects were asked to rate the acceptability of a target sentence in a specific context on a scale from 1 (not acceptable) to 5 (fully acceptable). The study compares the effect of difficulty of the inference of the required comparison degree, determined by its plausibility, on the comparative and a construction for which no contextual analysis is available. (Plausibility was determined by a pre-study with 26 subjects.) Two sets of fillers investigating phenomena at the semantics/pragmatics-interface were inserted.

Context:

Kenji and Mariko badly needed an umbrella yesterday afternoon as it was raining heavily.

Kenji and Marko hardly needed an umbrella yesterday afternoon as it was raining heavily.

Kenji bought a more expensive umbrella.

Kenji bought a longer umbrella.

Kenji and Marko bought umbrellas whose length was about the same.

Kenji and Marko bought umbrellas whose price was about the same.

Result:

The study compares the effect of difficulty of the inference of the required comparison degree, determined by its plausibility, on the comparative and a construction for which no contextual analysis is available. (Plausibility was determined by a pre-study with 26 subjects.) Two sets of fillers investigating phenomena at the semantics/pragmatics-interface were inserted.

Discussion

Despite the difficulty of interpreting null results like these, this data needs to be discussed as it casts doubt on the little data reported in the literature and on an analysis which is crucially designed to explain these kinds of data.

Concluding Remarks

While further empirical research is needed, the acceptability ratings for Japanese comparatives with superficially clausal yori-constituent point towards the need for a fully compositional analysis of the Japanese comparative, which at the same time remains true to the substantial differences between English and Japanese.

Selected References