Cambridge Studies in Linguistics 127

The Grammar of Polarity

Pragmatics, Sensitivity, and the Logic of Scales

Michael Israel

CAMBRIDGE

THE GRAMMAR OF POLARITY

PRAGMATICS, SENSITIVITY, AND THE LOGIC OF SCALES

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常州大学山书馆
藏书章

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521792400

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First published 2011

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Israel, Michael, 1965–
The grammar of polarity : pragmatics, sensitivity, and the logic
of scales / Michael Israel.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-521-79240-0
1. Polarity (Linguistics) 2. Grammar, Comparative and general–Negatives.
3. Grammar, Comparative and general–Syntax. 4. Semantics. I. Title.
P299.N4.I87 2011
415–dc22 2010051866

ISBN 978-0-521-79240-0 Hardback

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CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN LINGUISTICS

General Editors: P. AUSTIN, J. BRESNAN, B. COMRIE, S. CRAIN, W. DRESSLER, C. J. EWEN, R. LASS, D. LIGHTFOOT, K. RICE, I. ROBERTS, S. ROMAINE, N. V. SMITH

The Grammar of Polarity

The more that I philosophize
The more and more I realize
That little things which I despise,
Like peanut shells and grains of sand,
Are very hard, hard to understand.

Delmer Israel, *To Harry F. Harlow*

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Acknowledgments

This book began with an epiphany in a stairwell by the sea near San Diego. The idea that two rhetorical tropes, exaggeration (emphasis) and understatement (attenuation), might explain the entire grammar of polarity sensitivity (NPIs and PPIs), seemed in an instant so neat, obvious, and simple, I was sure it must be obviously wrong or else already widely assumed, or perhaps both. Now I think the idea was both less obvious and more correct than I first suspected. That idea became the basis for a qualifying paper in 1994, a paper in *Linguistics and Philosophy* in 1996, and a dissertation in 1998, as well as a handful of shorter works (Israel 1997, 1999, 2001, 2006), and now, finally, for this book. Even now I wonder if I have done justice to this one little idea, but I know that what justice I have done, I could never have done alone. While I am entirely responsibile for the inadequacies which remain in this work, I am deeply in the debt of others for what virtues I have managed to include.

Probably I never could have had the idea at all were it not for the extraordinary scholars and teachers who inspired me on my way. It was Chuck Fillmore who first introduced me to polarity items and Eve Sweetser who first taught me to see the rhetoric in lexical semantics, and neither seems ever to have tired of encouraging me since. Adele Goldberg, Suzanne Kemmer, and George Lakoff, each in their different ways, taught me to seek the connections between grammar and meaning, and to appreciate the importance of doing so. Ron Langacker was always generous to me with his thoughts and patient and kind as he encouraged me to develop my own. I am deeply grateful for the thoughtful advice and meticulous readings he has given to me and this work over the years. Gilles Fauconnier, whose old ideas are at the heart of this work, was unstinting in his willingness to revisit old issues here and to help me as I worked through them again. And special thanks are due to Larry Horn, who has been generously reading and responding to drafts of this work almost from the beginning. His unflagging enthusiasm has sustained me throughout and his insights have greatly improved the final product.

Many others have read and commented on drafts of this work and contributed to its final form. I am thus grateful to Raùl Aranovich, Chris Barker, Christine Bartels, Jack Hoeksema, Bill Ladusaw, Haj Ross, Neil Smith, and Yuki Kuroda. Very special thanks are also due to Peter Mallios and Tess Wood for their generosity as readers and editors in the long last stages of this writing, and to my editorial team at Cambridge – Jacqueline French, Sarah Green, Tom O'Reilly, and Andrew Winnard – for all their hard work.

Many others have aided, abetted, encouraged, and inspired me in this work. Scholarship is nurtured in friendship – it is hard to say where one begins and the other ends – and I am grateful for the friendly feedback and lively conversations I have enjoyed with, among others, Michel Achard, Noah Baum, Patty Brooks, Bill Byrne, Claudia Brugman, Kathleen Carey, Linda Coleman, Bill Croft, Seana Coulson, Adrian Cussins, Michelle Cutrer, Rich Epstein, Jeanne Fahnestock, Anastasia Giannikidou, David Gil, Joe Grady, Peter Harder, Martin Haspelmath, Dennis Hilton, Paul Hirschbühler, Chris Johnson, Paul Kay, Henny Klein, Margaret Langdon, Pierre Larrivée, Chungmin Lee, Phil Lesourd, Jeff Lidz, Louise McNally, Laura Michaelis, Bill Morris, Karin Pizer, Hotze Rullmann, Scott Scwhenter, Ron Sheffer, Vera Tobin, Michael Tomasello, Elizabeth Traugott, Mark Turner, Karen van Hoek, Arie Verhagen, Gregory Ward, Paul Weinstein, Deirdre Wilson, and Ton van der Wouden.

Finally, I am grateful to my family and friends for their love and support over the years, and especially to Tess Wood and Zev Israel who have had to live with me, and sometimes without me, as I wrote this. Words cannot express my gratitude.

Abbreviations

ACC	Accusative
ADJ	Adjective
API	Affective polarity item
BNC	British National Corpus
CN	Common Noun
DAT	Dative
DE	Downward entailing
DEC	Declarative
DET	Determiner
DISJ	Disjunctive
ERG	Ergative
FC	Free choice
FP	Focus particle
FUT	Future
IC	Implication Constraint
IMPF	Imperfective
INDEF	Indefinite
INF	Infinitive
LF	Logical form
LM	Landmark
MOD	Modal
N	Noun
NEG	Negative
NOM	Nominal (i.e. N′, the complement of a determiner in an NP)
NP	Noun Phrase
NPI	Negative polarity item
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*
P	Preposition/particle
PFV	Perfective
PL	Plural

PPI	Positive polarity item
PRO	Pronoun
PS	Polarity sensitive
S	Finite clause
SG	Singular
SUBJ	Subjunctive
UE	Upward entailing
TR	Trajector
V	Verb
VP	Verb Phrase
WSJ	*Wall Street Journal*

Contents

	List of figures	*page* xii
	List of tables	xiii
	Acknowledgments	xiv
	List of abbreviations	xvi
1	**Trivium pursuits**	**1**
1.1	As above, so below	1
1.2	A quirk of grammar or a trick of thought?	2
1.3	The hypothesis: sensitivity as lexical pragmatics	7
1.4	Putting pragmatics in its place	10
1.5	Pragmatics in a usage-based grammar	14
2	**Ex nihilo: the grammar of polarity**	**20**
2.1	The simplicity of negation	20
2.2	The complexity of polarity	21
2.3	The phenomenon of polarity sensitivity	26
2.4	Basic mysteries: three problems of polarity sensitivity	30
2.5	Varieties of polarity sensitivity	37
2.6	The Scalar Model of polarity sensitivity	47
3	**Licensing and the logic of scalar models**	**48**
3.1	What is a polarity context?	48
3.2	Fauconnier's insight	49
3.3	The natural logic of scalar models	51
3.4	Affectivity as a mode of scalar construal	61
3.5	Syntactic constraints on scalar contruals	70
3.6	Polarity contexts are mental spaces	78
4	**Sensitivity as inherent scalar semantics**	**79**
4.1	Scalar operators	79
4.2	Two scalar properties	81

4.3	Four sorts of polarity items	85
4.4	Sensitivity and the square of oppositions	92
4.5	The conspiracy theory of polarity licensing	93
4.6	The anomaly of inverted polarity items	95
5	**The elements of sensitivity**	**104**
5.1	The Informativity Hypothesis	104
5.2	Quantitative semantics	105
5.3	The pragmatics of informativity	109
5.4	Assessing informativity	116
5.5	Rhetorical coherence in polarity contexts	120
5.6	Compositional sensitivities	121
6	**The scalar lexicon**	**126**
6.1	Paradigmatic predictions of the Scalar Model	126
6.2	Modal polarity items	127
6.3	Connective polarity items	142
6.4	Aspectual polarity items	151
6.5	The limits of diversity	161
7	**The family of English indefinite polarity items**	**163**
7.1	The many splendors of *any*	163
7.2	Indefinite family resemblances	164
7.3	Emphatic construals of indefinite *any*	168
7.4	The effects of phantom reference	180
7.5	Some uses of *some*	188
7.6	The limits of free choice	196
7.7	Indefinite conclusions	200
8	**Polarity and the architecture of grammar**	**202**
8.1	High stakes grammar	202
8.2	Terms of the debate	203
8.3	The syntactic approach	206
8.4	Semantic approaches	212
8.5	Toward a more pragmatic approach	227
9	**The pragmatics of polarity licensing**	**233**
9.1	Affectivity reconsidered	233
9.2	Scalar construal	235
9.3	Logical conditions are not sufficient	237
9.4	Logical conditions are not necessary	243

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9.5 Rhetorical coherence 250
9.6 Affectivity reclaimed 254

10 Visions and revisions 256

Appendix: A catalogue of English polarity items 258
Notes 267
References 270
General index 285
Person index 290

Figures

2.1	Haspelmath's semantic map of indefinite functions	*page* 33
3.1	A scalar model of puzzles	58
3.2	A two-dimensional scalar model	59
4.1	Four sorts of polarity items	90
4.2	Polarity items and the square of opposition	93
4.3	Canonical and inverted polarity items	97
6.1	A connective lattice	147
6.2	Durative *until*	158
6.3	Punctual *until*	159
8.1	The monotonicity hierarchy	219

Tables

1	English quantifiers and indefinite constructions	*page* 165
2	Distributions of three polarity items	175

1 *Trivium pursuits*

> But the truth is, they be not the highest instances that give the securest information, as may be well expressed in the tale so common of the philosopher that while he gazed upwards into the stars fell into the water; for if he had looked down he might have seen the stars in the water, but looking aloft he could not see the water in the stars. So it cometh often to pass that mean and small things discover great, better than great can discover the small. Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, Book II, 1.v. (1605)

1.1 As above, so below

Bacon's philosopher might be forgiven for looking too much upwards and not enough down. We look "up" not just to the stars and the sky, but to those we admire and to our highest ideals. We look "down," as often as not, on things we despise, things beneath us, which are low, mean, and base. Familiarity breeds contempt, and it is easy to forget that what lies beneath may also run deep.

Figuratively speaking, up is where it's at. *Up* is above, on top of, superior to, beyond; it is higher than, taller than, farther than, and more. It can be a location or a direction. It is defined within a larger frame, the vertical scale, which it shares with *down* – normally, the physical dimension parallel to an upright person standing erect on an even surface. The basic experience of bodily uprightness motivates the common metaphorical associations of being "up" with wakefulness, alertness, strength, reason, and virtue, and being "down" with sleep, weakness, folly, and vice. This massive alignment of evaluative metaphors along a vertical scale is not just some whim of imaginative fancy, nor is it unique to English. Indeed, it is a normal way for conceptual contents to be imaginatively structured across semantic domains – a reflection in grammar of the workings of the mind.

The basic opposition between 'up' and 'down,' and the many metaphorical oppositions it engenders, are themselves symptoms of a much more general tendency for human concepts to be structured in terms of contraries. All languages, it seems, have metaphors in which abstract notions like 'truth' and

'goodness' are fleshed out in terms of more basic bodily experiences, and one of the most basic experiences featured in such metaphors is the sense of opposition one may feel between contrary concepts like 'up' and 'down,' 'light' and 'dark,' or 'hot' and 'cold.' Contrariety itself is a quintessentially abstract concept, but it is immanent in our most down-to-earth experiences. The human mind thrives on the logic of contraries, and this is everywhere reflected in the structure of language, from the most basic phonemic oppositions and antonymic lexical pairings to the elementary rules for predicate affirmation and denial.

Keeping with Bacon's advice, this book looks mainly down at little things in order to glimpse therein the image of something great. The little things of concern here are matters of grammar – ordinary constructions of everyday talk and their attendant bits of form and meaning. The greater things to be discovered are the elements and principles of thought itself: the commonsense imaginative abilities which allow us, the speaking ape, to entertain concepts and to share them with one another.

1.2 A quirk of grammar or a trick of thought?

This book is concerned with a single, intricate, and easily overlooked grammatical phenomenon going by the awkward name of *polarity sensitivity*. Many, and perhaps all, human languages include a class of constructions which are somehow sensitive to the expression of polarity – forms whose acceptability in a sentence can depend on whether that sentence is grammatically negative or affirmative. Such *polarity items* arise in many semantic domains and come in many morphosyntactic flavors; but, since polarity itself is a binary relation, all polarity items divide into two basic classes: positive polarity items (PPIs), which are unacceptable in the scope of negation, and negative polarity items (NPIs), which are unacceptable in simple affirmative contexts.

Both NPIs and PPIs can be found side by side in semantic domains they share with semantically similar but grammatically insensitive (or *neutral*) constructions. The data in (1–4), for example, reveal four sets of sensitivity triplets – items with similar semantics but different sensitivities – taken from four basic semantic domains: (1) agentive effort, (2) epistemic possibility, (3) propositional conjunction, and (4) event frequency. For each domain, the examples in (i) illustrate neutral items, those in (ii) illustrate PPIs, and those in (iii) illustrate NPIs. The unacceptable sentences in (ii–iiib) give some impression of what happens when a polarity item occurs in the wrong sort of context.

(1) EFFORT: (i) *make an effort to* V, (ii) *take a stab at* V-*ing*, and (iii) *even bother to* V.

i) a. He *made an effort* to solve the puzzle.
   b. He didn't *make an effort* to solve the puzzle.
ii) a. He *took a stab* at solving the puzzle.
   b. *He didn't *take a stab* at solving the puzzle.
iii) a. *He *even bothered* to solve the puzzle.
   b. He didn't *even bother* to solve the puzzle.

(2) POSSIBILITY: (i) *be likely to* V, (ii) *could well* V, and (iii) *can possibly* V.

i) a. She *is likely to* win the race.
   b. She *is* not *likely to* win the race.
ii) a. She *could well* win the race.
   b. *She *could*n't *well* win the race.
iii) a. *She *can possibly* win the race.
   b. She *can*'t *possibly* win the race.

(3) CONJUNCTION: (i) *and*, (ii) *as well as*, and (iii) *let alone*.

i) a. Chris has read the Aeniad *and* the Georgics.
   b. Chris hasn't read the Aeniad *and* the Georgics.
ii) a. Sally has read the Aeniad *as well as* the Georgics.
   b. *Sally hasn't read the Aeniad *as well as* the Georgics.
iii) a. *Glynda has read the Aeniad, *let alone* the Georgics.
   b. Glynda hasn't read the Aeniad, *let alone* the Georgics.

(4) FREQUENCY: (i) *to* V X *a lot*, (ii) *be always* V-*ing* X, (iii) *to* V X *much*.

i) a. Ann listens to the Grateful Dead *a lot*.
   b. Ann doesn't listen to the Grateful Dead *a lot*.
ii) a. Hugh *is always* listen*ing* to the Grateful Dead.
   b. *Hugh *is*n't *always* listen*ing* to the Grateful Dead.
iii) a. *Jeff listens to the Grateful Dead *much*.
   b. Jeff doesn't listen to the Grateful Dead *much*.

The proper way to account for this little phenomenon has been a subject of long-standing and at times rather intense controversy in theoretical linguistics. These are not the sorts of facts one is likely to notice about a language, but they are remarkable nonetheless. One would expect that anything one could affirm, one could also deny, and that anything one could deny, one could also affirm. But polarity items are subject to special constraints, the violation of which results in unexpectedly unacceptable sentences. These constraints are more complicated than the examples here suggest since NPIs can be licensed, and PPIs blocked, in a variety of contexts beside clausal negation – among others, in questions, and in conditional (*if*) and comparative (*than*) clauses (see below §2.3.2). Still, the fundamentally striking observation here is that a simple switch in polarity can make an otherwise unobjectionable sentence

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