

Review for “Evaluative adjective sentences: A question-based analysis of projection”

Based on corpus and experimental data, this paper argues that the prejacent of EAS is not a lexical presupposition (as per most previous analyses) but rather its projectivity depends on what the authors call the Current Question (CQ). It is also argued that projection strength is inversely correlated with being at issue, relative to the CQ. Below, I list the major problems that I see, including questions about the main contribution, experimental design, data, the account, and the redundancy of the prejacent of EAS. I do not believe the paper is suitable for publication in its current form, so I recommend Revise & Resubmit.

1. Main contribution unclear

This paper argues -- based on corpus and experimental work -- that the prejacent of EAS need not always project. So I take it the empirical results are the strongest focus of the paper. Beyond that, though, I struggled to understand what the major contribution of the paper actually is. Why should we care about EAS, what do we learn from them? If the goal is to demonstrate that the projection properties of an implication may not be a matter of lexical semantics but rather may depend on the CQ, this is not new and has already been discussed in work on soft presupposition triggers/semifactives, as cited in the paper (e.g. Simons 2007). If, on the other hand, the idea is to study EA constructions per se, we need to see a comparison e.g. to similar constructions with expletive subjects (*It was stupid of him to dance on the table*), differences between various evaluative adjectives, Jackendoff's 1972 manner/subject-oriented adverb distinction (e.g. *John clumsily dropped his cup of coffee* could mean “The manner in which John dropped his cup of coffee was clumsy” or “It was clumsy of him to drop his cup of coffee”), etc. Either of those would be honorable goals, but in its current form the paper seems too narrowly construed as looking into a construction showing properties that we already knew other constructions have.

2. Experimental design potentially introduces noise

The procedure of Experiment 1 glosses over an important issue, one that threatens to put the conclusions into question. In this experiment participants were asked whether the speaker is certain the prejacent of the EAS holds, which however presupposes that participants find the presented discourses coherent. But if indeed non-projecting readings of NEAS without *enough* are available in only 20-30% of the cases, one would expect that a lot of participants did not find the discourses exemplifying non-projection meaningful to start with. What is the reaction of such participants expected to be? The main worry is that in a majority of cases a low certainty rating was selected only because the discourse as a whole was difficult to parse, thus introducing a tremendous amount of noise into the results. I thus wonder why the authors chose as a target group American English speakers, given that (if I understand correctly) these are exactly the type of speakers that do not allow for non-projecting readings of the prejacent in NEAS (without *enough*). As far as I can tell, Experiment 2 in Section 4 suffers from the same problem.

Relatedly, on p.2 the authors write: “of the 94 self-reported native speakers of American English that participated in the study, about 20-30% judged negated evaluative adjective sentences without *enough* to be acceptable under a non-projecting interpretation of the prejacent.” I wonder what the assumed noise threshold here is, and whether it is in line with the experimental

literature. For example, would non-projecting interpretations have also been considered available if the acceptability levels were, say, at 15-20%? And even if assumed to be real, why are non-projecting interpretations strongly dispreferred overall and so difficult to access? The question is where to draw the line between lexical presuppositions and derived inferences, and the authors offer no answer.

3. Main data issue

The two examples in (18) on p.12 seem to be the crucial data that the authors draw in support of the claim that the prejacent project to the extent that it is not at-issue. My worry is specific to the exchange in (18b), where A's question already presupposes the prejacent, due to the follow-up assertion that the prices would go down, so after hearing the question we conclude that Sam did buy a ticket even though she should probably have waited. Given that, in B's answer we cannot interpret the prejacent in the scope of negation as this would contradict the presupposition of the question. This example then only shows that -- when not at issue -- the prejacent *can* project, not that it *has to* project. I would try the same question with "price would have gone up", which would not presuppose the prejacent, or somehow manipulate the question so that it problematizes the generalization without presupposing the prejacent of the answer.

4. Account fuzzy and not general enough

I found the semantic account of EAS too sketchy, in fact to the point where I'm not even sure what predictions it makes. The main data that the authors attempt to cover is as follows: In NEAS, when the prejacent projects, the negation negates the evaluative inference (1). However, when the prejacent doesn't project, the evaluative inference turns into a counterfactual statement (2).

- (1) Feynman wasn't stupid to dance on the table.
→ Feynman danced on the table.
→ It wasn't stupid of him that he did.
- (2) I wasn't fortunate (enough) to live close to my parents.
→ I don't live close to my parents.
→ It would have been fortunate to live close to my parents.

The way I understand the account is as follows. EAS have two lexical entailments, the prejacent and the generalization (a conditional-like statement), as shown in (3). The evaluation is then derived from these two through, I assume, a Modus Ponens rule. When the generalization projects past negation, we get to feel its hypothetical nature; but when the prejacent project, the generalization is negated, from which we derive negation of the evaluation (I'm less sure as to why in this case the evaluation is tensed).

- (3) Feynman was stupid to dance on the table.
Prejacent: Feynman danced on the table.
Generalization: In dancing on the table, Feynman is/would be stupid.
→ *Evaluation*: Feynman was stupid to dance on the table.

I now comment on the many problems and/or unclarities I see with this account. The first concerns the nature of the generalization inference. Is this indeed some sort of a conditional statement, and if so is it indicative or counterfactual? If not a conditional, what kind of inference is it? We started with an EAS, and the authors went one step further to split its meaning into two lexical entailments. But one of the entailments, the generalization, is stated informally and we don't know how to analyze it or make sense of it. The authors should be much more specific about the generalization inference; at a minimum, they should provide some basic logical formula, so the account is actually able to generate specific predictions.

Second, I wonder how the semantic composition is supposed to work? How can negation selectively target the prejacent or the generalization if presumably both triggers are in its syntactic scope? Without providing at least a sketch, this remains a mystery. In addition, the authors themselves note that entailment-canceling operators other than negation produce generalization inferences. The proposed semantics should at least suggest how projection works with some randomly selected modal, otherwise this is not much of an account.

My last and most serious worry is that the shape of the projection explanation seems rather ad hoc and specific to semifactives/EAS, given that regular entailments whose triggers are placed under entailment-canceling operators do not seem to project under any circumstances. The simplest way to make the point is to take a conjunction under an entailment-canceling operator where only one of the conjuncts answers the CQ; in such cases no projection arises. Consider a minimally different answer in (18b), where the answer has a conjunction under a negative operator instead of a NEAS. The second conjunct in the scope of *doubt* does not project even though it is not at-issue. We get an infelicity or perhaps a rejection of A's assumption that Sam bought a ticket. This pattern is quite general, as (4) shows, so similar examples can be easily generated. It seems that the prejacent of NEAS project because it has the "propensity" to project, i.e. because it is conventionally marked as projective, although in some weak sense (similarly to the complements of *know* or *discover*). But then the prejacent of EAS cannot be a regular entailment, contrary to the authors' main premise of the analysis.

(18b') A: Was Sam smart to buy a ticket for the show the day the tickets went on sale? The price would have gone down after a few days!

B: I doubt Sam was smart and bought a ticket the day they went on sale.

(4) A: Did Maria pass the exam?
B: She probably did and called her dad.

5. Non-redundancy and at-issue content

There is some potential confusion about whether Non-redundancy singles out at-issue content. On p.17 the authors write: "We assume here that an utterance of an indicative sentence is informative if its at-issue content is not already entailed by the common ground of the interlocutors prior to the utterance of the sentence. No such requirement exists for not-at-issue content: some not-at-issue content, like presuppositions, may be entailed by the common ground

prior to utterance and other not-at-issue content, like conventional implicatures, may even be required to not be entailed, as argued in Potts 2005.” I don’t understand how conventional implicatures differ from asserted content, if both are required to *not* be entailed by the common ground, i.e. both are required to be informative. The Non-Redundancy Principle cited in (32) then cannot single out at-issue content and should include conventional implicatures as well. If content *c* is entailed by the common ground, then indeed *c* is not the at-issue content of the utterance. But the opposite is false: just because *c* is not the at-issue content of the utterance, it doesn’t mean that *c* is entailed by the common ground, as *c* could be a conventional implicature. The gradient version in (33) of this principle falls prey to the same criticism: conventional implicatures are highly likely non-redundant but very unlikely entailed by the common ground. But that doesn’t mean conventional implicatures fall under the at-issue content of the utterance. So redundancy is more specific than at-issueness: redundant content is highly likely not at-issue, but not at-issue content may or may not be redundant. As far as I can tell, this is not crucial to the analysis, but the authors give the impression that redundancy and not-at-issueness are correlated in both directions, which seems wrong.

More importantly to the main claims of the paper, notice that the non-redundancy constraint actually argues *against* the idea that prejacent of EAS is a regular entailment. The reason is that the prejacent of EAS allows for being redundant/not being informative while regular entailments do not (5)-(6). This again speaks against treating the prejacent as a regular entailment, in line with (18b') and (4) above. The prejacent rather seems to inherit the core discourse properties of (soft) presuppositions.

- (5) Feynman danced on the table and he was smart to do so.
- (6) # Feynman danced on the table and he danced on the table.

6. Structure of the paper

The paper is way too long and talky for my taste, which I feel results in a lack of clarity of what is achieved here, a point that goes back to the unclarity of its main contribution mentioned above. More specifically, the reader should not be made to wait until p.9 before they are told what the actual proposal is. I would try to sketch the proposal and the main claims in the opening section and make the paper more focused. We should probably see more details of the analysis, while the experimental results can be presented in a more concise form.