

Comments on:
“Evaluative adjective sentences: A question-based analysis of projection”

In my judgment, the main proposal of the paper, i.e., the question-based analysis of the projective pattern in “evaluative adjective sentences”, is incomplete.

The key idea, according to the authors, is that “projection is not derived from a lexical specification but rather derived from projective content being backgrounded or not-at-issue”.

For one thing, it is not clear whether this is meant to be a generic statement about projective content or rather about specific cases, such as “the projection of the prejacent of the EAS”. I think, and the authors’ reply and new manuscript suggest that they agree, that the first interpretation is rather hard to maintain. A key observation here is that in (1), either entailment #1 or #2 may project, and exactly one of them must project.

- (1) John was smart to buy a Prius.
entailment #1 (prejacent-proposition): John bought a Prius
entailment #2 (generalization): John’s buying a Prius would be smart.

Typically it is entailment #1 that projects, but (for some speakers at least) when the DQ is “Did John buy a Prius?”, it is entailment #2 that (is backgrounded and therefore) projects.

But the same does not happen in most other cases. Unlike (1), (2) cannot be a felicitous answer to “Did John buy a Prius?” – it cannot be interpreted in such a way that the prejacent is non-projective. In other words, the CI-status of the prejacent-proposition is hardwired to the construction.

- (2) It was smart of John to buy a Prius.
entailment #1 (= **CI**): John bought a Prius
entailment #2 (= **proffered content**): John’s buying a Prius would be smart.

Similarly, in (3B), it is entailment #1 that is “foregrounded”, providing information that helps solving the DQ. However it does not make entailment #2 (‘John’s car is a Prius’) projective; evidence is that (3B’) does not entail that John’s car is a Prius.

- (3) A: What color is John’s car?
B: It is a blue Prius.
entailment #1: John’s car is blue.
entailment #2: John’s car is a Prius.
B’: It may be a blue Prius.

So, the variable projective pattern of sentence (1) must have a root in the lexically (constructionally), i.e. conventionally, specified semantics of the EAS.

If the semantics of (2) is to be phrased as in (4), that of (1) will look like (5) (“variable

entailment” is a tentative label applied to a semantic component that can end up either being proffered or conventionally implicated).

- (4) It was smart of John to buy a Prius.

CI: ‘John bought a Prius’

Proffered Content: ‘John’s buying a Prius would be smart’

- (5) John was smart to buy a Prius.

Variable Entailment #1: ‘John bought a Prius’

Variable Entailment #2: ‘John’s buying a Prius would be smart’

(additional conditions) Exactly one of VE #1 or VE #2 is proffered and the other is conventionally implicated. There is a general (rather strong), conventionalized preference for the interpretation where VE #1 is a CI. The DQ constrains which interpretation the sentence receives.

The authors claim that it does not need to be lexically specified which semantic component of the AES is conventionally implicated (projective), and its variable projective pattern follows from the principle such that the material that is not directly relevant to the DQ projects. But for this to work, *we need to lexically or constructionally specify, beforehand, that the two components of the AES are variable entailments, rather than hardwired proffered content or CI.* (In (5), the DQ may play an important role but it only constitutes part of the additional conditions.) This is an *idiosyncratic* (and peculiar/intriguing) feature of the AES construction, absent in most if not all other constructions including the “It is *Adj.* of *N* to *VP*” construction, and which needs to be specified at the level of conventional meaning.

As such, it is not clear whether the “question-based account” is much less costly than a simple polysemy account along the lines of (6).

- (6) John was smart to buy a Prius.

Sense #1 (preferred/more common one)

CI: ‘John bought a Prius’

Proffered Content: ‘John’s buying a Prius would be smart’

Sense #2 (marked/marginal one)

CI: ‘John’s buying a Prius would be smart’

Proffered Content: ‘John bought a Prius’

As noted in my previous review comments (with the *mole* example), it is independently acknowledged fact that DQ’s, among other contextual factors, contribute much to sense disambiguation. In a way, (6) is more parsimonious than (5) in not involving direct reference to the DQ. (For that matter, it is questionable if it is desirable to include it in (5); the last sentence of (5) may as well be left out, assuming that the relevant polysemy is resolved in the same way as polysemy in general is.)

The authors should provide a semantic formulation of the EAS that is at least as detailed and systematic as (5), and explain what exactly we gain by adopting it instead of an alternative like (6). (I see that the question-based approach to projection has gained some positive reaction and popularity, but I for one remain skeptic about it; the criticism

I raised above probably will apply to the question-based approach in general.) The notion of Variable Entailment (or whatever one calls it) will be an interesting idea to pursue, while it is yet to be seen whether we should admit the existence of such a thing. I am highly doubtful that reference to the DQ is an essential ingredient in the proper account of the observed phenomena.