

Contradiction and Grammar: The Case of Weak Islands

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Abstract

This thesis is about weak islands. Weak islands are contexts that are transparent to some but not all operator-variable dependencies. For this reason, they are also sometimes called selective islands. Some paradigmatic cases of weak island violations include the ungrammatical examples involving manner and degree extraction in (1)a and (2)a, as opposed to the acceptable questions about individuals in (1)b and (2)b:

- (1) a. *How does John regret that he fixed the car?
b. Who does John regret that he invited to the party?
- (2) a. *How much milk haven't you spilled on your shirt?
b. Which girl haven't you introduced to Mary?

The main questions that an account of weak islands should address are the following:

- ◆ What contexts create weak islands and why?
- ◆ Which expressions are sensitive to weak islands and why?
- ◆ Why do weak islands sometimes improve?

This thesis develops a semantic account for weak islands, whose core idea can be summarized as follows. What sets apart the expressions that are sensitive to weak islands from the ones that are not is that in the case of the former the domain of quantification is such that its elements stand in a particular logical relationship with each other. The island creating contexts are those in which this property of the island-sensitive expressions leads to a problem, namely a contradiction. This contradiction might manifest itself in one of two forms: In some cases, the question will presuppose that a number of mutually incompatible alternatives is true at the same time, therefore it will necessarily lead to a presupposition failure in any context. In other cases, the presupposition that there be a complete answer will not be met in any context, because the domain of question alternatives will always contain at least two alternatives that have to—but cannot—be ruled out at the same time.

The present proposal therefore fits in the family of proposals (most importantly Szabolcsi and Zwarts (1993), Honcoop (1998), Rullmann (1995), Fox and Hackl (2005)) which argue that it is independently necessary principles of semantic composition that lead to the oddness of weak islands, rather than abstract syntactic locality constraints. As such, it provides a further piece of evidence against the view which holds that principles governing the well-formedness of sentences necessarily belong to the realm of syntax as we know it. However, when we will examine the nature of the contradiction that arises in the cases of weak island violations, we will observe that it is only a special type of

contradiction—identified by Gajewski (2002) as L-analytic—which leads to ungrammaticality: namely one that results from the logical constants of the sentence alone. In this sense the violation that can be observed might be argued to be “syntactic”: it can be read from the logical form of the sentences.

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