

Gibberish and Ungrammaticality

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1 Abstract

According to the logicality of language hypothesis (hereinafter, LLH), logical considerations are relevant for syntactic formation to the point that they are needed to explain some ungrammaticalities (Gajewski 2002; Gajewski 2009; Fox and Hackl 2006; Chierchia 2013; Chierchia 2021; Abrusán 2014; Del Pinal 2019; Del Pinal 2021). In other words, the syntactic unacceptability of some linguistic constructions is traced back to their logical status, suggesting that speakers judge a word-sequence as ungrammatical or ill-formed when it is always false or always true. The aim of this talk is to examine the recent literature that attempts to offer alternative explanations, questioning the very possibility of evaluating (as always false or always true) the word-sequences taken into consideration. In particular, we intend to explore a new possible explanation which makes reference to logical formation rather than logical content.

Chief evidence in support of LLH comes from word-sequences, such as (1)–(4), judged ungrammatical *qua* contradictory.

1. *Some students but John passed the exam (Von Stechow 1993)
2. *There are any cookies left (Chierchia 2013)
3. *How fast didn't you drive? (Fox and Hackl 2006)
4. *How did John regret that he behaved at the party? (Abrusán 2007; Abrusán 2014)

Other word-sequences, such as (5)–(7), are judged ungrammatical *qua* tautological.

5. *There is every fly in my soup (Barwise and Cooper 1981)
6. *Mary is taller than no student is (Gajewski 2008)
7. *At least zero students smoked (Haida and Trinh 2020)

However, in general, contradictions and tautologies are not ungrammatical.

8. It is raining and it is not raining
9. It is raining or it is not raining

Within LLH, the syntactic acceptability of (8)–(9) is not questioned. As a result, the asymmetry between the ungrammaticality of (1)–(7), due to their logical status, and the grammaticality of (8)–(9), notwithstanding their logical status, has to be accounted for. This is the so-called “analyticity puzzle”.

Recently, there have been attempts to explain the rejection of (1)–(7) typologically, i.e., in terms of a failure of composition (Abrusán, Asher, and Van de Cruys 2021). To that extent, (1)–(7) would be similar to examples of semantic anomaly, such as (10)–(11).

10. #Tigers are Zermelo-Fraenkel sets
11. #My toothbrush is pregnant

According to LLH, (1)–(7) are only superficially uninterpretable: when analysed, they receive an interpretation, which is that of being either contradictory or tautological. According to Abrusán, Asher, and Van de Cruys 2021, (1)–(7) are instead uninterpretable for, in building up their semantic representation, we face an insuperable semantic problem involving a context-invariant logical meaning. Semantic anomaly would be the result of a type presupposition that cannot be satisfied (cf., Asher 2011).

We would like to explore a further possibility which, similarly to Abrusán, Asher, and Van de Cruys 2021, explains the rejection of (1)–(7) not in terms of their logically trivial content but in terms of their formation. However, unlike Abrusán, Asher, and Van de Cruys 2021, we would remain at a purely logico-syntactic level: (1)–(7) are rejected because they are not logically well-formed, as when we say that the sequence of symbols (13) adequately represents (12) whilst (14) does not ($C = \text{cat}$, $L = \text{lovely}$).

12. All cats are lovely
13. $\forall x(Cx \supset Lx)$
14. $\forall x(Cx \wedge Lx)$

Even though the syntactic unacceptability of (1)–(7) were not to depend on their logical triviality, it has to be acknowledged that logical considerations are still relevant to explain their rejection. Therefore, LLH is not defeated, but at most redefined. Moreover, it is not semantic considerations in general that are relevant, but particular logical considerations. As a result, as far as (1)–(7) are concerned, it seems appropriate to speak specifically of a syntax-logic interface, rather than generically of a syntax-semantics interface.

References

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