

Strengths and weaknesses of strengthening

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It has always been a puzzle why certain elements may only appear in negative (i.e. anti-additive or downward entailing) contexts and others only in positive ones. One line of research aims at explaining these distributional requirements by alluding to strengthening. Strengthening utterances in which such polarity-sensitive items appear should restrict them to particular contexts.

At the same time, approaches within this line of research differ with respect to the nature of the strengthening operation (most notably the type of exhaustification operator that gives rise to this strengthening). Also, approaches differ in terms of the licensing of exhaustifiers/strengtheners. For instance, in some approaches exhaustifiers trigger trivial readings (which should lead to ungrammaticality), whereas in other approaches, exhaustifiers may not be included when they would give rise to triviality. For these reasons, no unified approach to polarity-sensitivity exists as of yet; in fact, certain approaches are fully incompatible with other ones.

In this talk, I will discuss the nature and grammatical effects of different strengthening operators as well as the notion of triviality itself, and provide an alternative (mostly to PPI licensing) that is internally consistent.