

Bare Nominals in Hostile Environments

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The title of this talk partially quotes the title of an interesting paper by Josep Quer on the licensing of negative polarity items in “hostile environments”, i.e. in non-modal contexts (Quer 2000). Quer’s research deals with the reasons why *any* may appear in contexts that are, at least at first sight, non-modal (as in *The President thanked any soldier who had fought in the Gulf War*). In a similar vein, I am interested in analyzing under what conditions bare nominals in Spanish can be used in contexts where they should be typically excluded (for instance, as arguments of Individual-Level predicates, as preverbal subjects or as indirect objects). More precisely, I intend to consider cases where the mismatch created by the insertion of a bare nominal inside a hostile environment is solved by some kind of covert interpretive operation that gives rise to an acceptable reading of the sentence. Of course, this is only possible under very restrictive conditions. I assume that the process by which we adjust the interpretation is essentially the same general process of mismatch resolution that we find in coercion phenomena (Francis & Michaelis eds. 2003, de Swart 2010). A Spanish sentence like 1), for instance, contains a mismatch between the bare noun in object position and the IL / stative nature of the verb, and the only acceptable reading, if any, is obtained by shifting the aspectual semantics of the verb towards some sort of ‘activity’ or ‘habit’ reading (this is obviously not a natural interpretation, and is usually impossible with IL predicates):

1) #Adora paellas. ‘(S)he adores paellas’

The crucial fact is that the mismatch cannot be solved by shifting to a generic reading of the bare plural. One may wonder, then, to what extent bare nouns can survive in hostile contexts, and how mismatches involving bare nouns are solved (in case they are). Trying to answer these questions can shed light on the nature of the constraints that control the distribution of bare nominals in a language like Spanish, in particular on the role of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors. One specific problem that has to be addressed is why bare nouns are perfectly natural in topic positions, usually associated with specific or referentially independent expressions. These are facts that should be taken into consideration when building a general theory of the resolution of linguistic mismatches.

References

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