

Viewpoint Aspect and Negation Paradox

This paper analyzes a rarely discussed scope paradox in negation in Japanese syntax and argues that the “two component theory” of aspect (Smith 1997) provides us with the correct view on syntax–semantics interface. It is shown that viewpoint aspect as well as Aktionsart is immune to negation.

1. The Paradox

The scope paradox stems from the mismatch between the scope of negation and the relative position of the negative morpheme in syntactic hierarchy. A group of verbs that includes *kuru* (‘come’), *iku* (‘go’) and *iru* (‘be/exist’) conjoined with verbs in the gerundive ‘-te’ form continuously escapes the scope of negation even though the negative morpheme appears in a structurally higher position as indicated by the order of morphemes. See (1).

- (1) Taro wa ohiru o tabete ko-**nak**-atta.

TOP lunch ACC eat come-NEG.-PAST

(Taro did not eat lunch. Lit. Taro came without having eaten lunch.)

Due to the strict head final nature of the language, the relative position of the negative morpheme *nai* indicates that it is above the series of verbs. The negative morpheme; however, does not negate the left adjacent verb *kuru* (‘come’) but selectively negates *taberu* (‘eat’) which takes the gerundive ‘-te’ form. Thus (1) does not mean that Taro ate lunch and did not come but rather it means that he was in the state of not having eaten lunch. This is unexpected since negation normally takes scope over constituents that are lower than where it is in structural hierarchy.

2. Analysis

Since the state of affairs in (1) defies the most salient compositionality of syntax–semantics interface, a new approach is needed. I propose that the group of verbs that host the negative morpheme in sentences like (1) mark “viewpoint” aspect (Smith 1997) that “makes visible all or part of a situation, without obscuring the conceptual properties of the situation type.” (Smith 1997; 126) I.e., they do not function as event denoting verbs but specify perfective (*kuru/iku*) or imperfective (*iru*) viewpoints. More specifically, in (1) the verb *kuru* (‘come’) indicates the continuation of the situation of Taro’s not having eaten lunch, not the action Taro took. Negation does not affect *kuru* (‘come’) because viewpoint aspect cannot be negated for negating viewpoint would contradict with the act of speech itself. In other words, descriptions of events necessarily involve viewpoint aspect, and without this inference no speech is possible.

The claim that the verb *kuru* in (1) does not denote an event can be verified in (2) below where it appears with a stative verb *shiru* (‘know’) and has no indication of change of location of the subject. See (2).

- (2) Watashi wa sono zizitu o zutto shira-nai-de kita.

I TOP that fact ACC till now know-NEG-grnd come.

(I did not know the fact until now.)

3. Conclusion

The scope of negation is not rigidly fixed by its structural position but could be relativized with respect to the interpretation of aspect. If correct, this approach gives a strong piece of supporting evidence for the “two component theory” of aspect in Smith (1997). It also shows that negation in natural language applies only to constituents and propositions, but not to aspect since the intervals that are inherent in verbs (Aktionsart) cannot be negated also as Smith points out. An emerging generalization is that aspect is immune to negation.

4. References

Smith, Carlota S. (1997). *The Parameter of Aspect*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, the Netherlands.