

A puzzle regarding the interpretation of objects

- (1) a. Every visitor saw some stains on the rug.
CAN MEAN: there's a set of stains that every visitor saw
CAN MEAN: every visitor saw a different group of stains
b. Every visitor saw stains on the rug.
CAN'T MEAN: there's a set of stains that every visitor saw
CAN MEAN: every visitor saw a different group of stains

A long-standing puzzle about the interpretation of objects in English is that (1a) is ambiguous, while (1b) isn't.

In the first of the meanings that (1a) has, *some stains* asserts the existence of a set of stains, and simultaneously asserts something about those stains: namely, that every visitor saw them. Here we say that *some stains* 'takes scope' over the other elements in the sentence. The second meaning that (1a) has, by contrast, asserts something about each visitor: that they saw some stains – crucially, a potentially different set for each visitor. (Here, *every visitor* scopes over *some stains*, and that the latter takes 'low scope'.)

The so-called 'bare noun' *stains* in (1b) likewise asserts the existence of stains, and while a low scopal interpretation is available for this term is available, it cannot be interpreted as taking scope over the other terms in the sentence.

This is a subtle judgment, so let me illustrate it another way. Consider the interaction between a bare noun and negation:

- (2) John didn't see stains on the rug.
CAN'T MEAN: there were particular stains that John didn't see
CAN MEAN: John didn't see any stains at all

Here again, the bare noun cannot be interpreted outside the scope of negation. (2) simply can't mean that there are particular stains that John didn't see, though he might've seen others.

Another set of sentences that show the same pattern are those that contain so-called 'implicit objects', like (3b). These objects are not spoken at all, but they are interpreted in a way analogous to bare nouns.

- (3) a. Every guest ate some Italian dish.
CAN MEAN: there is a particular Italian dish every guest ate
CAN MEAN: every visitor ate a potentially different Italian dish
b. Every guest ate.
CAN'T MEAN: there is a particular thing that every guest ate
CAN MEAN: every visitor ate a potentially different thing

Given these patterns, a natural hypothesis might be that the presence or absence of a determiner (like *some*) is what is responsible for the ability of the verb's object to take scope over other elements in the sentence. Indeed, in many languages English is closely related to, this generalization holds.

Today, I want to show some data from Eskimoan that leans against this way of thinking about the problem.

Incorporation in Eskimoan

'Incorporation' is sometimes used as term for a morphological pattern where a verb and its object are spoken as a single word. In these cases we say that the verb incorporates its object.

Eskimoan incorporation has the following signature:

- The set of incorporating verbs are disjoint from the set of non-incorporating verbs.
- Incorporating verbs are detransitivized (with respect to their non-incorporating counterparts)

- (4) *Yup'ik*
- a. *Nayiq ner-a-a.*
seal eat-IND.TR-3SGS>3SGO
'She is eating the seal.'
 - b. *Nayir-tur-tu-q.*
seal-eat-IND.INTR-3SGS
'She is eating seal / a seal.'

Our baseline (4a) is transitive, and the verb shows agreement in person and number with both its object (*nayiq*) and its (silent) subject. (4b) features a different verb (albeit one with roughly the same meaning), but that verb is intransitive, and is expressed as a suffix on the incorporated object.

Now, crucially, Eskimoan incorporation has interpretational consequences for the verb's object that are akin to bare or implicit objects in English: they cannot scope over other terms. I'll illustrate with negation.

- (5) *Kalaallit oqaasii (West Greenlandic)*
- Arnajaraq aalisaga-si-nngi-la-q.*
Arnajaraq fish-buy-NEG-IND.INTR-3SGS
CAN'T MEAN: 'There's fish that Arnajaraq didn't buy.'
CAN MEAN: 'It isn't the case that Arnajaraq bought fish.'

The interpretation of objects is signalled heterogenously

In Eskimoan we see a totally different morpho-syntactic signature associated with low object scope. Low scope doesn't hinge on the presence or absence of an overt determiner, as is the case in English and closely related languages – it hinges on whether the object incorporates. (Indeed, it isn't clear that Eskimoan languages have determiners at all; at least of the kind English does.)

Our interrim conclusion is that there is a many-to-one correspondence between kinds of morpho-syntactic configurations and the kind of meaning that is associated with low object scope.

But it isn't that case that a given morpho-syntactic structure uniquely determines a particular kind of interpretation, either. For instance, many non-Eskimoan languages have word-formation processes that superficially resemble incorporation, but do not have the semantic characteristics that Eskimoan incorporation does. One oft-cited difference between the two language types involves the kinds of terms that can introduce a new referent in the discourse.

- (6) a. *Nasgauq hunted a whale yesterday. It was huge.*
- b. *Nasgauq hunted whales yesterday. They were huge.*
- c. *Nasgauq whale-hunted. *It was huge. / *They were huge.*

In English, bare nominal objects (*whales*, above) – as well as other kinds of independent terms (*a whale*) – can introduce a new referent that the interlocutors can subsequently refer back to, with, say, a pronoun. The superficially incorporating verb *whale-hunt* can't.

But the referential potential that the term *whale-* in *whale-hunt* lacks is actually manifested by incorporated objects in Eskimoan, which (7a-b) illustrate.

- (7) *Kalaallit oqaasii (West Greenlandic)*
- a. *Suulut timmisartu-lior-po-q.*
Suulut airplane-make-IND.INTR-3SG
'Suulut made an airplane.'
 - b. *Suluusa-qar-po-q aquute-qar-lluni-lu.*
wing-have-IND.INTR-3SG rudder-have-INF.4SG-and
'It has wings and a rudder.'

This suggests a many-to-many relationship between the kinds of morpho-syntactic configurations made available cross-linguistically, on the one hand, and the kinds of meanings that be achieved with those configurations on the other.

The challenge that lies before us is understand why this kind of variation exists, and why that variation is not unbounded (e.g. terms like *some*, cross-linguistically, always allow for the associated noun to take scope over other terms.)