

## Splitting the atoms of subtractive modification

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One central task of linguistic theory is to determine the composition of sentences in natural language. In doing this, we often face a non-trivial choice between assigning a class of sentences a syntactically complex analysis (on which the lexical items involved may have simple meanings) and a syntactically simple one (on which the lexical items involved may have complex meanings). We then strive to identify syntactic/semantic arguments, in addition to conceptual ones, that could help us adjudicate between the competing analyses.

In this talk, we will investigate such a choice point in the analysis of sentences containing subtractive modifiers, in particular, sentences with connected exceptives and approximatives. These are exemplified in (1) and (2), respectively.

- (1) John read every book but 'War and Peace'.
- (2) John read almost every book.

Connected exceptives and approximatives have traditionally been associated with a simple syntax and complex semantics. Their semantics was supposed to, on the one hand, capture their contribution to the sentences in which they occur, and to, on the other hand, indirectly regulate their distribution (e.g., von Stechow 1993, Penka 2006, among many others).

We will provide a new type of argument for, instead, associating these expressions with a complex syntax and simple semantics. In particular, we will argue that their semantic contribution should be split into two structurally separable components that jointly determine their semantic contribution and their distribution. The argument relies on ellipsis as a diagnostic tool for structure and meaning.

We will show that our conclusions are compatible with some recent, arguably closely related approaches to these expressions (Gajewski 2013, Hirsch 2016 on connected exceptives, Spector 2014 on approximatives). Specifically, following these authors, we will submit that subtractive modifiers (i) have a simple subtractive meaning and (ii) induce alternatives that are used up by an exhaustivity operator higher in the structure.

### Selected references:

- von Stechow, Kai. 1993. Exceptive constructions. *Natural Language Semantics* 1(2). 123– 148.
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