

On the rescuing of *des*-indefinites

1. The Puzzle. Crosslinguistically, all positive indefinites are ‘anti-licensed’ by negation (1), i.e., cannot occur in its local scope (Horn 1989, 2001), and thus qualify as PPIs (positive polarity items). In some contexts, however, PPIs appearing in the immediate scope of negation can be ‘rescued’ (Szabolcsi (2004, 419); Spector (2014, 3)). Witness the examples in (2), illustrating a conditional *if*-clause (2a), the adversative predicate *surprise* (2b), and *only* (2c). Surprisingly, *some*-NPs in English (3) contrast with *des*-NPs in French (as well as with *some*-pronouns) in being severely degraded in rescuing contexts. Our solution to this puzzle relies on the hypothesis that in anti-licensing contexts sentential negation is interpreted as ‘internal’ (which amounts to negative existential quantification over events), whereas in rescuing contexts it is interpreted as ‘external’ (which amounts to propositional negation). The second assumption will be a somewhat new analysis of the difference between weak and strong indefinites.

2. Substantiating the puzzle: online-based acceptability judgment task. Given our current knowledge about rescuing, the behavior of *des*-indefinites is unsurprising and the acceptability judgments seem clear enough. The unrescuability of *some*-NPs on the other hand, is unexpected and has so far gone unnoticed, the literature giving only examples with *some*-pronouns, which are rescuable. The acceptability judgments shown in (3) have been questioned by reviewers of previous versions of the present work. We have therefore tested the acceptability contrast between *some*-pronouns (not illustrated here for lack of space) and *some*-NPs (3) in rescuing contexts by means of an online acceptability judgment task using *OnExp 1.2* (Onea & Syring 2011–). The experiment, completed by monolingual speakers of American English (n=96), assessed the acceptability of *some*-pronouns and *some*-NPs in four different rescuing contexts (*{don’t, surprised, only, if} + not*) and followed the Latin Square Method (Schütze & Sprouse 2013; 5 repetitions per condition; 50% filler items). On a 7-point Likert Scale, the results obtained show a mean acceptability contrast between (2) and (3) of +0.28 (*don’t*), +1.62 (*surprised*), +0.97 (*if*), and +0.88 (*only*) in favor of *some*-pronouns, the statistical significance of which is evinced by a mixed linear regression analysis ($p < 0.001$).

3. State of the art. According to current analyses (Szabolcsi 2004, Homer 2011, Nicolae 2012) rescuing amounts to polarity reversal. This view incorrectly predicts all PPIs to be rescuable (see (2) vs. (3)).

4. The proposal

4.1 Two LF positions for sentential negation and the rescuability of *des*-indefinites. We will assume that rescuing triggers such as *if*, *I regret* or *only* are to be analyzed as illocutionary markers activating the functional projections above TP, more precisely as sitting in the Spec of Krifka’s (2020) Comm(itment) head, which takes Judg(ment)P as a complement and NEG raises to Judge^o. The example in (2b) can thus be represented as in (4). The intuitive interpretation of [Judge^oNEG] involves ‘external negation’ (see de Clercq 2020 on external vs. internal negation), paraphrasable by ‘it’s not true p, where p = John invited some friends’. In this configuration p is positive, hence the absence of the PPI effect (*des*-indefinites are acceptable). Compare the anti-licensing contexts (see (1)). In the absence of rescuing triggers, NEG stays inside the TP (‘inner negation’), the existential is in its scope (see (5)), hence the PPI-effect.

4.3 On the unrescuability of *some*-NPs. In order to explain the contrast between *some*-NPs and *des*-indefinites ((3) vs. (2)), we will propose that *des*-indefinites (and *some*-pronouns) are weak indefinites that can translate as existential Qs that together with the existential over the event yields a polyadic existential quantifier $\exists e, x$. *Some*-NPs, on the other hand, are headed by genuine quantificational Det’s; hence, the LF in (4) is unavailable to them. A *some* that takes a full-NP complement can only translate as a quantificational determiner, as in (6), where P

and Q respectively correspond to the nominal and verbal predicates (more precisely, Q is the lambda-abstract over the position of [DP some NP]). Given (6), *some* will scope above an internal NEG (i.e., a NEG that takes vP as a complement), which in this case acts as a predicate modifier (it turns the positive predicate $\lambda x.$ John called(x) into the negative predicate $\lambda x.$ John didn't call(x)). Hence, the LF of (3b) would be (7), where the *some*-NP scopes above (an internal) NEG, whereas *des amis* in (2b), represented as in (4), scopes below (an external) NEG. The unacceptability of (3b) is out of the scope of the present proposal, which is only concerned with the unrescuability of *some*-NPs. A possible explanation would be that in certain syntactic configurations, *inter alia* rescuing contexts, indefinites that scope above NEG need to be marked as partitives. We will design further experiments in order to confirm our tentative suggestion that examples of the type in (8a–c) built with partitives are more acceptable than our initial examples in (3a–c).

Conclusions. *Des*-indefinites can participate in polyadic existential quantification over events interpreted in the scope of a NEG that is interpreted as ‘external negation’. This accounts for their ‘rescuing’, i.e., for the fact that they allow narrow scope w.r.t to an ‘external’ NEG. The analysis extends to *some* pronouns, but not to *some*-NPs, where *some* functions as a unary Quantificational Det, and as such it can only be interpreted as scoping above an ‘internal’ NEG.

- (1) *Jean n’a pas invité des amis.
- (2) a. Si nous n’appelons pas des amis, nous sommes perdus.
b. Je suis surprise que Jean n’ait pas invité des amis.
c. Seulement Jean n’a pas invité des amis.
- (3) a. ??If we don’t call some friends, we are doomed.
b. ??I am surprised that John didn’t call some friends.
c. ??Only John didn’t call some friends.
- (4) [_{Spec,Comm}I am surpr] [_{Comm}^o[_{JudgP} [_{Judge}^oNEG] [_{TP}^tNEG [_{vP}^o $\exists e, x$ (invite(e) ^ Agent(e)=John) Theme(e)=x ^ friends(x)]]]]
- (5) [_{TP}NEG [_{vP}^o $\exists e, x$ (invite(e) ^ Agent(e)=John) ^ Theme(e)=x]]
- (6) [[some]] = $\lambda P \lambda Q. P \cap Q \neq \emptyset$
- (7) [_{Spec,Com}I am surpr] [_{Com}^o [_{Com}^o [_{JudgP} Judg^o [_{TP}^o $\exists x$ (boys(x) ^ John didn’t call(x)]]]]]
- (8) a. If we don’t call some of the boys, we are doomed.
b. I am surprised that John didn’t call some of the boys.
c. Only John didn’t call some of boys.

Selected References

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