

Indefinites and negative concord in Maltese: Towards a dynamic account

This paper examines the properties of indefinite pronouns and negative concord in Maltese, building on work by Haspelmath and Caruana (1996), and offers an account of these data from the perspective of Dynamic Syntax (DS; Kempson et al. 2001, Cann et al. 2005), a grammar formalism which models real-time language comprehension in terms of the goal-directed growth of semantic trees.

The Maltese indefinite system has several features of theoretical interest. First, it has a series of indefinites (the ‘*xi*-series’) that are licensed with a non-specific interpretation in nonveridical contexts such as interrogatives and conditionals (1), but not the ‘core’ nonveridical context – negation (2). In negative clauses, only so-called ‘n-word’ indefinites (the ‘*ebda*-series’) are licensed, i.e. words that can appear alone in well-formed fragments with a negative interpretation (3a), but which combine with one another or with predicate negation to give only one negation in interpretation (3b). Interestingly, however, at least one Maltese n-word – *qatt* ‘(n)ever’ – is also licensed in nonveridical contexts other than negation, where it is no longer associated with a negative interpretation (4). This is problematic both for theories of negative concord that see n-words as inherently negative (e.g. Haegeman and Zanuttini 1991, De Swart and Sag 2002), and for those in which n-words bear an uninterpretable syntactic negative feature requiring the presence of a negative operator to value it (e.g. Zeijlstra 2004).

The contention of this paper is that DS’s focus on the incremental online construction of interpretations, driven by lexical entries whose proposition-building properties are inherently context-sensitive, offers a natural way of capturing the behaviour of the Maltese indefinite system. Thus we can say that, e.g., *xejn* ‘n.thing’ is not, in itself, ‘inherently negative’, but merely encodes a constraint that the propositional node dominating the structure it contributes to must be decorated with a negation operator. If this does not already hold at the point in the parse where *xejn* is encountered, then its lexical entry instructs the parser to perform this decoration. If, however, another negative element has already performed this decoration (as would be the case in (3b)), then the parser is instructed to take no further action at that node. Similarly with *qatt* ‘(n)ever’, except here there is sensitivity to whether the propositional node is decorated with any nonveridical operator (including but not limited to negation). Indefinites of the *xi*-series, by contrast, have lexical entries instructing the parser to abort in the case that the propositional node has been decorated with a negation operator by the time the indefinite is parsed.

- (1) *Rajt xi haġa?*
 see.prf.2sg anything
 ‘Did you see anything?’
- (2) **It-tifla ma rat xi haġa.*
 the-girl neg see.prf.3fsg anything
 Intended: ‘The girl didn’t see anything.’
- (3) (a) *X’rat? Xejn!*
 what-see.prf.3fsg n.thing
 ‘What did she see?’ ‘Nothing!’
- (b) *It-tifla ma rat xejn.*
 the-girl neg see.prf.3fsg nothing
 ‘The girl didn’t see anything.’
- (4) *Qatt mort Londra? Le, qatt.*
 (n)ever go.prf.2s London no (n)ever.
 ‘Have you ever been to London?’ ‘No, never.’