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Scalar Model and Maximizers/Minimizers

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Maximizers/minimizers refer to linguistic items denoting extreme (maximal or minimal) values on a scale, such as "a king's ransom" (maximizer) and "a red cent" (minimizer) in English. To account for the meaning and use of these items, Israel (2001, 2011) borrowed ideas from the Scalar Model Theory (SMT), a theory on scalar reasoning and scalar operators (such as the linguistic items "even" and "at least") developed by Fillmore *et al* (1988) and Kay (1990), and applied it to maximizers/minimizers. A prominent feature of Israel's theory is that it distinguished two types of scale: canonical and inverted, and classified 4 types of emphatic maximizers/minimizers and 2 types of attenuating maximizers/minimizers. Note that Israel's classification is asymmetric. Moreover, the distinction between canonical and inverted scales is only applicable to one-dimensional scales, which are adequate for the study on maximizers/minimizers, but not so for scalar operators, because the scales associated with sentences with scalar operators are often multi-dimensional.

The objective of this study is to develop an enhanced SMT based on the notion of informativeness that can provide a uniform treatment for scalar operators and maximizers/minimizers. For example, a constraint in the use of "even" and emphatic maximizers/minimizers can be represented by the following conditions:

$$\text{even: } I(TP) \text{ is extremely high, though not necessarily the highest} \quad (1)$$
$$\text{emphatic maximizers/minimizers: } I(TP) \text{ is maximal} \quad (2)$$

where TP ("text proposition") represents the sentence containing "even" or the emphatic maximizer/minimizer and $I(TP)$ represents a measure of the informativeness of TP. The similarity between (1) and (2) enables us to account for the fact that "even" can often co-occur with emphatic maximizers/minimizers as in "He won't spend even a red cent on your wedding". Similarly, one can also account for the close relation between "at least" and attenuating maximizers/minimizers as pointed out by Israel.

Moreover, there is no longer the need to distinguish between canonical and inverted scales, because the notion of informativeness can take care of both types of scale in a uniform way. The enhanced SMT will also remove the asymmetry in Israel's classification of maximizers/minimizers by proposing two new types of attenuating maximizers/minimizers that have not been studied by Israel. These will be exemplified by Chinese idioms with extreme numerals, such as "bu wei wu dou mi

zhe yao", and I will show how these idioms can be used for attenuation. The study on these maximizers/minimizers will deepen our understanding of the rhetoric of attenuation.

References

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