

Lexical Positive Polarity Items in Romanian

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1. Aim and Claim: This paper examines the lexicalization patterns of Positive Polarity Items (PPIs) in Romanian and claims that the distribution of polarity items can be explained in terms of their lexical semantics, that polarity sensitivity is a sensitivity to scalar reasoning, and that the inferences relevant to polarity licensing do not depend on semantic entailment alone, but on a general ability for scalar reasoning. This paper shows that Romanian exhibits quite a large number of PPIs, which qualify as scalar operators denoting small and large quantities that have an emphatic or attenuating effect (thus, intensifying or attenuating the rhetorical force of an utterance).

2. The Data

(1) a. Sînt olecută tristă, e ultima zi și a început
Am-1st.p,sg little sad is-3rd.p,sg. last day and have-3rd.p,sg start-
past.part

să plouă la Viena.

SA rain in Vienna.

‘I am a little sad, it is the last day and it started raining in Vienna.’

b. Bucureștiul are o sumedenie de muzee foarte bune.
Bucharest-the have-3rd.p,sg. a multitude of museum-pl. very good.

‘Bucharest has tons/ scads of interesting museums.’

‘Olecuta’ (a little) in (1a) denotes a minimal scalar degree and qualifies as an attenuating PPI and ‘sumedenie’ (tons) in (1b) denotes a maximal scalar degree and qualifies as an emphatic PPI. Polarity items, like *olecuta* (a little) and *sumedenie* (tons) are conventionally specified for two semantic features, quantitative value and informative value, and the interaction of these two features in a single lexical form is what creates the effect of polarity sensitivity.

3. Analysis: This paper analyzes Polarity Sensitive Items (PSIs) as scalar operators which must be interpreted with respect to an appropriately structured scalar model: they are forms whose lexical semantic-pragmatic content makes them sensitive to scalar inferences (cf. Israel, 1996). Polarity items tend to be associated with certain kinds of pragmatic affect, frequently serving either to intensify or to attenuate the rhetorical force of an utterance. Quantitative (Q) value reflects the fact that most PSIs encode a scalar semantics. The high and low Q-value of polarity items is understood relative to the contextual norms associated with a given dimension. Informative (I) value is a pragmatic feature, a property of sentences used in context. The paper shows that the 60 PPIs (16 attenuating PPIs and 44 emphatic PPIs) that were tested, no matter how varied they are (degree adverbs, QPs, pseudo-partitive constructions, PPs, AdvPs and verbal idioms), license the same type of inferences: PPIs are scale preserving, allowing inferences from high values to low values.

(2) a. Are o gramada de rabdare cu acești copii. →
Has-3rd.p,sg. a pile/ heap of patience with these children.

‘He/ She has lots/ tons of patience in dealing with these children.’

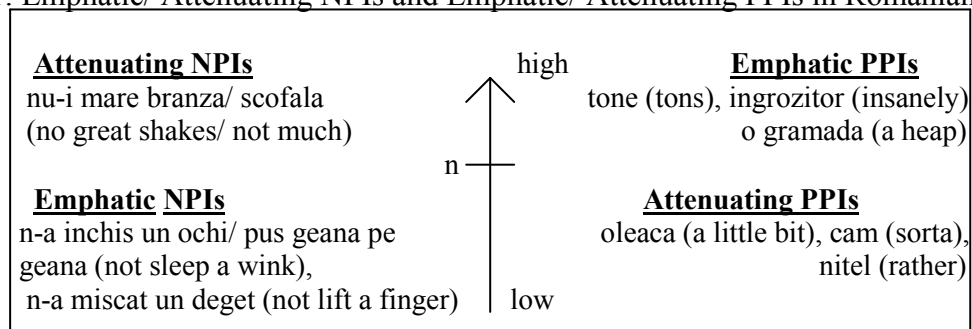
→ Are oleaca de/ nitica rabdare cu acești copii.
Has-3rd.p,sg. little DE/ little patience with these children.

‘He/ She has a little bit of patience in dealing with these children.’

The present paper will also provide experimental data which show that speakers of Romanian as L1, confirmed the hypothesis that PPIs are scale preserving and that the items and expressions we analyzed in this paper qualify as PPIs.

4. Conclusions: PPIs are scalar operators, specified for two scalar semantic features, quantitative value and informative value, whose lexical semantic-pragmatic content make them sensitive to scalar inferences.

Fig. 1: Emphatic/ Attenuating NPIs and Emphatic/ Attenuating PPIs in Romanian



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