

Semantic Viruses and Multiple Superlatives

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We don't immediately perceive the interpretation of sentences with multiple superlatives, such as (1) and (2), as particularly complicated:

- (1) Floyd bought the nicest computer at the lowest price.
- (2) Floyd bought the nicest, cheapest computer.

Their most natural reading (or in any case, the most natural interpretation of (1)) involves a claim of having maximized price and quality. It's not clear that standard accounts of superlatives (such as Szabolcsi 1986, Heim 1999, Sharvit & Stateva 2002) suffice to deliver quite this reading in a way that does it justice and distinguishes it from those of similar sentences we perceive as distinct. The other striking property of (1-2) is that this reading seems brittle and unsteady—revealingly so, I will argue.

This talk will consider the possibility that these facts are an instance of a broader phenomenon: semantic viruses. Sobin (1994, 1997) and Lasnik & Sobin (2000) proposed that certain syntactic processes should be regarded as what they called grammatical viruses, rules that operate outside the grammar. They suggested that these rules are generally complicated, consciously acquired, and awkwardly half-internalized. If the syntax can be infected in this way, it stands to reason that the semantics might be as well. I'll argue that it may be. The potential viruses I'll examine are the word *respectively*, factor/ratio phrases, and certain mathematical expressions such as *zero* (Bylinina & Nouwen to appear).

It's actually harder to make the case that multiple superlatives have this status, because they are after all composed of entirely down-to-earth ingredients. Nevertheless, they are independently puzzling and provide a challenging proving ground for the idea.

References

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