

Selectional restrictions in Mlabri ingestion verbs

Overview Some predicates in natural language come with lexically specified semantic restrictions, e.g., predicates such as *amputate* require the object to be a limb and *drink* requires the object to be liquid. It is commonly assumed that these restrictions can be accounted for as presuppositions. This talk introduces a new class of selectional restrictions that are not amenable to either a presuppositional or at-issue truth-conditional treatment by investigating a class of ‘ingestion’ verbs in Mlabri, an Austro-Asiatic language spoken by 100-435 native speakers in scattered settlements across northern provinces in Thailand and bordering areas in Laos. Previously documented by Itou (2014), we provide an updated picture of Mlabri ‘ingestion’ verbs based on original fieldwork, utilizing truth-value judgments and other tasks to elicit additional data from two native speakers in the Ban Huai Yuak Mlabri village in Nan, Thailand. We propose that one of the ingestion verbs, ʔʔʔ , acts as a generic consumption verb, which is blocked when a more restricted verb can be used. We then argue that the selectional restrictions in these verbs are not presuppositional, but rather relevance-based inferences, based on the interpretation of ‘ingestion’ verbs in existentially negated sentences.

Data Mlabri exhibits five distinct verbs of ‘ingestion’ which are restricted by the type of food being consumed evident by the infelicity that occurs when a predicate is used with an incompatible food-type, as shown below:

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| <p>(1) a. ʔʔʔ: yam, rice, bread, grains,
snacks, meals, ‘non-conventional food’
b. boŋ: fish, meat
c. pɔy: fruit, vegetables</p> | <p>d. sot: soup
e. wɔk: liquids</p> |
| <p>(2) $\text{mɔy ʔʔʔ \{e-bri / \#cin\}}$
3.SG ingest yam-forest / meat
‘He/she eats wild-yam/#meat.’</p> | <p>(3) $\text{mɔy boŋ \{\#e-bri / cin\}}$
3.SG ingest yam-forest / meat
‘He/she eats #wild-yam/meat.’</p> |

Following previous work by Itou (2014) and our own fieldwork data (suppressed here for space reasons), we argue that ʔʔʔ lacks any s-selections, and is thus *semantically* compatible with any kind of ingestible object. The other verbs have conventionalized s-selectional restrictions. It is by competition with these other verbs that ʔʔʔ also ends up being restricted, in that the ‘more specific’ verb must be used when its s-selectional requirements are met. An obvious way to formalize this picture would be to treat the s-selectional requirements of the non- ʔʔʔ verbs as presuppositions. Doing so, the restrictions seen with ʔʔʔ would result from Maximize Presupposition (Heim 1991). The following data, however, show the presuppositional analysis to be untenable. Consider the following sentences:

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| <p>(4) kris kalay ʔʔʔ jidɔh-idɔh
Chris has.not ʔʔʔ anything
‘Chris hasn’t ingested anything.’</p> | <p>(5) kris kalay boŋ jidɔh-idɔh
Chris has.not boŋ anything
‘Chris hasn’t ingested anything.’</p> |
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Under the presuppositional analysis, the sentence in (4) is expected to entail that Chris has not ingested anything, since $\text{?}\text{r?}$ lacks (by hypothesis) any presuppositions. This prediction is confirmed. Surprisingly, however, the sentence in (5), in which the verb boŋ ‘eat (meat/fish)’ is used, seems to have exactly the same truth conditions. That is, the sentence does not mean ‘Chris did not eat meat/fish’, as expected under the presuppositional analysis, but means instead that Chris did not ingest anything at all. This is unexpected, given that the s-selectional restriction to meat/fish associated with boŋ is encoded as a presupposition. A similar pattern is shown by sentences with exclusive particles. Contrary to expectations, use of selective boŋ in (7) entails that the only thing Yuma ingested was fish, rather than entailing the weaker condition that the only meat/fish Yuma ingested was fish, thus seeming to have the same truth conditions as non-selective $\text{?}\text{r?}$ in (6).

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| <p>(6) yuma $\text{?}\text{r?}$ du e
 yuma $\text{?}\text{r?}$ only yam
 ‘Yuma only ingested yams.’</p> | <p>(7) yuma boŋ du ga
 yuma boŋ only fish
 ‘Yuma only ingested fish.’</p> |
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Analysis As seen, a presuppositional treatment of s-selection in Mlabri ingestion verbs makes incorrect predictions in sentences involving quantification and negation. We instead propose the following trivalent truth conditions:

$$(8) \quad \llbracket \text{boŋ} \rrbracket^w = \lambda x_e. \lambda y_e. \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } y \text{ ate } x \text{ and } x \text{ is meat, fish etc. in } w \\ 0 & \text{if } y \text{ did not eat } y \text{ in } w \\ \# & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Here, $\#$ represents not presupposition failure, but ‘conversational relevance’ that gives rise to pragmatic felicity conditions relative to a Question under Discussion (QuD). In the case of (5), this means that the sentence is true just in case Chris didn’t ingest anything, and the utterance is only felicitous if the current QuD presumes that had Chris eaten anything, it would have been meat. Details of the mechanics are given in the full talk.

$$(9) \quad \llbracket (5) \rrbracket^w = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if Chris ate nothing in } w \\ 0 & \text{if Chris ate fish, meat etc. in } w \\ \# & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Implications Our data and analysis has theoretical implications for lexical semantics and selectional restrictions, which has previously been researched in the domain of clause embedding predicates (Grimshaw 1978; Uegaki & Sudo 2019; Theiler et al. 2019 a.o.) and the domain restrictions of classifiers (McCready 2009; 2010). In a broader context, our work highlights the fact that selectional restrictions cannot be treated uniformly in terms of presupposition and proposes a relevance-based analysis that should be applicable beyond Mlabri ‘ingestion’ predicates. Moreover, our work contributes to our understanding and documentation of a severely understudied Austro-Asiatic language in Mainland South-East Asia.

References

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