Comparison under uncertainty
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Recent research on epistemic modals and evidentials made headway in analyzing assertions with various provisos on speaker’s certainty (Davis, Potts, and Speas 2008, Barker 2009, von Fintel and Gillies 2010, Lassiter 2016). I use these advances to account for rarely discussed clausal comparatives that use temporal adverbs, such as Russian skoree ‘sooner’, to compare degrees of personal probabilities assigned by the speaker or attitude holder.

In (1), the speaker compares two propositions \( p = ‘Ivan is at work’ \) and \( q = ‘Ivan is at home’ \) and asserts that she is more willing to believe \( p \) than \( q \).

(1) Ivan skoree na rabote čem doma.
‘The speaker is more willing to believe that Ivan is at work than that Ivan is at home.’

Following Herburger and Rubinstein’s (2014) analysis of German eher, I propose that (a) skoree consists of an epistemic modal skor- and a comparative operator -ee, see the LF in (2-a), and (b) skor- has an ‘indirectness presupposition’ requiring both \( p \) and \( q \) not to be directly settled by the speaker’s knowledge. The ‘indirectness presupposition’ is modelled after von Fintel and Gillies (2010), see (2-b), where \( K \) (kernel) is a set of propositions directly known by the speaker. Evidence for (2-b) comes from the fact that skoree is infelicitous with the 1st person who is normally aware of his location, see (3-a). Additional evidence comes from the fact the skoree cannot be embedded under factive verbs like regret, see (3-b). (The attitude holder in embedding cases is the subject of the embedding clause, rather than the speaker.)

(2) a. [[-ee [ than skor- Ivan is at home ] skor- Ivan is at work ]
   b. skor-(p) is undefined if \( \exists r \in K : r \subseteq p \lor p \cap r = \emptyset \)
   (i.e. if \( K \) has some proposition that entails \( p \) or contradicts \( p \))

(3) a. #Ja skoree na rabote čem doma.
   ‘The speaker is more willing to believe that the speaker is at work than that the speaker is at home.’
   b. #Maša sožaleet čto Ivan skoree na rabote čem doma.
   ‘Masha regrets that Ivan skoree at work than home
   ‘#Masha regrets that she is more willing to believe that Ivan is at work than that Ivan is at home.’

However, I depart from Herburger and Rubinstein (2014) in analyzing the contribution of skor- in terms of degrees of probability (rather than degrees of belief) and adding the condition that the probability of \( p \) (or \( q \)) needs to exceed a contextually set threshold, see (4):

(4) \([skor-\lambda](p) = \lambda.p\lambda.d. \text{Probability}_a(p) \geq d \land d \geq \theta \) (if defined)

where \( a \) = the speaker or attitude holder, \( \theta \) = contextually determined threshold

The condition that \( d \) exceeds the contextually determined threshold is supported by the observation that skoree creates a Moore’s paradox when used with an epistemic necessity modal, see (5-a). According to new evidence in Lassiter (2016), must \( p \) (if defined) is true iff \( \text{Probability}(p) \geq \theta \). For skoree to create the contradiction, the speaker’s probability must exceed the threshold. A weaker might does not have this effect, see (5-b), where \( \text{Probability}(p) \) is true iff \( \text{Probability}(p) \geq (1 - \theta) \) (Lassiter 2016).

(5) a. #Ivan dolžno byt’ doma, no on skoree na rabote čem doma.
   ‘The speaker deducts that Ivan must be at home and the speaker is more willing to believe that Ivan is at work than that Ivan is at home.’
b. Ivan možet byt’ doma, no on skoree na rabote čem doma.
   Ivan might be home but he SKOREE at work than home
   ‘The speaker thinks that Ivan might be at home and the speaker is more willing to believe that Ivan is at work than that Ivan is at home.’

The full derivation of (1) based on the LF in (2-a) is shown in (6):

(6) a. \([-ee]^{a,c} = \lambda P_{dt}\lambda Q_{dt}. \max(P) > \max(Q)\)

b. \([skor – Ivan is at work/home]^{a,c} = \lambda d. \Probability_a([Ivan is at work/home]) \geq d & d \geq \theta \) (if defined)

c. \([-ee]^{a,c}([skor – Ivan is at home]^{a,c})([skor – Ivan is at work]^{a,c}) = \max(\lambda d. \Probability_a([Ivan is at work]) \geq d & d \geq \theta \) > \max(\lambda d. \Probability_a([Ivan is at home]) \geq d & d \geq \theta \) (if defined)

The analysis of skoree proposed here has an interesting consequence: ‘indecisiveness’ is associated with probability degrees that exceed the contextually set threshold. For instance, if a person cannot decide whether she is for or against something, the probability of either is rather high. Consider a frequent use of skoree in ‘polar’ comparatives such as in (7):

(7) a. Ja skoree za čem protiv.
   I (am) SKOREE for than against

b. \max(\lambda d. \Probability_a(‘for’) \geq d & d \geq \theta \) > \max(\lambda d. \Probability_a(‘against’) \geq d & d \geq \theta \) (if defined)

This analysis is one further step towards understanding the nature of comparison at the clausal level. Although I looked at a subset of clausal comparatives, this investigation is revealing. It has been claimed that clausal comparatives of this kind can be assimilated to metalinguistic comparatives, such as Your problems are more financial than legal, and derived from a desire predicate, e.g. Giannakidou and Stavrou 2007, Giannakidou and Yoon 2011 for Greek and Korean. Russian data shows that this is not the case and cross-linguistic differences must be taken into the picture.

References.