Polarity subjunctive: its meaning and development

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In Peninsular Spanish semi-factive verbs, communication verbs as well as doxastic predicates (among others) select indicative mood in the embedded clause. However, the appearance of matrix negation with these same predicates licenses the use subjunctive morphology, a phenomenon known as Polarity Subjunctive (Quer 1998), as well as indicative morphology, see (1).

(1) **No** creía que Pedro se **hubiese/había** ido de viaje
     Not believed that Peter clt had.subj/ind gone of trip
     They (sg.) didn't know that Peter had gone on a trip.

Although the phenomenon occurs with a wide range of predicates, current theoretical works do not predict differences across them (see Portner (2018) for an overview of current approaches). This talk, however, shows, using experimental as well corpus data, that there are important differences both in terms of their semantic contribution and diachronic development. Firstly, only semi-factive predicates trigger a clear-cut semantic difference: the use of indicative triggers speaker commitment to the embedded proposition p on the part of the speaker, but subjunctive does not trigger such presupposition. With non-factive predicates the picture is more complicated and there does not seem to be one clear semantic contrast, which raises interesting question about the availability of semantically vacuous alternations in natural language. Secondly, while semi-factive predicates have been diachronically more stable, non-factive predicates have been unstable, the use of subjunctive becoming more frequent.

In order to account for these differences, the works explores the possibility of combining the Schlenker (2005)'s Referential theory of mood morphology with the observation that subjunctive is the equivalent of genitive case at the clausal level (Kagan 2012). The proposal in a nutshell states that there are two licensing mechanisms of subjunctive mood: one syntactic and another semantic, and that these have been diachronically competing. The proposed analysis not only accounts better for the semantic differences across predicates and their diachronic development, but also is capable of explaining two other correlated effects: the first person effect and the effect of clause type.

References:

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