Non-conservative readings with percentage quantifiers in Slavic and German

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Recently, it has been observed that certain percentage quantifier (%Q) constructions give rise to conservative (C) (1-a) as well as non-conservative readings (NC) (1-b) (Ahn & Sauerland 2015, 2017 [A&S]), challenging the Conservativity Universal (Barwise & Cooper 1981, Keenan & Stavi 1986). While A&S propose an analysis, under which the NC construal comes out as conservative in more abstract terms, they note that in languages like English it is not available with "subjects" (2-a), whereas in languages like German it is (2-b). However, they do not have an account for this "subject-object asymmetry" (SOA).

(1) a. MIT hired 30% of the women last year.   C
     b. MIT hired 30% women$_F$ last year. (~ 30% of the people that MIT hired were women.)   NC

(2) a. *30% women work here.
     b. 30%   Frauen$_F$ arbeiten hier.   '30% of the people that work here are women.'
         30%.NOM women.NOM work   here

Across the languages A&S discuss, the NC reading can correlate with the use of bare nominals (as opposed to definites) and case agreement with the %Q (as opposed to genitive marking). A&S's analysis crucially builds on the claim that NC %Qs are focus-sensitive (focus accent is indicated with subscript F above): The %Q in (1-b)/(2-b) forms a constituent with a contextually determined element providing a set of focus alternatives and the NC reading arises as a result of an obligatory movement of that constituent to take clausal scope.

In this talk, we show that both C and NC readings also exist in languages that do not display a morphosyntactic distinction between the corresponding %Q constructions, namely Slavic languages without articles. Based on data from corpora and cross-linguistic questionnaires, we make the novel empirical generalization that word order plays a crucial role in distinguishing between the two readings, irrespective of whether a language additionally marks the difference between the two by the use of definite vs. bare nominals (German, Bulgarian and Macedonian) or not (the other Slavic languages), and that this also accounts for the SOA: Languages with a rigid word order (e.g. English) do not allow for NC subjects, because subjects necessarily have to appear sentence-initially, whereas languages with 'free' word order (German, Slavic) do, because subjects can stay within the VP. We argue against previous accounts that ascribe a crucial role to focus for the NC reading to arise, in taking focus to merely be derivative from the requirement of NC %Qs to appear low, paired with a general rule for sentential stress placement.