

Concessivity: Admissible and inadmissible background assumption

Ekkehard König

Freie Universität Berlin & University of Freiburg

koenig@zedat.fu-berlin.de

Concessive sentences and constructions are fundamentally assertions of two facts against the background assumption of their general incompatibility. One of the basic questions in their analysis therefore concerns the form that these background assumption take: that of (i) conditionals (if p, q), of (ii) proportional correlations (the more p, the more q), that of a general statement (if p, one does not q) or of a more subjective specific judgement (If p, I never q). Judgements on what goes together as cause and effect, as reason and action in the world is based on social and personal experience and is not available to children, who because of late acquisition do not use concessive constructions at all or highly personal ways.

Another open question concerns the precise status of the non-truth-conditional contribution made by such a background assumption: presupposition, implicature, non-at-issue meaning, etc.? Interestingly enough, a concessive statement does still make sense and can be accepted as true if the background assumption is not accepted by the addressee. In contrast to concessive markers, adversative ones (Engl. but; Fr. mais; German aber, etc.) typically express contrasts between the values of the relevant conjoined clauses as arguments in favor or against a certain conclusion (Anscombe & Ducrot 1977).

Building on my own work (1985, 1988) and related studies of others, my paper will discuss such questions in relation to formal properties of concessive constructions found in a variety of languages.

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