

**“No News Is Good News”:  
The Quantifier/SOA Ambiguity in English**

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**Some sentences with quantifiers do not have standard generalized-quantifier semantics.  
Instead, the semantics seems to refer to a state of affairs (SOA).**

*No news is good news.*

Standard GQ semantics:

**no'**(**news'**)(**good-news'**), i.e.  $[[news]] \cap [[is\ good\ news]] = \emptyset$   
“There is no such thing as good news.”

Intended meaning:

“The situation in which there is no news is itself good news.”

*Too many cooks spoil the broth.*

Standard GQ semantics:

**too-many'**(**cook'**)(**spoil-broth'**), i.e.  
 $|[[cook]] \cap [[spoil\ the\ broth]]| > N$ , where  $N$  = maximum allowable number of broth-spoiling cooks.  
“There are too many broth-spoiling cooks.”

Intended meaning:

“When there are too many cooks, that spoils the broth.”

*More money means more problems.*

Standard GQ semantics:

**more'**(**money'**)( $\lambda y.$ **more'**(**problem'**)( $\lambda x.$ **mean'**( $x$ )( $y$ )))  
“The intersection of things that are money and things that cause a number of problems greater than some contextually determined number  $N1$  is greater some contextually determined number  $N2$ .”

Intended meaning:

“The more money there is, the more problems exist.”

## Where do SOA readings occur?

Only...

- in syntactic NP positions where a state of affairs makes semantic sense. Especially common as subjects and objects of the verb *mean*.
- with weak/existential/indefinite NPs (Milsark 1977, Keenan 1987, 1996; Keenan and Stavi 1986); not with determiners such as *every, each, most, a*. Notice that most SOA meanings can be paraphrased with an existential sentence: “The SOA in which there is/are ...”

Often...

- with comparative determiners: *more, less, fewer*.
- with negative quantifiers: *no+NP, nothing, no one*
- with determiners of value judgment: *too many, too few, too much*.

## Easiest SOA readings to identify: negatives

**No news** is good news.

Half a loaf is better than **no loaf**.

Quant. reading: There is no loaf that is better than half a loaf.

SOA reading: Having half a loaf is better than having no loaf.

Oatmeal is better than **nothing**.

Quant. reading: There is nothing that oatmeal is better than. It's the worst.

SOA reading: Having oatmeal is better than having nothing. It's not the worst.

**No one** would be better for your department than this candidate.

Quant. reading: There is no candidate better than this one.

SOA reading: Having no one would be better than having this candidate.

As your governor, I promise **no new taxes**.

Quant. reading: There might be new taxes, but I don't promise any.

SOA reading: I promise that there will be no new taxes.

Such SOA NPs involving *no* also have other identifying properties.

- They don't license NPIs: *\*No new taxes will help our economy at all*.
- Multiple negation is not perceived as non-standard: *No new taxes doesn't mean no fee increases*.

## Other easy SOA readings to identify

Those with a plural subject that licenses singular verb agreement: *Fewer animals means less carbon*.

- Multiple negation is not perceived as non-standard: *No new taxes doesn't mean no fee increases*.

Subjects and direct objects of the verb *mean*. If the subject or direct object begins with some of the comparative determiners, the sentence is highly likely to have the SOA reading. If both do, it's almost a certainty.

*More money means more problems; Fewer animals mean(s) less carbon..*

## Hardest SOA readings to identify: bare plural, mass nouns

I'm against **higher taxes**.

Quant. reading: I oppose higher taxes.

SOA reading: I oppose the existence of higher taxes.

Is there even an ambiguity here? The SOA meanings are so similar to those with actual quantified NPs that it makes more sense to include them. And it requires more stipulation to exclude them.

## Quantifier-to-SOA semantic shift

SOA function:  $\lambda\phi.\text{SOA}_{(te)}(\phi) =_{\text{def}}$  the state of affairs in which  $\phi$  true

Quantifier-to-SOA shifting mechanism:  $\lambda\mathcal{P}_{(ett)}.\text{SOA}(\mathcal{P}(\text{exist}'))$

No news is good news.

*no news*:  $\text{no}'(\text{news}') \Rightarrow \lambda\mathcal{P}.\text{SOA}(\mathcal{P}(\text{exist}'))(\text{no}'(\text{news}')) = \text{SOA}(\text{no}'(\text{news}')(\text{exist}'))$

*No news is good news*:  $(\text{good-news}')(\text{SOA}(\text{no}'(\text{news}')(\text{exist}')))$

Too many cooks spoil the broth.

*too many cooks*:  $\text{too-many}'(\text{cook}') \Rightarrow$

$\lambda\mathcal{P}.\text{SOA}(\mathcal{P}(\text{exist}'))(\text{too-many}'(\text{cook}')) = \text{SOA}(\text{too-many}'(\text{cook}')(\text{exist}'))$

*Too many cooks spoil the broth*:  $\text{spoil-broth}'(\text{SOA}(\text{too-many}'(\text{cook}')(\text{exist}')))$

More money means more problems.

*more money*:  $\text{more}'(\text{money}') \Rightarrow$

$\lambda\mathcal{P}.\text{SOA}(\mathcal{P}(\text{exist}'))(\text{more}'(\text{money}')) = \text{SOA}(\text{more}'(\text{money}')(\text{exist}'))$

*more problems*:  $\text{more}'(\text{problem}') \Rightarrow$

$\lambda\mathcal{P}.\text{SOA}(\mathcal{P}(\text{exist}'))(\text{more}'(\text{problem}')) = \text{SOA}(\text{more}'(\text{problem}')(\text{exist}'))$

*More money means more problems*:

$\text{mean}'(\text{SOA}(\text{more}'(\text{problem}')(\text{exist}')))(\text{SOA}(\text{more}'(\text{money}')(\text{exist}')))$

## *All work and no play*

*All* is not an existential, so we would not predict it to have an SOA reading. So what to make of *All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy*?

Standard GQ semantics:

$[[\text{work}]] \subset [[\text{makes Jack a dull boy}]] \wedge [[\text{play}]] \cap [[\text{makes Jack a dull boy}]] = \emptyset$

“Every kind of work dullens Jack; no kind of play does.”

Intended meaning:

“When everything is work and nothing is play, that makes Jack a dull boy.”

A uniform SOA semantics is possible for *all* and other quantifiers, with this lexical rule:

Lexical rule for GQ determiners:  $\lambda D_{(et)(et)}\lambda Q.SOA(D(\mathbf{exist}')(Q))$

*all work*: SOA (**all(exist')(work')**)

*no play*: SOA (**no(exist')(play')**)

However, lexical GQs such as *nothing*, *no one* are left unaccounted for, as are existential bare plural NPs. In light of the non-productivity of *all* in SOA semantics for NPs, I leave *All work and no play...* as a separately learned idiom.

## Further directions

- How can the quantifier-to-SOA shift be formally restricted to weak/indefinite NPs?
- Do other languages exhibit quantifier/SOA ambiguity, or disambiguate the meanings overtly in their syntax or morphology?
- How do SOA NPs fit into the bigger picture with “amount” semantics, small clauses, and collective predication?

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## Attestations

(Many are out there; the main problem is having time to write down every single one of them you find.)

- (1) NPs as object of preposition
  - a. That's a good solution for too many papers—throw 'em away! (Michael Dordick, 26 Sept. 2001)
  - b. After a morning of gridlock and spotty train service Monday, street and subway traffic was better yesterday, smoothed somewhat by fewer commuters, due in part to the Jewish new year holiday. (Derrill Holly and Jim Fitzgerald, "One week later, Pentagon reduces recovery efforts," Associated Press, 19 Sept. 2001)
  - c. The administration hopes to better educate people about what they can take onto airplanes by Christmas, when air travel will be complicated by new gate-check procedures and many more checked bags screened for explosives. (John Fuddy, "Some still packin' at check-in," *Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch*, 4 Dec. 2002, p. A2)
  - d. First, inflating the economy that is suffering from too much debt, by prescribing more debt, is not the answer to preventing a double-dip recession. (Keith Sarbaugh, letter to the editor, *Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch*, Sept. 11, 2010)
  - e. Get used to more. (car advertisement, Oct. 18, 2010) They're not saying get used to more stuff than you did in the past, or more than someone else is used to, but to the SOA in which there is more (stuff, value).
  - f. One suspects that the disconnect is the product of too many cooks in the story-development kitchen... (review of *Tangled* by Nick Chordas, *Columbus Dispatch*, Nov. 29, 2010, p d2)
  - g. ...die prematurely due to the effects of too much salt (heard on TV, Nov. 24, 2010)
- (2) NPs as object of verb
  - a. But the prosecutor neglected to specify any "aggravated"-type weapon, and an appeals court ruled that only "aggravated" crimes justify no parole. (Chuck Shepherd, "News of the Weird," date unknown)
  - b. Bush backs more benefits for jobless. (*Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch*, 15 Dec. 2002)
- (3) NPs as subject
  - a. Fewer flights could raise ticket prices, already expected to go up because of additional security precautions against terrorism, industry analysts said. (Chris Fontaine, "Late-night flights should be stopped, court tells London," Associated Press, 3 Oct. 2001)
  - b. Less sugar makes school days pretty sweet! (cereal advertisement, 2010)
  - c. No action would mean that tax rates will jump next year and return to pre-2001 and -2003 rates. (heard on radio, Nov. 12, 2010)
- (4) NPs as subject and object of verb (all with *mean*): Singular subj & verb
  - a. And no polish means no passengers. (*The Gallant Old Engine, and other Thomas Stories*, VHS)
  - b. Another poof means another poop. (Douglas Whitman, age 4, 22 Nov. 2002)
  - c. Less recovery time means more family time. (Billboard for hospital, Aug. 2010)
- (5) NPs as subject and object of verb (all with *mean*): Plural subj & verb
  - a. Fewer companies bidding mean less competition and higher costs. (Editorial, *Columbus Dispatch*, Aug. 19, 2010)
  - b. "More jobs mean less violence," Retik noted. (Nicholas D. Kristof, "9/11 Unleashed their Better Angels," Sept. 11, 2010)
- (6) NPs as subject and object of verb (all with *mean*): Disagree subj & verb
  - a. More teeth means more screams. (*Monsters, Inc.* DVD, 2002, special feature: monster trading cards commentary)
  - b. No passengers means no polish. (*The Gallant Old Engine, and other Thomas Stories*, VHS)
  - c. More pipes into the Crypt means more business in the long run. (Neal Stephenson, *Cryptonomicon*, 1999, p. 308)