
Locative *have* and context modulation

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Maria M. Piñango
Yale University
maria.pinango@yale.edu

Ashwini Deo
Ohio State University
deo.13@osu.edu

Muye Zhang
Yale University
muye.zhang@yale.edu

It's been claimed that in the absence of a prepositional phrase, *have* sentences are said to be either ungrammatical ((1a) vs. (1b)) or receive a non-locative interpretation ((1c) vs. (1d)).

- (1)
- a. *The tree has a nest.
 - b. [The tree]_i has a nest in it_i. (locative)
 - c. The mall has a children's park (only non-loc. reading possible)
 - d. [The mall]_i has a children's park near it_i. (locative)

We test the **hypothesis** that *have* lexically captures lexico-conceptual space that ranges from pure incidental proximity to inalienable possession. Accordingly, *have* sentences are semantically compatible with locative and non-locative (possessive) interpretations. The alleged unacceptability of sentences like (1a) arises not from grammatical constraints but from (a) the competing salience of the possessive meaning of *have*, and (b) the absence of supportive context for the possible (though not frequent) locative interpretation. If this is correct then we expect speaker responses to PP-less locative *have* sentences to be when supported by (local) linguistic locative context. An **acceptability study** (N=100) bears this prediction out: when presented with PP-less *have* sentences like (1a) with a prior location-invoking context, subjects rate them significantly higher (within the acceptable range) than when presented with the same sentence in isolation or in possession-supporting contexts. We interpret the upward shift in acceptability ratings in the presence of the right contextual conditions to signal an increase in certainty (decrease in surprisal) on part of the hearer. Thus, in the semantic domain, reduction in surprisal can be understood as the increase in the speaker's confidence (measurable in acceptability ratings) that communication is succeeding.