

The Pragmatics of “until”

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In English, the word “until” optionally carries connotations of a change in state for the subject of the sentence after the subordinate clause is fulfilled. For example:

- 1) Be good until I get home.
- 2) Hold that pose until I snap the picture.

In 1, it is not intended by the speaker that the unnamed children stop being good once she returns, whereas in 2, it seems acceptable to break the pose immediately after the picture is taken.

In this study, I investigate possible strategies for parsing sentences with “until”. Stevenson (2003) suggests a well-trained parser could assign a probability to each sense of the word by using collocates. Less ambitious than using a computer, I believe we may approach descriptive adequacy by pitting the two interpretations against each other and first evaluating the possibility or impossibility of one of them, and if there is no resolution, weighing the practicality of the subject’s continued or discontinued state, and if still necessary, the preferability of each state.

I use the New American Standard Bible as my corpus. I chose this source for three reasons. First, the Bible is readily searchable online, second, the NASB contains the most instances of “until” and “till” of the different translations I searched, and third, the current NASB was published in 1995, thus reflecting current usages. I include “till” in my analysis as it is simply a clipping of “until”. Of course, I exclude “till” in the farming sense.

Stevenson, M. (2003). *Word Sense Disambiguation: The Case for Combinations of Knowledge*

Sources. CSLI Publications: Leland Stanford Junior University.