Three ways of not being lucky

Lauri Karttunen
Stanford University

Being lucky has two facets: *likelihood* and *benefit*. Apart from presupposing or entailing that Linda got into Stanford, a sentence like

    (1) Linda was lucky to get to Stanford.

implies that

    (i) the odds of being admitted were not in her favor and that

    (ii) Linda will or did benefit from being at Stanford

The **first** way of *NP not being lucky to VP* involves challenges to (i) and (ii), the unlikelihood or beneficiality of the event. (2a) contradicts (i), (2b) disclaims (ii).

    (2) (a) Linda was not 'lucky' to get to Stanford. She was one of the best candidates.

        (b) Linda was not lucky to get to Stanford. It was not the right place for her.

What is not denied in (2) is that Linda did in fact get to Stanford. Examples like (3) show that there are states that are too beneficial to be characterized merely as *lucky*:

    (3) I was not lucky to be alive. I was blessed.

Here, the negative version, *NP was not lucky to VP*, is metalinguistic, it says that the word *lucky* is not correct as an evaluation of what is presumed to be the case for the protagonist. Most linguistic articles that mention the *NP was lucky to VP* construction assume that it is **factive**, presupposing the truth of the clause *NP VPed*.

The **second** way of *NP not being lucky to VP* is illustrated in (4).

    (4) (a) I was not lucky to find any data on this topic.

        (b) We were not lucky to book a sea view room, but still we absolutely enjoyed our 3-night stay there .

        (c) I still have not been lucky to manage to get my orchids to flower again.

These examples come from the web with a context that clearly indicates that the author intends to communicate that the embedded clause is false. This *NP was not lucky to VP* construction is **implicative**, it entails *NP did not VP*.

For many speakers of American English the examples in (4) sound ungrammatical. For them these examples would be acceptable in the intended sense only if *not lucky* was replaced by *not lucky enough*. But the robust presence of such examples on the web suggests that the existence of a dialect where the *NP is lucky to VP* construction is implicative rather than factive.

Moreover, the split between a factive and implicative interpretation in this construction is not unique to *lucky*. It holds for a whole class of so-called **evaluative** adjectives such as *clever*, *brave*, *fortunate*, *lucky*, *stupid*, etc. (Karttunen et al. 2014)

The **third** way of not being lucky is illustrated in (5).

    (5) You will be lucky to break even.

Among the evaluative adjectives *lucky* and *fortunate* are unique in that they can be used to make negative, pessimistic predictions. Most likely the speaker of (5) intends to convey that probably you are not going to break even. This is an **idiomatic** sense of *lucky*. (Karttunen 2013).

In an experimental study (Karttunen et al. 2014) demonstrate that in the simple present or

past tense the construction *NP is not lucky to VP* is predominantly factive for most people but implicative for some. We also demonstrate that the interpretations are sensitive to preconceptions about how suitable the adjective is as a characterization of the event described by the infinitival clause. This **consonant/dissonant** effect can be seen in the in (6) and (7), all picked from the US, UK, and Canadian web sites.

    (6) (a) Obviously she is not lucky to go through a divorce.
        (b) Women with mixed or black skin are not lucky to have to cheat with foundation to look good.
        (c) You are right he is lucky to get the property but he is not lucky to have to pay for it when he hasn't got a tenancy agreement, keys, or even seen the property.

The examples in (6) are clearly meant to have a factive interpretation, e.g. the protagonist of (6a) is going through the divorce. The examples in (7) have an implicative interpretation. The infinitival clause is presented as false. The girl in (7a) did not get away alive.

    (7) (a) Only a week before Urbina was due in court to face the charges for his alleged rape of a waitress, police believe that he claimed another victim. This time, the girl was not lucky to get away alive.
        (b) I was so fucking excited to go there, eat pizza, play games and get tickets to win awesome prizes, but I was not lucky to experience any of that.
        (c) But all are not lucky to get a well shaped and chiseled body because of inactive lifestyle.

The factive *NP is not lucky to VP* examples in (6) are **dissonant**, it is not lucky for the protagonist that the infinitival clause is true. The implicative examples in (7) are **consonant**. If the protagonist of (7a) had got away, she would have been lucky.

The idiomatic 'probably not' sense of *lucky* illustrated in (5) is subject to structural constraints, e.g. future orientation, affirmative only. There are also non-structural factors even subtler than the consonance/dissonance effect. For example, the majority of our Amazon Mechanical Turk subjects interpret (8a) in the idiomatic way as saying that probably you will not avoid a jail sentence.

    (8) (a) You will be lucky to avoid a jail sentence.
        (b) At least you will be lucky to avoid a jail sentence.

But (8b) is interpreted by most of our informants in the literal way, as a positive prediction, because of the effect of *at least* that signals a silver lining on an approaching dark cloud.

Looking back at my own early work and the work of many others in the late 1960s and 1970s, one now sees that the field was too quick to assign semantic labels such as 'factive', 'semi-factive', 'implicative', etc. as if they were unequivocal like part-of-speech categories, 'verb', 'noun', 'adjective', etc. There are adjectives that are truly factive by all the relevant criteria, namely the emotive ones: *surprised/outraged/annoyed*, but the evaluative adjectives like *lucky*, *stupid*, *brave* etc. are different. To get a handle these matters one needs more data than one can dream up by oneself, more data than one can find on the web, experimental data to calibrate the effects of factors that might have an effect.

References

Lauri Karttunen 2013: http://www.stanford.edu/~laurik/publications/Lucky.pdf
Lauri Karttunen, Stanley Peters, Cleo Condoravdi and Annie Zaenen 2014: (submission to EISS-10) "The Chameleon-like Nature of Evaluative Adjectives."