Negative Polarity Items

Readings: Portner, Ch. 6.3

1. What are Negative Polarity Items?

- Negative Polarity Items (NPIs) are expressions that don’t like to appear in positive sentences, are can be used only in certain environments, negative environments in particular.

1. Mary doesn’t want any cookies.
   b. *Mary wants any cookies.

2. a. No-one has ever seen the dark side of the Moon.
   b. *Someone has ever seen the dark side of the Moon.

3. a. She didn’t like that at all.
   b. *She liked that at all.

4. a. He didn’t lift a finger to help me.
   b. *He lifted a finger to help me.

5. a. John never dares go in there.
   b. *John (sometimes/always) dares go in there.

6. a. I can’t help thinking of it.
   b. *I can help thinking of it.

7. a. Susan hasn’t been to Mongolia in years.
   b. *Susan has been to Mongolia in years.

8. a. We can’t see jackshit.
   b. *We can see jackshit.

- NPI-hood can vary by dialect.

9. The gas has been really expensive anymore.

10. Michelle smoked at all.

- More generally, while most languages seem to have NPIs, and they often fall in the same semantic domains, there is usually no direct correspondence between languages.

11. a. De kritiek was niet mals. [Dutch]
    The criticism was not soft
    There was fierce criticism.
   b. *De kritiek was mals.
    The criticism was soft
    int. The criticism was soft.

- NPI indefinites like “anyone” are among the most common, but many languages don’t have them.
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LING-UA 4 Introduction to Semantics
Lecture 24, Negative Polarity Items

(12) a. Khoeʔe ta ke mūu tama. [Khoekhoe]
    person I DECL see not
    I didn’t see anyone.

    b. Khoeʔe ta ke mūu.
    person I DECL see
    I saw someone.

- A fun one: DP reduplication in Gâ (Korsah 2016\(^1\))

(13) a. Kwei na wolo ko.
    Kwei saw book a
    Kwei saw a book.

    b. Kwei é-ná-áá wolo ko wolo ko.
    Kwei SBJ-see-not book a book a
    Kwei did not see any book.

    c. *Kwei na wolo ko wolo ko.
    Kwei saw book a book a

2. NPI licensing environments

- An NPI licensing environment is an environment in which NPIs can survive.
- Negation and negative quantifiers are licensing environments, but there are others.

(14) **Inherently negative predicates and adverbs**
    a. I doubt Mary wants any cookies.
    b. He refused to lift a finger to help me.
    c. It’s unlikely that anyone has ever seen the dark side of the Moon.

(15) **Questions**
    a. Does Mary want any cookies?
    b. Who has ever seen the dark side of the Moon?
    c. Kimse-yi gör-dii-n mū? [Turkish]
       anyone-acc see-past-2sg MI
       Have you seen anyone?

(16) **Antecedents of conditionals**
    a. If John had dared go in there, he would’ve realized.
    b. If he had lifted a finger to help me, our friendship would’ve survived.
    c. Si tu as vu quel que ce soit, dis-le moi. [French]
       if you have seen what that it is tell-it to me
       If you saw anyone, tell me.

(17) **Only**
    a. Only John dares go in there.
    b. Only Mary has ever been to the dark side of the Moon.

(18) **Restrictor of every**
   a. Everyone who has ever seen the dark side of the Moon is wise.
   b. *Someone who has ever seen the dark side of the Moon is wise.

(19) **Exactly n**
   a. Exactly two people have ever seen the Loch Ness monster.
   b. *Two people have ever seen the Loch Ness monster.

- These licensing environments are more or less the same across languages.
- Can you think of other ones?

3. **Strong and weak NPIs**

- Not all NPIs survive in all licensing environments.

(20) *in years*
   a. *Everyone who has been to Paris in years is happy.
   b. *Has John been to Paris in years?
   c. *Only John has been to Paris in years.
   d. *If John has been to Paris in years, ...

(21) *can help*
   a. *Everyone who can help thinking of it is happy.
   b. *Can I help thinking of it?
   c. *Only I can help thinking of it.
   d. *If I could help thinking about it, I would be happier.

(22) *jackshit*
   a. *Everyone who can see jackshit is happy.
   b. *Can we see jackshit?
   c. *Only we can see jackshit.
   d. *If we could see jackshit, we would be happier.

(23) *lift a finger*
   a. %Everyone who lifted a finger to help me made me happy.
   b. %Has he lifted a finger to help me?
   c. %Only John has lifted a finger to help me.
   d. %If he had lifted a finger to help me, ...

- Such NPIs that don’t survive in questions, antecedents of conditionals, and others are called **strong NPIs**. Others like *any, ever, dare*, etc, that survive in all licensing environments are called **weak NPIs**.
4. Strict and non-strict NPIs

• Some NPIs are licensed in an embedded clause.

(24) Mary didn’t say she wanted any cookies.
(25) No-one claims to ever see the dark side of the Moon.

• Some NPIs are not licensed in an embedded clause.

(26) *She didn’t say she liked that at all.
(27) *I didn’t say I could help thinking of it.
(28) *We didn’t claim we could see jackshit.
(29) *Susan didn’t say she has been to Mongolia in years.
(30) *John didn’t say he dared go in there.

• Open question: what is the relationship between strong and strict NPIs?

5. A theory of weak NPI licensing: Downward entailment

• In order to understand the meaning of NPIs, we have to understand the type(s) of environments in which they occur.

• Fauconnier (1975) and Ladusaw (1979) propose that weak NPIs occur in downward entailing environments.

• A downward entailing environment reverses the relation of semantic strength of expressions occurring in it.

(31) An environment $E[~]$ is downward-entailing if for all predicates $P$ and $Q$ such that $P \subseteq Q$, then $E[Q] \rightarrow E[P]$.

• Let’s check environments if they’re downward entailing by taking a sentence, replacing its predicate, e.g. “ate an apple”, with a stronger one, e.g. “ate a red apple”, and seeing whether the original sentence entails the new one.

(32) a. John ate an apple.
    b. John ate a red apple.

→ (32a) does not entail (32b): “John ate [~]” is not a downward entailing environment.

(33) a. John didn’t eat an apple.
    b. John didn’t eat a red apple.

→ (33a) entails (33b): negation is a downward entailing environment.

(34) a. I doubt Mary ate an apple.
    b. I doubt Mary ate a red apple.

→ (34a) entails (34b): doubt is a downward entailing environment.
In-class Exercise 1
- Say whether the following are downward entailing environments:
  
  (35) Every [ ] is delicious.

  (36) Some [ ] is delicious.

  (37) Every student [ ].

  (38) If [ ], then I’d be happy.

- So far, downward entailing and NPI licensing environments seem to match. Enough for downward entailment to be the most popular theory of NPI licensing currently on the market.
- But the theory is not without its problems.

Problems with the theory of downward entailment

In-class Exercise 2
- Say why the following environments pose a problem for the downward entailment theory of NPI licensing.
  
  (39) exactly n NP [ ]

  (40) only [ ]

  (41) questions