

NEGATIVE POLARITY: LICENSING CONDITIONS AND CONNECTIONS TO SCALAR IMPLICATURES

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Negative polarity items (NPIs) are a class of lexical items or phrases (including, ‘ever’, ‘any’, ‘lift a finger’) whose grammatical acceptability is sensitive to semantic features of their linguistic environment. It has long been claimed that NPIs are licensed exclusively in downward-entailing environments (Fauconnier, 1975; Ladusaw, 1979), where downward-entailingness (DE) is a generalized semantic notion of negativity. This generalization explains, for instance, the following contrasts in the acceptability of the NPI ‘ever’:

- (1) a. John won’t ever eat that. (2) a. Every student who ever ate that got ill.
b. *John will ever eat that. b. *Some student who ever ate that got ill.

Many researchers argue that the licensing of NPIs is pragmatic in nature, and closely related to the calculation of scalar implicatures (SIs) a paradigmatic pragmatic phenomenon. One motivation for drawing such a connection is that standard SIs are active in upward monotonic environments, as in (3-a), but not in DE environments, as in (3-b):

- (3) a. John did some of the work. → NOT John did all of the work
b. John didn’t do some of the work. ↯ NOT John didn’t do all of the work.

The connection between SIs and monotonicity is straightforward: SIs are pragmatic inferences which rely on the relative informativity/entailment relation between alternatives, and this relation is directly driven by the monotonicity properties of the linguistic environment where the scalar item lies. The notion of ‘domain widening’ relates NPIs and monotonicity in a similar fashion: in a nutshell, the licensing conditions of NPIs could be driven by a similar preference for informativity plus their inclination to include into the picture even remote options (Kadmon and Landman, 1993).

The goal of this project is twofold. First, we will use experimental techniques to collect robust grammaticality judgments about NPIs. To adjudicate between various theories of NPIs, we will test the acceptability of NPIs in DE environments but crucially also in non-monotonic environments and so-called Strawson DE environments for which different theories make different predictions *and* introspective judgments diverge (see Krifka, 1995; von Stechow, 1999; Chierchia, 2004; Homer, 2007). Second, we will collect inferential judgments about scalar implicatures triggered in the same environments (see Chemla, 2009; Chemla and Spector, 2009).

By testing these phenomena in a single experimental setting we expect to be able to see if there are significant correlations between implicature calculations and NPI licensing, in particular correlations in the graded judgments we might find in non-monotonic environments which lead to difficulties in both domains (relevant discussions can be found in Spector (2006) for Gricean approaches of SI, and in Rothschild (2005) for NPIs). If we find such correlations this will provide direct empirical evidence for the connection between NPI licensing and SI computation.

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