

Negative polarity in natural language:

Variation, scalarity, and dependent reference

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In this presentation, I discuss the distribution and lexical properties of common varieties of negative polarity items. We establish first that NPIs can be licensed in negative, downward entailing, and nonveridical environments. Then we examine if the scalarity approach (originating in Kadmon and Landman 1993) can handle the attested NPI distribution and empirical variation. By positing a unitary lexical source for NPIs—widening, plus EVEN— scalarity fails to capture the fact that a significant number of NPIs are not scalar, and does not predict correctly NPI distribution in nonveridical contexts. It also misses the variation within the scalar class between broader (any) and narrow NPIs (either). Finally, scalarity predicts weaker effects (contradictions, presupposition failures) with ill- formed NPIs than is actually the case. The variation approach (Giannakidou 1998, 2001, 2007), on the other hand, posits that besides scalarity, NPIs can be created because of referential deficiency. Such NPIs contain variables that cannot be interpreted deictically. This approach capitalizes on the core property of NPIs that-- they do not refer, that they fail to introduce discourse referents-- and succeeds in making PI sanctioning a subpart of the discussion on restrictions on NP-anchoring (specificity, definiteness, domain restriction, temporal anchoring), which are independently needed in grammar.