snippets

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Zero licensers

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Negative Polarity Items (NPI's) are elements that can only occur in contexts that are negative or in some other way "affective". According to the standard theory of NPI licensing, these contexts are Downward Entailing (DE) (cf. Fauconnier 1975, Ladusaw 1980). In (1) *no student* is downward entailing, as it allows reasoning from sets to subsets, and *no students* is clearly able to license *any car*.

(1)   a.   No student bought a car → No student bought a red car
        b.   No student bought any car

The notion of DE has been criticized as the proper notion for NPI-licensing as it may be too restrictive. Giannakidou (1998), amongst others, has proposed to replace DE-ness by the notion of non-veridicality, which allows for more contexts (such as imperatives). On the other hand Linebarger (1987) observed that NPI licensing requires that no non-DE operator may intervene between the licenser and the licensee. But adopting these amendments to the standard theory of NPI licensing still entails that if an NPI, such as English *any*, is immediately outscoped by a DE operator, it is properly licensed.

This conclusion is at odds with the following observation, new to the best of my knowledge. Expressions with the cardinality of zero should be able to license NPI's, as they are typically DE (see (2) and (3)):

(2)   Zero students bought a car → Zero students bought a red car
(3)   Less than one student bought a car → Less than one student bought a red car

However, these DP's are unable to license NPI's as is demonstrated in (4) and (5) below.

(4) *Zero students bought any car
(5) *Less than one student bought any car

These effects not only hold for English, but also for other languages such as Dutch:

(6)   *Nul studenten kochten enige auto   Dutch
      Zero students bought any car

(7)   *Minder dan één student kocht enige auto   Dutch
         Less than one student bought any car

        Apparently DE-ness is not a sufficient condition for NPI licensing. This forms a challenge for current theories of NPI licensing and suggests that the negative strength of an expression alone is not responsible for the licensing of NPI's.

References

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