

snippets

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8.

Benjamin Spector - Institut Jean-Nicod (CNRS-ENS -EHESS) ***Being simultaneously an NPI and a PPI: a bipolar item in French***

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It is well known that the licensing contexts for Negative Polarity Items (NPIs) and the anti-licensing contexts for Positive Polarity Items (PPIs) are not identical (cf. van der Wouden 1997, Szabolcsi 2004, Homer 2011). In particular, while some NPIs are licensed in every downward-entailing (DE) context (*weak* NPIs, cf. Zwart 1998), all PPIs seem to be acceptable in the antecedent of a conditional clause and the restrictor of universal quantifiers. This fact opens the possibility that a certain expression be simultaneously a weak NPI and a PPI. Van der Wouden and Nishiguchi (2005) have already suggested that ‘bipolar items’ exist. The distribution of such an item would be constrained as follows: it should be able to occur in all NPI-licensing contexts which are not simultaneously PPI-anti-licensing contexts.

More specifically, such an item will display the following four properties:

1. Being an NPI, it must be interpreted under the scope of a DE operator.
2. Being a PPI, it cannot occur in the immediate scope of an unembedded negation. (If occurring in the syntactic scope of negation, it will generally not be able to escape its semantic scope, due to its NPI status, and will thus be unacceptable on every conceivable reading.)
3. Being a PPI, it can occur (be ‘rescued’) in the immediate scope of a negation that is itself embedded in a DE environment (see Szabolcsi 2004, Homer 2011; thanks to V. Homer for emphasizing this point). It will then occur in a globally upward-entailing context, but the NPI-licensing requirement from 1. will nevertheless be satisfied because it will still be interpreted under the scope of a DE operator, namely, negation.
4. Being a *weak* NPI, it will be licensed in the antecedent of a conditional clause or the restrictor of a universal quantifier, among others.

I argue that the French locution *un tant soit peu* (which means something like ‘minimally’) is an especially good example of a bipolar item:

1. *un tant soit peu* is disallowed if not in the scope of a DE operator [it is an NPI]
 - (1) Ce livre est (*un tant soit peu) abîmé.
This book is *un tant soit peu* damaged.
 - (2) Chaque livre est (*un tant soit peu) abîmé.
Every book is *un tant soit peu* abîmé.
 - (3) Marie est (*un tant soit peu) en colère.
Marie is *un tant soit peu* angry.
 - (4) Tous les étudiants sont (*un tant soit peu) en colère.
All the students are *un tant soit peu* angry.
 2. *un tant soit peu* is disallowed in the scope of a clause-mate negation... [It is a PPI]
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- (5) Ce livre n'est pas (*un tant soit peu) abîmé.
This book is not *un tant soit peu* damaged.
- (6) Marie n'est pas (*un tant soit peu) en colère.
Marie is not *un tant soit peu* angry.

3 ... unless the relevant negation is itself in a DE environment. [Rescuing]

- (7) Je ne peux pas croire que ce livre ne soit pas un tant soit peu abîmé.
I can't believe that this book is-SUBJ not *un tant soit peu* damaged.
- (8) Je ne peux pas croire que Marie ne soit pas un tant soit peu en colère
I can't believe that Marie is-SUBJ not *un tant soit peu* angry.

4. *un tant soit peu* is licensed in the restrictor of universal quantifiers and the antecedent clause of conditional sentences. [It is a *weak NPI*]

- (9) Chaque livre (qui était) un tant soit peu abîmé a été jeté
Every book (that was) *un tant soit peu* damaged were thrown away.
- (10) Si ce livre est un tant soit peu abîmé, il sera jeté
If this book is *un tant soit peu* damaged, it will be thrown away.
- (11) Tous les étudiants (qui étaient) un tant soit peu en colère sont partis.
All the students (that were) *un tant soit peu* angry left.
- (12) Si Marie avait été un tant soit peu en colère, elle serait partie
If Marie had been *un tant soit peu* angry, she would have left.

Finally, in the scope of a negative quantifier, *un tant soit peu* is, to my ear, marginally acceptable. This is consistent with the fact that some PPIs are acceptable in such environments, e.g. *déjà* ('already' in French) and its German and Dutch counterparts (see van der Wouden 1997).

- (13) Aucun de ces livres n'est (?? un tant soit peu) abîmé
None of these books is *un tant soit peu* abîmé
- (14) Aucun des étudiants n'est (?? un tant soit peu) en colère
None of the students is *un tant soit peu* angry

Given that *un tant soit peu* is a complex expression, it is tempting to analyze it as containing a PPI-part and an NPI-part. Note, in particular, that *un peu* ('a bit') is a PPI. Thus, deleting *tant soit* in *un tant soit peu* makes the sentences from (1) to (4) perfectly acceptable, but does not change anything to other judgments. We might then want to analyze *tant soit* as an NPI, presumably as a minimizer. In this case, *un tant soit peu* would be, quite literally, made up of an NPI and a PPI. It should be noted, however, that *tant soit* never occurs outside of the environment *un ... peu*, so that there is no independent evidence for its NPI status. (At the same time, *tant* does appear in other syntactically complex NPIs, such as *tant que ça* 'as much as that' (E. Chemla, p.c.)).

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