Formal Semantics: Lecture 9

Some case studies

# Negative polarity items

There are certain lexical items which seem to have a “negative” polarity. By “polarity” here, we mean something like “affect”. It’s not the same as negation (as in *I didn’t...* or *it is not the case that*). Negative polarity items (NPIs) are a much broader class.

Here are some examples

* *any*
* *ever*
* *yet*
* *anymore*

Try to think of some equivalent expressions in another language (say, Maltese or Italian)

# Distributional properties

It seems that NPIs are very sensitive to the linguistic context they occur in. Here are some interesting cases (most are from Ladusaw 1980). In each case, try to think about why one example is acceptable, while the other apparently isn’t.

## NPIs with quantificational adverbs

**These seem OK:**

1. I **never** eat anything before dinner anymore.
2. I **rarely** eat anything before dinner anymore.
3. I **seldom** eat anything before dinner anymore.

**These don’t:**

1. I **usually** eat anything before dinner anymore.
2. I **always** eat anything before dinner anymore.
3. I **sometimes** eat anything before dinner anymore.

## NPIs with verbs

**These seem ok:**

1. John **refused** to return any of the cash.
2. John **forgot** to return any of the cash.
3. John **failed** to return any of the cash.

**These don’t:**

1. John **agreed** to return any of the cash.
2. John **remembered** to return any of the cash.
3. John **managed** to return any of the cash.

## NPIs with prepositions

**This seems ok:**

1. John finished his homework **without** any help

**This doesn’t:**

1. John finished his homework **with** any help

## NPIs with generalised quantifiers

**These seem OK:**

1. **No one** who has ever studied formal semantics has ever remembered anything afterwards.
2. **At most three people** who have ever studied formal semantics have ever remembered anything afterwards.
3. **Few students** who have ever studied formal semantics have ever remembered anything afterwards.

**These don’t:**

1. \***Someone** who has ever studied formal semantics has ever remembered anything afterwards.
2. \***At least three people** who have ever studied formal semantics have ever remembered anything afterwards.
3. \***Many students** who have ever studied formal semantics have ever remembered anything afterwards.

**Things to note**:

* The NPI in these examples is in both the NP itself and the VP.
* If you drop the NPI from one of these places in (4-6) does acceptability improve?

**A question:**

* Can you think of a quantifier where you can have an NPI in the NP but not the VP, or an NPI in the VP but not the NP?