

**VARIATION AND CHANGE IN THE LICENSING  
OF INDEFINITE POLARITY ITEMS  
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## 0. Introduction

The licensing of polarity items has been studied from a great many angles ever since Klima (1964) put the issue on the linguistic agenda. A great deal more is now known about this knotty problem, but relatively little from a diachronic perspective. Is the licensing of polarity items stable or does it change over time, and if so, what types of changes can be distinguished, and what could cause such changes to occur? In this paper, I will take a look at one class of negative polarity items, the familiar type of polarity sensitive indefinites, and discuss a number of diachronic changes in the licensing patterns associated with these items.

## 1. Polarity Sensitive Indefinites

Among the many types of negative polarity items (henceforth: NPU's) that are known to exist (cf. Ladusaw 1979, Horn 1989, Van der Wouden 1997, *inter alii*), no doubt the best-known cases are polarity-sensitive indefinites, such as the English determiner *any* and the indefinite pronouns derived from it, such as *anybody*, *anything*, *anywhere*, the English temporal adverbial indefinite *ever*, and the Dutch determiner *enig*, a cognate of *any*. Compare the examples in (1), where grammatical cases with negation are contrasted with ungrammatical counterparts without negation:

- (1) a. There wasn't any time/\*There was any time.  
b. Don't ever cross that line/\*Ever cross that line.  
c. Niemand/\*Jan had enige verblijfsplaats.  
Nobody / \*Jan had any place to stay.

Another set of indefinite NPU's are so-called minimizers (Bolinger 1972), expressions which denote the endpoint of some scale (Fauconnier 1975a,b). For instance, *a word* is a minimal amount in the context of communication, and can be used, in combination with negation, as an equivalent to negative quantifiers such as *nothing*, in sentences such as (2a). The positive counterpart (2b) is not strictly speaking ungrammatical, but semantically slightly odd.

- (2) a. Fred did not say a word all evening.  
b. #Fred said a word all evening.

In addition to straightforward minimizers such as *a word*, *a thing*, *a moment*, there are also idioms with similar meanings, but less transparent forms, such as

*a blessed word, a damn thing, a dicky bird* (rhyming slang for ‘a word’), *an iota, a red cent, a plugged nickle* etc. (For an overview of Dutch minimizers, cf. Postma 2001, Hoeksema 2002). Use as a minimizer is not an automatic consequence of lexical semantics, but stems from a process of grammaticalization, whereby items from appropriate semantic domains are enlisted to become conventional minimizers (cf. Hoeksema 1994, 2002). For instance, while *a thing* functions as a minimizer in English, its Dutch and German cognates do not have this function:

- (3)
- |    |  |          |
|----|--|----------|
| a. | I can’t see a thing.                             |          |
| b. | Fred didn’t say a thing.                         |          |
| c. | #Ik kan geen ding zien.<br>I can no thing see    | [Dutch]  |
| d. | #Fred zei geen ding<br>Fred said no thing        | [Dutch]  |
| e. | #Ich kann kein Ding sehen.<br>I can no thing see | [German] |
| f. | #Fred sagte kein Ding<br>Fred said no thing      | [German] |

In addition to minimizers, there is a special class of so-called *minimizing superlatives* (cf. e.g. Fauconnier 1975b for some discussion). In English, *the least* and *the slightest* belong to this class (less commonly, also *the tiniest, the smallest*). It should be noticed that such superlatives are not always used as polarity items, cf.

- (4)
- |    |  |
|----|--|
| a. | The slightest noise bothers Ellen.           |
| b. | Edna was the least interesting of the girls. |

However, in other cases, there is evidence for the polarity-sensitivity of minimizing superlatives. For instance, in the following examples, we find minimal pair involving negative and positive counterparts.

- (5)
- |    |   |
|----|---|
| a. | There wasn’t the slightest hesitation in his demeanour. |
| b. | *There was the slightest hesitation in his demeanour.   |
| c. | I don’t have the slightest doubt about her involvement. |
| d. | *I have the slightest doubt about her involvement.      |

It should be noted that minimizing superlatives are indefinite according to several criteria:

- appearance in existential sentences (e.g. (5a) above)
- appearance in other contexts requiring indefinite NPs, e.g. *not have \_\_\_ doubt* (cf. *not have any doubt, not have the least doubt, not have much doubt, \*not have the doubt, \*not have every doubt*)

Yet another group of polarity-sensitive indefinites are indefinites with an adverbial modifier of the *ever*-class, such as Dutch *ook maar iets* ‘anything at all’ (literally: even anything), German *auch nur etwas* (idem), cf.:

- (6) Niemand wist ook maar iets. (Dutch)  
 nobody knew even anything  
 “Nobody knew anything whatsoever”
- (7) \*Iedereen wist ook maar iets.  
 Everybody know even anything  
 “Everybody knew anything whatsoever”
- (8) Niemand darf auch nur etwas essen. (German)  
 nobody may even anything eat  
 “Nobody may eat anything at all”
- (9) \*Jeder darf auch nur etwas essen.  
 Everybody may even anything eat  
 “Everybody may eat anything at all”

### 3. Distribution of indefinite NPIs

The above indefinites may appear in all scale-reversing (Fauconnier 1975) or downward-monotonic (Ladusaw 1979) environments, including:

- (10) a. scope of negation (*I don't have any tomatoes*)  
 b. scope of negative quantifiers: *no one, nobody, nothing, nowhere, never, none, no N, naught, neither X nor Y; few N, little N, not many N, at most k N, less than k N* (*Few people had any tomatoes, Fewer/\*more than 5 people had any tomatoes*)  
 c. certain types of clausal complements: complements of negative predicates (*unable, unlikely, impossible, fail, deny, doubt*) (*It is unlikely she has any tomatoes*); complements of degree-adverbial *too* (*I am too poor to buy any tomatoes*), conditional clauses (*I will be so grateful if you give me any tomatoes*), restrictive relatives in universally quantified or superlative noun phrases (*everybody who knows anything about tomatoes knows that this is the worst place to buy any*), clauses introduced by *before* (*before I do anything, the boys were throwing tomatoes at me*), by rhetorical *as if* (*as if I would need any tomatoes!*), or by *without* (*he arrived without any tomatoes*) and comparative clauses (*this apple tastes better than any tomato*).  
 d. questions, both direct and indirect, yes/no and WH, rhetorical and (sometimes) nonrhetorical (*Do you have any tomatoes? Who on earth would mistake any tomato for a potato? I am curious whether you have any tomatoes.*).

## (11) Downward Entailing Environments (Ladusaw 1979, Zwarts 1981)

$X_Z$  is downward entailing iff  $Y, Y'$  such that  $Y < Y'$ :  $XY'X$  entails  $XYZ$ . (By  $Y < Y'$  we indicate that  $Y$  is a hyponym of  $Y'$ . E.g. *dog* < *animal*, *old people* < *people*, *Dutch* < *European*, *waltz* < *dance*, *talk about linguistics* < *talk*.) Normally, when  $Y < Y'$ ,  $XYZ$  will entail  $XY'Z$ , so downward entailing contexts are implication-reversing.

## (12) Examples of downward entailing environments in Dutch:

- (a) niet \_\_\_\_
  - (b) van \_\_\_\_ is geen sprake
  - (c) alle \_\_\_\_
- (13) Zij praten over taalkunde → Zij praten  
They talk about linguistics they talk
- (14) Jullie moeten niet praten → Jullie moeten niet praten over taalkunde  
You must not talk you must not talk about linguistics
- (15) Van hulp uit Nederland is geen sprake →  
of help from Netherlands is no talk  
Van hulp uit Groningen is geen sprake  
of help from Groningen is no talk
- (16) Alle honden zwemmen in de vijver → Alle teckels zwemmen in de vijver  
all dogs swim in the pont all dachshunds swim in the pond

## (17) Role of scope w.r.t. negation crucial: to gain universal force, these indefinites must be within the scope of negation.

- (a) \*Ever, nobody will forgot his words.
- (b) \*Any bread, Fred did not buy.
- (c) \*Any bread was not bought by Fiona.
- (d) \*The slightest idea, Jones never had.
- (e) \*Ook maar iets heeft geen van hen gezegd.  
Even anything has none of them said  
“\*Anything at all, none of them has said”

(Cf. Ladusaw 1979, E. Hoekstra 1991)

## (18) Legitimate occurrences of indefinite NPIs to the left of negation are nonetheless within its scope (cf. Hoekstra 1991, Uribe-Etxebarria 1994, De Swart 1998, Hoeksema 2000 for discussion)

## A Embedded Cases

- a. A doctor who knew anything about acupuncture was not available.
- b. That John would ever do a thing like that, nobody had expected.

## B Focus scrambling (Neeleman 1994) with narrow scope

- c. Dit spreekt van zelf en heeft het minste bewys niet nodig.  
This speaks of itself and has the least proof not necessary  
“This is self-evident and does not need the least bit of proof”  
(Justus van Effen, De Hollandsche Spectator)

## (19) Nonreferential Indefinites (Zwarts 1995, Giannakidou 1997, Haspelmath 1997)

Modern Greek *kanenas* (and various other indefinites) appears in (roughly) all regular scale reversing environments, as well as in other *nonveridical* contexts. **Nonveridicality**: a context  $\phi$  for some proposition  $p$  is nonveridical just in case from  $\phi[p]$  we may not infer  $p$ . Examples: modals, propositional attitudes such as *wish, hope, fear*, modal adverbials such as *perhaps, hopefully*, non-indicative mood, and disjunctions all provide a nonveridical context.

- a. Dhen idha kanenan fititi.  
not saw\_I any student  
“I did not see any student”
- b. Elpizo na emine kanena komati.  
Hope\_I left any piece  
“I hope there is a piece left”
- c. Pijene se kanenan jatro  
Go to any doctor  
“Go to a doctor!”

Dutch *enig* “some/any”

- (20) a. We hebben enige tijd.  
We have some time
- b. We hebben nooit enige tijd.  
We have never any time
- c. We hebben enige problemen.  
We have some problems
- d. We hebben nooit enige problemen.  
We have never some problems.
- e. \*We hebben enig probleem.  
We have some problem
- f. We hebben nooit enig probleem.  
We have never any problem

Besides negative sentences, singular count *enig* is found in conditionals, questions, complements of negative predicates, *too*, restrictive relatives with universal or superlative heads, comparatives, following *weinig* “few/little”, *zelden* “seldom”, *nauwelijks/amper* “hardly” .

(21) Older texts

Modal contexts

- a. Men moest toch wel enige aanwijzing hebben  
“ One would have to have some clue”
- b. Ziedaar een paar vragen, waarop ik gaarne eenig antwoord zou willen ontvangen.  
“ These are some questions for which I would like to receive an answer.
- c. Zij streed met den wensch, om onder eenig voorwendsel opnieuw daar binnen te gaan.  
“ She was fighting her desire to go back in under some pretext”

Imperative

- d. Kom daar maar eens om in enig ander land.  
Come there but once for in any other country  
“Try to find/get that in any other country!”

Subjunctive

- e. En wie geen steenen kan aandragen storte ten minsten eenige gift in de offerbus  
“ And who cannot carry bricks, should at least donate some gift in the offertory-box”

Disjunction

- f. [...] terwijl mijne oudste Zuster tusschen beide in den Bijbel of eenig stichtelijk boek las  
“ (..) while in between my oldest sister was reading in the Bible or some devotional book”
- g. dan worden ze, volgens de talenten die men in hen ontdekt, het zy in de troupes, of in eenig ander post tot den oorlog geemployeert.  
“Then they are employed, according to the talents discerned in them, in the troops or in any other military position”

## Habitual

- h. Vrienden en bekenden hadden de gewoonte om eenig deel van een nieuw gebouw te versieren met een glas  
 “Friends and acquaintances had the habit to decorate some part of a new building with a glass”

Sporadic occurrences of “some or other” readings (6% of about 200 “positive” occurrences):

- i. Hy zondt enige Benden zyner Lyfwachten naar enig Binnenlandts Dorp, dat wat verre van de handt ligt.  
 “He sent some groups of his body-guards to some interior village, that is lying a bit out of the way.
- i. Die de minste kennis van de manieren van Den Haag hebben, weeten, dat het een gerecipieerd gebruik is, dat Jonge Juffrouwen nooit alleen in een Gezelschap komen, maar altyd verzeld van hunne Moeders, of eenige andere getrouwde Vrouw  
 “Those who have the least knowledge of the manners of The Hague, know, that it is a received custom, that young Ladies never appear alone in society, but always accompanied by their Mothers, of any other married Woman”

TABLE 1: ENIG - distribution of singular count occurrences  
 [minus those of the collocation *op enig moment*]

Context	< 1600 N=81	1600-1700 N=208	1700-1800 N=222	1800-1900 N=469	1900-1990 N=734	1990-2002 N=374
Negation	19	30	32	34	37	42
Before	1	1	-	0.5	2	1
Conditional	21	16	9	6	4	3
Comparative	11	5	5	9	15	18
Comp. of Eq.	-	5	5	2	0.4	-
Few/little	-	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	-
Hardly	-	0.5	0.5	1	1	0.5
Neg. pred.	5	3	7	6	7	6
Question	11	4	7	7	8	3
Seldom	1	-	-	1	-	1
Superlative	2	1	1	1	1	1
Too	-	-	0.5	1	1	0.5
Universal	1	4	3	2	1	1
Without	17	12	14	10	19	19
<b>Positive</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>

Assumptions: nonveridical NPIs in negative contexts may develop rhetorical strength (e.g. by focus, by adding focus particles such as *ook maar*) and thus a second use gets established in these contexts, different from the nonemphatic use of these items elsewhere. (Cf. also Krifka 1995, Rohrbaugh 1997 on strengthening in relation to stress for *any* and Giannakidou 1997 regarding the *kanenas/KANENAS* distinction.) The Dutch developments surrounding *enig* are then to be viewed as (1) split in two uses; (2) gradual disappearance of original nonveridical use.

Cf. also Hoeksema 1999 on Dutch *ooit*

Afrikaans: *enig* = *any*

- (20) a. Dit is ook van waarde vir enige student wat teologiese kennis soek.  
 b. Enige student wat voel dat sy/haar regte geskend is, kan hom/haar wend tot die studentehof.  
 c. Ons is 'n Christen-jeug organisasie wat sorg vir tonne pret op die kampus en wat ons arms wyd oop hou vir enige student op hierdie kampus.

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