
A simplicity-based account of high-degree NPIs

Stephanie Solt & Andreea Nicolae

Leibniz-Zentrum Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft (ZAS)

[solt, nicolae]@leibniz-zas.de

We investigate the class of high-degree negative polarity items (NPIs), modifiers of gradable adjectives that specify a high degree of the property in question and that are acceptable in negative but not positive contexts. Such items are widespread across languages, a prime example being English (*all that*) (Onea & Sailer 2013):

- (1) a. *Homer is (all) that tall.
b. Homer isn't (all) that tall.

The analysis of high-degree NPIs presents two challenges. First, they belong to the class of attenuating polarity items (Israel 1996), which make weaker assertions than salient alternatives. Such items are not well accounted for within semantic frameworks that link NPI status to semantic strengthening (e.g. Chierchia 2013). Second, their distribution resists easy classification into the categories of strong vs. weak NPIs (Onea & Sailer 2013, Schwab & Liu 2022), in that they are acceptable in anti-additive and some but not all downward-entailing contexts.

Extending previous work (e.g. Krifka 1995, Chierchia 2013), we propose a novel alternative-based account of polarity sensitivity, according to which strength-based competition between alternatives is augmented by simplicity-based competition. Specifically, alternatives are ranked by structural complexity, and blocking occurs when an expression has a semantically equivalent but simpler alternative. Turning to degree expressions, we analyze high-degree NPIs such as (*all that*) as degree modifiers that introduce a variable over thresholds d^* that must be existentially bound. Assuming independently motivated constraints on the possible values that d^* can take, the resulting semantics of the positive (1a) is semantically equivalent to the simpler *Homer is tall*, resulting in blocking, whereas the negative (1b) is semantically distinct from its simpler alternative *Homer is not tall*, allowing it to surface. Hence (*all that*) and similar items pattern as NPIs.

From the perspective of this analysis, we then revisit the distribution of high-degree NPIs, arguing that variable acceptability in downward-entailing environments can be related to restrictions on the scope of the existential operator, whereas certain cases of felicity can be derived via licensing by implicated content.

References: • Chierchia, G. (2013). *Logic in grammar*. Oxford: OUP. • Israel, M. (1996). Polarity sensitivity as lexical semantics. *L&P* 19, 619–666. • Katzir, R. (2007). Structurally defined alternatives. *L&P* 30, 669–690. • Krifka, M. (1995). The semantics and pragmatics of polarity items. *Linguistic Analysis* 25, 1–49. • Onea, E. & M. Sailer (2013). Really all that clear? In E. Csapak et al. (eds.), *Beyond 'Any' and 'Ever'*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 323–25. • Schwab, J. & M. Liu (2022). Attenuating NPIs in indicative and counterfactual conditionals. *Proceedings of SuB* 26, 772–789.