

Notes on Szabolcsi's "Positive polarity – Negative polarity"

1. Positive polarity items: Anti-licensing

In the crudest description, positive polarity items (PPIs) are words or idioms that are barred from negative sentences. Let us say that they are "anti-licensed" by negation. Here is a list of examples from Baker (1970a).

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| (1) a. The Sox have already clinched the pennant. | [<i>already</i>] |
| b. * The Sox haven't already clinched the pennant. | |
| (2) a. I would rather go to New Orleans. | [<i>would rather</i>] |
| b. * I wouldn't rather go to New Orleans. | |
| (3) a. Jacques could just as well have taken the train. | [<i>just as well</i>] |
| b. * Jacques couldn't just as well have taken the train. | |
| (4) a. He did pretty well on the exam. | [<i>pretty</i>] |
| b. * He didn't do pretty well on the exam. | |
| (5) a. He is far taller than his uncle. | [<i>far</i>] |
| b. * He isn't far taller than his uncle. | |

Negative sentence hosting *some* (which aren't used as denials) are sometimes unacceptable.

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| (6) a. He took some time off. | |
| b. * He didn't take some time off. | |
| (7) a. I was somewhat disappointed. | |
| b. * I wasn't somewhat disappointed. | |

Other cases only allow for a reading in which the phrase headed by *some* outscopes negation. (For simplicity, such cases are marked with an asterisk in the following.)

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| (8) a. He passed because he read some difficult paper on velar fricatives. | |
| b. * He failed because he didn't read some difficult paper on velar fricatives. | |

2. Positive polarity items: Rescuing

Baker observed that a negative clause with a positive polarity item that is unacceptable in isolation can be acceptable as a part of a larger negative sentence. Baker calls this phenomenon “polarity reversal”. Szabolcsi calls it “rescuing”.

- (9) a. * He wouldn't rather be in Montpellier.
b. There isn't anybody in this camp who wouldn't rather be in Montpellier.
- (10)a. * Someone else couldn't do a far better job than our present governor.
b. I find it impossible to believe that someone else couldn't do a far better job than our present governor.
- (11)a. * Someone isn't still holed up in this cave.
b. You can't convince me that someone isn't still holed up in this cave.
- (12)a. They couldn't do pretty well on that exam.
b. George has never come across anyone who couldn't do pretty well on that exam.
- (13)a. * He doesn't know something about the case.
b. You'll never convince me that he doesn't know something about the case.

3. Positive and negative polarity: A first guess

The flip-flop generalization

Krifka (1992) suggests that Baker's data fall under what one might call the “flip-flop generalization”.

The flip-flop generalization

“... an NPI must be in the scope of an odd (1,3,...) number of NPI licensing operators, whereas a PPI must be in the scope of an even (0,2,...) number of NPI licensing operators.”

Krifka presents data like the following in support of the assumption that the flip-flop generalization applies to negative polarity items. (The (b) and (d) cases are given in Schmerling 1971, the others are added for good measure.)

- (14)a. * There was someone at the scene of the accident who did [a thing] to help.
b. There wasn't anyone at the scene of the accident who did [a thing] to help.
c. There was someone at the scene of the accident who didn't do [a thing] to help.
d. * There wasn't anyone at the scene of the accident who didn't do [a thing] to help.

- (15)a. * There was somebody at my dinner party last night who had [a bite] of the special haggis casserole I spent so much time preparing.
b. There wasn't anybody at my dinner party last night who had [a bite] of the special haggis casserole I spent so much time preparing.
c. There was someone at my dinner party last night who didn't have [a bite] of the special haggis casserole I spent so much time preparing.
d. * There wasn't anybody at my dinner party last night who didn't have [a bite] of the special haggis casserole I spent so much time preparing.
- (16)a. * There was someone in the huge lecture hall who uttered [a peep] when the distinguished linguist suggested that post-Bloomfieldian structuralist phonology and the theory presented in *The Sound Pattern of English* were notational variants.
b. There was no one in the huge lecture hall who uttered [a peep] when the distinguished linguist suggested that post-Bloomfieldian structuralist phonology and the theory presented in *The Sound Pattern of English* were notational variants.
c. There was someone in the huge lecture hall who didn't utter [a peep] when the distinguished linguist suggested that post-Bloomfieldian structuralist phonology and the theory presented in *The Sound Pattern of English* were notational variants.
d. There was no one in the huge lecture hall who didn't utter [a peep] when the distinguished linguist suggested that post-Bloomfieldian structuralist phonology and the theory presented in *The Sound Pattern of English* were notational variants.

Note that the flip-flop generalization predicts that negative polarity items like *any* and positive polarity items like *some* are in complementary distribution. This prediction has long been known to be incorrect (see e.g. Baker 1970: 177, also Szabolcsi, p. 19).

- (17)a. I didn't say that John came up with anything.
b. I didn't say that John came up with something

Let us now take a closer look at what is wrong with the flip-flop generalization.

Flip-flop and negative polarity

As Krifka notes, the flip-flop generalization for negative polarity items would follow from the assumption that negative polarity items want to be in (Strawson) downward monotone environments and that licensing is global.

(18) **Global NPI licensing**

A NPI must be in a downward monotone sentence frame.

We have already seen, however, that negative polarity items do not consistently show the behavior that global licensing predicts. The following cases are counterexamples to the flip-flop generalization, and hence to the global licensing condition.

- (19)a. Some student who did not [lift a finger] failed.
b. Every student who did not [lift a finger] failed.
(from last week's handout)
- (20)a. It is true that there aren't [any] potatoes.
b. It is not true that there aren't [any] potatoes.
(from Chierchia to appear)
- (21)a. I'm surprised that there is [anyone] here who wants to come along.
b. I'm surprised that there isn't [anyone] here who wants to come along.
(adapted from Ladusaw 1979:180)
- (22)a. If he knows [anything] about logic, he will know Modus Ponens.
b. If he doesn't know [anything] about logic, he will know Modus Ponens.
(Dowty 1994, citing Hoeksema 1986)
- (23)a. She very rarely eats [anything at all] for lunch.
b. She very rarely doesn't eat [anything at all] for lunch.
(Dowty 1994, citing Hoeksema 1986)
- (24)a. Only Theodore asked [any] questions about the velar fricatives.
b. Only Theodore didn't ask [any] questions about the velar fricatives.
- (25)a. I don't think that John come up with [anything].
b. I don't think that John didn't come up with [anything].
(Szabolcsi, p. 19)

A complete theory of NPI licensing must characterize the conditions under which local licensing is possible as opposed to those under which global licensing is forced. As far as we know, such a characterization has not been attempted.

Note also that the flip-flop generalization remains silent about certain additional constraints on NPI licensing, ignoring intervention effects as well as the distinction between weak and strong negative polarity items.

Flip-flop and positive polarity

What might the flip-flop generalization for positive polarity items follow from? Krifka seems to suggest that some sort of global licensing condition can be held responsible, but he remains silent on the details. Here is a concrete proposal.

(26) **Global PPI licensing**

A PPI must be in an upward monotone sentence frame.

To be sure, assuming that NPI licensers are downward monotone, this condition would derive the flip-flop generalization. However, it incorrectly predicts that positive polarity items are allergic to non-monotone expressions, that is, expressions which are neither downward nor upward monotone.

- (27) brought a chocolate cake >>
brought a cake
Exactly three students brought a chocolate cake. >/> </<
Exactly three students brought a cake.

- (28) Exactly three students brought something.

The following weakened global licensing condition avoids the particular problem just encountered.

(29) **Global PPI licensing**

A PPI must not be in a downward monotone sentence frame.

However, this weakened condition does not in fact derive the flip-flop generalization. It incorrectly allows for non-monotone quantifiers to act as rescuers.

- (30) didn't bring a cake >>
didn't bring a chocolate cake
Exactly three students didn't bring a cake. </< >/>
Exactly three students didn't bring a chocolate cake.

- (31) * Exactly three students didn't bring something.

It is not clear, then, how the flip-flop generalization for positive polarity items can be derived from a semantic theory of licensing. Actually, this may be just as well. Szabolcsi's discussion shows that the flip-flop generalization does not fit the PPI facts very well.

To begin, Szabolcsi (p. 19) notes that adding another NPI licenser to a rescuing sentence does not always destroy acceptability. (Does it ever?)

- (32)a. * Someone else couldn't do a far better job than our present governor.
b. I find it impossible to believe that someone else couldn't do a far better job than our present governor.
c. No one found it impossible to believe that someone else couldn't do a far better job than our present governor.

Szabolcsi also discovers or rediscovers some more basic empirical details about anti-licensing that the flip-flop generalization misses. We turn to these next.

4. A second look at anti-licensing

Anti-licensors

The set of anti-licensors is not quite what the flip-flop generalization makes it out to be. As observed independently by Ladusaw (1979: 170) and Szabolcsi, positive polarity items are allergic to some but not all licensors of (weak) negative polarity items. Here are some anti-licensors:

- (33)a. Theodore didn't get help from anyone. [n't]
b. * Theodore didn't get help from someone.
(34)a. Theodore never got help from anyone. [never]
b. * Theodore never got help from someone.
(35)a. None of them got help from anyone. [none of them]
b. * None of them got help from someone.
(36)a. Theodore passed without help from anyone. [without]
b. * Theodore passed without help from someone.

These contrast with the following harmless negative polarity licensors:

- (37)a. Theodore rarely got help from anyone. [rarely]
b. Theodore rarely got help from someone.
(38)a. Few students got help from anyone. [few students]
b. Few students got help from someone.
(39)a. At most five students got help from anyone. [at most five students]
b. At most five students got help from someone.

Szabolcsi suggests that the harmful licensors are those that are anti-additive in the sense of Zwarts (1998).

Anti-licensing: Locality

Another observation, also first reported by Ladusaw (1979: 169), is that positive polarity items do not seem to be allergic to anti-additive NPI licensors sitting outside their home clause.

- (40)a. Theodore passed without [_S anyone helping him].
- b. Theodore passed without [_S someone helping him].
 (Szabolcsi)

- (41)a. Every student [_S who said anything] passed the exam.
- b. Every student [_S who said something] passed the exam.

- (42)a. No student [_S who said anything] failed the exam.
- b. No student [_S who said something] failed the exam.

- (43)a. It's inconceivable [_S that he will find out anything].
- b. It's inconceivable [_S that he will find out something].

See Szabolcsi's footnote 10 on some interesting complications in characterizing the relevant notion of PPI licensing locality.

Anti-licensing: Shielding

Szabolcsi attributes to Kroch (1979) the observation that certain intervening operators can shield a positive polarity item from a harmful NPI licensor scoping over it in the same clause. A shielding operator must be interpreted as taking scope between the positive polarity item and the harmful licensor.

- (44) John doesn't always call someone.

This sentence, like those below, may allow for a reading in which *someone* takes widest scope. Naturally, in this reading the positive polarity item doesn't need a shield in the first place.

- (45) Theodore didn't insult someone because he was bored.

According to Szabolcsi's assessment of the facts, this sentence cannot have the meaning expressed by the first two logical forms shown below, but it can have the meaning expressed by the third.

- (46)a. * not [someone₁ [because he was bored [Theodore insulted e₁]]]
b. * because he was bored [not [someone₁ [Theodore insulted e₁]]]
c. ✓ not [because he was bored [someone₁ [Theodore insulted e₁]]]
- (47) Theodore didn't insult someone at every party.
- (48)a. * not [someone₁ [every party₂ [Theodore insulted e₁ at e₂]]]
b. * every party₂ [not [someone₁ [Theodore insulted e₁ at e₂]]]
c. ✓ not [every party₂ [someone₁ [Theodore insulted e₁ at e₂]]]

5. Positive and negative polarity: Rescuing

Here are some of the rescuing examples that Szabolcsi provides (pp.10,11)

- (49)a. I don't think that John didn't call someone.
b. No one thinks that John didn't call someone.
c. I am surprised that John didn't call someone.
d. I regret that John didn't call someone.
- (50)a. If we don't call someone, we are doomed.
b. Every boy who didn't call someone ...
c. Only John didn't call someone.
d. Few boys didn't call someone.
e. Few boys thought that you didn't call someone.

On the basis of these data, she offers the following simple description of the rescuing phenomenon, call it the "rescuing generalization".

- (51) **Rescuing generalization**
The smallest constituent containing a positive polarity item and its anti-licenser is a weak negative polarity item, that is, it is subject to the same licensing conditions as *ever*.

There is one prediction made by this generalization that Szabolcsi does not test. If rescuing amounts to licensing a weak negative polarity item, then rescuing should be subject to intervention effects. Is this correct?

6. Positive and negative polarity: Anti-licensing

Szabolcsi also posits a close connection between anti-licensing and negative polarity licensing. Let us call her proposal the “anti-licensing” generalization.

- (52) **Anti-licensing generalization**
Ignoring rescuing, positive polarity items are anti-licensed in exactly those contexts where strong negative polarity items like *lift a finger*, *yet*, or *squat* are licensed.

Anti-licensors

Recall that according to Zwarts (1998), anti-additive expressions seem to be exactly those that license strong negative polarity items like *lift a finger*, *yet*, or *squat* (see Szabolcsi, p. 20).

- (53)a. He didn't {lift a finger/*do something}
b. No one {lifted a finger/*did something}
- (54) At most five students {*lifted a finger/did something}.

Locality

Szabolcsi (p. 21) suggests that strong NPIs need clausmate licensors.

- (55)a. He didn't say that Theodore {*lifted a finger/did something}
b. No one said that Theodore {*lifted a finger/did something}

Shielding

Finally, Szabolcsi (p. 21) notes that the shielding phenomenon in PPI licensing is very much reminiscent of intervention effects in NPI licensing. We have seen that the operators *and* and *the* block the NPI licensing relation when scopally intervening between the licensor and the licensee. The quantificational adverb *always* is an intervener as well.

- (56) * John doesn't always call anyone. [cf. (44)]

And Linebarger (1987) discusses intervention cases like the following.

- (57) Theodore didn't insult anyone because he was bored. [cf. (45)]

- (58)a. ✓ not [anyone₁ [because he was bored [Theodore insulted e₁]]]
b. ✓ because he was bored [not [anyone₁ [Theodore insulted e₁]]]
c. * not [because he was bored [anyone₁ [Theodore insulted e₁]]]
- (59) Theodore didn't insult anyone at every party. [cf. (47)]
- (60)a. ✓ not [anyone₁ [every party₂ [Theodore insulted e₁ at e₂]]]
b. ? every party₂ [not [anyone₁ [Theodore insulted e₁ at e₂]]]
c. * not [every party₂ [anyone₁ [Theodore insulted e₁ at e₂]]]

This suggests that the set of shields is identical to the set of interveners. More empirical study seems needed, however. See especially Szabolcsi's footnote 18.

7. Szabolcsi's description

"I propose that this configuration of data can be understood if we assume that PPIs have two NPI-features. One is a strong-NPI feature like that of *yet* and *squat*: it requires a clausemate antiadditive licenser, without intervention. The other is a weak-NPI feature like that of *ever*: it requires a Strawson-decreasing licenser (not necessarily clausemate but without intervention). To understand the exact distribution of PPIs, let us develop a metaphor for expository purposes. I propose that these two features are normally "dormant". A context that can license the strong-NPI feature "activates" and, in the same breath, licenses that feature. What we have seen indicates, however, that the other, weak-NPI feature also gets activated at the same time – activated, but not licensed. Therefore, the emergent constellation is illegitimate, unless a licenser for the weak-NPI feature is provided."