

MINDS – MA PRESENTATION



SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

AARHUS UNIVERSITY

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NPIS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DANISH AND ENGLISH



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THE 'WHAT?'

What are Negative Polarity Items (NPIs)?

- Words/expressions sensitive to grammatical polarity

PM Mette Frederiksen

- a) Jeg har aldrig ***nogensinde*** været så meget i tvivl.
b) *Jeg har ***nogensinde*** været så meget i tvivl.

(dr.dk 05/07/2020)

PM Boris Johnson

- a) I will never ***ever*** be able to repay you.
b) *I will ***ever*** be able to repay you.

(bbc.co.uk 12/04/2020)

Some, very brief, terminology:

- ***NPIs*** italicised, and bold.
- Licensing element underlined.



NPI LICENSING

A lot of different non-negative contexts also license NPIs. For example:

Questions:

- Er du **overhovedet** klar over hvad et surfboard koster? (KorpusDK)
- Can we do **anything** about that? (BNC)

Conditionals:

- Han har at holde sin kæft. Hvis han røber **noget som helst**, vil det gå ud over hans mor. (KorpusDK)
- On a serious note, if there is **anything** you want to delegate, you know where to find me. (BNC)

Superlatives:

- Pernille Vermunds påstand om CO2-udledning er noget af det dummeste, der **nogensinde** er sagt i klimadebatten. (Information 28/11/2020)
- The Supersaurus was probably the biggest creature **ever** to walk on [the] Earth. (BNC)



THE 'WHY?'

Why is a comparison between Danish and English NPIs even interesting?

Danish

- There has been some research on Danish NPIs e.g. K. R. Christensen (2005), but not all that much. No mention in neither *Grammatik over the Danske Sprog* (Hansen & Heltoft 2011) nor in *Dansk Grammatik* (L. H. Christensen & R. Z. Christensen 2014).

English

- Well-documented phenomenon, yet no consensus on what the *exact* licensing property is, nor how said property is best encapsulated:
 - Semantics (e.g. Giannakidou 1998)
 - Syntactic (e.g. Progovac 1994)
 - A combination of both (e.g. Linebarger 1984)

Noticeable parallels between Danish and English NPI phenomena, although there are major differences with regards to negation, e.g. English clitic negation (*isn't*) & *do*-support.



THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- a) What are the exact characteristics of the structural relationship that has to hold between the licensing (negative) element and an NPI, and is it the same relationship for the other non-negative licensing contexts?
- b) What is the relationship between Danish and English NPIs? Do Danish NPIs behave the same way as their English counterparts?

MA thesis divided into two parts

- Presentation and discussion of the theoretical NPI requirements.
- A corpus study of Danish and English NPIs to determine whether the NPIs behave alike.



THE 'HOW?'

I argue that NPI licensing has both a **syntactic** and a **semantic** requirement

Syntactically, there are two requirements:

- The presence of the licensing element.
- The NPI must be in scope of the licensing element. I.e. the NPI must be contained within the structural sister of the licensing element. In other words, the NPI must be c-commanded by its licensing element (Vikner 2013, 477).



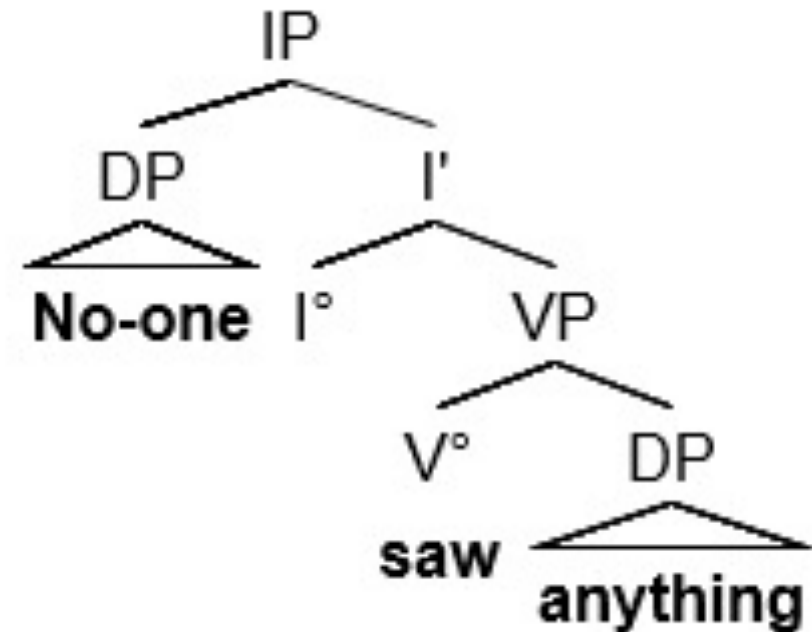
C-COMMAND

C-command:

- 'Node X c-commands node Y iff the first branching node dominating X also dominates Y' (Haegeman and Guéron 1999, 214).

The subject c-commands the object, while the object does not c-command the subject:

- A negative subject can license an NPI-object, while a negative object licensing an NPI subject is ungrammatical:
 - No-one understood *anything*
 - **Anyone* understood nothing
 - Ingen forstod *noget som helst*
 - *Nogen som helst* forstod ingenting



SEMANTICS

The syntactic requirements are insufficient on their own.

If c-command was sufficient, then the following conditional *should* license the NPI

- *If you love coffee, then you should **ever** visit the Double R Diner.

Which it clearly does not.

For long, the principal semantic requirement was thought to be Downward Entailment (DE):

Downward Entailment: ‘ δ is a trigger for NPI’s iff δ is downward-entailing.’

(Ladusaw 1979, 147)

DE is entailing/reasoning from a superset (i.e. general) to a subset (specific):

- Bob won't buy apples --> Bob won't buy Golden Delicious.
- -/-> Bob won't buy fruit.



SEMANTICS

Problems with DE:

- Yes/no questions in general are not DE.
 - Ladusaw appeals to 'availability of a biased negative answer' (Giannakidou 2002, 7).
 - Unsatisfactory for most yes/no-questions.
- Conditionals are not DE either (Brandtler 2010, 19).

Newer theory is Giannakidou's (1998, 2002, ...) *Veridicality Hypothesis* (Abridged version)

- Focuses on the veridicality (i.e. truth value) of sentences.



EMPIRICAL DATA

I settled on a non-exhaustive of ‘classic’ English NPIs and located their Danish equivalents.

- Verbs from Vikner (2011, 48).
- Jensen (2002) points toward a limited distribution of *slet* and *heller*.

CHOSEN NPIs	
Danish	English
<i>Nogensinde</i>	<i>Ever</i>
<i>Overhovedet</i>	<i>At all</i>
<i>Slet</i>	<i>At all</i>
<i>Heller</i>	<i>Either</i>
<i>Behøve</i>	<i>Need</i>
<i>Fordrage</i>	<i>Stand</i>
<i>Nogen/</i>	<i>Any</i>
<i>Noget som helst</i>	<i>Any</i>
<i>Nogen som helst</i>	<i>Any</i>
<i>Noget som helst</i>	<i>Anything (at all)</i>
<i>Nogen som helst</i>	<i>Anyone (at all)</i>



MORE EMPIRICAL DATA

Empirical data for the Danish and English NPI distribution collected via text corpora:

Danish

- *KorpusDK*
 - Offline corpus allowed R script extractions.
- *Infomedia*
 - Danish newspaper database.
 - Searched in a four week timespan to limit parameters.

English

- *British National Corpus* (BNC).
- *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA).

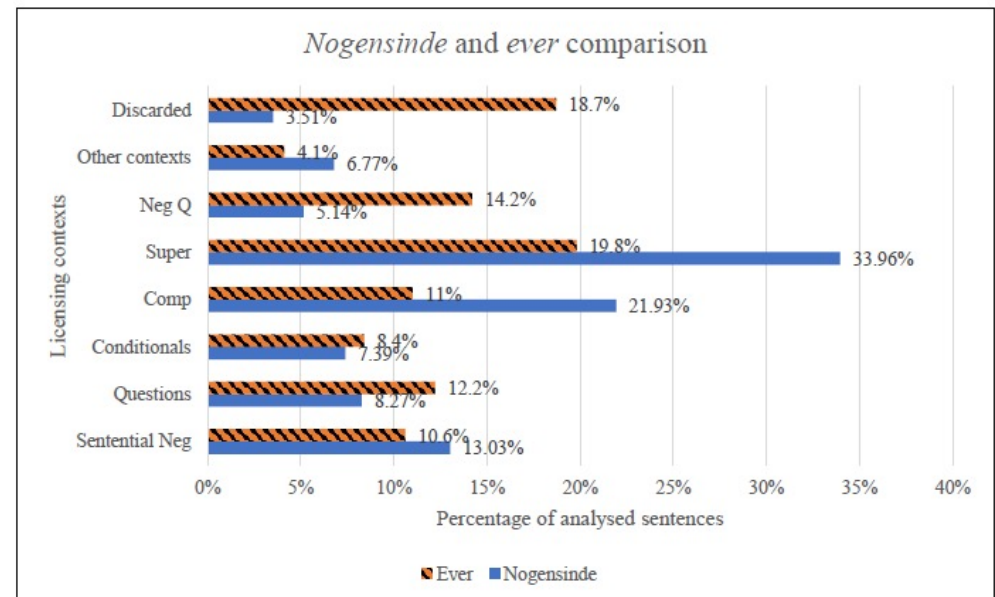
A lot of counting.



First determine the distribution of the individual NPI. Then compare the NPI pairs to determine whether the pairs are found in the same licensing contexts.

Empirical conclusion

- Strong similarities between Danish and English NPIs
 - Different enough that a 1:1 relation is impossible to conclude
- All NPIs except for *nogensinde/ever* are most frequent under the scope of sentential negation.



THE 'WHY, GOD WHY?!'

- Data collection
 - When is 'enough' data enough?
 - (Ken most likely says 'never')
 - Noise in the data (discarded category)
- *KorpusDK*
 - Some R issues lead to duplications
- *Infomedia*
 - No automated approached (Copyrights).
 - How *Infomedia* 'logs' news.
 - Unique hits.



(MORE) PROBLEMS/ISSUES/CHALLENGES

- Delimiting scope
 - *How many NPIs and licensing contexts should I include?*
- Semantic theory is very labyrinthine



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