

## Negative Polarity Items and Definite Descriptions

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The uniqueness implications of singular definite descriptions have been the focus of much controversy (e.g., Roberts, 2003). Singular definite descriptions (DDs) often imply some domain-relative uniqueness; the question is whether this implication derives from the truth-conditional semantic content of definite descriptions (as on the Russellian view in, e.g., Neale, 1990), from their uniqueness presupposition, (the “Fregean” view in, e.g., Heim and Kratzer, 1995), or from pragmatic inferences from discourse requirements on DDs (as argued in, e.g., Heim, 1982 and Roberts, 2003). I show that a careful look at the licensing conditions of negative polarity items (NPIs) provides evidence for the last view.

Although the standard account of weak NPIs (e.g. “any” and “ever”) has it that they are licensed just in downward-entailing (DE) contexts, it is well-known that they are also acceptable in many non-monotonic contexts (see, e.g., Heim 1985, von Stechow 1995).

- (1) Most people who ever went to Paris liked it.
- (2) There were exactly five people with any sense left.

While various proposals have been made to explain why examples such as (1) and (2) are, in some extended sense, DE, the generalization still holds that almost all non-monotonic contexts, such as those in (1) and (2) and the antecedents of conditionals, tend to license NPIs in many conversational contexts (and perhaps even most such contexts). I argue that this conclusion is compatible with many previous accounts of NPI-licensing such as Krifka (1995) and (with some modification) Kadmon and Landman (1993). In particular, if we assume that NPIs call for domain extensions which do not weaken the original statement (following Kadmon and Landman), we need only assume that statements with NPIs in them need *not* to be weaker than alternative statements with smaller domains. This then yields the prediction that non-UE contexts (and hence non-monotonic ones) should allow NPIs. (I argue that various purported counter-examples in which NPIs are supposed *not* to be allowed in non-monotonic contexts are only pragmatically infelicitous).

I note that this conclusion immediately puts pressure on the Russellian semantics for descriptions, on which “The F is G” is true just in case there is exactly one F and it satisfies G. On that view, descriptions are quantifiers which are non-monotonic in their restrictor, thus the Russellian should expect DDs to license NPIs. Singular definite descriptions do not do so, however (besides in various cases where *other* elements in the sentence create non-monotonic contexts within the DD):

- (3) ? The boy who’d ever been to Hollywood enjoyed it.

A more pressing issue is whether presuppositions of uniqueness (and non-monotonic presuppositions generally) can license NPIs. I consider other linguistic devices besides singular DDs which have been supposed to trigger non-monotonic presuppositions. One case is that of descriptions of the form *the n F*, as in “the one man.” These descriptions are taken by many, including Heim and Kratzer, to presuppose that there are just *n* things satisfying *F*. However, they license NPIs, as in (4).

(4) The one man who ever went to France is in the bar.

This case is not definitive, however, as it is possible that it is the “one” alone that licenses the NPI, with something besides a uniqueness presupposition (rather than “the one” licensing the NPI with its uniqueness presupposition). Against this response it is worth noting that “one,” being UE, does not alone normally license NPIs, as in (5).

(5) ? One person who ever went to Paris is in the bar.

I examine the possibility that there might be a silent “only” in the expression “the one,” but suggest that this still leaves an open problem about the distribution of silent “only.”

A deciding case for the question of whether uniqueness presuppositions license NPIs might be “both” which is widely supposed to presuppose that there are exactly two things satisfying its restrictor. This presupposition, like the uniqueness presupposition, is non-monotonic. It has sometimes been claimed that “both” cannot license NPIs in its restrictor. However, the data is not nearly so clear. Many speakers find (6) acceptable, and almost all speakers find it considerably better than (7).

(6) In the study, both dogs that received any physical therapy eventually managed to walk again.

(7) ? In the study, the dog that received any physical therapy eventually managed to walk again.

If “both” really just presupposes a unique pair satisfying its restrictor predicate, then this minimal pair provides evidence that singular definite descriptions do not have semantic uniqueness presuppositions.

I consider a couple ways of accommodating the uniqueness view of descriptions in combination with an account of NPI-licensing. This is von Stechow’s (1994) account of NPI-licensing in terms of Strawson-entailment. I note that this account, too, wrongly predicts that singular DDs should license NPIs (since they are Strawson-DE). Von Stechow has suggested that this problem may be fixed by restricting the NPI-licensing contexts to those that are Strawson-DE and not Strawson-UE, which would exclude singular descriptions. However, this fix still does not adequately capture the contrast between (6) and (7).

I argue that accounts of singular definites that treat uniqueness implications as the result of conversational implicatures (as in Roberts, 2003) do not predict that they should license NPIs. To support this claim I show that non-monotonic implicatures, generally, do not license NPIs. Consider, for instance (8):

(8) ? Two people drank any soda.

↪ No more than two people drank any soda.

Despite the non-monotonic scalar implicature the NPI “any” is still completely unacceptable.

## References

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