

ESLLI Introductory Course on
Negative Polarity Items: Corpus Linguistics, Semantics, and Psycholinguistics
English NPIs Collected in von Bergen and von Bergen 1993

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1 Denotative Strengthening of Negation (Denotative Negationsverstärkung)

- (1) a. at all
b. what(so)ever
c. possibly
mainly with *can*.

2 Affective Strengthening of Negation (Affektive Negationsverstärker)

- (2) a. the hell
b. the fuck
c. give a damn
d. worth a damn
e. a (god)damned thing
(i) You can't get a (god)damned thing out of him.
f. a doggoned thing
(i) Three months I've worked here, and not a doggoned thing has happened.

Some of these are similar to minimal elements, but for von Bergen and von Bergen (1993) these are more affective.

With occurrences primarily in questions (?)

- (3) a. on earth
b. the hell
c. the fuck

These have to precede the interrogative constituent immediately:

- (4) a. What the hell are you doing?
b. *What are you doing the hell?

3 Strengthening of Negation by Minimal Items (Negationsverstärkung durch minimale Elemente)

- (5) p. 139
- a. budge an inch
 - b. drink a drop
 - c. sing a note
 - d. say a word
 - e. believe a word of it
 - f. have had a bite to eat
 - (i) I haven't had a bite to eat all day
 - g. hurt a fly
 - (i) He wouldn't hurt a fly
(normally with "would"?)
 - h. sleep a wink
 - i. cost you a penny
 - j. has a penny to his name
 - k. move a muscle
 - l. worth the paper it was written on
 - m. have got a stitch on
 - (i) The maid walked in without knocking, and he hadn't got a stitch on.
 - n. a hair of his head
 - (i) Not a hair of his head was harmed.
 - o. a hair out of place
 - (i) She turned up with not a hair out fo place
why is this in this group??
 - p. give a damn
also in group 2
 - q. worth a damn
also in group 2
 - r. have a bean
 - s. worth a bean
 - t. care a rap
 - u. have a leg to stand on
 - (i) When he changed his mind, I had not a leg to stand on
 - v. be worth the candle
 - w. make head or tail (of sth)
 - x. have the ghost of a chance
 - (i) You haven't the ghost of a chance of getting the job.
 - y. have a spark of decency (generosity, honour, consideration, interest, enthusiasm)
 - z. an iota of truth
 - (i) There's not an iota of truth in what she said!
 - aa. a drop of jealousy
 - (i) There isn't a drop of jealousy in her.
 - ab. a thing

- (6) verbal NPI
- a. bat an eyelid
idiomatic VP (even-test):
(i) *He didn't bat anything, not even an eyelid.
(ii) He didn't do anything, not even bat an eyelid.
 - b. lift a finger
idiomatic VP
 - c. [p. 140]
 - d. say boo to a goose
idiomatic VP
(i) He couldn't say boo to a goose
always with "can"/modal?
 - e. have a clue (about)
 - f. have the least idea
 - g. turn a hair
idiomatic VP
(i) He did not turn a hair
 - h. dream of (V-ing)
idiomatic VP
 - i. touch
VP NPI
(i) He swore he'd never touch a drink again.
 - j. lay a finger on
idiomatic VP
 - k. will hear of
idiomatic VP
(i) I won't hear of you walking to the station — let me give you a lift
 - l. budge (sth)
VP NPI
(i) We tried to lift the rock but we couldn't budge it.
 - m. touch (???)
VP NPI
(i) When it comes to making speeches, there's no one to touch him.
 - n. can (be fit to) hold a candle to (so) [= be a servant to]
idiomatic VP
(i) Everyone is so inferior that they can't even hold a candle to him.
 - o. be in the same street as [=be in the same category]
idiomatic VP
(i) His second book is not in the same street as his first
 - p. be a patch on
idiomatic VP
(i) This Algerian wine isn't a patch on the French.

- (7) Adverbial NPI
- a. suggesting for a minute
Adv NPI
 - b. see an inch in front of him
Adv NPI
 - c. in the least
Adv NPI
 - (i) He's not in the least worried.
 - d. be caught dead
Adv NPI
 - (i) I wouldn't be caught dead in a fast food restaurant.
 - (ii) even-test (p. 151): I wouldn't be caught in a fast food restaurant, not even dead.
 - e. can get a word in edgeways
"word" is NP minimizer
"in edgeways" is ADV-NPI
 - (i) He talks so much that no one else can get a word in edgeways.
 - f. begin to (p. 150)
 - (i) I couldn't begin to explain
- (8) *even*-test (von Bergen and von Bergen, 1993, p. 145):
- a. Ist das Einfügen von *even* in einem NPI-Satz nicht möglich, ohne dessen Sinn entscheidend zu beeinträchtigen, so kann das NPI keine minimale Einheit enthalten.
 - b. Wenn wir das minimale Element nach hinten in eine *even*-Phrase auslagern, tritt es unzweideutig hervor. So kann man nachweisen, ob das minimal Element eine Nominalphrase [...], eine Verbalphrase oder eine adverbiale Bestimmung ist.

The (b)-test is rather strange: most NPIs have nominal minimizers. If there is a V and an NP, it fails for the NP in cases of idiomatic VPs.

Productivity

von Bergen and von Bergen (1993) (p. 152) observe a high degree of productivity: in V-NPmin combinations, V can vary. Maybe there is even a general pattern of "Verb + minimales Element". Generalizing this idea to endpoints on scales, they attempt to capture superlatives as well. . . . and purely pragmatically inferable endpoints for occasional NPIs:

- (9) She didn't even want to see her boyfriend. (p. 153)

4 Strengthening of Negation by Maximal Items (Negationsverstärkung durch maximale Elemente)

- (10)
- a. for the world
 - (i) I wouldn't hurt her for the world.
 - b. hit the broad side of a barn.
 - (i) He can't hit the broad side of a barn.
always with "can"?
 - c. touch with a barge-pole/ ten-foot pole
 - d. Wild horses would drag (someone somewhere)

- e. in a hundred years
Adv-NPI
- f. for all the tea in China
Adv-NPI
- g. know him from Adam [= I have no idea who he is]
idiomatic VP
 - (i) I don't know him from Adam.

even-test is applied here as well!

5 Simple and Elaborated Forms (Einfache und elaborierte Form)

pairs, one of which is an NPI:

- (11) a. much (vs. a lot) (Adv)
 - (i) He didn't say much.
 - (ii) He said a lot.
- b. much N (vs. a lot of N)
 - (i) There isn't much food left.
 - (ii) There is a lot/ lots of/ plenty of food left.
- c. many N (vs. a lot of/ a great many/ plenty of)
 - (i) I don't have many things to see to.
 - (ii) I have a lot of/ a great many/ plenty of things to see to.
- d. far (vs. a long way/ quite far/ rather far)
 - (i) It's not far from here.
 - (ii) It's a long way from here.
- e. long (vs. a long time)
 - (i) He's not been away long.
 - (ii) He's been away a long time.
- f. yet (vs. already)
- g. that A (vs. as A as that)
 - (i) Come along, it's not that difficult.
 - (ii) It's as difficult as that.

Observations:

- the simple form is the NPI, the “elaborated” the positive element (Lott, 1962).
- some of these NPIs are only NPIs in certain registers.

6 Nonreferential Indefinites (Nichtreferentielle Indefinita)

(von Bergen and von Bergen (1993) list the NPI together with its positive counterpart)

- (12)
- a. any (vs. some)
 - (i) There aren't any left.
There are some left.
 - b. any (vs. a little (somewhat))
 - (i) It isn't any better
It's a little (somewhat) better.
 - c. anything (vs. something)
 - d. anybody (vs. somebody)
 - e. anywhere (vs. somewhere)
 - f. any more (vs. some time)
 - (i) I won't go there anymore
I will go there again some time.
 - g. any good (vs. ???)
 - (i) The film wasn't any good.
The film had some good scenes in it.
 - h. ever (vs. sometimes)
 - (i) He won't ever admit that he's made a mistake.
He will sometimes admit that he's made a mistake.
 - i. ever (vs. -)
 - (i) I don't remember ever seeing him before.
I remember having seen him before
 - j. either (vs. both)
 - (i) I don't want either of them.
I want both of them.
 - k. , either (vs. , too)
 - (i) I don't want that one, either.
I want that one, too.

Why are these not sorted under "einfache und elaborierte Form"? (p.162)

- they are a homogeneous semantic class (indefinites)
- the positive form is not "more elaborated"/ "phonologically stronger" than the negative form.
- exchanging the simple and the elaborated form leads to a change in register; exchanging some/any leads to a different meaning:

- (13)
- a. I live far/a long way from the center of town.
 - b. The student couldn't answer some/any of the questions.

7 Understatement

(14) First subgroup: modifiers

The positive equivalent is often possible, but has a different meaning (*He's quite the James Bond type..* But not always: * *He's a lot of a swimmer* (see (14-f)).

- a. too
 - (i) I haven't been too well lately.
- b. overly
 - (i) I'm not overly interested.
- c. exactly
 - (i) She's not exactly beautiful.
- d. quite
 - (i) She is not quite right in the head.
- e. quite
 - (i) He's not quite the James Bond type.
- f. much
 - (i) He's not much of a swimmer.
 - (ii) She's not much to look at.
 - (iii) This film is not up to much.
- g. all that
 - (i) I'm not all that hungry.
- h. overmuch
 - (i) He doesn't like me overmuch.

(15) Second subgroup: contains idiomatic expressions.

- a. in a hurry [= (not) too fast]
 - (i) I won't forget her kindness in a hurry.
 - (ii) I won't help her again in a hurry — she's so ungrateful.
- b. set the Thames on fire. [= (never) do anything overly spectacular]
 - (i) Jim will never set the Thames on fire.
- c. great shakes [= (not) too good at it]
 - (i) He's no great shakes as a piano player.
- d. mince matters/ his words [= said very clearly what he thought]
 - (i) The minister didn't mince matters/ his words.
- e. make bones about sth. [= felt no doubt or shame about it]
 - (i) She made no bones about her prejudice against them.
- f. care to [= keinen gesteigerten Wert legen auf]
 - (i) I wouldn't care to try hang-gliding.
- g. born yesterday [= he's not a fool]
 - (i) You won't take him in; he wasn't born yesterday.
- h. flies on him [= he cannot be tricked]
 - (i) There are no flies on him.

8 Presuppositionally Marked Verb Phrases (Präsuppositionell markierte Verbalphrasen)

- (16)
- a. can place so.
 - (i) I'm sure I've met her before somewhere, but I can't quite place her.
 - b. as black as X is painted
 - (i) He is not as black as he is painted.
 - c. can help
 - (i) The queen couldn't help sneezing
 - d. dare
 - (i) I dare not say anything against him.
 - e. mind
 - (i) I don't mind doing the washing up.
 - f. can stand
 - (i) I can't stand whisky [= it doesn't agree with me.]
 - g. can support
 - (i) I can't support this heat.
 - h. can abide
 - (i) I can't abide rude people.
 - i. can bear
 - (i) I can't bear being kept waiting.
 - j. can stand
 - (i) I couldn't stand people telling me what to do.
 - k. can stand the sight of
 - (i) I can't stand the sight of him.
 - l. have use for so
 - (i) I have no use for people who are always grumbling.
 - m. can support [= endure]
 - (i) I cannot support his jealousy any longer.
 - n. brook
 - (i) He would brook no interruptions from his listeners.
 - o. will stand for
 - (i) I won't stand for being treated like a child.
 - p. have
 - (i) I'm not having any more of your nonsense!
 - q. care (about)
 - (i) I don't care (about) what people think.
 - r. care for
 - (i) I don't really care for tea; I like coffee better.
 - s. bother
 - (i) He didn't bother to dress up for the party.
 - t. can be bothered
 - (i) I can't be bothered to look for it just now.
 - u. matter
 - (i) It doesn't matter if I miss my train.
 - v. good
 - (i) It's no good talking to him, because he never listens.
 - w. use

- (i) It's no use use complaining; they won't do anything about it.
- x. point
 - (i) There is no point in trying to persuade him — he'll never change his mind.
- y. dare
 - (i) I dare not say anything against him.
- z. hurry [= need for quickness]
 - (i) Don't drive so fast: there is no hurry.
- aa. need
 - (i) There is no need for you to come if you don't want to.
- ab. need
 - (i) You need not come to the meeting.

Characterization of the group (p. 177f.)

- These NPIs add information that directly contradicts presuppositions. (See: I've met her before, but I can't place her.)
- They can be used to explicitly confirm the presupposition (He's as black as he is painted.)

References

von Bergen, Anke and von Bergen, Klaus (1993). *Negative Polarity in English*. Tübingen: Narr.

Lott, Bernhard (1962). The Restricted Use of Certain Words and Collocations in Affirmative, Negative and Interrogative Constructions. In *Bulletin of the Central Institute of English*, Number 2, pp. 32–46. Hyderabad.