

Proposal This abstract revisits the problem of strict negative concord (NC) languages. We offer an analysis of n-words that takes them to be strong NPIs (in the sense of Gajewski 2011 and Chierchia 2013), therefore straightforwardly deriving the restricted set of possible licensors for n-words: sentential negation (SN) and *without*. We argue that the main difference between n-words and other NPIs is a question of where licensing (which on our account amounts to exhaustification of active alternatives) occurs: descriptively, n-words can be licensed in their base position, whereas NPIs need to be licensed in their surface position. Crucially, our account can derive the obligatory co-occurrence of sentential negation with n-words in strict NC languages, a detail that many previous analyses fail to capture.

Background In strict NC languages (e.g. Slavic languages, Hungarian, Greek or Romanian), an n-word needs to be accompanied by SN, be it in subject or object position:

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|--------|-----------------------|----|-------------------------|
| (1) a. | Nimeni *(nu) a venit. | b. | *(Nu) am văzut nimic |
| | n-body not has come | | not have seen n-thing |
| | ‘Nobody came.’ | | ‘I didn’t see anything’ |

Previous approaches differ with respect to the quantificational status of n-words and the source of negation (n-words and/or SN). On a recent influential syntactic approach (Zeijlstra 2004, 2008), NC amounts to agreement between a single negative operator, carrying [iNEG], which may be covert, and one or more overt elements carrying [uNEG] (n-words and/or SN). Semantically, this amounts to saying that n-words are uniformly non-negative (i.e. regular indefinites carrying [uNEG]) and that only the [iNEG] element contributes negation to the semantic interpretation. In strict NC languages, both n-words and SN are [uNEG] elements. Consequently, in strict NC languages the [iNEG] feature must be carried by a covert element. The problem is that by treating both n-words and SN in strict NC as [uNEG] elements, this approach fails to explain why SN is obligatory with n-words: if [uNEG] elements require the insertion of a covert negation, why can’t n-words do that on their own? Furthermore, why should the semantic interpretation of SN differ cross-linguistically? Lastly, this approach is forced to stipulate the set of possible licensors, i.e. [iNEG] carriers.

Analysis We propose that n-words are, across the board, strong NPIs. We adopt an alternative-based account of NPI licensing wherein they denote regular existential quantifiers which furthermore activate sub-domain alternatives (Krifka 1995, Lahiri 1998, Chierchia 2013). Alternatives need to be incorporated into meaning and the way to do so is via a covert exhaustifier (call it O) with a meaning essentially equivalent to *only*. The exhaustification of these alternatives will be felicitous only if the NPI occurs in the scope of a downward-entailing operator (Op-DE), meaning that the configuration $O > \text{Op-DE} > \text{NPI}$ is felicitous whereas the configuration $O > \text{NPI}$ gives rise to an unrescuable contradiction (in the sense of Gajewski 2002). Exhaustification comes in two varieties: weak (O_w) and strong (O_s). O_w applies to just truth conditions, whereas O_s applies to both truth-conditions and non-truth-conditional dimensions of meaning, such as presuppositions and implicatures (Gajewski 2011). The result is that NPIs requiring strong exhaustification, i.e. strong NPIs like *in weeks* or *either* can only occur in the scope of operators that do not bring in any presuppositions or implicatures. This approach thus predicts the limited set of n-word licensors: SN and *without*.

On our proposal the difference between a weak NPI (*any, ever*) and an n-word comes from weak vs. strong exhaustification. The story cannot end here for we see that even though n-words and strong NPIs behave similarly with respect to which operators license them, n-words are differently restricted than NPIs, both strong and weak. Namely, they are licensed even if they are not c-commanded by their licensor, contrary to NPIs which do need to be c-commanded by their licensor. We illustrate this with an example from Romanian, using the NPI *vreun*:

- (2) a. Nimeni *(nu) a venit.
 n-body not has come
 ‘Nobody came.’
- b. *Vreun student (nu) a venit.
 any student not has come

Data like (2b) has been used to argue that NPIs cannot reconstruct (cf. Boskovic 2008), meaning that they cannot be interpreted in a position other than their surface position. In line with current literature on exhaustification (Chierchia, Fox and Spector 2012) we assume that only the interpreted copy is subject to the requirement of noncontradictory exhaustification. In the current setup, this translates into a requirement that only the highest (i.e. overt) copy needs to be noncontradictorily exhaustified. On the other hand, we take the distribution of n-words to indicate that they can reconstruct, i.e. be interpreted in their pre-movement position. Since this position is below sentential negation, exhaustification can proceed noncontradictorily. It’s worth noting that in Romanian post-verbal subjects (e.g. ‘nu a venit nimeni’, the variant of (2a)) are just as common as pre-verbal subjects, with no obvious difference in meaning.

We next turn to another difference between n-words and NPIs. Unlike NPIs, n-words are felicitous in fragment answers and elliptical structures, where there is no overt negation.

- (3) a. Cine a venit? Nimeni. b. Maria cam exagerează, dar Ion niciodată.
 who has come? nobody Mary sort of exaggerate but John never
 ‘Who came? Nobody.’ ‘Mary sort of exaggerates, but John never does.’

That n-words in strict NC languages can survive even in the absence of negation is surprising. One possibility would be to say that in the case of a fragment answer a negation is part of the elided material (e.g., Giannakidou 2000). The problem with such an approach is that there is no proper antecedent for the negation, thus disobeying the identity condition on ellipsis. The same can be argued for the construction in (3b). We account for this by invoking a covert negation as a last resort rescuing mechanism. It’s clear that this strategy is not available for regular NPIs since they cannot occur in structures like (3). So the question is why this strategy cannot be invoked in the case of pre-verbal n-words, as in (1a) in the absence of SN. To tackle this problem, we appeal to an economy condition: if you spell out the material within the VP, then a spelled-out negative marker trumps the insertion of covert negation; i.e. you cannot appeal to covert negation if you have the space where you could have spelled out overt negation.

Further support in favor of invoking covert negation comes from double negation (DN) readings. In strict NC languages, a DN reading can only arise in the presence of two n-words and SN, as in (4).

- (4) Nimeni nu a citit nimic.
 nobody not has read nothing
 ‘Nobody hasn’t read anything.’ (DN) *or* ‘Nobody has read anything.’ (NC)

Since a DN meaning amounts to two negations, for (4) to receive a DN reading a covert negation must be invoked. This seems to go against the economy condition above. This violation falls under the umbrella of phenomena regulated by the principle of minimal compliance (Richards 1998): it’s enough if one n-word satisfies the economy condition, namely enough if one n-word is licensed by an overt negation. Once that happens, the second n-word can be licensed by either the SN, giving rise to the NC reading, or by a covert negation, giving rise to the DN reading. **Conclusion** Our proposal provides an explanation for why SN obligatorily co-occurs with n-words in strict NC languages, something that the syntactic approach is unable to do. This account also allows for an easier integration of n-words in the broader typology of polarity-sensitive indefinites. Furthermore, it allows us to get rid of the stipulation that the semantic interpretation of SN varies across languages.