

SOME DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE WITH RESPECT TO NPI LICENSING*

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ABSTRACT

The cross-linguistic research on “negative polarity items” (NPIs) not only reveals what constraints are imposed by semantics on the output of syntax but also provides insights into how individual languages differ with respect to the way they satisfy these constraints. This note makes a small contribution to this enterprise: it discusses some differences in distribution between NPIs in English and their counterparts in Vietnamese. The discussion is preluded by a brief introduction to background concepts and assumptions. The Vietnamese data are presented as a challenge which motivates further thought and investigation. A sketch of an approach is provided at the end.

Keywords: NPI, question words, Vietnamese, English, syntax-semantics interface

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1. INTRODUCTION

Negative Polarity Items (NPIs) are indefinites whose syntactic distribution is subject to semantic constraints. What is meant by the “syntactic” distribution of NPIs is the set of environments where these expressions can occur without causing “ill-formedness”. The fascinating fact about NPIs is that this set must be characterized in terms of the logical properties of the expressions involved (Chierchia 2013; Abrusán 2019; Del Pinal 2022). To illustrate, let us consider the prototypical case of NPIs: DPs headed by *any*.

- (1) a. no one read a book
b. no one read any book
- (2) a. someone read a book
b. *someone read any book

Intuitively, (1a) and (1b) say the same thing: no person x is such that there is a book y such that x read y . Thus, *a book* and *any book* are arguably equivalent (Kadmon and Landman 1993; Gajewski 2008). And clearly, (2a) is the negation of (1a). So why is (2b) not accepted as the negation of (1b)? Note that the feeling about (2b) is not that it expresses some weird meaning, but that it is ill-formed: the words don’t fit, so to speak (Linebarger 1980). Note, also, that it is hard to pinpoint a syntactic difference between (1b) and (2b) which could explain the contrast. These sentences differ with respect to the subject, which is a singular DP in both cases. As far as syntax is concerned, *no one* and *someone* are identical. But semantically, they are different (Barwise and Cooper 1981; Heim and Kratzer 1998).

- (3) a. $[[\text{no one}]](P) = 1$ iff $P \cap \{x: x \text{ is a person}\} = \emptyset$
b. $[[\text{someone}]](P) = 1$ iff $P \cap \{x: x \text{ is a person}\} \neq \emptyset$

What relates the semantic difference between *no one* and *someone* to the contrast in well-formedness between (1b) and (2b) is the condition in (4).

(4) NPI-Licensing (first version, to be revised)

A DP headed by *any* causes ill-formedness unless it is contained in a sentence S which is downward-entailing (DE) with respect to the NP complement of *any*

A constituent X is said to be DE with respect to its subconstituent Y iff strengthening of Y leads to weakening of X (Ladusaw 1979). Take (1a), for example. This sentence is DE with respect to the NP *book*. If we strengthen *book* to, say, *long book*, the result would be the sentence *no one read a long book*, which is weaker than (1a).¹

What (4) predicts is this: whenever *any book* can occur grammatically in a sentence S, replacing *book* with *long book* will result in a sentence entailed by S. This prediction seems correct.

- (5) a. no one read any book
 \implies no one read any long book
- b. John does not read any book
 \implies John does not read any long book
- c. few students read any book
 \implies few students read any long book
- d. at most three students read any book
 \implies at most three students read any long book

The condition in (4) also predicts that if replacing *book* with *long book* is not weakening, the sentence is unacceptable. This prediction is borne out too, although it is a bit more difficult to see. Because the sentences involved are all deviant, the intuition we are after is that to the extent we can interpret them under the assumption that *any book* is equivalent to *a book*, the inferences do not go through. Thus, I will present the ill-formed sentence with *any book*, and then show that the inference does not go through with the equivalent sentences containing *a book*.

¹ Assuming denotations to be sets, we can say that expression A is stronger than expression B iff $[[A]] \subseteq [[B]]$. We thus have $[[long\ book]] \subseteq [[book]]$, since everything which is a long book must also be a book, and $[[no\ one\ read\ a\ book]] \subseteq [[no\ one\ read\ a\ long\ book]]$, since every world in which no one read a book must also be a world in which no one read a long book.

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- (6) a. *someone read any book
 someone read a book
 \Rightarrow someone read a long book
 b. *John read any book
 John read a book
 \Rightarrow John read a long book
 c. *many students read any book
 many students read a book
 \Rightarrow many students read a long book
 d. *at least three students read a book
 at least three students read a book
 \Rightarrow at least three students read a long book

Thus, (4) does good work. However, as it turns out, the condition is not adequate in its current form. Consider (7).

- (7) only John read any book

Intuitively, (7) is well-formed. Now, suppose I learn that only John read a book, can I conclude that only John read a long book? Of course not! How do I know that the book John read is not a short book? Thus, replacing *book* with *long book* is not guaranteed to be weakening.

- (8) only John read any book
 \Rightarrow only John read any long book

Can we fix (4) to deal with (7) as well as with the cases we have considered? The answer is yes (von Stechow 1999; Crnič 2019).

- (9) NPI-Licensing (final version)
 A DP headed by *any* causes ill-formedness unless it is contained in a sentence S which is Strawson-downward-entailing (Strawson-DE) with respect to the NP complement of *any*

S Strawson-entails S' iff S together with the presupposing of S' entails S' (von Fintel 1999). Thus, S is Strawson-DE with respect to NP if replacing NP in S with a stronger expression results in a sentence Strawson-entailed by S. Let us now look at the case of *only* again.

- (10) a. only John read any book
 - (i) presupposition: John read a book
 - (ii) assertion: no one but John read a book
- b. only John read any long book
 - (i) presupposition: John read a long book
 - (ii) assertion: no one but John read a long book

Assuming the standard analysis of *only p* as presupposition *p* and asserting that alternatives of *p* not entailed by *p* are false (Horn 1969), we have the situation in (10). We can see that (10a) Strawson-entails (10b). Specifically, if (10a) is true and the presupposition of (10b), (10b-i), is also true, then (10b) has to be true too. This means that (10a) is Strawson-DE with respect to *book*. Given NPI-Licensing as formulated in (9), we predict the sentence to be well-formed, as observed.

Note that (9) is more “inclusive” than (4). If A entails B then A Strawson-entails B. Thus, if S is DE with respect to NP, then S is Strawson-DE with respect to NP. This means that (9) includes all cases of well-formedness predicted by (4) and more. It turns out that upgrading (4) to (9) is crucial, as the latter is needed to capture many other occurrences of NPIs, for example NPIs in the restriction of *every* (11a), in *if* clauses (11b), under adversative predicates such as *regret* (11c), and in the scope of existential modals such as *allowed* (11d) (von Fintel 1999; Crnič 2022).

- (11) a. every student who read any book passed the exam
- b. if John reads any book, he will pass the exam
- c. John regrets having read any book
- d. John is allowed to read any book

To see how Strawson-DEness is required in these cases, replace *book* in (11a-d) with *ten thousand year-old book*. The result will be (12a-d).

- (12) a. every student who read any ten thousand year-old book passed the exam
b. if John reads any ten thousand year-old book, he will pass the exam
c. John regret having read any ten thousand year-old book
d. John is allowed to read any ten thousand year-old book

Suppose it is common ground, i.e. true in every world of the context set, that there are no ten thousand year-old books. There would then be nothing incoherent about accepting the sentences in (11) as true without accepting the sentences in (12) as true. This means that the former do not entail the latter, i.e. that these sentences are not DE with respect to the NP complement of *any*. Now, suppose that the presuppositions of (12a-d), presented in (13a-d) respectively, are satisfied.

- (13) a. there are students who read ten thousand year-old books
b. it is possible that John reads a ten thousand year-old book
c. John has read a ten thousand year-old book
d. there are ten thousand year-old books

We can see that while (11a) does not entail (12a), the conjunction of (11a) and (13a) does entail (12a), and similarly for the b- to d-sentences. Thus, the sentences in (11) does not entail, but does Strawson-entail, those in (12). That *any* is acceptable in these cases is evidence that (9) is the correct licensing condition.

2. THE VIETNAMESE CHALLENGE

Vietnamese is one of the languages where NPIs and question words show clear morphological affinity. In fact, the same expression is used in this language to express the meaning of ‘which book’ and ‘any book’ (Bruening and Tran 2006; Trinh 2020, to appear). Sentences such as (12) are thus ambiguous between an interrogative and an NPI reading.²

² The word *quyển* is the so-called “classifier” (CL) that goes with *sách* (‘book’).

- (14) Nam không đọc quyển sách nào
Nam not read CL book NAO
a. Interrogative reading: ‘which book did Nam not read?’
b. NPI reading: ‘Nam did not read any book’

In what follows, we will only be interested in the NPI reading. Well-formedness judgements will be understood as being relative to this reading. This means that sentences with *nào* which have only the interrogative reading will be marked as ill-formed, and I will gloss *nào* as ANY, using capitalization to distinguish the item in question from English *any*. An example is the non-negated counterpart of (12).

- (15) *Nam đọc quyển sách nào
Nam read CL book ANY

The contrast between (14) and (15) already suggest similarity between English *any* and Vietnamese ANY. Both are licensed in the scope of negation and deviant in plain non-negated sentences. What about the rest of *any*’s distribution? As it turns out, *any*’s distribution overlaps but does not coincide with ANY’s. Specifically, ANY’s distribution seems to be more restricted. Let us go through the facts.

First, ANY resembles *any* not only with respect to negated vs non-negated sentences, but also with respect to *no one* vs. *someone*, *few* vs. *many*, *if* clauses, and the restriction of *every*.

- (16) a. không-ai đọc quyển sách nào
no-one read CL book ANY
b. *ai-đó đọc quyển sách nào
someone read CL book ANY
- (17) a. ít-ai đọc quyển sách nào
few-people read CL book ANY
b. *nhiều-người đọc quyển sách nào
many-people read CL book ANY

- (18) nếu Nam đọc quyển sách nào, nó sẽ thi-đỗ
if Nam read CL book ANY he will pass-the-exam

However, unlike *any*, ANY is not licensed under *at most*, in the restriction of *every*, in the complement of *regret*, or in the scope of existential modals.

- (19) *nhiều-nhất ba sinh-viên đọc quyển sách nào
at-most three student read CL book ANY
- (20) *tất-cả-những-người mà đọc quyển sách nào đều sẽ thi-đỗ
everyone that read CL book ANY all will pass-the-exam
- (21) *Nam hối-hận là đã đọc quyển sách nào
regret that have read CL book ANY
- (22) *Nam được-phép đọc quyển sách nào
Nam is-allowed-to read CL book ANY

The empirical situation presented by Vietnamese is quite puzzling. The question facing us is how the environments that license ANY constitute a natural class. Are they sentences that are Strawson-DE with respect to the NP complement of ANY? No, because if they were, ANY's distribution should coincide with that of *any*, and all of (19)-(22) should be well-formed. What if ANY is subject to the stronger condition in (4) instead of the more inclusive one in (9)? In other words, can we say that ANY requires not Strawson-DEness but unqualified DEness? The answer, again, is no, because if (4) were the right condition on ANY, (19) should be well-formed and (18) should be ill-formed.

- (23) at most three students read a book
==> at most three students read a ten thousand year-old book
- (24) if John reads a book, he will pass an exam
=/=> if John reads a ten thousand year-old book, he will pass the exam

In a (realistic) context where there are no ten thousand year-old books, we still have to accept (23) as a valid argument, but it seems possible to accept the premise but not the conclusion of (24). Thus, (24) is valid only to the extent that it is possible for John to read a ten thousand year-old book, i.e. to the extent that the presupposition of the conclusion is satisfied. Assuming the Vietnamese translation of *at most* and *if* work just like their English counterparts, (19) is DE with respect to the NP complement of ANY, while (18) is not. If (4) is the right condition on ANY, we expect (19) to be natural and (18) to be odd. The facts, of course, are the opposite. Thus, (4) cannot be the right condition for ANY.

I just said “assuming the Vietnamese translation of *at most* and *if* work just like the English originals”. Should this assumption be made without justification? What if the translations are not faithful? Is it possible that ANY and *any* are both subject to the same condition, namely (9), and that the differences between them are due to the differences in meaning between the English items and their Vietnamese translations? More concretely, is it possible that what we have taken to be the Vietnamese equivalent of *at most*, *if*, *every*, *regret*, and *allowed* do not work in the same way as their English counterparts?

Let us now address this question. We will begin with the Vietnamese counterpart of *at most*.

- (25) a. nhiều-nhất ba sinh-viên đọc một quyển sách
at-most three student read one CL book
- b. nhiều-nhất ba sinh-viên đọc một quyển sách mười-ngàn-năm-tuổi
at-most three students read one CL book ten-thousand-year-old

Here's the fact: if (25a) is true, (25b) has to be true. Thus, we know that these sentences are DE, hence Strawson-DE, with respect to the noun *sách* ('book'), i.e. that there is no relevant difference between English *at most* and Vietnamese *nhiều nhất*, which we have assumed to be the translation of *at most*. Let us now consider *if*.

- (26) a. nếu Nam đọc một quyển sách, nó sẽ thi-đỗ
if Nam read one CL book, he will pass-the-exam
b. nếu Nam đọc một quyển sách mười-ngàn-năm-tuổi, nó sẽ thi-đỗ
if Nam read one CL book ten-thousand-year-old, he will pass-the-exam
c. it's possible that Nam read a ten thousand year-old book

The fact is that for Vietnamese speakers it is possible to accept (26a) as true without also accepting (26b) as true, for example in a context where it is clear that there are no ten thousand year-old books, hence it is clear that Nam could not have read one such book. However, if the speaker accepts (26a) and the fact in (26c), then she would have to accept (26b) as true. This shows that *nếu*, which we have used as the Vietnamese counterpart of English *if*, works just like *if* in the relevant respects. In other words, (24a) is Strawson-DE with respect to *sách*, just like (11b) is with respect to *book*. Let us turn to *every* next.

- (27) a. tất-cả-những-người mà đọc một quyển sách đều thi-đỗ
everyone that read one CL book all passed-the-exam
b. tất-cả-những-người mà đọc một quyển sách mười-ngàn-năm-tuổi đều thi-đỗ
everyone that read one CL book ten-thousand-year-old all passed-the-exam
c. there are people who read a ten thousand year-old book

It is possible for Vietnamese speakers to accept (27a) as true without accepting (27b) as true, for example in a context where it is clear that there are no ten thousand year-old books, hence that no one could have read such books. However, if the speaker accepts (27a) and the fact in (27c), then she would have to accept (27b) as true also. This shows that *tất-cả-những-người*, which we have used as the Vietnamese counterpart of English *everyone*, works just like *everyone* in the relevant respects. Specifically, (27a) is Strawson-DE with respect to *sách*, just like (11c) is with respect to *book*. Let us turn to *regret* next.

- (28) a. Nam hối-hận là đã đọc một quyển sách
 Nam regret that have read one CL book
 b. Nam hối-hận là đã đọc một quyển sách mười-ngàn-năm-tuổi
 Nam regret that have read one CL book ten-thousand-year-old
 c. Nam read a ten thousand year-old book

Again, it is possible for a Vietnamese speaker to accept (28a) as true without accepting (28b) as true too. However, if she takes (28c), which is the presupposition of (28b), to be a fact, then she would have to agree that (28b) is a necessary consequence of (28a). This shows that English *regret* and its Vietnamese counterpart, *hối-hận*, are identical as far as the properties of relevance to our discussion are concerned.

Last but not least, we come to the case of existential modals. Free choice reading of regular indefinites under these modals is possible in Vietnamese just as it is in English. For the sentences below, the intended reading is that Nam is free to choose the book that he is allowed to read.

- (29) a. Nam được-phép đọc một quyển sách
 Nam is-allowed-to read one CL book
 b. Nam được-phép đọc một quyển sách mười-ngàn-năm-tuổi
 Nam is-allowed-to read one CL book ten-thousand-year-old
 c. there are ten thousand year-old books

Vietnamese speakers may accept (29a) and at the same time reject (29b). However, once it is agreed that (29c) is a fact, then they will have to accept (29b) if they accept (29a). This shows that existential modals work the same way in English and Vietnamese with respect to the properties that are of concern.

The discussion above has admittedly not provided much in the way of interesting information. What we have learned is that English and Vietnamese have items that express the same meanings, namely those of *at most*, *if*, *every*, *regret*, and *allowed*. This is to be expected, given the assumption that universal grammar also includes an inventory of conceptual building blocks out of which lexical materials are constructed. What is surprising is that NPIs in Vietnamese, or at least, expressions in this language that resemble what we call “NPIs” in English, have a

different distribution than their English counterparts. The challenge posed by the Vietnamese facts is that this different distribution does not seem to be derivable from a straightforward revision of the condition of NPI-Licensing for English.³

I will not attempt to provide an analysis in this note. However, I will offer some speculation as to what an analysis could be based on. I do this in the next section.

3. SKETCH OF AN APPROACH

The sketch I am going to provide starts from asking what explains the principle which we have called “NPI-Licensing”, presented in (9) and repeated in (30) below.

(30) NPI-Licensing

A DP headed by *any* causes ill-formedness unless it is contained in a sentence S which is Strawson-downward-entailing (Strawson-DE) with respect to the NP complement of *any*

The derivation of (30) I will present here is basically that of Crnič (2014, 2019, 2022), which is itself based on insights from a family of well-known proposals (Heim 1984; Kadmon and Landman 1993; Lee and Horn 1994; Krifka 1995).⁴

These proposals share the assumption that *any* and *a* denote the same relation of having a non-empty intersection between sets. Note that *any* and *a*, just as other quantificational determiners, come with a resource domain D which is phonologically covert (von Stechow 1994).

$$(31) \quad [[\text{any}_D]](P)(Q) = [[a_D]](P)(Q) = 1 \text{ iff } D \cap P \cap Q \neq \emptyset$$

³ Note that we cannot say that *nao*-phrases correspond to “strong NPIs” in English such as *in weeks*: strong NPIs cannot occur in *if*-clauses (Chierchia 2013), whereas *nao*-phrases can, as evidenced by (18).

⁴ The presentation follows closely that of Trinh (2023).

The difference in distribution between *any* and *a* is then explained in terms of (i) the alternatives which are introduced by *any* and (ii) the condition which *any* imposes on these alternatives. Specifically, *any* introduces “subdomain” alternatives.

- (32) a. $\text{ALT}(\text{any}_D) = \{\text{any}_{D'} \mid D' \subseteq D\}$
 b. $\text{ALT}(\text{John read any}_D \text{ book}) = \{\text{John read any}_{D'} \text{ book} \mid D' \subseteq D\}$

The condition on alternatives of *any*-sentences is usually modeled in terms of an operator, call it MAX, which c-commands and associates with *any* and which presupposes that its prejacent is more informative than all of the alternatives induced by *any* (Crnič 2021).

- (33) MAX(S)
 (i) presupposes that S is more informative than its alternatives
 (ii) asserts that S is true

S is more informative than S' iff S entails S', given contextual information. In effect, this means that S is more informative than S' iff S Strawson-entails S', as Strawson-entailment means, essentially, entailment given that all the presuppositions involved are satisfied. We can thus reformulate the interpretation of MAX as (34).

- (34) MAX(S)
 (i) presupposes that S Strawson-entails its alternatives
 (ii) asserts that S is true

Let us see how the theory works. Consider (35).

- (35) MAX [John did not read any_D book]

Let D range over all books and $D' \subseteq D$ range over long books. What (35) presupposes is that (36a) Strawson-entails (36b). This presupposition, of course, is trivially satisfied.

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- (36) a. John did not read a book
b. John did not read a long book

Now consider (37).

- (37) MAX [John read any_D book]

The presupposition introduced by MAX in (37) is that (38a) Strawson-entails (38b).

- (38) a. John read a book
b. John read a long book

This presupposition, of course, cannot be satisfied. Thus, the deviance of **John read any book* can be explained as this sentence having an inconsistent presupposition.

The reader is invited to verify for herself that this account works for the other cases of English *any* also. What I want to point out here, however, is that the account involves a number of possible “parameters” on the basis of which we can hope to explain the differences between *any* and ANY. The first parameter is the meaning of the ANY vs. *any*. We have assumed they have the same meaning. However, this is not necessary. The second parameter is the alternatives introduced by *any* vs. ANY. We can pose the question whether ANY induced the same alternatives as *any* or, in fact, whether ANY introduced alternatives at all. In case we do say that ANY introduces alternatives, there is the question regarding the condition imposed by ANY on these alternatives. More concretely, we can ask whether the operator associated with ANY is the same MAX as defined in (34) or whether it is some other operator. To address these questions, more empirical and theoretical work is required. As I said, I will not make the attempt in this note. My hope was to present some data from Vietnamese which could give further stimulation to the cross-linguistic research on NPIs, and to provide a very brief sketch of what I think could be the starting point of an explanation of these data.

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對「否定極項」(NPI)的跨語言研究不僅揭露了語義對語法輸出所施加的限制性，也顯現了關於各個語言對於如何滿足這些限制所展現的差異性。這篇文章試圖對這個主題做出些許貢獻：我們討論英語 NPI 和越南語 NPI 之間在分佈上的一些差異。我們的討論首先簡要介紹背景概念和假設。越南語的語料則挑戰了現有的理論，並激發進一步的思考。最後我們提供了一個如何解決這個問題的草案。

關鍵字：NPI、疑問詞、越南語、英語、句法語義介面