

The role of predictions in backwards NPI licensing: first insights and prospective studies

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Negative polarity items (NPIs) such as *any* or *ever* are words or phrases that need to be licensed by negative contexts. In theoretical linguistics, this licensing process has been proposed to rely on syntactic, semantic, and/or pragmatic mechanisms [1;2;4;5]. To shed more light onto the licensing process, the on-line mechanisms via which NPIs are integrated with their licensing context have been investigated in some recent psycho- and neurolinguistic studies measuring reading times [9;11], or ERP-components [8;10;14]. These studies typically measure the response while readers are reading an NPI that is either licensed or unlicensed in a given context (e.g. ‘*Anna has *(not) read **any** books this year.*’), thereby providing insight into the nature of the licensing mechanism. Some NPIs in German, however, can also appear ahead of their licenser (1). Crucially, given the considerable evidence that humans form expectations about upcoming material while processing incomplete dependencies [3;6;7], reading the NPI in such cases may generate an expectation for the upcoming licenser.

(1) [*So recht*]_{NPI} hat Anna der Spielplatz in der Innenstadt **nicht** gefallen.

[Quite truly]_{NPI} has Anna the playground in the city-centre **not** liked

‘Anna did not particularly like the playground in the city centre.’

Recent studies on Turkish [12] and Korean [13] (where NPIs precede their licenser) indeed suggest that expectations may play a role in establishing the dependency relation between the two elements. However, (i) neither study explicitly tested for expectations in sentence processing, and (ii) it is unsure how these findings would translate to German or English NPI processing, as Korean and Turkish have a highly limited range of licensers that may render the NPI-licenser relation more akin to an ‘item-to-item’ dependency.

In this presentation, I will summarise a recent self-paced reading study in German that provides evidence for expectation-based parsing in backwards NPI licensing. Then, I will lay out the plans for two follow-up studies: the first will target the electrophysiological response patterns in the material *preceding and including* the licenser; the second will investigate negative polarity illusions in forward and backwards NPI dependencies [9]. Together, these studies will contribute to our understanding of language processing at the interface of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

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