

Negative Polarity and Definite Descriptions

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ABSTRACT:

In English almost any apparently non-monotonic context will allow a weak negative polarity item (such as "any", "ever", or "at all") to appear within it. Examples include the antecedents of conditionals, the restrictor predicate with "most", superlatives, plural definite descriptions, plural demonstratives, and some expressions with "only". I will critically discuss some of the various proposals to "explain" this licensing, both by appeal to expansions of the notion of downward-entailment and by appeal to more pragmatically flavored explanations of NPI licensing. I will argue that getting clear on the licensing of NPIs in non-monotonic contexts is particularly important since NPIs could provide decisive evidence in the debates over the semantics of definite descriptions and, perhaps, the cardinal numbers. I will also argue that, even at our current state of knowledge, facts about NPI-licensing provide strong evidence against the classic Russellian account of singular definite descriptions. I will suggest that even accounts that claim that definite descriptions make only presuppositions of uniqueness are not obviously in the clear.

LINK:

A copy of a paper that discusses some, but certainly not all of this is on my website: www.princeton.edu/~drothsch/