WHY DOES MOST LICENSE NEGATIVE POLARITY ITEMS?

CHRIS BARKER
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Negative polarity items thrive in downward-entailing environments, i.e., in contexts in which an inference from *students* to *semantics students* is valid. For example, *Every student left* entails *Every semantics student left*. And indeed, negative polarity items such as *any* are good in the nominal restriction of *every*: *Every semantics student with any sense left*. However, this theory makes the wrong prediction for *most*, since *Most students left* does not entail (or even Strawson-entail) *Most semantics students left*. This incorrectly predicts that NPIs should not appear in the restriction of *most*, contrary to fact: *Most students with any sense left* is perfectly fine.

Gajewski 2010 assumes along with many (notably Hackl, Roelandt) that *most* is covertly a superlative. He shows that under certain assumptions, the restriction of *most* does contain a downward-entailing environment, though this environment is embedded under additional sublexical operators that make it impossible to detect from the outside. If this is correct, this shows that NPIs cannot in general be relied upon as cues for automatic (shallow) inferencing.

I will explore an alternative hypothesis: that at least some of the time, it is the job of a negative polarity item to signal that an indefinite takes narrow scope with respect to its licensing operator. *Most students in one of Bill's classes always read Montague* is ambiguous: does it apply to the students in just one of Bill's classes, or to all of them? In contrast, the version containing an NPI is not ambiguous: *Most students in any of Bill's classes always read Montague*. Thus *any* signals that the indefinite must take narrow scope with respect to *most*.