

Negation in Czech: How logical and syntactic constraints interact in licensing semantic concepts (joint work with Mojmír Dočekal)

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January 24, 2018

In the analysis of negation, it is common to distinguish (at least) three different groups of expressions licensed in negative-like environments: weak negative polarity items (*anything* (1a)), strong NPIs (punctual *until*, (1b)) and n-words. The last group is restricted to the so-called negative concord (NC) languages, as is Czech, (1c).

- (1) a. John didn't say anything.
b. John didn't leave until his birthday.
c. Neznám tady nikoho.
not-know here nobody
'I don't know anybody here.'

While the licensing conditions of (strong) NPIs are commonly characterized in semantic terms (e.g., Zwarts, 1996, Gajewski, 2011, Chierchia, 2013) and the distribution of n-words is described in syntactic terms (Zeijlstra, 2004, a.o.) it is also often observed that the two groups are closely related (Laka, 1990, a.o.).

In this talk I go through several experiments that study the distribution of negative elements in Czech. We'll see that besides the two uncontroversial groups (weak NPIs, n-words), there is evidence that Czech also has strong NPIs. This has interesting consequences: (i) strong NPIs can be used as a probe of the existence of neg-raising, which has been claimed to be absent in Slavic (Bosković and Gajewski, 2009), incorrectly, in our view, (ii) since strong NPIs and n-words have almost identical distributions, their co-existence alongside n-words pose a challenge to learning; that is, they raise an issue as to how Czech speakers can correctly categorize some items as strong NPIs and other items as n-words, when there is so little evidence to distinguish the two groups. I will discuss experimental evidence probing issues (i) and (ii).