

# Polarity and other distributional properties of *uitkijken/oplettten/oppassen* ('look out')

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## 1 Introduction

This short article presents and discusses some results of a corpus investigation into the use and distribution of the verbs *uitkijken*, *oplettten* and *oppassen* ('watch out, look out, take care'). The study focuses on some aspects of the distribution of these verbs which are relevant to the study of negative polarity items. I will show that the verbs under consideration can be described as negative polarity items which are licensed or triggered by conditions that are applied cumulatively.<sup>1</sup>

Hoeksema (1999) argues that for some negative polarity items, the conditions which "license" or "trigger" polarity items are applied cumulatively. He discusses the properties of the verb *wijsmaken* ('deceive') and argues that this verb shows a special type of sensitivity to negation. Hoeksema makes a distinction between two uses of this verb *wijsmaken*. First, there is a so-called neutral use, as illustrated in (1). In this use, the verb refers to a situation in which someone really deceives someone into thinking something. We can add a negative adverb to such sentences, as is illustrated in (1b) and the two sentences in (1) are both acceptable.

- (1) a. We hebben hem wijsgemaakt dat het feest is uitgesteld.  
'We have deceived him into thinking that the party has been postponed.'

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this material was presented on July 9 2018 as part of an informal colloquium series during the academic year 2008-2009, organized by Liliane Haegeman at Ghent University. Some of the results were published in an article written in Dutch (Oosterhof & Hoeksema 2008). Author's address: KU Leuven, Sint-Andriesstraat 2, 2000 Antwerp, [albert.oosterhof@kuleuven.be](mailto:albert.oosterhof@kuleuven.be).

- b. We hebben hem (toch maar) niet wijsgemaakt dat het feest is uitgesteld.  
 'We have not deceived him into thinking that the party has been postponed.'

Secondly, the verb can be used in counterfactual environments as illustrated in (2). The relevant reading is available in sentences containing a negative element, like (2b). Hoeksema (1999) observes that this counterfactual use does not seem to be available if the adverb of negation is absent, as in (2a).

- (2) a. #Je maakt mij wijs dat het feest is uitgesteld.  
 (Suppose someone tried to deceive me into thinking that the party has been postponed, then I would believe it.  $\approx$  'I do believe that the party is postponed.')
- b. Je maakt mij niet wijs dat het feest is uitgesteld.  
 (Suppose someone tried to deceive me into thinking that the party has been postponed, then I would not believe it.  $\approx$  'I do not believe that the party is postponed.')

Hoeksema (1999) concludes from such observations that *wijsmaken* can be described as a negative polarity item with triggering conditions that can be applied cumulatively. This item is not a "standard polarity item", but in a certain environment, in this case in counterfactual contexts, it requires the presence of negation.

My corpus research presented here focuses on the distribution of the verbs *uitkijken*, *oppassen* and *opletten* and on similarities with the distribution of *wijsmaken*. The sentences presented in (3) are corpus examples taken from the Spoken Dutch Corpus, a corpus of some ten million words with spoken Dutch material.

- (3) a. en als je dan niet uitkijkt dan uh dan gaat 't één ten koste van 't ander.  
 (CGN)  
 'if you do not look out, then one thing is at the expense of another thing.'
- b. nou je kan er ruzie om krijgen als je niet oppast. (CGN)  
 'in fact there will be a row if you do not look out.'
- c. en dan uh uh mmm dan wordt 't uh al gauw een puinhoop als je niet oplet. (CGN)  
 'it all becomes a mess quickly if you do not look out.'

In these sentences, the verbs under consideration are used in a conditional clause and accompanied by an adverb of negation. Intuitively, such conditional sentences with verbs like *uitkijken* are less natural without the adverb of negation. The pattern in (4a), in which an adverb of negation is used, is a more natural type of conditional sentence than (4b).

(4) Intuition:

- a. Als je niet uitkijkt/oppast/oplet, dan X  
'If you do not look out, then X' (= a very 'natural' type of sentence)
- b. Als je uitkijkt/oppast/oplet, dan X  
'If you look out, then X' (= a less 'natural' type of sentence)

I do not claim that there is a strict difference in grammaticality or acceptability between the patterns in (4). I will carry out a corpus investigation to verify the introspection-based pattern in (4). This method is in line with current research into negative polarity items, in which claims about the polarity sensitivity of items are based on such corpus data.

## 2 Corpus

Table 1 presents an overview of corpus material used in my corpus study. The material consists of various types of texts, spoken as well as written material; formal as well as informal texts and Flemish as well as Dutch texts. The relevant information can be found in the table.

## 3 Results

The results of the corpus study are presented in Table 2. Only occurrences where the verb has the desired meaning are taken into account. For example, *uitkijken* has an alternative meaning under which the verb can be translated in English as 'look forward to'. We are only interested in cases where the verbs under consideration can be translated as 'watch out', 'look out' or a similar expression.

The three verbs under consideration have a relatively similar distribution. For each verb the occurrences in modal contexts and imperatives correspond to two thirds or more of the total number of sentences.

Each verb occurs in combination with a 'nonveridical' (cf. Zwarts 1995) trigger in more than 90% of the total number of cases. In the literature, such items

Corpus	Number of Words	Period	Material
INL 27 million and 38 million words corpora (1995-1996)	65 million	1970-1995	material from Dutch and Flemish newspapers, books, speeches, articles, journalistic and legal texts
CGN (2004)	10 million	1998-2004	Dutch and Flemish spoken material: dialogues, other conversations, interviews, lessons, speeches, news bulletins, live coverages and (other) spoken texts
CONDIV-corpus	4.8 million	1998	material from Dutch newspapers
Mediargus (online digital archive of articles from Flemish newspapers and magazines)	relevant number of words cannot be determined	1990-2008	material from Flemish newspapers and magazines

Table 1: Overview of the corpus material

which show a (strong) tendency to occur in nonveridical environments are referred to semi-NPI's or weak NPI's (see Hoeksema 1994, van der Wal 1996, Oosterhof 2003-4). On the basis of our results, we could draw the conclusion that *uitkijken*, *oppassen* and *opletten* are polarity sensitive items on the basis of their general distribution. The question is of course whether this is the desired result, but I will return to this question in the discussion section.

Now that we have discussed the general distribution of the three verbs, we will now consider some more detailed results with regard to conditional sentences. Table 3 shows a comparison between the use of the verbs in conditional sentences and other contexts. The table provides for each case the number of occurrences in combination with an adverb of negation *niet* and the number of occurrences without such an adverb of negation.

environments/triggers			<i>uitkijken</i>	<i>oppassen</i>	<i>opletten</i>
			'look/watch out, take care'		
<b>modal contexts</b>	modal auxiliary	<i>moeten</i> ('must, have to')	137	213	133
		<i>mogen</i> ('may, be allowed to')	3	10	3
		<i>kunnen</i> ('can')			1
		<i>zullen</i> ('shall')	1		1
	other		17	28	24
<b>imperatives</b>			55	94	117
<b>negative contexts</b>	<i>niet</i> ('not')		13		36
	<i>niet goed</i> ('not well')		4		18
	other		1	1	2
<b>conditional sentences</b>	with negation	<i>als...niet...</i> ('if...not...')	22	24	12
		<i>als...niet goed</i> ('if...not well...')			2
		<i>wanneer + niet</i> ('when + not')			1
	without negation	<i>als...</i> ('if...')	1	1	6
		<i>mits...</i> ('only if...')			1
<b>inherently negative</b>	<i>zonder</i> ('without')		8	1	
	<i>alleen</i> ('only')		1		
<b>future</b>			3		11
<b>questions</b>			1	2	2
<b>combination of two 'nonveridical' triggers</b>			3	2	6
<b>other 'nonveridical' triggers</b>			4	7	9
<b>without any trigger</b>			14	1	34
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>281</b>	<b>384</b>	<b>419</b>

Table 2: Distribution of the three verbs

	<i>uitkijken</i>		<i>oppassen</i>		<i>opletten</i>	
	conditional sentences	other contexts	conditional sentences	other contexts	conditional sentences	other contexts
<b>with neg. (<i>niet</i>)</b>	39 <b>91%</b>	18 <b>7%</b>	102 <b>96%</b>	1 <b>0%</b>	98 <b>80%</b>	56 <b>14%</b>
<b>without neg. (<i>niet</i>)</b>	4 <b>9%</b>	247 <b>93%</b>	4 <b>4%</b>	358 <b>100%</b>	24 <b>20%</b>	339 <b>86%</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	43	265	106	359	122	395

Table 3: The occurrence of *niet* in the protasis of conditional sentences and other contexts

There is a significant difference between the use of these three verbs in conditional sentences and other contexts. In conditional sentences, by far most occurrences of the verbs are accompanied by the adverb of negation. In other con-

texts, most sentences in which one of the verbs is used do not contain an adverb of negation

## 4 Discussion

More than 90% of the occurrences of the verbs *uitkijken*, *oppassen* and *opletten* can be identified as occurrences in nonveridical contexts, which implies that these verbs can be described as weak negative polarity items. However, this conclusion is in a sense counterintuitive: there is only a small proportion of the total number of occurrences in which an adverb of negation is used (cf. Table 2). The nonveridicality hypothesis leads to a situation where an item can be identified as a (weak) negative polarity item, even though the percentage of occurrences with negation is low. If we accept the nonveridicality hypothesis, the relation between the set of items identified by using the relevant criterion and the concept of polarity sensitivity is lost. The criterion of nonveridicality provides us with a very broad definition, as a consequence of which even items not especially sensitive to polarity end up as polarity sensitive items.

In earlier work on negative polarity items other logical properties were used in order to describe the distribution of negative polarity items. In publications from the eighties and the nineties by people like Ladusaw, Zwarts, Hoeksema and van der Wouden the assumption was made that negative polarity items are sensitive to downward entailment and related properties. Modal contexts and imperatives do not have the property of downward entailment. Under such a hypothesis, *uitkijken*, *oppassen* and *opletten* would not be labelled as negative polarity items, which seems to be a more desired result.

Let us now consider the relation between the use of *uitkijken*, *oppassen* and *opletten* in conditional sentences and the presence of an adverb of negation. We have observed that there is a clear tendency that in most cases such conditional sentences contain an adverb of negation. These verbs are polarity sensitive when used in conditional sentences. This leads to a confusing situation. The claim that the verbs *uitkijken*, *oppassen* and *opletten* are negative polarity items in conditional sentences suggests that they must be used with an appropriate trigger. However, the protasis of a conditional sentence is assumed to be an appropriate trigger for negative polarity items itself. This implies that the claim that *uitkijken*, *oppassen* and *opletten* are negative polarity items in conditional sentences is tautologically true (i.e. it cannot be falsified).

This illustrates that there is a complex relation between the sensitivity of so-

called polarity items and their licensing environments. This point can be further demonstrated by referring to another item, *iemand gegeven zijn* ('be granted to someone'). This item is included by Hoeksema (2013) in his lexicon of polarity items. Hoeksema (2013: 42) writes that this item is fairly common in conditional sentences (5% of total number of attestations). We can conclude that the protasis of a conditional sentence is an example of an environment which plays a different role with regard to different polarity items. It is part of the set of licensing conditions of an item like *iemand gegeven zijn* ('be granted to someone'), but for *uitkijken*, *oppassen* and *opletten*, it is part of the definition of the relevant item.

As a conclusion, note that we can describe the restrictions on the verbs *uitkijken*, *oppassen* and *opletten* as a special kind of collocational behaviour. A collocation can be defined as an idiosyncratic restriction on the compatibility of lexical items. In our data, there seems to be collocational behaviour as well, but in this case there is an idiosyncratic restriction on the compatibility of environments in which items occur. The three verbs under consideration in our study provide an example of the fact that description of concrete behaviour of lexical items is a more complicated task than expected from the perspective of straightforward logical notions like nonveridicality.

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