

LICENSING ENVIRONMENTS OF NEGATIVE POLARITY ITEMS IN MIZO

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Abstract

This paper highlights the Negative Polarity Items in Mizo – a language spoken in the state of Mizoram, situated in North-East India. It attempts to explain the concept of the NPI as simple as possible. It identifies the NPIs, analyses their morphological structure, and categorises their licensing context or environment. This paper indicates that the NPIs in Mizo are licensed in three main contexts – in negation, conditional clauses, and polar questions. In further studying these environments, this paper observes two major findings regarding the NPIs. The first finding is that the analysed NPIs are not Free Choice Items or FCIs. The second feature is that most of the NPIs do not have an internal composition.

Keywords: Negative Polarity Items, environment, context, licensing, Mizo

I. INTRODUCTION

A Negative Polarity Item, or NPI, is a lexical item which occurs only in negative contexts or environments. NPIs are frequently used in languages that do not have negative concord. NPIs are restricted to negative environments (Gianakiddou, 2011). They are sensitive to negation, and need negation to be licensed (Gianakiddou 1997). They exhibit differences in feature from normal negation lexicons in the sense that they do not simply turn affirmative sentences to negative sentences.

E.g 1. Take the sentence ‘ I will dance’

Negation word – not

Affirmative – I will dance.

Negative – I will *not* dance

Negative Polarity Item – ever

Affirmative – I will *ever* dance

Negative – I will not *ever* dance

In example 1, we see how the word ‘not’ simply transforms the given sentence into a negative sentence. However, when the same rule was applied to the word ‘ever’, the sentence did not make sense whatsoever. The word ‘ever’ is an example of an NPI that exists only in negative environments.

I. Negative Polarity Items in Mizo

NPIs are quite abundant in Mizo. The NPIs observed in this paper are selected on the basis of their frequency in day to day conversations, as compared to some NPIs which are used in more literary contexts. Another reason for the selection of these particular words are that they each exude features of all the

licensing criteria of the Mizo NPIs. The selected NPIs for observation are three words – ngai, engmah, and hlawl. The detailed analysis are given below-

1. Ngai

a. Sa ka ei. (I eat meat.)

Sa ka ei.
(meat) (I) (eat)

*Sa ka ei **ngai**. (* I **ever** eat meat.)

b. Sa ka ei lo. (I don't eat meat.)

Sa ka ei lo.
(meat) (I) (eat) (do not).

Sa ka ei **ngai** lo. (I don't **ever** eat meat.)

As we can observe from the above sentences, the Mizo word '**ngai**' exhibits an NPI quality. We can say that it is an NPI because it can only appear in a negative environment. When used in a positive context (see sentence a.), it does not make any sense. However, when used in a negative context (see sentence b.), it makes perfect sense. It intensifies the negation that already exists. The closest English counterpart of this NPI is 'ever'. In some cases, it can also mean 'never'.

2. Engmah

a. Ka hria. (I know.)

Ka hria
(I) (know)

***Engmah** ka hria. (I know **anything**.)

b. Ka hre lo. (I don't know.)

Ka hre lo.
(I) (know) (do not)

Engmah ka hre lo. (I don't know **anything**.)

As can be observed from the above sentences, ‘engmah’ is also an NPI in the Mizo language. The provided example highlights how it can only be used in a negative context (see sentence 2b). When used in a positive environment, the sentence loses its meaning. Though the sentence is still technically grammatical, it is meaningless. ‘Engmah’ has the closest meaning to the English word ‘anything’, when used in a negative sense. An interesting note is that this particular word has a counterpart which is used in positive contexts, which I will attempt to explain later.

3. **Hlawl**

a. Kha kha ka duh. (I like that.)

Kha kha ka duh.
(that) (I) (like)

*Kha kha ka duh **hlawl**. (I like that **at all**).

b. Kha kha ka duh lo. (I don’t like that.)

Kha kha ka duh lo.
(that) (I) (like) (do not).

Kha kha ka duh **hlawl** lo. (I don’t like that **at all**.)

As evident from the above sentences, it is clear that the word ‘hlawl’, is another NPI in the Mizo language. It means ‘at all’. Similarly to all the other NPIs, this word is allowed only in negative environments. When the word occurs in a positive context (see sentence 3a), it does not make any sense at all, but as can be seen from Sentence 3(b), the inclusion of the NPI heightens the degree of the negation, and does not make the sentence meaningless at all.

II. Licensing Environments of Mizo NPIs

Taking into account the observations made with the analysed NPIs, it is evident that there are three licensing environments of Mizo NPIs. They are – negation, conditional clauses, and yes/no questions. The licensing factors are explained and exemplified below-

a. Negation –

The NPIs in Mizo are licensed by negation. This means that appear in negative environments / contexts.

E.g.

Sa ka ei ngai lo.
(meat) (I) (eat) (ever) (not)

In this sentence, the NPI ‘ngai’ (ever) is licensed by the negative feature of the sentence. If ‘ngai’ were to be used in a positive context, it would take away the meaning of the sentence.

**Sa ka ei ngai. (* I ever eat meat)*

b. Conditional Clauses–

Another licensing context of Mizo NPIs is conditional clauses. NPIs can be frequently found with conditional sentences, and they are allowed in the protasis of the conditionals.

E.g.

Engmah I ziah loh **chuan**, mark I hmu lo ang.
(anything) (you) (write) (not) (if) (mark) (you) (get) (not) (will)

‘If you don’t write anything, you will not get any marks.’

We can say that conditional clauses allow the use of NPIs because, when the conditional is removed from a sentence, then the remaining sentence with the NPI makes no sense at all. The conditional in the example sentence I have used is the word ‘chuan’, which is equivalent to the English word ‘if’. Observe the radical change that happens when the conditional ‘chuan’ is removed. You will find that the NPI is out of place and does not really belong there anymore. See the example below -

**Engmah I ziah loh, mark I hmu lo ang.*

(You don’t write anything, you will not get marks.)*

c. Yes/ No Questions –

A Yes/No question, or a polar question, is basically a question that expects a yes or no for an answer. Yes/no questions are also NPI licensors in Mizo.

E.g

Sa I ei ngai em? (Do you ever eat meat?)

Sa I ei ngai em?

(meat) (you) (eat) (ever) (do)

In the above sentence, we can see that the polar question allows the inclusion of the NPI. If the same NPI 'ngai' were to be used in a Wh- question, the result would be fairly odd.

E.g.

**Eng sa nge I ei ngai em?*

**What meat do you ever eat?*

III. Observations and Conclusion

Among the environments I have listed out, the negation environment is a plain Downward Entailment (DE). The downward entailing nature of this environment is explained below -

Sa ka ei ngai lo. (I don't ever eat meat.)

Arsa ka ei ngai lo. (I don't ever eat chicken.)

Arsa kan ka ei ngailo. (I don't ever eat fried chicken.)

When a person says 'Sa ka ei ngailo', he is saying that he does not ever eat meat. This entails that he does not eat chicken, because chicken is meat. And this further implies that he does not eat fried chicken, because if he does not eat meat/ chicken at all in the first place, there is no scope for him to eat fried chicken at all. Thus, this environment is downward entailing.

The environments I have listed do not have any Strawson entailment. An environment that is Strawson entailing in Mizo would be the use of superlatives or 'only'.

See the following sentence as an example –

'Only the best students ate cookies'

'Zirlai tha berte chauhin chhang an ei'.

(Students) (good) (most) (only) (cookies) (eat)

This sentence says that only the best students ate cookies. We can assume that the best mathematics students ate cookies, as the best mathematics students are students after all, and a subset of the superset ‘best students’.

Only the best mathematics students ate cookies

‘*Chhiarkawp zirlai tha berte chauhin chhang an ei.*’

(*mathematics*) (*students*) (*good*) (*most*) (*only*) (*cookies*) (*eat*)

This further leads us to presuppose that the cookies are eaten by girls, as females can be a subset of ‘mathematics students’, as there are female mathematics students.

‘*Only the best female mathematics students ate cookies.*’

‘*Hmeichhe chhiarkawp zirlai tha berte chauhin chhang an ei.*’

So by presupposing that the best students in the first sentence are mathematics students, we have the second sentence. The first sentence strawson-entails the second one. In the same way, the second sentence leads us to presuppose that the mathematics students are female. So, we come up with the conclusion-

‘*Zirlai tha berte chauhin chhang an ei.*’

⇓

‘*Chhiarkawp zirlai tha berte chauhin chhang an ei.*’

⇓

‘*Hmeichhe chhiarkawp zirlai tha berte chauhin chhang an ei.*’

This is an example of a Strawson-entailing environment in Mizo.

Further observations lead to two findings. The first is that the listed NPIs do not have an FCI use. But one of them has a counterpart which can be used in positive environments. That NPI is ‘*engmah*’ and the counterpart is ‘*engpawh*’. Although ‘*engmah*’, as I have pointed out earlier, is an NPI that means ‘anything’, it has a positive counterpart ‘*engpawh*’, which also means ‘anything’, but is only used in positive sentences.

I have some examples below which will help explain this concept better –

a. ***Engmah*** ka la eilo.

I have not eaten anything.

b. ***Engpoh*** ka ei thei.

I can eat anything.

From the above examples, we can see that when used in a positive context, ‘anything’ is used differently with a different word. ‘Engmah’ in the negative sentence becomes ‘engpoh’ in the positive one. Although they both seem similar, they are completely different entities with different functions and cannot be regarded as the same terms. From this example, we can say that the pattern is similar to that of French, i.e. it is French-type.

And secondly, most of the listed NPIs do not have an internal composition. The word ‘engmah’ seems to be comprised of two separate words ‘eng’ and ‘mah’, because there are indeed words like ‘eng’ and ‘mah’ in Mizo. But it is not the same as the Hindi ‘ek bhii’ (Lahiri, 1998) because ‘engmah’ does not have any characteristics of the words ‘eng’ and ‘mah’ that it could be supposedly comprised of. In actuality, ‘eng’, if isolated from ‘engmah’ will have a completely different meaning to it, and being a word from a tonal language and will mean completely different things like ‘light’, ‘what’ and ‘yellow’, depending on the tone. And as I have mentioned before, ‘engpawh’ has a positive counterpart that can be used when ‘anything’ is used in a positive context. The other NPIs I have listed, such as ‘ngai’ and ‘hlawl’, don’t seem to have any internal compositions either. You might find these words in positive contexts, but they won’t be the same terms because ‘ngai’ and ‘hlawl’ also have multiple tones and multiple meanings, and the NPI forms are just one of them. The domain of not just NPIs, but semantics as a whole is fairly unexplored in Mizo, and is very much an open invitation for more observation and analysis.

References

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