
Leave yourself a (negative) loophole: How subjectivity predicts negative strengthening

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Abstract

The attenuating uses of negated expressions like not happy have puzzled scholars since Greek antiquity. Existing proposals agree that speakers exploit negation for pragmatic purposes but differ on the underlying sources they attribute to these uses. Here, we propose to combine different proposals via subjectivity. We present experimental evidence that the degree of subjectivity of a negated adjective predicts the degree to which participants strengthen that expression, but only if the adjective under consideration has positive polarity. This finding indicates that speakers may intentionally use negation to leave themselves the option to retract the implicated face-threatening meaning if openly challenged.

Keywords: negation, politeness, R implicatures, polarity

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