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# THE GRAMMAR OF POLARITY

Many, and perhaps all, languages include constructions which are sensitive to the expression of polarity: that is, negative polarity items, which cannot occur in affirmative clauses, and positive polarity items, which cannot occur in negatives. Although relatively unknown outside of linguistics, the phenomenon of polarity sensitivity has been an important source of evidence for theories about the mental architecture of grammar over the last fifty years, and to many the oddly dysfunctional sensitivities of polarity items have seemed to support a view of grammar as an encapsulated mental module fundamentally unrelated to other aspects of human cognition or communicative behavior. This book draws on insights from cognitive/functional linguistics and formal semantics to argue that, on the contrary, the grammar of sensitivity is grounded in a very general human cognitive ability to form categories and draw inferences based on scalar alternatives, and in the ways this ability is deployed for rhetorical effects in ordinary interpersonal communication. The book surveys a wide variety of polarity items, both negative and positive, commonly found in English and other languages and shows that grammatical sensitivities arise regularly and only in semantic domains which are inherently scalar.

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# THE GRAMMAR OF POLARITY

## PRAGMATICS, SENSITIVITY, AND THE LOGIC OF SCALES

MICHAEL ISRAEL

*University of Maryland, College Park*

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The more that I philosophize
The more and more I realize
That little things which I despise,
Like peanut shells and grains of sand,
Are very hard, hard to understand.

Delmer Israel, *To Harry F. Harlow*

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# *Acknowledgments*

This book began with an epiphany in a stairwell by the sea near San Diego. The idea that two rhetorical tropes, exaggeration (emphasis) and understatement (attenuation), might explain the entire grammar of polarity sensitivity (NPIs and PPIs), seemed in an instant so neat, obvious, and simple, I was sure it must be obviously wrong or else already widely assumed, or perhaps both. Now I think the idea was both less obvious and more correct than I first suspected. That idea became the basis for a qualifying paper in 1994, a paper in *Linguistics and Philosophy* in 1996, and a dissertation in 1998, as well as a handful of shorter works (Israel 1997, 1999, 2001, 2006), and now, finally, for this book. Even now I wonder if I have done justice to this one little idea, but I know that what justice I have done, I could never have done alone. While I am entirely responsibile for the inadequacies which remain in this work, I am deeply in the debt of others for what virtues I have managed to include.

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# *Abbreviations*

| | |
|---|---|
| ACC | Accusative |
| ADJ | Adjective |
| API | Affective polarity item |
| BNC | British National Corpus |
| CN | Common Noun |
| DAT | Dative |
| DE | Downward entailing |
| DEC | Declarative |
| DET | Determiner |
| DISJ | Disjunctive |
| ERG | Ergative |
| FC | Free choice |
| FP | Focus particle |
| FUT | Future |
| IC | Implication Constraint |
| IMPF | Imperfective |
| INDEF | Indefinite |
| INF | Infinitive |
| LF | Logical form |
| LM | Landmark |
| MOD | Modal |
| N | Noun |
| NEG | Negative |
| NOM | Nominal (i.e. N′, the complement of a determiner in an NP) |
| NP | Noun Phrase |
| NPI | Negative polarity item |
| *OED* | *Oxford English Dictionary* |
| P | Preposition/particle |
| PFV | Perfective |
| PL | Plural |



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| | |
|---|---|
| PPI | Positive polarity item |
| PRO | Pronoun |
| PS | Polarity sensitive |
| S | Finite clause |
| SG | Singular |
| SUBJ | Subjunctive |
| UE | Upward entailing |
| TR | Trajector |
| V | Verb |
| VP | Verb Phrase |
| *WSJ* | *Wall Street Journal* |

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