

# A fresh look at the compatibility between *any* and veridical contexts: The quality of indefiniteness is not strained



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## Abstract

The primary source of polarity sensitivity is generally assumed to lie in the interpretative properties of sentences, whether these are formulated in terms of downward entailments, nonveridicality or scalar presuppositions. By means of an extensive examination of corpus data, the dependency of the occurrence of the polarity item *any* on the property of nonveridicality proposed in the most recent study dealing with this topic (Giannakidou and Quer, 2013) is shown to be contradicted by the occurrence of *any* in the context of episodic past perfectives, progressives, affirmative existentials and predicates expressing epistemic attitudes. These are argued to support an analysis of *any* as expressing arbitrary choice of an indefinite occurrence (Duffley and Larrivée, 2010), in the same vein as the notion of arbitrariness proposed by Jayez and Tovenà (2007) and the indiscriminacy value put forward by Horn (2005). Veridical contexts are shown to be possible with *any* when emphasis is placed on utter indiscriminacy of reference, as indicated by the lexical content of the main verb, focus particles such as *just*, or other discursive markers of indiscriminacy. Lexical characteristics of polarity items are thus shown to play an important role in accounting for polarity sensitivity, which cannot be reduced to a scope constraint requiring a nonveridical operator.

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## 1. Introduction

Along with *ever*, *any* is standardly cited in the literature as a “model case of negative polarity item” (Eckardt and Seiler, 2013:13). However, it is noteworthy that this item also occupies pride of place in the literature on free choice (cf. Aloni, 2007; Carlson, 1981; Chierchia, 2006; Dayal, 1995, 1998, 2009, 2013; Dayal and Veneeta, 2004; Giannakidou, 2001; Giannakidou and Quer, 2013). While many authors treat the NPI and the FCI as two separate items, the last and most recent study cited above follows in the footsteps of Partee (2004), Kadmon and Landman (1993) and Lee and Horn (1994) in moving toward a unification of the negative polarity and free choice uses of *any* by treating this item as a special kind of indefinite. Arguing that *any* is “a combination of an NPI with a free choice component in it,” Giannakidou and Quer (2013:132) place this determiner squarely among the indefinites. The complete formulation of their definition of the meaning of *any* is as follows:

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- a. Any *P* is an extensional indefinite of the form  $P(x)$ , where  $x$  is an individual variable.
- b. The  $x$  variable is dependent: it cannot be bound by a default existential, unless there is another nonveridical operator above the existential. If the nonveridical operator is a  $Q$ -operator, then the  $Q$ -operator binds the  $x$  variable, as is standardly the case with indefinites.
- c. Domain exhaustification implicature of *any*

If *any* is in the scope of an operator contributing a set of worlds  $W$ :

$\forall d \forall D_{any} \forall w$  in  $W$ .  $Q(d)(w)$  and no other member of the domain  $d'$  is such that  $Q(d')(w)$ ; where  $D$  is the domain of the FCI, and  $Q$  is the main VP predicate.

The proposal in (a) that *any* is an extensional indefinite that does not introduce a new referent appears intuitively correct.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it frees one from the conundrum of having to adjudicate as to which value is more fundamental between the existential found in *You can pick any number* and the universal in *You must correct any mistakes*, as it is not obvious how one of these two values could be derived from its contrary.

Regarding (b), the constraint formulated above runs into obvious difficulties with *only*-clauses (e.g. *Only Mary solved the problem*), where the entailed positive proposition (e.g. *Mary solved the problem*) demonstrates the veridicality of the context, but where *any*, along with other weak polarity items (*ever*, *lift a finger*, etc.), is grammatical (*Only Mary solved any of the problems*). Giannakidou has addressed this issue (2006:595) by invoking the notion of ‘rescuing’: *any* can sometimes be ‘rescued’ inside the scope of a veridical operator “if that operator additionally makes a nonveridical inference available in the global context of the sentence” (i.e. *No one else but Mary solved any of the problems*). Rescuing implies that the polarity item “does not, strictly speaking, become legitimate in a structure but is merely tolerated in it” (2006:592). The distinction postulated between licencing and rescuing appears problematic however: how is one to distinguish between an item being used ‘legitimately’ and its use being ‘merely tolerated’ in a given context if both types of use are attested? Such a distinction seems more like a stipulation motivated by a desire to rescue the theory rather than the polarity item. Moreover, we have uncovered new empirical data that shows *any* occurring under veridical operators with no nonveridical inference available in the global context of the sentence, as in (1) below, from the British National Corpus (henceforth BNC):

- (1) With the conciseness of mathematics, I can therefore write [mathematical formula]. You can see that I am representing **any** vector  $V$  as a superposition of two standard vectors 1 and 2.

Also contentious is the claim formulated by Giannakidou and Quer in (c) that the free choice implicature associated with *any* is conditional upon this determiner being in the scope of an operator contributing a set of worlds such as a modal or a generic. No such operator can be argued to be present in the following context from the Time Magazine Corpus (henceforth TIME) which involves an episodic past perfective:

- (2) A Columbia University psychiatrist reports that students come to him to find out what is wrong with them if they are not having intercourse. “My virginity was such a burden to me that I just went out to get rid of it,” a junior at the University of Vermont revealed to a Boston sex counselor. “On a trip to Greece, I found **any** old Greek and did it so it wouldn’t be an issue any more.”

The usage illustrated in (1) and (2) raises a number of interesting questions. Regarding (1), how can *any*, predicted to occur only in nonveridical contexts by Giannakidou and Quer, be found in veridical environments? And how can the notion of free choice be compatible with a one-off occurrence, as is the case in (2)? There seems to be more to the story here than the simple triggering of a free choice implicature by the presence of an operator contributing a set of worlds, as *any* itself appears to be responsible for introducing the notion of multiple possibilities in this context. These uses call for a re-examination of Giannakidou and Quer (2013)’s analysis and for further reflection on the exact nature of *any*’s meaning.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Although we will be somewhat critical of the framework in which Giannakidou and Quer’s analysis is set, we are nevertheless in agreement with their conclusion that *any* is better classified among the indefinites than among the universals. Consonant with its historical origins (*an/aen* + adjectival suffix *-ig*), we will be working here on a hypothesis which implies that *any* evokes a referent as having merely the quality of the indefinite, i.e. of being a representative exemplar of a category, which means that the referent is completely indistinguishable from and interchangeable with all the other members of its category (cf. Duffley and Larrivé, 2010, 2012a). This ties in with Giannakidou and Quer’s (2013:120) notions of “referential deficiency” and “low referentiality”, although our approach differs from theirs in being non-formal.

<sup>2</sup> Our analysis will part company with Giannakidou and Quer’s on two general points which should be mentioned before getting into the nitty-gritty of the particular issues regarding *any*. The first of these concerns the fact that the object of our attention will be the English word *any* and not the abstract notions of negative polarity or free choice. As far as English is concerned, the latter are essentially non-linguistic categories, each of which covers only part of the uses of *any*, a fact which has the unfortunate effect of obscuring the underlying unity of meaning attached to this linguistic form. From the epistemological point of view, moreover, such categories are descriptive rather than explanatory: what stands in a causal relation to the use of *any* by

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