# Delimiting the class of free choice items in a comparative perspective: Evidence from the database of French and Greek free choice items

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## Abstract

This study argues that free choice items (FCIs) form a distinct class of lexical items. Just like other lexical items, they are associated with alternatives. Their core semantic property is that they have descriptive contents that bring information on these alternatives. In doing so, they form three interpretational categories: (1) full set FCIs, or else FCIs that express widening, require that all alternatives of the relevant type, without exception, are considered, (2) subset FCIs that express ignorance require that unknown alternatives are considered and (3) subset FCIs that express absence of preference require that non-preferred alternatives are considered. FCIs meaning components are encoded in the form of semantic features in the individual items and give rise to three grammaticality conditions for the class of FCIs. FCI grammaticality is analyzed in terms of a two-way feature satisfaction of the FCI's feature requirement vis à vis the alternatives under consideration.
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## 1. Introduction

The study of free choice items (FCIs) has occupied a central position in formal linguistics over the last fifty years. The appeal of FCIs is enormous for many reasons. On the one hand, their study is directly related to the concept of free(dom of) choice that has occupied logicians and philosophers (cf. Locke, 1689). As originally explained by Vendler (1967:80) in relation to the English item *any*, freedom of choice "succeeds in blending indetermination with generality". In the sentence below, for instance, the speaker allows her addressee to pick a card freely:

(1) *You can take any card.*

On the other hand, their distribution is restricted to certain contexts. This property immediately surfaces when one considers the distribution of the English indefinite *any* in affirmative episodic contexts (2–3). The category of affirmative contexts contains episodic contexts (3), contexts with the verb *to be* (4), contexts with factive predicates (5) and contexts with existential constructions (6). I follow Giannakidou (2001) in calling *episodic* (2–3) the contexts that refer to exactly one event.

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(2)   *He took any card.
(3)    Yesterday, I saw John.
(4)    He is a professor of physics.
(5)    I am happy that John became a professor.
(6)    There is a lot of dust in this room.

In view of data as in (1) and (2), one would like to know why *any* is ungrammatical in affirmative episodic sentences while it is grammatical in modal sentences. The answer to this question is even more crucial when one compares the FCI *any* to the regular indefinite *a* which is grammatical in affirmative episodic sentences[1]:

(7)    He took a card.

The data above are crucial not only for the analysis of *any*, itself, but also for all studies that attempt to define the properties of FCIs. In view of the different behavior between FCI and non-FCI indefinites, one wonders whether FCIs form a *class* of items with common properties that make them differ from other lexical items (like the indefinite *a*, for instance). The answer to this question is the goal of the present paper.

Certain scholars working on the distribution of FCIs attempted to answer to this question by arguing that FCIs are lexical items with a common grammaticality condition that universally accounts for their distribution. The English FCI *any* which has deeply influenced these studies has also been characterized as polarity sensitive item (PSI) in English.[2] The most discussed characteristic of *any* that led scholars to classify it in the set of PSIs was that, just like negative polarity items (NPIs) (like *lift a finger* (9)), it is grammatical in negative sentences (8) and ungrammatical in affirmative ones (2):

(8)    He did not take any card.
(9)    a. * He lifted a finger.
       b. He did not lift a finger.

Since the meaning of freedom of choice has been first discussed in relation to the English PSI *any* by Vendler (1967), many researchers followed a unitary approach for this item (see Giannakidou (2001) for a list of languages that have morphologically distinct FCIs and NPIs). The polarity sensitivity tradition has, therefore, deeply influenced the theory on FCIs and researchers that attempted to answer to the abovementioned question.

In the remainder of the present section, I first present briefly the following most prominent approaches in the polarity sensitivity tradition: (a) the theory of Klima (1964) which proposed that PSIs are licensed by a c-commanding relation between an element and a negative operator and (b) the theory of Ladusaw (1979) which suggested that PSIs are grammatical only in downward entailing contexts. I further discuss the theory of nonveridicality and non-episodicity (Giannakidou, 2001) and the theory of non-individuation (Jayez and Tovena, 2005) that attempted to account for FCI distribution by proposing a universal grammaticality condition. It will be shown that the grammaticality of certain FCIs in affirmative sentences poses a challenge for both theories.

The common line underpinning analyses on polarity sensitive items is that their distribution is conditioned by the presence or absence of a specific sentential operator. PSIs are thus said to be licensed or anti-licensed (or anti-triggered) by the semantics of sentential operators (cf. Ladusaw, 1979).[3] Klima (1964) was the first to suggest a licensing condition for PSIs by arguing that, like *any*, these items are grammatical if and only if they are in construction with (or c-commanded by) a negative operator, namely when found in sentences that are "similar to negatives" (Klima, 1964:311). This category includes sentences that contain negative words (10), adverbs like *only* (11), negative predicates (12) as well as interrogative sentences (13):

(10)   Nowhere has anybody been hit by anyone.
(11)   Only young writers ever accept suggestions with any sincerity.
(12)   He is unable to find any time for that.
(13)   Who expects him to write any more novels?

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[1] *Regular* is a term that serves to refer to non-FC (in)definites throughout the paper.
[2] *Any* is not the only English item that has been characterized as FCI. Dayal (1997) and Von Fintel (2000) suggested that the English free relatives (FRs) with the particle *ever* (*wh-ever*) are FCIs too, expressing ignorance and indifference. We will come back to the notions of ignorance and indifference in section 5.
[3] The notion of *anti-licensing* has been initially introduced in the literature on PSIs to characterize items that are not grammatical in the scope of negation (Ladusaw, 1979). This notion has been introduced in the literature on FCIs by Giannakidou (1997, 2001).