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# POLARITY ITEMS AS DISAMBIGUATING ELEMENTS

## THE VERB *EPÄILLÄ*

The verbs of inherent negation license negative polarity items (NPIs) in their complements (Israel 2004: 712; Horn 1989: 523). The inherent negativity of the Finnish verb *epäillä* is equivocal, as the verb varies between two readings 'doubt' and 'suspect/suppose.' The verb displays twofold syntactic-semantic potential with respect to its complement:

(1) negation-inclining 'doubt'

Scope of negation

*Epäilen, että kukaan riitauttaa tätä.*  
 epäillä.1SG that anyone contest.3SG this.PART  
 'I doubt that anyone (NPI) will contest this matter.' (MoF, 2014)

(2) affirmation-inclining 'suspect/suppose'

No scope of negation

*Epäilen, että yksiosässä mätäneee joku.*  
 epäillä.1SG that studio.INE decompose.3SG someone  
 'I suspect that there is someone (PPI) decomposing in the studio.' (MoF, 2013)

In the negative scope configuration (1), the complement represents the target of the doubt expressed by *epäillä*, and the verb clearly conveys negation. However, in (2), the complement constitutes the content of the process denoted by *epäillä*, here 'suspect.' In this case, there is no scope of negation. This difference is supported by the distribution of polarity items (PIs).

The content complement may also contain an explicit negation. The interpretation is necessarily negation-inclining, but the underlying semantic structure is equivocal:

(3) negation-inclining with an explicit negation

Scope of NEG within the complement

*Epäilemme, ettei kukaan onnistunut.*  
 epäillä.1PL that.NEG anyone succeed.PTCP  
 EITHER: 'We doubt that [NEG] anyone succeeded.'  
 OR: 'We suspect that no one succeeded.' (MoF, 90s)

The negation-inclining use of *epäillä* (with an interclausal scope of negation) has decreased diachronically, but is still not extinct in Modern Finnish, as (1) exemplifies. As a part of an investigation of the development of the use of this verb (for example, see Salminen 2015), this paper analyzes the role of PIs in disambiguating the intended meaning.

## THEORY AND DATA

This study subscribes to the usage-based theory of language and meaning; thus, no autonomous syntax is assumed, but the scope of

negation, for example, is identified through the surface of an utterance and its contextual interpretation (Langacker 2008: 26, Israel 2011: 227). The paper is based on diachronic data (nearly 2000 instances of *epäillä*, from Old Finnish (OldF), Early Modern Finnish (EMoF), and Modern Finnish (MoF).

Polarity items may take part in the disambiguation in clausal complements of *epäillä*. Table 1 introduces the number of such PIs in each sub-part of the data.

In addition to polarity value (+/-), PIs always carry their idiosyncratic lexical features (Israel 2011: § 6): thus, they cannot be added purely for the clarification of polarity.

## PIs IN DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS

In the course of the shift from negation-inclining towards affirmation-inclining, many examples are ambiguous in their inclination (at least for an analyst due to temporal distance). It is the PIs that most unequivocally disambiguate the intended meaning. This is illustrated in (4) and (5) with a non-finite complement construction (NFC):

(4) *Hän alkaa epäillä rahansa riittävänkään.*  
 he begin.3SG epäillä money.GEN.PX suffice.NFC.NPICL  
 'He begins to doubt if his money will suffice, after all.' (EMoF, 1837)

(5) *Olin epäillyt jotakin tämäntapaista olevan tekemisissä.*  
 be.PST.1SG epäillä.PTCP something like.this.PART  
 be.NFC make.INF.PL.INE

'I had suspected that something like this was going on.' (EMoF, 1876)  
 However, this disambiguation process is anachronistic: it is impossible to reliably assess the actual extent of ambiguity of the constructions (with no clarifying PIs) for the contemporaries.

## NAVIGATING CURRENT POLYSEMY

In Modern Finnish, the finite and non-finite complement typically evoke affirmation-inclining reading, while the embedded question complement guides toward negation-inclining reading. Still, exceptions exist, and often the PIs support the intended meaning.

Example (1) serves as a negation-inclining *että* construction with a NPI *kukaan* ('anyone').

**The Finnish polarity clitics -kin (PPI) / -kAAn (NPI)**

**A. Clitic uses:**  
 'also', 'even' (6), expectedness, counter-expectation (4) etc.

**B. Several lexicalized uses:**  
*jota(k)in* 'something' (5) *-mitään* 'anything'  
*ainakin* 'at least' *-ainakaan* '(not) at least'  
*jokin* 'some' (7) *-mikään* 'any'  
*kukaan* 'anyone' (1),(3) etc.

PIs are especially common in embedded question complements (see Table 1). In this construction the polarity reading is based on the implication the embedded question evokes (no interclausal scope relation has to be assumed). PIs have a significant role in clarifying this implication, both in typical negation-inclining (5), and in exceptional affirmation-inclining cases (6).

(6) *Välillä aikuinenkin epäilee, kannattaako yrittääkään edistää ihmisen asiaa.*  
 sometimes adult.PPICL epäillä.3SG be.worth.3SG.O try.INF.NPICL advance.INF human.GEN interest.PART  
 'Sometimes even an adult doubts if it is worth to even try to advance the interests of human beings.' (MoF, 1995)

(7) *Hajanaisuus antaa aiheita epäillä, voisiko kyseessä olla jokin vanha jäännös.* (MoF, 2013)  
 heterogeneity give.3SG reason.PART epäillä.INF can.COND.O question.INE be.INF some (PPI) old relic  
 'The heterogeneity [of the case agreement system in the Uralic languages] offers a reason to suppose that it could be a question of an [some] old relic.'

The function of PIs in (6) and (7) can easily be associated with the PIs' role in creating an implication of intended polarity in independent main clause *yes/no*-questions (cf. Hartung 2007).

## NATURE OF POLARITY

The current case with *epäillä* reveals that, instead of merely emerging in a favorable context, PIs often work as a genuine tool for constructing the polar interpretation. The intended meaning of the verb *epäillä* and the whole construction may be supported with PIs (speaker) and reasoned based on them (hearer) by aiming for a rhetoric coherence of the whole (cf. Israel 2011).

Thus, polarity of utterances is a contextually constructed, pragmatic phenomenon: languages provide speakers with wide variety of tools, including polarity items, for the continuous negotiation of the extent of commitment or inclination to the (un)truth of the discussed topics and states of affairs.

Table 1. Polarity items in the data

PIs/n	Finite complement	Non-finite complement	Embedded question compl.
OldF	3/57	0/4	1/14
EMoF	28/200 (14 %)	27/96 (28 %)	83/199 (42 %)
MoF	33/139 (24 %)	7/74 (9 %)	18/42 (43 %)