

**NPI Licensing Contexts in German and English:  
An Analysis of a Peculiar Construction**

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**Abstract**

The licensing conditions governing Negative Polarity Items (NPIs) are extremely idiosyncratic, causing problems for linguistics who wish to describe them in terms of classes or hierarchies. Furthermore, since many NPI licensing contexts involve no overt negation, it is difficult to define what characterizes a “negative sense.” With examples from English and German, this paper examines the behavior of both Negative Polarity Items and Positive Polarity Items (PPIs) and reviews several attempts toward their organization. This paper pays special attention to a particular construction in German, *einen Dreck + V*, whose behavior is characteristic of an NPI but whose inability to appear in the scope of a negative operator challenges this label. With the help of more elaborated definitions of NPI classes and parallel examples from English, this paper concludes that while the characterization of *einen Dreck + V* as an NPI that elicits its own negation is not an unreasonable conclusion, there exists compelling evidence that it belongs to a different class of phrases, or ZERO operators.

## **1.0 Introduction**

This paper examines the phenomena of negative and positive polarity as they pertain to modern German. Research has long ago revealed that negative polarity items (NPIs) and positive polarity items (PPIs) are not static within a Lexicon, but rather that words and phrases can gain or lose properties of negative polarity over time. While it is generally accepted that NPIs are licensed in downward entailing environments, others have shown that downward entailment is not the only type of NPI-licensing context. Some have attempted to classify NPIs along numerous hierarchies based on semantics, syntax, or pragmatics. One commonly-cited system of classification by Zwarts (1995) classifies NPIs based on the entailment patterns of their potential licensing contexts. Another system by Von Bergen and Von Bergen classifies NPIs according to

a semantic hierarchy that takes into account intention or contribution to a sentence.

However, there exist constructions such as *einen {Dreck/Quark/Mist/(feuchten) Kehricht}* in German and *fuckall* in certain dialects of English which appear either to defy classification as polarity items or to exist in a category of their own. This owes to the fact that they are explicitly banned from contexts most characteristic of NPIs (overt negation) but produce what on the surface seems to be an identical semantic effect (i.e. imposing a scalar minimum). I argue that, although there may be no straightforward explanation for their peculiarity and there are several reasons why an NPI classification for these phrases is not unreasonable, a different explanation could be in order.

## 2.0 Background

### 2.1 Negative Polarity Items

A negative polarity item (NPI) is a word or phrase that can appear in a sentence only when accompanied by a negative licensing context. Common examples in English include words such as *any* or *ever*, as illustrated by (1). A common example in German is *gar*, shown by (3).

(1) I don't have any money.

(2) \*I have any money.

(3) Ich habe gar kein Geld.

I have at-all no money.

(4)\*Ich habe gar Geld.

I have at-all money.

As (1) and (3) reveal, a negative licensing context can be as simple as an utterance that falls within the scope of a negative operator such as *not/no* in English or *nicht/kein* in German. In (1), *don't* suffices to license the NPI *ever*, while in (3), *kein* 'no' licenses *gar* 'at all.' However, there remain many situations in which NPIs are licensed and no explicit negation is visible, as (5) through (10) reveal.

(5) Would you ever go to England?

(6) \*I would ever go to England

(7) If one ever has the money, he or she should go to England.

(8) Tom doubts that Joe ever saw a mammal.

(9) \*Tom believes that Joe ever saw a mammal.

(10) Genau vier Leute waren jemals glücklich.

Exactly four people were at any time happy.

'Only four people were ever happy.'

Given such constructions, which are by no means rare, many have sought a more precise account of NPI licensing. According to Ladusaw (1979), such a context is provided by an environment of downward entailment. This means that given information about a particular set, it is possible to make an inference concerning a subset of that set. In (7), for instance, the NPI *ever* is licensed because *one* applies to the set of human beings. It follows that Americans, Pennsylvanians, college students, and so on should go to England. According to Ladusaw, this account also explains why NPIs can be licensed by, as he defines them, verbs of downward-entailment such as *doubt*, as in (8), but not verbs of upward-entailment such as *believe* in (9). In

(8), one can replace *mammal* with anything contained in that set, and the sentence would remain logically consistent. *Believe*, however, is upward-entailing. If Tom believes that Joe saw a mammal, we can expand the category of mammals to include animals or living things, but we cannot make any inference about the type of mammal that Joe may have seen.

Ladusaw's assertion that NPI-licensing contexts are downward-entailing is, however, incomplete. Linebarger (Linebarger 1980) was among the first to challenge his assertion by showing how sentences such as (10) are not actually downward-entailing. Furthermore, she charges that verbs such as *doubt* (8) do not actually create an environment of downward-entailment. For example, Ladusaw argues that a similar verb, *be surprised*, creates an environment of downward entailment, while its counterpart (*expect*) creates an upward-entailing environment, as demonstrated by (11) through (14). According to this assertion, it follows that NPIs are licensed in (13) and (14), since the category of *green vegetable* can always be reduced.

(11) Mary expects that John will eat Brussels sprouts.

(12) Mary expects that John will eat a green vegetable.

(13) Mary is surprised that John will eat a green vegetable.

(14) Mary is surprised that John will eat Brussels sprouts.

However, Linebarger challenges the notion that (13) entails (14). Such a leap would require assumptions that "cannot be called entailment from truth conditional meaning (200)." More specifically, *A green vegetable* could refer to the entire category or it could refer to a specific, undefined vegetable besides Brussels sprouts. Given that verbs such as *be surprised*,

*doubt*, or *deny* license NPIs in dependent clauses but, according to Linebarger, don't exhibit downward entailment presents a significant challenge not only to Ladusaw's claim that downward-entailing environments are sufficient licensers of NPIs but also to his claim that they are characteristic of NPI-licensing environments. Other examples have been provided in which NPIs occur in environments that are shown not to be downward entailing (Linebarger 1980).

In addition, the licensing contexts of individual NPIs are by no means uniform. Some are restricted to certain very idiosyncratic contexts, while others appear in a wide range of sentences. *Ever*, for instance, can appear in a diverse range of constructions while some NPIs can be found only in very limited of domains, requiring the presence of an operator such as *not* or *no* in English (i.e. overt negation). The semantic implications of NPIs are likewise diverse; while some are integral parts of the overall effect of a phrase, others serve only to emphasis negation or to contribute a subtle shade of meaning. This poses a significant problem for the description of NPI licensing contexts in precise terms, since it appears that different NPIs are subject to very different sets of semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic restrictions.

## **2.2 Positive Polarity Items**

Another set of phrases exists that has been given significantly less attention than negative polarity items. Positive Polarity items (PPIs) can be understood along the same lines as NPIs. A common definition of a PPI is a word or phrase that cannot appear in downward-entailing environments.

However, as with NPIs, an account of PPI licensing that takes only downward entailment into account is likewise incomplete. In both German and in English, there are phrases that earn the PPI status but are not banned in downward-entailing environments (*absolut* 'absolutely,

absolute' in German, for instance). In addition, as with NPIs, PPIs are often used very idiosyncratically in expressions such as the English idiom *kick oneself* in (15).

(15) I could kick myself.

(16) \*I couldn't kick myself.

Common German examples of PPIs include *zeimlich* 'pretty, rather' and *geradezu* 'downright.'

(17) Am Donnerstag war das Wetter (\*nicht) zeimlich schlecht.

On-the Thursday was the weather pretty bad.

The weather was pretty bad on Saturday.

(18) Das ist fuer Familien (\*nicht) geradezu ideal.

That is for families downright ideal.

'That is absolutely ideal for families.'

We see that these phrases are restricted in the scope of the negative operator *nicht*. I return to PPIs and their relationship to NPIs in greater detail in section 4.

## 2.3 Systems of Classification

### 2.3.1 Zwarts (1998)

Using Boolean principles, Zwarts classifies NPIs across languages according to the different contexts that license them. He defines three properties:

- a.  $\sim(p \text{ or } q) \rightarrow (\sim p) \text{ and } (\sim q)$
- b.  $(\sim p) \text{ and } (\sim q) \rightarrow \sim(p \text{ or } q)$
- c.  $\sim(p \text{ and } q) \rightarrow (\sim p) \text{ or } (\sim q)$

(a) represents downward-entailment, the property that Ladusaw argues licenses NPIs. An utterance in which all three properties hold is called antimorphic. When only (a) and (b) hold, the utterance is anti-additive, while when (a) and (c) hold, the utterance is anti-multiplicative.

According to Zwarts, NPIs such as *ever*, which require only (a) (downward-entailment), are weak. Many NPIs are impossible even when (a) is present. NPIs that require both (a) and (b) are considered strong, and NPIs that can appear only in antimorphic environments (that is, where all three properties hold) are superstrong. Antimorphic environments, including English utterances that contain *not*, are thus able to license the greatest number of NPIs, since among the phrases they can license are superstrong, strong, and weak NPIs. It is thus considered characteristic of NPIs to be licensed in antimorphic environments.

In addition, although Zwarts' system was designed to account for NPI-licensing environments, environments that license PPIs can be categorized with the help of the same hierarchy. A superstrong PPI is incompatible with downward-entailing, anti-additive, and antimorphic contexts. A strong PPI is compatible with downward-entailing contexts but not anti-additive or antimorphic contexts. Finally, a weak PPI is incompatible only with antimorphic contexts.

### **2.3.2 Von Bergen and Von Bergen**

Von Bergen and Von Bergen (1993) classify NPIs in English according to their semantic effects.



They establish five categories:

- a. Strengthening of negation
- b. Plain and elaborated forms
- c. Nonreferential indefinites
- d. Understatement
- e. Presuppositionally marked verbal phrases

In (a), we find NPIs such as *at all* in English or *gar* in German. These words tend to leave the meaning of a sentence intact and serve rather to highlight or strengthen negation. Included in this category are phrases that Von Bergen and Von Bergen call “affective strengtheners” of negation contexts such as *what the hell* in (19) and *on earth* in (20).

(19) I don't know what the hell you mean.

(20) What on earth happened?

In addition, under (a) we find words and phrases that highlight negation by imposing scalar endpoints on some action. In English, this includes minimizers such as *drink a drop* and *lift a finger* and maximizers such as *for the world* (21). Frequently, such NPIs take the form of taboo phrases as in *a rat's ass* or *a shit* (24). These phrases must be licensed both by an NPI licensing context and by a more specific semantic context in which they are appropriate. We can say, for instance, that *a rat's ass* or *a shit* must occur not only in an NPI-licensing context, but also with a verb of intellectual concern such as *know* or *give*. Such expressions sometimes take a similar but

peculiar form in German, as sentence (23) reveals. Unlike nearly all maximizers and minimizers in English, the German equivalents don't consistently seem to require overt negation. Although the sense of a scalar limit is present (*einen Dreck* 'a dirt'), there is no overt negation or other NPI licensing context present. I return to this example and introduce others in section 4, where they are treated in greater detail.

(21) I wouldn't do that for the world.

(22) \*I would do that for the world.

(23) Dafür interessiere ich mich einen Dreck.

For that interest I myself a dirt.

'I don't give a crap about that'

(24) I don't give a crap about the story.

Under (b), we find words such as *much*, which sometimes have NPI properties as in (25).

(25) He (didn't sleep)/\*slept much

Under (c) Von Stechow and Von Stechow place indefinite pronouns such as *any*. In addition, they place NPIs such as *ever* and certain uses of *either* into this category. NPIs in (d) exist in English as modifying phrases such as *not exactly* (26) and *too great* and as idiomatic expressions such as *make no bones about* (27).

(26) I wasn't exactly thrilled to be there.

(27) He made no bones about his position.

Finally, (e) includes words that become NPIs contextually in order to correct an assumption or ignorance. In this sense, they are presuppositionally marked. The affirmative form of (28), for instance, would be useless for pragmatic reasons. The phrase *to mind* rather serves to contradict a positive assumption and is therefore restricted to negative contexts.

(28) I don't mind helping you.

(29) It doesn't matter if he is late.

### 2.3.3 CODII

The Collection of Distributionally Idiosyncratic Items (CODII) attempts to provide an exhaustive list of German words and phrases identified as polarity items. The database lists items along with fourteen possible licensing contexts and provides an example sentence to illustrate each context with which a given NPI or PPI can occur. In addition, using the hierarchy outlined by Zwarts, each NPI is classified as weak (licensed by downward-entailing contexts), strong (licensed by *n*-words and "without" [antimorphic and anti-additive contexts]), or superstrong (licensed only by overt negation [antimorphic contexts]). Alternatively, PPIs are classified as weak if they are compatible with downward-entailing and anti-additive contexts but not antimorphic ones (e.g. those with *not*), strong if they are compatible with downward-entailing contexts but incompatible with anti-additive and antimorphic ones, and superstrong if they are incompatible with downward-entailing, anti-additive and antimorphic contexts.

### 3.0 NPI formation and deletion

As the CODII reveals, NPIs and PPIs are subject to extremely idiosyncratic restrictions. Furthermore, these restrictions are not always stable, with phrases gaining or losing properties of NPI-hood over time. The Jespersen Cycle is a well-studied linguistic phenomenon that helps account for this process. To summarize the process, a word or phrase is first used by speakers to strengthen or emphasize a negation (thus making it an NPI), as do the words Von Bergen and Von Bergen place in category (a) of their hierarchy. Over time, the NPI becomes obligatory when negation occurs, and at some point the original negating operator disappears, and what was once an NPI creates a negative context itself. A classic example of the Jespersen cycle in French can be seen in (30) and (31).

(30) Je ne sais pas

'I don't know'

(31) Je sais pas.

'I don't know'

Negation in French once required the structure of *ne... pas*. *Pas*, an NPI, could not exist alone and thus required the licensing element *ne*. However, modern French allows speakers to omit *ne* and to use *pas* alone.

Bayer (2006) explains how the German *nichts* 'nothing', like *pas*, might be a survivor of the Jespersen Cycle. Using examples from historical German, he shows how *nichts* might have been licensed by operators such as *niemand* 'no one' or downward-entailing verbs such as

*verboten sein* 'is forbidden.' He uses (32), an example taken from Goethe.

(32) Hier sei für niemanden nichts gethan, als für den Schüler

Here be for nobody nothing done, than for the disciple.

'For nobody other than the disciple should anything be done'

Bayer takes the double negation in such sentences as evidence that *nichts* was once a dependent element of negation. Bayer buttressed this argument by pointing to examples such as *einen Dreck*, which was mentioned earlier as a type of minimizer in German that requires no overt negation. Bayer asserts that *einen Dreck* is an NPI and the fact that, as he states, it carries negation by itself helps support a claim that *nichts* could develop from an item once licensed by negation to something that licenses negation. However, as I argue in section 4, there are several compelling challenges to the position that *einen Dreck* indeed creates a negative context and the problem thus requires further exploration.

#### 4.0 A Special Class of German minimizers

In section (3), it was observed that languages use NPIs that strengthen negation by defining a scalar endpoint. In the following examples, the underlined words seem to perform this function. The lack of any apparent NPI-licensing context, however, is surprising.

(33) Das geht mir am Arsch vorbei.

That goes to me on the ass past.

'I don't give a shit about that.'

(34) Ich schere mich einen Scheissdreck darum.

I shear myself a shit about that.

'I don't give a shit about that.'

(35) Du verstehst einen Dreck davon.

You understand a dirt of that.

'You don't know jack shit.'

(36) Dafür interessiere ich mich (nicht/einen Dreck).

For that interest I myself (not/a dirt)

'I am (not) interested in that.'

(37) Das geht ihn einen {Dreck/Quark/ (feuchten) Kehricht/Mist} an.

That goes him a dirt curd rubbish garbage on.

'That is none of his business.'

By scalar endpoint, I mean to say that *am Arsch* or *einen Dreck* are marked as the lowest possible points along a continuum relating to a verb. The above phrases are problematic because while *einen Dreck* and *am Arsch* seem to impose absolute minimums, it is difficult to claim that they are NPIs without an apparent negative context. In the English sentence *I don't give a crap*, the NPI *a crap* is understood pragmatically as the lower limit of caring, and its licensing is revealed in *don't*. It could be argued that *I give a crap* is grammatical, but this sentence has pragmatic effects that distinguish it from its literal German translation. Namely, *I give a crap* might be said in order to assert that one indeed cares or to correct a presupposition that one does not.

It appears that sentence (37) has the effect of negating (36) (the affirmative version,

without the optional *nicht/einen Dreck*); that is, it creates a negative context rather than acts as an NPI. It could thus be argued that *einen Dreck* behaves like a negating operator itself rather than as an NPI. The fact that *nicht* and *einen Dreck* are interchangeable helps motivate this explanation. Furthermore, German has many examples of NPIs that emphasize negation but still require an explicit negative context, as do (38) and (39), which closely parallel their respective English translations.

(38) Er macht keinen Finger krumm.

He makes no finger bent.

"He doesn't lift a Finger"

(39) Sie hat kein Auge zugetan.

She had no eye devoted.

"She didn't sleep a wink"

It appears that there are two things that distinguish *einen Dreck* and *am Arsch* from NPIs that require overt negation.

First, they can appear in very few contexts. Richter and Sailer (2006) note that the contexts licensing *einen Dreck*, and indeed it would appear *am Arsch*, are restricted to verbs of intellectual concern such as *kuemmern um* 'to care for', *angehen* 'to concern', *sich interessieren* 'to interest oneself', and *verstehen* 'to understand'. They note that similar constructions with verbs such as *gefallen* 'to be pleasing' are ungrammatical, although other NPIs (such as *gar*) are licensed. This reveals the importance of the verb, since the syntax of (40) is not significantly different from (33) through (37) and does not contain any different sort of licensing context that

would explain why *gar* can be used but not *einen Dreck*.

(40) Mir gefällt das \*einen Dreck/gar nicht.

To-me is-pleasing that a crap/ not at all

"I don't like that at all"

There are still, however, constructions that capture a similar sense of intellectual concern but do require explicit negation.

(41) Ich habe **keinen** blassen {Dunst/Schimmer}

I have no faint glimmer/haze.

"I haven't the foggiest idea."

(42) Er hat **nicht** die Bohne Ahnung.

He has not the bean idea.

"He doesn't have a clue."

Second, *(Scheiss)Dreck/Arsch/(feuchten)Kehricht/Quark/Mist* are either taboo words or words that have an distasteful connotation. Gertjan (2001) notes a strikingly similar phenomenon in Dutch (38).<sup>1</sup> She labels this the *ene bal* construction and postulates that it is a productive form of NPI production in Dutch. Although the class of NPIs that she examines is normal in that they can (and indeed, must) occur in the scope of a negative operator, the noun phrases themselves closely resemble the *einen Dreck* construction in German. Because of these other

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<sup>1</sup> From this point on, "*einen Dreck*" or "*einen Dreck* nouns" will be used to refer to this class as a whole, since it is most ubiquitous and representative of the others.



similarities they are relevant to note.

(43) Niemand begreep er ene {zak/bal/fluit/ kloot/.../moer/sodemieter  
/flikker/donder} van

Nobody understood a {scrotum/ball/flute/testicle/.../mother/gay/gay/thunder/...} of it

The words in (43) are analogous to *einen Dreck* nouns in several respects. First, the NPs have a taboo reading and act as minimizers. Gertjan notes that minimizers often imply a sense of ridicule or scorn, which lends itself to NPs that have pejorative or taboo readings. By analogy, words like *Dreck* 'dirt' or *Mist* 'garbage' serve the same role. Second, Gertjan notes that the *ene bal* construction must be licensed by specific verb forms. These include non-agentive (see, hear, etc.), modal, or auxiliary verbs. Likewise, as we have seen, the *einen Dreck* construction is licensed primarily by verbs of intellectual concern. Finally, all of the *ene bal* nouns are neuter in gender. Although the larger number of *ene bal* nouns more easily allows one to draw the conclusion that gender influences their ability to inherit NPI-properties, it is interesting to parallel this with the *Dreck/Quark/(feuchten)Kehricht/Mist* nouns, which are all masculine.

It is also worth noting that the *Dreck* nouns fit perfectly with Von Bergen and Von Bergen's account of NPIs that strengthen negation by means of a minimal amount. This evidence seems to best dispute an alternative claim, which will be explored further in section 4.2, that *einen Dreck* resembles most a PPI, since as the function of defining scalar limits is generally the function of NPIs. A further explanation, which lends itself to a comparison with certain English expressions like *squat* (see section 4.3), is that *einen Dreck* itself is a negative operator. In (33) through (37), *nicht* would suffice to negate each sentence, just as the NPIs in (41) and

(42) are totally optional. I maintain, however (see 5.1), that *einen Dreck* does not behave like a negative operator even when it appears in a licensed context. For instance, it cannot license other NPIs such as *gar* ‘at all’ or *überhaupt* ‘at all.’(44)

(44) Ich habe [(gar/überhaupt) nichts] /[(*\*gar*/*\*überhaupt*) einen Dreck] davon verstanden.

I have (at-all/at-all) nothing/(at-all/at-all) a dirt of it understood.

"I didn't understand any of it"

<sup>2</sup>*Einen Pfifferling* is an interesting case because it belongs both to the category of *einen Dreck* nouns and to the broader category of NPIs that require overt negation. (45) through (46) can be read as further evidence that the specific verb form influences the ability of *Dreck* nouns to inherit NPI properties without an overt licensing context. Although *einen Pfifferling* can be used as an NPI with many verbs, it appears that it exists without negation only in the case when it is used with *kümmern um*, a verb of intellectual concern.

(45) Sie kümmern sich einen Pfifferling um die Statistik.

They care themselves a mushroom about the statistics.

"They don't care about the statistics."

(46) Dieses Forum ist keinen Pfifferling wert.

This forum is no mushroom worth.

"This forum is worth nothing."

(47) \*Dieses Forum ist einen Pfifferling mehr wert.

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<sup>2</sup> I received conflicting reports from my informants about *einen Pfifferling*. While some found (45) grammatical, others maintained that it should be used only with negation. However, it seems relevant that it exists in the idiolects of at least some speakers, and I thus decided to mention *einen Pfifferling* without negation in this paper.

This forum is a mushroom more worth.

A challenge presented by the *einen Dreck* construction is whether or not it should be considered an NPI given its semantic function. There seem to be compelling reasons to make this assumption, although I argue in the next section that there is perhaps a stronger alternative to this conclusion. Additionally, although *einen Dreck* can occur with a fairly broad set of verbs, it might be appropriate not to consider the particular noun phrase a polarity item by itself, but rather to consider entire VPs that include *einen Dreck* as polarity items, much like the VPs *lift a finger* or *sleep a wink*. Since *einen Dreck* tends to occur with verbs of intellectual concern, we can make the generalization that *einen Dreck* + *V* (*intellectual concern*) is a more appropriate description of the construction. From here on, it will be called *einen Dreck* + *V*.

## 5.0 What is *Einen Dreck* + *V*?

### 5.1 *Einen Dreck* and the CODII

Two possible proposals are that *einen Dreck* + *V* is best classified either as a PPI or as an NPI. Here, it is useful to return to the licensing contexts that govern weak, strong, and superstrong polarity items to see which can license the *einen Dreck* + *V* construction. Although the CODII does not include the *Dreck* nouns, a separate chart can be constructed using example sentences in order to compare them with PPIs and NPIs of different strengths.<sup>3, 4</sup>

Licensing Context	<i>einen Dreck</i> + <i>V</i>	Example (with <i>einen Dreck</i> noun)
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<sup>3</sup> Some of these examples, while written by native German speakers, would likely be considered non-standard.

<sup>4</sup> My informants were not in agreement about the grammaticality of several sentences listed below. Sentences with which I encountered difficulties are noted by a “?”.

Clausemate Negation	No	
Non-Clausemate Negation	No	
N-word	Yes	<i>Niemand schert sich einen Dreck um die bedrohlichen Richtungswechsel in der Politik</i>
kein "no"	No	
ohne "without"	Yes	<i>(?)...fuer jemanden der sich schon nach einem Jahr auf die gemuetliche Seite gelegt hat, ohne einen Dreck auf Deine Beduerfnisse zu geben</i>
Restrictor of Universal Quantifier	No	
Downward-entailing	Yes	<i>Die Amis scheren sich einen Teufel um das, was sie den anderen den ganzen Tag erzählen.</i>
nur "only"	No	
Negative Verb	No	
Question	Yes	<i>Schert er sich eigentlich einen Dreck ums Studium?</i>
Conditional	Yes	<i>Wenn dich das einen Dreck interessiert, glaube ich nicht, dass du hingehen soll.</i>
Comparative	Yes	<i>Es gibt sicherlich genug schulen, die weniger als einen Dreck darauf geben, ob spielbare Musikinstrumente vorhanden sind oder nicht.</i>
Superlative	No	
Imperative	Yes	<i>(?) Sei ein Mann und scher dich einen Dreck um meine Meinung.</i>

### 5.1.2 As a PPI

A superstrong PPI is incompatible with downward-entailing, anti-additive, and antimorphic contexts. Anti-additive contexts include words in the scope of n-words (*niemand* ‘no one’, *nichts* ‘nothing’, etc) or *ohne* ‘without.’ Although my informants disagreed about the grammaticality of *einen Dreck* in the scope of *ohne*, there was little ambiguity when it came to n-words. Likewise, it was possible to find many examples of downward-entailing sentences that licensed *einen Dreck + V*. This seems to eliminate strong and superstrong PPIs as possible categories.

However, *einen Dreck* does seem to obey the rules for a weak PPI; namely, it does not appear in antimorphic contexts. The following list compares *einen Dreck + V* with all of the weak PPIs in German listed by the CODII.

Licensing Condition	Einen Dreck + V	keineswegs ‘no way’	Jemandem zum Teufel wuenschen ‘to curse someone’	frohlocken ‘to rejoice’	absolut ‘absolutely’	preisen ‘to commend’
Clausemate Negation	No	No	No	No	No	No
Non-Clausemate Negation	No	No	No	No	No	No
N-word	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
kein "no"	No	No	No	No	No	No
ohne "without"	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Restrictor of Universal Quantifier	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

Downward-entailing	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
nur "only"	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Negative Verb	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Question	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Conditional	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Comparative	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Superlative	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Imperative	Yes (?)	No	No	Yes	Yes	No

From these examples, it is difficult to determine whether *einen Dreck + V* could really be called a weak PPI. The most important feature of a weak PPI is that it is forbidden in the scope of a negative operator. This is true for all of these phrases, and whether they are licensed by the remaining contexts might just depend on their idiosyncrasies. In addition, while the most basic feature of a PPI is displayed by *einen Dreck + V*, it still seems, semantically at least, to play the role of an NPI, as it imposes a scalar minimum.

### 5.1.2 As an NPI

The few who have commented on the *einen Dreck + V* construction seem to agree that it is an NPI. According to the model of Richter and Sailer, for instance, "Dreck is lexically specified as optionally introducing a negation (Richter and Sailer, 17)." Likewise, Bayer states that such constructions are "NPIs which in certain contexts can trigger sentential negation while retaining

the emphatic interpretation typical of these NPIs (Bayer, 3)." They claim that *einen Dreck* is licensed by a null negator; the sentence, thus, must display syntactic negation without revealing it in the surface form of the utterance. In addition, the semantic effects of the construction are a big motivation toward this classification, since the establishment of scalar minimums and maximums is generally thought to fall in the domain of NPIs.

Again, although none of the *einen Dreck* nouns are found within the set of phrases in CODII, parallels can be drawn between CODII's classification of semantically-related, unambiguous NPIs such as *einen Finger krumm machen* "to lift a finger" and *einen blassen Schimmer haben* "to have the foggiest idea." Both of these phrases involve the establishment of a scalar endpoint, as does *einen Dreck*, while *einen blassen Schimmer haben* has the additional similarity of describing an epistemological matter.

Licensing Context	<i>einen Dreck + V</i>	<i>einen Finger krumm machen</i>	<i>einen blassen Schimmer haben</i>
Clausemate Negation	No	Yes	Yes
Non-Clausemate Negation	No	Yes	Yes
N-word	Yes	Yes	Yes
kein "no"	No	Yes	Yes
ohne "without"	Yes (?)	Yes	Yes
Restrictor of Universal Quantifier	No	No	No
Downward-entailing	Yes	Yes	Yes
nur "only"	No	No	Yes

Negative Verb	No	No	No
Question	Yes	No	Yes
Conditional	Yes	No	Yes
Comparative	Yes	Yes	No
Superlative	No	Yes	No
Imperative	Yes (?)	No	No

There is a significant amount of overlap between the contexts that license the *einen Dreck + V* constructions and *einen blassen Schimmer haben*. The most noticeable difference here is that *einen Dreck* is not licensed by negation within the clause in which it appears or by *kein* (i.e. overt negation). These two operators, with regard to Zwarts' system of classification, establish an antimorphic environment, which is thought to license the greatest number of NPIs.

If it could be established that *einen Dreck + V* contained a null negator, it would be tempting to call the construction an NPI, given this overlap with *einen blassen Schimmer haben* and its semantic contribution. However, as I argue in section 5.2, there are some very compelling challenges to this proposal.

### 5.1.3 A Bipolar Item

Van der Wouden proposes that there are certain words which are unclassifiable as PPIs or as NPIs, but rather occupy the nebulous space of “bipolar elements,” displaying properties of both types of polarity items.

Matters are even more complicated: negative polarity behavior and positive polarity behavior are shown to be independent properties. This fact predicts the



existence of bipolar elements, lexical items that combine these two properties. The distributional idiosyncracies of various lexical items are best captured by assuming that they are indeed bipolar elements: they behave like negative polarity items because they occur in downward monotonic contexts only, and they are like positive polarity items in the sense that they are excluded from, e.g., antimorphic contexts (Van der Wouden, 217).

He provides the example of *ooit* ‘ever’ in Dutch. *Ooit* is banned in antimorphic environments (overt negation), giving it the characteristic of a weak PPI. However, it is comfortable in environments that are downward-entailing and environments that are both downward-entailing and anti-additive. The latter property, with respect to CODII’s classification, represent occurrence in the scope of an N-word and *ohne* ‘without.’

Although it is unclear whether or not *einen Dreck + V* can fall within the scope of *ohne* ‘without,’ since my informants tended to disagree, the construction still seems like a very good candidate for bipolar category. Referring to the first charts, we see that *einen Dreck + V* is indeed banned in antimorphic contexts. However, it is licensed by downward entailment and, if we ignore the ambiguity of *ohne*, by anti-additive contexts. This matches perfectly Van der Wouden’s definition of a bipolar element, presenting one possible solution for the classification of *einen Dreck + V*.

## **5.2 *Einen Dreck + V* as a negative operator: A comparison with English**

In section 4, it was noted that *einen Dreck + V* does not itself appear to be negative operator or to be an NPI that has a null negative reading because of its inability to license other NPIs. For instance, in sentence (44) *einen Dreck + V* is unable to license an NPI such as *gar*. According to the CODII, *gar* is licensed by *kein* ‘no’-negation, N-words (*niemals* ‘never,’ *niemand* ‘no one’, *nichts* ‘nothing’), and by clausemate negation, making it a strong NPI. Since none of these words

are present in sentence (44), and *gar* remains unlicensed by *einen Dreck + V*, this can be taken as evidence that sentences with *einen Dreck + V* may not, on their own, carry a negative reading.

Furthermore, using the findings of Postal, a parallel can be drawn between *einen Dreck* words and vulgar minimizers, as Postal (2008) calls them, in English. In this category are words such as *(diddly)squat*, *fuckall*, and *jackshit*. As (48) and (49) reveal, most of these words can occur with or without negation and the truth conditions of the utterances remain intact. Also discussed are words that function, as Postal calls them, as ZERO operators, including *zilch*, *nix*, *zip*, and *naught*. These operators are labeled as ZERO because they mark as null whatever occurs within their scope. Members of this group normally cannot occur with negation, nor do they carry a negative reading of their own. For instance a *He gave me zilch* has an affirmative reading, despite describe a null quantity. Like NPIs, ZERO operators establish a minimal amount but one that consists of nothing and can appear only in utterances that are not negated.

(48) Tom didn't understand diddly-squat about the lecture.

(49) Tom understood diddly-squat about the lecture.

Postal notes how, like *einen Dreck*, English vulgar minimizers are unable to license NPIs, as in (50) and (51).

(50) \*He has done squat to lift a finger

(51) \*He gave squat to any charity.

Intuition seems to say that *squat* can be read as *anything* in (48) and *nothing* in (49). In other

words, it is an NPI in (48) but itself expresses negation in (49). Postal argues against this interpretation, however, claiming that "vulgar minimizers cannot be analyzed as forms having negative quantifiers for determiners and, even more generally, cannot be correctly analyzed as containing any syntactic negatives at all (Postal 4)." He uses tests devised by Klima to show that *nothing* as a negative operator and *squat* are not logically equivalent. For instance, one test for negation in English is the *not even* + *X* Strengthenener in (52) through (55). This requires a negative antecedent before a *not even* phrase.<sup>5</sup>

(52) \*Janet read some book yesterday, not even the assigned book.

(53) Janet read no book yesterday, not even the assigned book.

(54) Janet didn't read squat yesterday, not even the assigned book. .

(55) \*Janet read squat yesterday, not even the assigned book.

Another example, shown in (56) through (59), is the test of interrogative tags. A requirement for a sentence that contains negation is the ability for a positive interrogative tag to be attached. The ungrammaticality of (59) with *did she?* reveals, according to Postal, that *squat* contributes no syntactic negation.

(56) Janet read some book, \*did she/didn't she?

(57) Janet read no book, did she/\*didn't she?

(58) Janet didn't read squat, did she/\*didn't she?

(59) Janet read squat, \*did she/didn't she?

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<sup>5</sup> These examples have been reproduced from Postal (2008).

According to both of these tests, no overt negation occurs in sentences such as (49). Instead, Postal argues for two different functions of *nothing*, one which is negative and one which is comparable to a vulgar minimizer. In other words, what occurs in the scope of the negative *nothing* receives a negative interpretation, while what is in the scope of the ZERO nothing is null, and its respective sentence has an affirmative reading. The vulgar minimizer is thus a semantically equivalent manifestation of the ZERO nothing.

The major difference between the vulgar minimizers in English and *einen Dreck + V* is that overt negation is not an option with the latter. However, at least one word that Postal classifies as vulgar minimizer (but is only briefly mentioned in his article), *fuckall*, behaves similarly.

(60) My job agency informs me that there are fuckall jobs around right now.

(61) \*He doesn't know fuckall about physics.

*Fuckall* is licensed only in contexts where there is no overt negation, illustrated by the unacceptability of (61). In addition to its syntactic restrictions, it occurs often with verbs of intellectual concern ((60) is an exceptional). Going along with Postal's explanation, *fuckall* is comparable with *diddly-squat* of sentence (49). That is, it does not involve overt negation, but rather sets a scalar minimum of nothing by acting as a ZERO operator (rather than a negative operator). If we accept this argument, this definition of a ZERO operator applies nicely to the *einen Dreck* nouns. We might say, thus, that *fuckall* and *einen Dreck + V* belong to a more restricted class of vulgar minimizers that have no ability to appear as NPIs (the anything reading

in (48)).

## 6.0 Conclusion

In this paper, several possibilities were explored regarding the status of *einen Dreck + V*. It was concluded that the construction does display a property quite characteristic of NPIs; that is, it imposes a scalar minimum with respect to a particular verb. As it was, the few pieces of literature (Bayer 2006; Van der Wouden 1994; Richter and Soehn 2006) giving any treatment to similar constructions in German suggest that it is indeed an NPI that can carry its own negation.

It is understandable how *einen Dreck + V* might be mistaken as an NPI that is licensed by a null negator, given that null quantities are often expressed via a negative operator (e.g. *not*, *nicht*). However, given the construction's inability to occur in antimorphic environments and evidence that it involves no syntactic negation, it seems insufficient to give *einen Dreck + V* the label of NPI. In addition, evidence for the treatment of *einen Dreck + V* as a PPI was considered. Although the construction displays an important property of PPI-hood, its restriction to contexts that are not antimorphic, the sense that it contributes to a sentence is uncharacteristic of PPIs, challenging this proposal.

This leaves two options, both of which have their merits. Using van der Wouden's definition of a bipolar item allows us to account for the apparent contradiction that the construction seems to resemble, in some respects, both a PPI and an NPI. However, it seems that the second proposal explored, that *einen Dreck + V* is analogous to the ZERO operator reading of *squat* and to *fuckall* may be stronger. With this account, a scalar minimum is still assigned with *einen Dreck* representing a null quantity. Thus, negation is unnecessary, since we understand *einen Dreck* to be replaceable with ZERO, or, in other words, something similar to

the English minimizers *zilch* or *nix*. This position seems more concrete than the bipolar proposal, and it provides a better explanation of the idiosyncrasies of the phrase.

This analysis, where *einen Dreck + V* parallels the ZERO reading of *nothing*, has several advantages over the treatment of the construction as an NPI. Most significantly, one would need compelling evidence to suggest that *einen Dreck + V* is licensed by a negative operator that deletes in a sentence's surface structure. So far, little evidence has been presented to support this hypothesis. Furthermore, the ZERO construction approach allows us to shed some additional light on the semantic implications of *einen Dreck + V* versus an NPI such as *einen Finger krumm machen*, which likewise presents a scalar limit, but not at a null value.

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