

On referential vagueness: A comparative study of English and American Sign Language*

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Yoon, Suwon. 2021. On referential vagueness: A comparative study of English and American Sign Language. *Linguistic Research* 38(1): 53-73. In addition to the widely known Free Choice Items (FCIs), there exists another type of anti-specific item, known as existential indeterminate or Referentially Vague Items (RVIs) such as *some-X-or-other* in English. Such polarity items are characterized to be rather semantically non-emphatic, and their non-emphaticness is modeled as referential vagueness as a speaker-based felicity condition of minimal, non-exhaustive variation. Both FCIs and RVIs are anti-specificity phenomena, relying on a speaker's epistemic judgment, but distinct in that, whereas FCIs require exhaustive variation, RVIs require partial, non-exhaustive variation. However, the landscape of specificity in signed languages has been less well-defined. In this background, the main goal of current study is twofold: first, by identifying an RVI sign in ASL, equivalent to RVIs in English, I support the necessity of the notion of referential vagueness to correctly capture the meaning and distribution of non-emphatic, non-exhaustive NPIs occurring in nonveridical contexts; and second, I show how both English and ASL exhibit a remarkable case of semantic-o-pragmatic extension from anti-specificity (as RVIs) to anti-veridicality (as metalinguistic negation). (University of Texas, Arlington)

Keywords (Anti-)specificity, referentially vague items, free choice items, polarity, metalinguistic negation, English, ASL

1. Introduction

Polarity phenomena have been the subject of a great deal of academic interest in recent years. Much attention has been paid to determining licensing conditions for negative polarity items (NPIs) in English, Greek, etc. (Klima 1964; Ladusaw 1980; Linebarger 1980; Giannakidou 2009, a.o.) and free choice items (FCIs) (Kadmon and Landman 1993, a.o.), but the idea of non-exhaustive polarity phenomena has received less attention. In labeling certain polarity items non-exhaustive, I mean that their meaning and

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use is not dependent on considering all possible values in all possible worlds. These items, then, differ significantly from FCIs, which require full exhaustivity (Giannakidou and Quer 2013). The fact that non-exhaustive polarity items have not received much attention until recently is due, in part, to a prevailing thought that all polarity items must be exhaustive, as Chierchia (2013) discusses. Such a generalization fails to capture the true spectrum of these phenomena, however, and is central to many of the counter-arguments proposed in the present study. The specific claims of this paper are focused on the existence of referential vagueness (discussed in more detail in section 2) as a non-emphatic, non-exhaustive polarity item. Significant evidence to this fact already exists (Giannakidou and Quer 2013; Giannakidou and Yoon 2016, a.o.), however I present novel data from American Sign Language (ASL) that adds to these claims. This data helps to show that the notion of non-emphatic, non-exhaustive polarity extends across language modalities as a universal feature.

In addition, I illustrate that there exists a strong connection between non-specificity and nonveridicality as illustrated through metalinguistic negation. This is a connection that has been documented in the past (Kiparsky and Kiparsky 1970; Melvold 1991; Borschev et al. 2006; a.o.), and is based on the idea that the nonveridicality of metalinguistic negation arises from a decrease in definiteness or specificity.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 details the existing theories on referential vagueness. Section 3 provides background on the current understanding of definiteness and specificity in signed languages and introduces the indefiniteness particle that is central to our analysis. In section 4, I introduce novel evidence from ASL, compared to English, as to why this particle does not fit the definition of an FCI. I also introduce four identity diagnostics in order to demonstrate where the particle fits into the landscape of referential vagueness. Section 5 proposes and discusses the idea of anti-specificity as a source for metalinguistic negation in ASL, English, and beyond. Finally, section 6 concludes and discusses the larger implications of this work.

2. Negative polarity, free choice and referential vagueness in English

Within the landscape of polarity, referential vagueness refers to a type of anti-specificity phenomena similar to free choice. Free Choice Items (FCIs) are observed in many languages, and show tendency to be morphologically complex, typically

consisting of a *wh*-part and free choice marking, except for *any* in English or true FCI universals such as French *tout* (Jayez and Tovena 2004). As shown in the following example, *whatever* in English follows the FCI-formation pattern.

(1) *Free Choice Items: wh-ever, any*

- a. I will order *whatever* is recommended by the chef. [English]
- b. I will order *anything* that is recommended by the chef.

Any, on the other hand, is morphologically simple, which may have been historically derived by the indefinite article *a(n)* (Giannakidou and Quer 2013). Regarding morphological property, English *any*, which is not *wh*-based, is thus distinctive from regular FCIs and *wh*-indefinites. Regarding distributional property, *any* doesn't behave like typical FCIs, since it may appear in episodic contexts such as negation or questions, in which case *any* is used as a Negative Polarity Item (NPI):

(2) *Negative Polarity Items: any*

- a. John didn't see anything. [English]
- b. *John saw anything.
- c. Did you hear (*almost) any noise?

The semantics of NPI *any* is defined as existential, along with similar types of NPIs crosslinguistically (Ladusaw 1980; Carlson 1981). To disambiguate the true meaning of *any*, modifiability by *almost* is suggested as a diagnostic for FC-*any* (Davison 1980).

Based on the contrast between ungrammaticality of (2c) above and (3a) below and grammaticality (3b), Giannakidou and Quer note that *almost* modifies a universal quantifier like *every*, which implies that the NPI *any* cannot be a universal quantifier.

(3) Modifiability by *almost*

- a. *Did you hear almost one/a/some noise? [English]
- b. Did you hear almost every noise?

Although the ambiguous status of *any* between NPI and FCI is not the main focus of current work, it is important to understand since all free choice discussions in the literature begins with the nature of *any*. Two main questions surrounding *any* are the

following: First, should we treat FCI-any as lexically distinct from NPI-any? Second, if distinct, is FC-any a universal quantifier, as opposed to existential NPI-any (Dayal 2004; Sæbø 2001; see Horn 2005)?

Going back to our main concern, referential vagueness and free choiceness, both involve a type of indefinite NP where the speaker does not know the identity of the referent, but referentially vague indefinites (RVI; à la Giannakidou and Quer 2013) are generally weaker than FCIs and require just partial, rather than exhaustive, variation. In other words, where FCIs require domain exhaustification, or for there to be plural domain where we exhaust all values in this domain, RVIs instead have a speaker-based felicity condition of non-exhaustive variation; only some values in a given domain need be considered.

RVIs have been identified in several other languages, including Greek, Catalan, and Spanish (Giannakidou and Quer 2013) as well as Korean (Giannakidou and Yoon 2016). The English equivalent of these RVIs is the phrase *some-X-or-other*, where a speaker can only felicitously use this indefinite construction if they do not have a specific value in mind for the referent.

(4) *Referentially Vague Items: some X or other* [English]

He was asking for *some book or other*. #It was “A Farewell to Arms.”

The example in (4) best fits a conversational context where the speaker does not know what specific book the subject was asking about. If, however, we imagine that the speaker knows the title in question, it becomes odd to use the *some-X-or-other* construction; this infelicity is noted in the second half of (4), where adding a specific value to the NP creates a sentence that is semantically odd. The concept of speaker ignorance or uncertainty is crucial to the theory of referential vagueness.

Similar concepts to referential vagueness have been previously proposed, though they did not construct an argument of these indefinites as a type of polarity item; indeed, similar phenomena include *wh*-indeterminates (Kratzer and Shimoyama 2002), Heimian variables (Cheng and Huang 1996), existential indeterminates (Kratzer 2005), epistemic indefinites (Jayez and Tovena 2006), modal indefinites (Alonso-Ovalle and Menéndez-Benito 2010), and extremely non-specific (Farkas 2000). However, for the specific purposes of this paper, I follow Giannakidou and Quer (2013)’s analysis.

3. Specificity and definiteness in English vs. signed languages

Von Heusinger (2002) characterizes a specific reading as the speaker's *identifiability* of the referent: the specific reading can be acquired by the continuation of (5a) while the non-specific reading is triggered by (5b). Furthermore, von Heusinger summarizes the pretheoretical and informal specificity properties as in (6):

- (5) Umberto Eco: "I desired to poison a monk." [English]
 - (a) Specific: He lived in the famous monastery Bobbio in the year 1347.
 - (b) Non-Specific: Therefore, Eco started to write a novel about a monastery.
- (6) Pretheoretical and informal characterization of specificity
 - (i) certainty of the speaker about the identity of the referent
 - (ii) the referent is fixed
 - (iii) specific indefinite NPs are "scopeless", i.e. they behave as if they always have widest scope
 - (iv) specific indefinite NPs can be paraphrased by *a certain*

Von Heusinger, however, refutes (6i) and (6iii) as specificity properties, arguing for the specificity as "NP being referentially anchored." His claim against (6i) is in line with Kratzer's (2003) argument that knowing a choice function does not guarantee knowing its value. The following Kratzer's funeral example illustrates this point. In the context (7), the 'some person' indicates a person who will die next. Therefore, 'some person' is specific but the speaker lacks certainty about the identity of the referent because it is impossible for the speaker to pick out the person who will die next after every funeral in Mindelheim.

- (7) After every funeral in Mindelheim, the mourners pray for some [English] (particular) person among them.

Given this partial controversy on the definition of specificity, specificity seems to be more of a family of phenomena or a matter of a strong tendency toward abovementioned characteristics along with Partee (2005).

Similar to spoken languages, definiteness and specificity are well-established parts of the grammar of the larger typological class of signed languages. In the field of signed

languages, MacLaughlin (1997) found that American Sign Language (ASL) has both a definite and indefinite determiner that are distinct in form from one another. Indefinite NPs are usually indicated with the signs commonly glossed as ONE or SOMETHING/ONE based on the degree of identifiability that the signer has for the referent. Both of these signs express uncertainty and unidentifiability on the signer's part, and must obligatorily be used with non-manual markers, or facial expressions, that signal this uncertainty. The sign SOMETHING/ONE, in particular, is traditionally combined with a wrinkled nose and furrowed eyebrows. As shown in (8a) and (8b), the sign ONE has a more specific interpretation than SOMETHING/ONE. However, as the example in (9) shows, signers must still have some knowledge about the referent in question to use SOMETHING/ONE because of the interpretation that the specific referent can be picked out through ostension. The sign SOMETHING/ONE on its own does not have the necessary degree of speaker uncertainty to be considered an RVI. For all of the ASL data presented here, it is important to note that each word in all capital letters represents the commonly accepted gloss for a specific sign. Signs glossed as IX represent an index, which is either a pronominal form or a location.

- | | | |
|--------|--|-----------|
| (8) a. | ONE DOG BITE IX _{pro} 1P | [ASL] |
| | b. A (specific) dog bit me. | [English] |
| | c. SOMETHING/ONE DOG BITE IX _{pro} 1P | [ASL] |
| | d. Some dog bit me. | [English] |
| (9) a. | SOMETHING/ONE WOMAN IX KNOW PRESIDENT | [ASL] |
| | b. Some woman (there) knows the president. | [English] |
- (MacLaughlin 1997:122, (15), (16), (22))

Because signed languages operate in a different modality than spoken languages, they are also able to use spatial relationships between signs, as well as a sign's location within the larger sign space surrounding the signer, to indicate specificity. This phenomenon has been documented for Catalan Sign Language (LSC) (Barbera 2012), where lower spatial locations are used for more specific referents and higher spatial locations are used for non-specific referents. As a result, the more specific a referent is, the lower it would appear in the sign space. This is also true in ASL, where a non-specific SOMETHING/ONE is signed high in the sign space (MacLaughlin 1997). Sign height has also been found to have a domain widening function in ASL, similar to free choice

(Davidson and Gagne 2014).

In addition to the specific definite and indefinite determiners identified by MacLaughlin (1997), ASL also possesses what Conlin et al. (2003) termed an indefiniteness particle. This sign, glossed as *part:indef*, has previously been believed to serve a domain widening function similar to that proposed for English *any* by Kadmon and Landman (1993). Under this analysis, when *part:indef* is included in a proposition, it widens the domain of possibilities under consideration. In (10) below, the domain is widened to include some type of sea vessel that may only be superficially similar to a boat.

- (10)a. SOMETHING/ONE BOAT (2h)**part:indef** SINK CAPE COD [ASL]
 b. A boat (or something) sank off of Cape Cod. [English]
 (Conlin et al. 2003: 9, (24))

I argue, however, that this is not the case for *part:indef*. Rather than serving a domain widening function similar to an FCI, it instead signals domain non-specificity as an RVI. This is a notable distinction, as no previous notion of referential vagueness has been identified in ASL. Adding novel data from ASL to the existing understanding of non-specificity further supports the necessity of the notion of referential vagueness to capture the meaning and distribution of non-emphatic, non-exhaustive polarity items occurring in nonveridical contexts.

4. Proposal: Referential vagueness in ASL

Though RVIs have only been identified in spoken languages so far, using data elicited from native signers I show that they are not exclusive to the domain of spoken language. This language data was collected from four signer consultants and primarily involved elicitations and judgments; consultants were given a particular semantic context in ASL and asked how they would describe a particular concept in the given context.¹ Once that information was collected, consultants were then asked to provide grammaticality judgments on similar sentences with changes in specific signs or

¹ An earlier version of the project with initial data has been discussed in Fleckenstein and Yoon (2017).

additional information added. Consultants were asked whether these new sentences were ones that they would use themselves with other members of the Deaf community in order to avoid positive judgments on sentences that a native signer would not use but might accept from a non-native signer.²

In addition to the particle of indefiniteness, *part:indef*, identified by Conlin et al. (2003), ASL possesses a separate sign ANY. These signs are distinct from one another in both form and function. In terms of phonological form, *part:indef* follows a larger typological pattern (discussed in Giannakidou and Quer 2013; Giannakidou and Yoon 2016) of an RVI having a *wh*-source but no question meaning. In fact, *part:indef* is so similar to the sign WHAT that it is often mistaken for the *wh*-word, leading to its only recent discovery (Conlin et al. 2003). Further, while ASL ANY is licensed in nonveridical contexts similar to an NPI (Schlenker 2016; Fleckenstein and Yoon 2016), it is also licensed as an FCI. *Part:indef*, on the other hand, is not licensed in the same FC environments as ANY due to differences in exhaustivity. This evidence, outlined below, is significant in that it highlights why *part:indef* is not an FCI and cannot serve the same domain widening function as we would expect from one.

4.1 Referential vagueness items or Free choice items?

As previously discussed, FCIs and RVIs have different licensing conditions and distinct distributions. Where FCIs require domain exhaustification, or the existence of a plural domain where all values in this domain are exhausted, RVIs require non-exhaustive variation. The difference in licensing conditions is illustrated by the following examples, where the use of the sign ANY is licensed in nonveridical contexts such as modal verbs in (11) and conditionals in (12). In these same contexts, *part:indef* is considered to be ungrammatical because the meaning of these sentences relies on exhaustive variation. It should be noted that in the gloss in (12), the line over the first clause indicates the non-manual markers, or facial expressions, associated with a conditional statement. In this case, these non-manual markers indicate raised eyebrows.

² Note, however, that there might be variation across dialects of ASL and ASL-based creoles.

- (11)a. {ANY/***part:indef**} CAN WIN. [ASL]
 b. Anyone can win. [English]
 _____ cond.
- (12)a. IX:2P TELL {ANY/***part:indef**} NEVER FORGIVE. [ASL]
 b. If you tell anyone, I'll never forgive you. [English]

Additionally, in contexts where exhaustive variation is not satisfied, using an FCI renders the proposition semantically odd.³ RVIs, however, are fine in these contexts. In the propositions in (13a,b) and (14a,b), the sentences are odd because in the given context, exhaustive variation cannot possibly be obtained. The examples in (13c,d) and (14c,d), on the other hand, are semantically fine because the use of *part:indef* does not demand that a domain be exhausted in the first place. In (13a,b), the use of the FCI creates a strong imperative to consider or to eat all of the sweets, and in (14a,b) the FCI is infelicitous due to the strong suggestion to consider all kinds of books including those that would be inappropriate as a birthday present.

- (13) Context: a variety of delicious desserts are presented at the buffet in front of me. A says: 'Eat some (or other) of these sweets!'
- a. #EAT ANY IX:THESE [ASL]
 b. #Eat ANY of these! [English]
 c. EAT SOMETHING/ONE **part:indef** IX:THESE [ASL]
 d. Eat some (or other) of these! [English]
- (14) Context: it's my dear friend John's birthday. What should I buy him as a present? A: 'You should get him a book. He likes books.'
- a. #SHOULD GIVE ANY BOOK IX:3P LIKE BOOK [ASL]
 b. #You should give him ANY book. He likes books. [English]
 c. SHOULD GIVE BOOK **part:indef** IX:3P LIKE BOOK [ASL]
 d. You should give him a book (of some sort). He likes books. [English]

While it is clear that *part:indef* does not function as an FCI, and thus does not serve the same domain widening function as English *any*, in the following section I introduce a number of identifiability diagnostics to show that it does meet the criteria for RVIs.

3 Baik and Park (2018) discuss effects of conceptual distinctions on semantic memory retrieval.

4.2 Identifiability diagnostics

Referentially vague indefinites require a degree of *speaker ignorance* and can only be used when a speaker is in a state of epistemic indeterminacy. In other words, in order to felicitously use an RVI, the speaker must not be able to identify the individual to which the RVI points. This property is shown in the following examples in Greek and Spanish (Giannkidou and Quer 2013):

- (15)a. Thelo na miliso me kapjon glosologo. #Ine aftos o kirios eki. [Greek]
 ‘I want to meet some linguist or other. ??It’s that guy over there.’
- b. Thelo na miliso me kapjon kathijiti. #To onoma tu ine Veloudis.
 ‘I want to meet some professor or other. #His name is Veloudis.’
- c. Thelo na miliso me kapjon kathijiti. #Ine o proedros tu tmimatos filosofias.
 ‘I want to meet some professor or other. #He is the head of the Philosophy Department.’
- (16)a. Tengo que leer un articulo de algún profesor. #Es aquel señor de alli.
 [Spanish]
 ‘I have to read an article by some professor or other. ??It’s this guy over there.’
- b. Tengo que quedar con algún profesor. #Se llama Bob Smith.
 ‘I have to meet with some professor or other. #His name is Bob Smith.’
- c. Tengo que quedar con algún profesor. #Es el director del Departamento de Filosofia.
 ‘I have to meet some professor or other. #He is the Head of the Philosophy Department.’

Likewise in the following data from ASL and English, *part:indef* and *some X or other* follows this same pattern. As (17)-(19) show, naming, ostension, and description, are all incompatible with *part:indef* in ASL and *some X or other* in English:

- (17)a. SOMETHING/ONE **part:indef** TEACH+AGENT WANT [ASL]
 MEET #NAME BILL
 b. I want to meet some professor (or other). #His name is Bill. [English]
- (18)a. SOMETHING/ONE **part:indef** TEACH+AGENT WANT [ASL]
 MEET #MAN IX:THERE
 b. I want to meet some professor (or other). #It's that guy over there.
 [English]
- (19)a. SOMETHING/ONE **part:indef** TEACH+AGENT WANT [ASL]
 MEET #BOSS DEPARTMENT LINGUISTICS
 b. I want to meet some professor (or other). #He's the head of the
 Linguistics Department. [English]

The first sentence in each example from (17) to (19) carries the implication that there is uncertainty on the speaker's part and that they do not have an identifiable referent in mind that they are trying to point out. As a result, the second sentence in each example, which serves to point out a specific referent or to provide a specific value is interpreted as semantically odd. A speaker cannot simultaneously have ignorance or uncertainty of a specific value as well as knowledge of the specific value. These results parallel what has previously been found for Spanish, Catalan, and Greek (Giannakidou and Quer 2013) as well as for Korean (Giannakidou and Yoon 2016).

Further, *part:indef* is also incompatible with requests for a specific value, illustrated in (20).⁴ While the speaker can assert that something strange arrived, the listener cannot request a specific value as to what that something was because the speaker does not have this information. Similar to the example in (12) above, the line over speaker B's utterance indicates non-manual markings.

- (20)A:SOMETHING/ONE **part:indef** STRANGE ARRIVE [ASL]
 'Something (or other) strange arrived.' [English]
 _____whq
 B:#WHAT [ASL]
 'What was it?' [English]

4 Regarding the role of semantic prominence in syntactic structure, refer to Lee (2018).

In ASL, *wh*-questions have a specific, obligatory non-manual marking that consists of furrowed eyebrows, as shown below. Eyebrows play an important part in signed languages: While a yes/no-question is signed with lower eyebrows, this expression with furrowed eyebrows is normally used for questions using the signs of *wh*-phrases such as *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *how*, *how many* and *why*.

(21) *A version of the sign 'who' with furrowed eyebrows in ASL*



(image obtained at www.lifeprint.com)⁵

4.3 Referential vagueness condition of *part:indef* in ASL and *some X or other* in English

In order to account for the pattern of data presented in sections 4.1 and 4.2, I propose that *part:indef* in ASL, along with *some X or other* in English, represents the NPI morphology as referential vagueness, as defined in (22) (Giannakidou and Quer 2013; Giannakidou and Yoon 2016). This definition accounts for the data in section 4.1. Second, (22b) states the felicity condition of minimal variation, due to speaker's ignorance, as shown in its infelicity in contexts that require a fixed value in (17)-(19) in section 4.2 above.

5 <https://www.lifeprint.com/asl101/pages-layout/whfacialexpression.htm>

- (22)a. anti-uniqueness: A sentence of the form $[s \alpha] \zeta$, where α is a singular indefinite containing a referential vagueness marker, expresses a proposition only in those contexts c where the following felicity condition is fulfilled: the speaker s of c does not intend to refer to exactly one individual d in c .
- b. minimal choice of values:
- (i) a sentence containing a referentially vague indefinite α will have a truth value iff: $\exists w_1, w_2 \in W: \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^{w_1} \neq \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^{w_2}$; where α is the referentially vague variable.
 - (ii) The words w_1, w_2 are epistemic alternatives of the speaker: $w_1, w_2 \in M(\text{speaker})$, where $M(\text{speaker})$ is the speaker's belief state, the worlds compatible with what she believes/knows.
 - (iii) The speaker does not know which one is the actual value. (Ignorance).

5. Anti-specificity as a source for metalinguistic negation

In addition to its function as an RVI, *part:indef* has also been documented (Conlin et al. 2003) in instances where it served as a source of metalinguistic (ML) negation. To understand the phenomena of ML negation (Horn 1989, 2018; McCawley 1991; Geurts 1998; Burton-Roberts 1999; Carston 1999), it will be instructive to remind the reader Horn's (1989) discussion of ML negation. Horn (1989) proposes that, besides its regular job as a truth functional denial, i.e. 'It is not the case that S', regular sentence negation can be used as ML negation also. In this case, he defines this special type of negation as "a device for objecting to a previous utterance on any grounds whatsoever including the conventional or conversational implicata it potentially induces, its morphology, its style or register or its phonetic realization" (Horn 1989: 363). Observe the following examples:

- (23)a. My brother is not a crook—I don't have a brother! [English]
 b. Speaker A: It's stewed bunny.
 Speaker B: It's not stewed bunny, it's *civet de lapin*! (Drozd 1995: 586, (1))

In example (23a), the job of negation 'not' is not denying the truth condition of

assertion, meaning ‘It is not the case that my brother is a crook,’ which only makes sense in the context where the speaker has a brother. Instead, ‘not’ therein negates the presupposition that the speaker has a brother. In (23b), on the other hand, ‘not’ negates the appropriateness or speaker’s subjective preference with regard to the choice of the linguistic expression “stewed bunny”. The speaker thus replaces this inappropriate expression with what she finds a more appropriate expression “civet de lapin”. Note that, as hinted by the use of exclamation marker “!” at both examples, ML negation typically involves this contrastive use, hence comes with an exclamative emphatic flavor, as shown in the following examples (Horn 1989: ch. 6):

(24) *Metalinguistic Negation*

- a. Around here we don’t LIKE coffee—we LOVE it. [English]
- b. She doesn’t sell INsurance—she sells inSURance.
- c. I’m not HIS brother—he’s MY brother!
- d. Mozart’s sonatas were for piano and violin, not for violin and piano.
- e. I’m not happy with the plan, I’m ecstatic!
- f. You didn’t eat some of the cookies, you ate them all!

This specialized metalinguistic negation, or also characterized as echoic negation, arises due to pragmatic ambiguity, unlike ordinary descriptive negation form (Horn 1989).

It is important to note, however, that ML negation can also be conveyed by special negations. In the following example in Greek, *oxi* is only reserved for ML negation use (Giannakidou 1998; see also Giannakidou and Stavrou 2009; Giannkdiou and Yoon 2011):

- (25) Speaker A: *o Petros exi tria pedia.* [Greek]
 ‘Peter has three children.’
 Speaker B: *oxi ! o Petros exi oxī tria pedia, ala tessera!*
 ‘No! Peter doesn’t have three children, but four!’

In this example also, we can observe the exclamative and emphatic flavor in the *oxi* sentence. Further, Horn (1989) notes that early sentence initial negation in English-learning children is realized in the form of metalinguistic negation. Drozd (1995) further develops this idea for child speech as in the following examples:

(26) *Negation in Child speech*

- a. No sunny outside! [English]
- b. No Leila have a turn!
- c. No over!

Giannkdiou and Yoon (2011) also discusses another metalinguistic phenomena, showing how metalinguistic comparatives in Greek and Korean further support the grammatical status of metalinguistic functions.

Given the properties of ML negation, Horn (1989) glosses the metalinguistic use as I object to U, where U is an utterance or utterance type. As example (27) shows, there is no other negation marker present, yet the sentence is still interpreted as the speaker objecting to another, previous utterance.

- (27)a. JOHN KNOW ANSWER !*part:indef*! [ASL]
 - b. John knows the answer! (How could you have thought he wouldn't?). [English]
- (Conlin et al. 2003: 25, (72))

Though Conlin et al. (2003) do not explicitly analyze the sentence in (27) as an instance of ML negation, it is clear that it meets many of the hallmark properties of ML negation (Horn 1985, 1989; Burton-Roberts 1989):

(28) *Hallmarks of ML negation*

- a. Metalinguistic negations are standardly used as a rejoinder to a previous utterance.
- b. There is a certain prosodic pattern commonly associated with metalinguistic negation.

The example in (27) could only be stated following an assertion that *John does not know the answer*, otherwise it would be interpreted as semantically odd to assert out of the blue that he does; as a result of this restriction, the sentence follows the property outlined in A. Despite the fact that it has a different modality from spoken language, ASL still displays the same kind of prosodic pattern usually found in ML negation in (27). There is a kind of emphatic or contrastive stress placed on *part:indef* that correlates

to the contrastive stress on the offending item and its replacement in spoken instances of ML negation.⁶

There are additional properties of ML negation that have been previously identified that ASL does not appear to meet, though this is most likely due to the syntactic structure of the language. For instance, the example in (27) does not garden-path the other member of the conversation into first interpreting it descriptively because it is not structured the way most instances of ML negation are in English (i.e. *it's not x, it's x*).⁷

A number of definitions for ML negation have been posited in the literature on the subject. Horn (1986) theorized that ML negation could be defined as an objection to a previous utterance, which was further formalized by Van der Sandt's (1998) echo operator:

(29) I object U

U : the previous utterance

(30) a. $\text{CONT}(\varphi, c_i) = (\text{PROP}(\varphi, c_i) + \text{PRES}(\varphi, c_i) + \text{IMP}(\varphi, c_i) + \text{FORM}(\varphi, c_i)) - \text{GIVEN}(\varphi, c_i)$

b. $\text{PROP}(*\varphi, c_i) = \text{CONT}(\varphi, c_{i-1})$, provided φ was uttered in c_{i-1} by another speaker;

otherwise $\text{PROP}(*\varphi, c_i)$ is undefined.

Another definition for ML negation was proposed by Linebarger (1980) wherein she posited a TRUE operator between ML negation and the proposition.

(31) a. NOT TRUE (she lifted a finger to help)

b. She didn't lift a finger to help.

To account for the instance of ML negation observed in (31) above, however, I propose that *part:indef* has undergone a shift in semantic-o-pragmatic meaning from anti-specificity to anti-veridicality as ML negation. This shift is not altogether unexpected, as the relationship between a decrease in referentiality and anti-veridicality is well-documented (Kiparsky and Kiparsky 1970; Melvold 1991; Borschev et al. 2006,

⁶ See Kim (2018) for the classification of negation into four types.

⁷ As a reviewer notes, this difference may be due to the fact that derivational morphology in ASL is agglutinative.

a.o.).

According to Borschev et al. (2006), anti-veridicality can be considered to be “the absence of a presupposition or entailment of truth in the actual world.” Beyond that “[a] decrease in specificity or referentiality [is] often implicating non-existence in a given location, or absence from an observer’s perceptual field” (Borschev et al. 2006). The conditions of anti-veridicality and non-specificity or non-referentiality overlap significantly in that both deal with non-existence; as a result, the extension of *part:indef* from anti-specificity to anti-veridicality is not so abnormal or inexplicable, but a rather welcome and expected change.

Within this framework, there exist other languages where ML negation is based on anti-specificity. In Korean, for instance, a vulgar expression like *kayppwul* ‘dog’s horn’ serves as a ML negation marker. A similar concept exists in European Portuguese, where *uma ova* ‘a fish’s roe’ can be used to denote ML negation (Martins 2014). In both of these instances, ML negation seems to arise from the non-referentiality, akin to anti-specificity in a sense, that comes from the non-existence of such things.

Given the potential semantic sources of Metalinguistic Negation, our main claim with regard to English and ASL fact is that the crucial connection between ML-Neg and RVI lies in the fact that both elements are marker for *purely subjective meaning*, i.e. *subjective kind of anti-veridicality and subjective kind of anti-specificity*. For one thing, recall that a RVI marks the speaker’s subjective intention of not referring to a specific referent, not because there is more than one referent, but because, even if there might be a single referent, the speaker is *uncertain* about the identity of the referent. The speaker’s reluctance to commit to the identity of specific referent only concerns the *subjective kind of anti-specificity*. Hence the proper use of RVI is constrained by pragmatic felicity condition with respect to speaker’s intention and knowledge.

ML negation, on the other hand, is *subjective negation* marker, expressing speaker’s personal opinion of *disagreement or dispreference*, objecting to a previous utterance based on purely subjective reasons. This is different from regular negation that is logical negation, involving more objective kind of evaluation, entailing the falsity of the proposition based on the state of affairs in real world.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I proposed an analysis of *part:indef* as a marker of referential vagueness in ASL, compared to *some-X-or-other* in English. In doing so, I have shown that non-emphatic, non-exhaustive NPIs (i.e. RVIs) do exist and are deficient, non-deictic variables that are subject to referential vagueness. These polarity items demonstrate a broader distribution in nonveridical contexts and are not solely licensed under negation. In addition to signifying referential vagueness, in ASL, the *part:indef* RVI can also be used to mark metalinguistic negation as a result of the connection between anti-specificity and anti-veridicality.

The implication of our account is the following. First, this analysis of referential vagueness as a marker of metalinguistic negation is extremely interesting considering previous assumptions on the nature of negative operators; I found that contrary to previous assumptions (Gazdar 1979; Horn 1989) that no language seems to employ a special negative operator that is non-truth conditional, i.e. metalinguistic negation, ASL possesses a negative marker in *part:indef* that is exclusively used for metalinguistic negation. Second, our analysis of this indefinite sign as an RVI offers a plausible answer to the question of why it also marks metalinguistic negation, further confirming the well-known connection between *anti-specificity* and *anti-veridicality*; crucially, this connection serves compelling evidence that there are *two* sources of polarity behavior, i.e. scalarity and referential deficiency (à la Giannakidou 1998, 2011). In sum, our analysis adds this sign in ASL to the polarity phenomena of *weakening* as RVIs and *semantic-o-pragmatic reanalysis* as an MN marker relating to polarity and negation.

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