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Conditional interpretation of *with/without* and the licensing of negative polarity items

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1. Introduction

The familiar *some-any* alternation in English (*some* being preferred in positive sentences, and *any* in negative ones, cf. Klima 1964 and much subsequent literature) can be shown to play out in prepositional phrases involving the pair *with-without* as well:

- (1) a. Ed left with some/*any of his friends.
b. Ed left without any/*some of his friends. [narrow scope reading]

This is fully as expected, given that *without* is the negative counterpart to *with*. *Any*, being a negative polarity item, requires the presence of a negative element, such as *without*, scoping over it. *Some*, on the other hand, must either scope over a negative operator, or appear in an entirely positive context, such as (1a). In (1b), *some* is fine on a wide scope reading according to which Ed left, leaving some of his friends behind. The reading that is unavailable is the one where Ed took none of his friends along, the reading that is in fact the only one available for the variant with *any*. This is the narrow scope reading, and the star in (1b) is intended to indicate the unavailability of this reading.

A complication arises when we consider the polysemous prepositions *with* and *without* in some more detail. In particular, it will be interesting to compare *with* and *without* in contexts where they receive a conditional interpretation (Roch 2013, Reuneker 2016). Compare for example:

- (2) a. Without some/any help, we won't make it.
b. With any/some luck, we will be on time.

Note that these examples can be felicitously paraphrased as conditionals, unlike the examples in (1):

- (3) a. If we don't get some/any help, we won't make it.
b. If we have any/some luck, we will be on time.

The first thing to notice about the examples in (2) is that *some* may have narrow scope in a *without*-PP. This seems to correspond to what we find in the conditionals in (3). As was

noted in Baker (1970) and subsequent work (Horn 1989, van der Wouden 1997, Szabolcsi 2004, Giannakidou 2011), positive polarity items, such as *some*, are admissible in doubly negative contexts, including the negated protasis of a conditional (cf. 3a).

The second noteworthy thing in (2) is the possibility of licensing *any* in a conditionally interpreted *with*-PP.

These two observations (licensing of *any* in *with*-PP and lack of anti-licensing of *some* in a *without*-PP) are at the basis of this paper. In the following sections I will take a closer look at licensing and anti-licensing behavior in conditionally interpreted *with*- and *without*-PPs (henceforth to be abbreviated as *w*-PPs). I will make use of intuitions and corpus data. In section 2 below, I discuss the contexts in which *w*-PPs receive a conditional interpretation. In section 3, I consider the licensing of negative polarity items, using data from English and Dutch. Section 4 contains the conclusions.

2. Conditional contexts

In Roch (2013), on German *ohne* ‘without’, and in Reuneker (2016), devoted to Dutch *zonder* ‘without’, two factors are distinguished that tend to co-occur with the possibility of a conditional interpretation for these counterparts of English *without*.

Reuneker (2016: 126) noted that about 13% of occurrences of Dutch *zonder* received a conditional interpretation (as determined by two independent expert judges). Conditionally interpreted *zonder*-PPs were more likely to appear in modal contexts than non-conditionally interpreted PP (62.5% versus 23.2%), and likely to have a negated apodosis (56.6% of conditional cases). Roch (2013) found similar data for German.

To see whether these factors are also at play in English, I did a Google query [January 20-1-2017], looking for the strings “With some help, I might be able to” and “With any help, I might be able to”. The first query yielded 20 hits, including:

(4) With some help I might be able to enjoy this class and the content¹

The other examples were similar, and all had a conditional interpretation, no doubt thanks to the modal context, and perhaps also in part to the sentence initial position of the *with*-clause. Given this robust presence of a conditional interpretation, one would expect some occurrences of *any* in the same context. However, our query yielded only a single hit, which was not conditional:

(5) So I'm here to help, with any help I might be able to offer.²

¹ <https://www.polleverywhere.com/example/polls/with-some-help-i-might-be-able-to-enjoy-this-class-and-the-content-2902165>

² <https://www.skillshare.com/classes/writing/Introduction-to-Screenwriting-for-Short-Films/637339250/classroom/discussions/18521>

Note that the *with*-clause is not interpreted as a condition, and that the following material is not a main clause, serving as apodosis, as it is in (4) above, but rather a relative clause, modifying *with any help*. Simplifying the search somewhat to *with any help I might* yielded a total of 6 hits, all involving relative clauses, and none having what one might reasonably call a conditional interpretation. Changing *I* to *we* yielded a similar result, a number of sentences, typically from hotel or B&B reviews, none of which had a conditional interpretation:

- (6) Glyn and Valerie were excellent hosts and only to [sic] happy to assist with any help we might require.³

The presence of relative clauses is no mere accident, but a tell-tale sign of the phenomenon known in the literature as *subtriggering* (LeGrand 1975, Dayal 1998). Sentences with *any* that would otherwise be ungrammatical become acceptable once a modifier is added. Compare sentence (7) below with the Dylan quote in (8):

- (7) *Anyone had already left town.

- (8) The curfew had been lifted and the gamblin' wheel shut down
Anyone with any sense had already left town⁴

Here the *with*-phrase enables the presence of *anyone*. The embedded occurrence of *any* in the *with*-phrase is licensed by the free choice operator *anyone*, making this a case of almost circular licensing: *any* depends on *anyone* which itself depends on the modifier that *any* is part of.

So why do we have such a hard time finding cases of *any* licensed by conditional *with*? Example (2b) above did not require any help from subtriggering modifiers. Part of the answer is provided by a quick corpus search. Using the query *with any NOUN* in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA, cf. Davies 2011), we get a long list of output, the top part of which is shown in the screenshot in Figure 1.

The thing to note here is the noun at the very top: *luck*, the same as the noun in ((2b) above.

³ https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Hotel_Review-g504046-d2173255-Reviews-Sycamore_House-Lesbury_Alswick_Northumberland_England.html

⁴ Bob Dylan, Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts. From the album *Blood on the tracks* [1974].

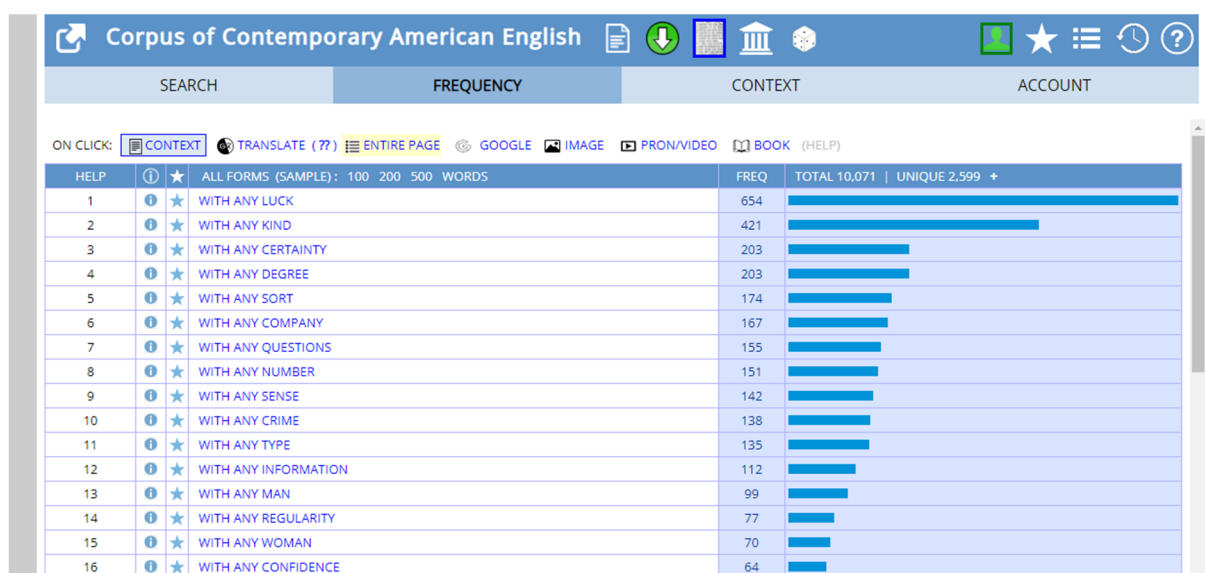


Figure 1: COCA output for *with any NOUN*

A search for nouns in almost any other context would not yield *luck* as the most frequent candidate. If we search for nouns following *any* (now forgetting about *with*), *luck* is demoted to the 39th most common noun. What is even more striking is that the occurrences of *with any luck* are all cases of conditional *with*, whereas the other combinations listed in Figure 1 do not depend on the conditional nature of *with* for the licensing of *any*, but rather have outside triggers. Here are some typical examples from COCA:

- (9) a. This fractured hyoid is likely cause of death, but we can't know with any certainty till we look at it in further detail.
- b. And he had been happy, so incredibly, blissfully happy, more than he'd ever been with any woman, including his ex-wife, Nancy.
- c. Correct use of the language has nothing to do with any kind of 'prescriptivist bible.'
- d. Now you can get away with any number of obvious lies for a long time if you have the sheer pig-fancying entitlement to simply brazen it out, blame the other guy and stroll into power like you already own the place.

In the first three examples, *any* is not dependent on *with* but rather on *can't*, *more than* and *nothing*, respectively, all perfectly ordinary licensors of polarity items, whereas the fourth example has an occurrence of free choice *any* (Vendler 1967, Carlson 1981, Kadmon & Landman 1993, Dayal 2004). It would seem, then, that *with any luck* is a special case. It seems to be a fixed phrase, with conditional interpretation, unlike most other combinations of *with any + noun*.

3. Licensing of negative polarity items by *with/met*

One of the more reliable contexts for negative polarity items are PPs headed by *without* or its counterparts in other languages, e.g. *ohne* in German, *sans* in French and *zonder* in Dutch. Most Dutch negative polarity items are attested in the context of *zonder* (Hoeksema 2008) and the same can be said of the other languages just listed. Given the potential conditional interpretation of *with*, what about licensing negative polarity items, other than the fixed combination *with any luck*? A quick look at a database with 11491 occurrences of the famous Dutch items *ook maar* and *zelfs maar* (cf. Vandeweghe 1981, Zwarts 1986, Hoeksema & Rullmann 2001) yields many occurrences in conditional clauses (1496, to be exact), but no cases of *met*-PPs. Interestingly, there are two instances of PPs with the preposition *bij* which have a conditional flavor. Here they are:

(10) Bij ook maar de geringste twijfel over de echtheid of herkomst sluit
At even the slightest doubt over the authenticity or provenance rules
de 175 keurmeesters tellende commissie een kunstwerk uit van de beurs.⁵
the 175 judges counting committee an artwork out from the art fair
'If there is even the slightest doubt about the authenticity or provenance, the
committee of 175 expert judges will bar a work of art from the art fair'

(11) Vooral gedreven door het gevoel dat 9/11 moest worden gewroken,
especially driven by the feeling that 9/11 had to be avenged
werden Afghanen bij ook maar de geringste verdenking van connecties
became Afghans at even the slightest suspicion of connections
met de Taliban en al-Qaeda opgepakt.⁶
with the Taliban and al-Qaeda up-picked
'Driven foremost by the feeling that 9/11 had to be avenged, Afghans were picked
up at even the slightest suspicion of connections with the Taliban and al-Qaeda.'

In the above cases, *bij* can be translated as 'at', which seems to work in the same way in English.

A search in my database among other polarity items for cases of licensing by conditional *met/with* does not yield anything, for English nor for Dutch. However, Google finds a genuine case in Dutch, with the polarity item *ook maar* (see (12) below). With other nouns than *geluk* 'luck', it appears that *met* needs additional licensers and does not trigger *ook maar een beetje* by itself (compare the examples in (13) below with the English cases in (9)

⁵ Trouw 10-3-2016, p 9.

⁶ De Groene Amsterdammer 12-8-2021, p 53.

above). Thus (13a) *ook maar* relies on a universal quantifier, (13b) on the negative quantifier *weinig* and (13c) on its embedding inside an interrogative structure.

(12) In februari hebben we kunnen zien dat Ajax in de wedstrijd thuis tegen
In February have we can see that Ajax in the game home against Juventus
Juventus met ook maar een beetje geluk 3-0 had kunnen en moeten winnen.⁷
with even a bit of luck 3-0 had could and should win
'In February we saw that Ajax, in the home match against Juventus could and
should have won 3-0 with even a little bit of luck'

(13) a. Iedereen met ook maar een beetje rechtvaardigheidsgevoel in zijn donder
Everyone with even a bit justice-feeling in his body
leest dit knarsetandend. ...⁸
reads this teeth-gnashingly
'Everyone with even the slightest sense of justice will read this while gnashing
their teeth'

b. M'n leerresultaten gaven weinig reden te veronderstellen
my learn-results gave little reason to assume
dat ik de "gewone" lagere school met ook maar een beetje succes
that I the 'ordinary' elementary school with even a bit success
zou kunnen afronden ...⁹
would can finish
'My learning outcomes provided little reason to assume that I would be able
to finish elementary school with even a modicum of success.'

c. Hoe kan iemand met ook maar een beetje verstand nou denken
how can anyone with even a bit sense now think
dat wij een intieme relatie met Kadhafi hadden?¹⁰
that we an intimate relationship with Kadhafi had?

4. Conclusions

Both *with* and *without* have conditional interpretations, in which they can be paraphrased as *if there is* or *if there isn't*, respectively. These conditional interpretations carry over to Dutch, and presumably a great many other languages. A typical Dutch example would be:

⁷ <https://www.voetbalzone.nl/doc.asp?uid=101618> [2012]

⁸ <https://twitter.com/WKoevoet/status/1543111910299680768>

⁹ <https://www.ikazia.nl/blog/ome-leen>

¹⁰ <https://nos.nl/artikel/269793-papa-kadhafi-was-aardig-voor-ons>

- (14) Met een beetje goede wil heeft Goffe de feestbundel nog op tijd.
With a bit good will has Goffe the Festschrift still on time
'With a bit of good luck, Goffe will have the Festschrift on time'

Note the appearance of 'luck' in the translation!

Given the affinity of negative polarity items with conditional contexts, one might expect such *with/met*-PPs to be excellent hosts for negative polarity items. The upshot of this paper is, however, that with the exception of the fixed phrase *with any luck*, and an occasional Dutch counterpart (example 12), conditional *with* fails to meet expectations. At the moment, it is unclear why. More generally, the relation between polarity items and conditionals is not that well understood. The modal verb *hoeven*, one of the prime examples of a polarity item in Dutch, does not appear in conditionals, nor does its German counterpart *brauchen*. English polarity sensitive *need* does show up in conditionals, but only in the fixed expression *if need be* (Hoeksema 2008). That expression resembles our example *with any luck*, which is likewise a fixed idiomatic combination.

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