

## Discourse negativity: Counterfactual content and at-issueness

Anaphoric negativity-tags (neg-tags) occur naturally after negative clausal antecedents, but not affirmative ones (1). These include: (2a) English *neither*-tags, (2b) ‘*not even*’ tags (Klima 1964), and (2c) factive uses of elliptical ‘*why not*’ interrogatives (Hofmann 2022; Anand et al. 2021).

- (1) *I think that the defense lawyer’s closing statement {didn’t make / # made} an impact in this case.*  
 (2) a. *Yeah, and neither did the testimonies.* c. *Yeah, and the jury foreperson explained why not.*  
 b. *Yeah, not even on the public perception.*

This work investigates neg-tag licensing, presenting evidence for a discourse-level view of negativity. While prior accounts link neg-tags to clausal negation (**sentential negativity hypothesis**, e.g., Klima 1964), we build on recent proposals that neg-tags are sensitive to counterfactual propositional content in a discourse-level representation (**discourse negativity hypothesis**, Krifka 2013; Hofmann 2023).

**Exp. 1** assessed naturalness of utterances with the neg-tags in (2) following bi-clausal antecedents, on a slider marked ‘*totally unnatural*’ and ‘*totally natural*’ at the ends. Manipulating how the antecedent conveyed counterfactuality, we tested 15 licensors: 2 neg-raising (NR) contexts (with *think/believe*), 4 island-contexts with NR (e.g., *I don’t get the feeling...*), 5 anti-veridical (AV) embeddings (e.g., *It’s a lie...*), 2 explicit irony cues (*as if...*), and affirmative/negative controls. Neg-tags were rated as natural (compared to an affirmative baseline) with counterfactual antecedents even without explicit negation (Figure 1), supporting a discourse-level account. However, there was also variability among antecedent types, where AV and ironic licensors received lower ratings, suggesting additional pragmatic factors.

**Exp. 2** explored the variability from Exp.1 by assessing question-answer match (asking *How well does the response match the question?*) for the 15 items, following questions targeting the embedded proposition (e.g., *Did the defense lawyer’s final remarks influence the case?* followed by *I don’t think that the defense lawyer’s closing statement made an impact in this case.*) Participant responses on a slider from ‘*total mismatch*’ to ‘*perfect match*’ reflect how easily the embedded content is construed as at-issue relative to the QUD. We found a strong positive correlation ( $r = .73$ ): higher at-issueness measures for the counterfactual content corresponded to higher neg-tag naturalness ratings (shown in Figure 2).

**Theoretical significance.** The findings support a nuanced view of neg-tag licensing that goes beyond clausal negation to highlight the role of counterfactual content and its discourse-level salience. The effects of how easily its counterfactual antecedent is interpreted as QUD-at-issue raises broader questions about the role of propositional salience in interpreting counterfactual propositions in discourse.

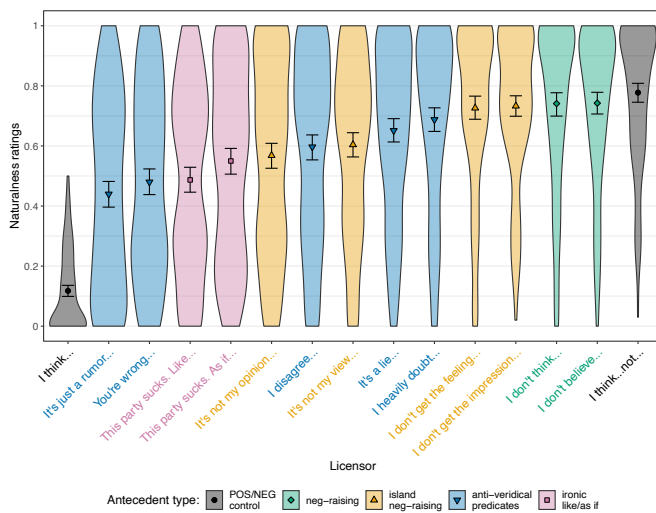


Figure 1: Neg-tag naturalness ratings by licensor with bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals.

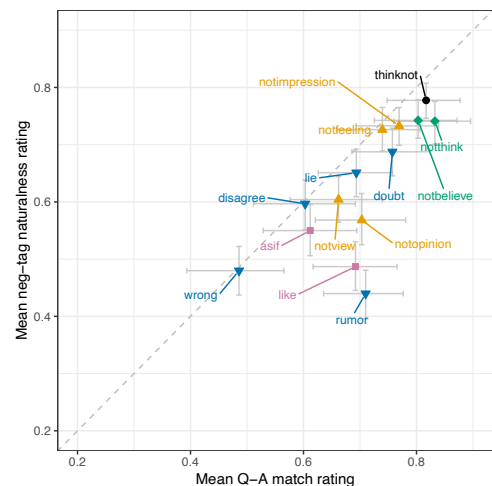


Figure 2: Mean neg-tag naturalness ratings against mean Q-A match ratings by counterfactual embedder, with bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals.

**References:** Anand et al. (2021). The Santa Cruz sluicing data set. *Language*, 97(1):e68–e88. Degen & Tonhauser (2022). Are there factive predicates? An empirical investigation. *Language*, 98(3):552–591. Hofmann (2022). *Anaphora and Negation*. PhD Thesis, UC Santa Cruz. Hofmann (2023). *Negativity without negation*. *SuB* 27:309–327. Klima (1964). Negation in English. *The structure of language*, 246–32. Krifka (2013). Response Particles as Propositional Anaphors. *SALT* 23:1–18, 2013.