

Tags and Negative Polarity Items

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1. Introduction

Tags are elements or (remnant) clauses that attach to a sentence in order to signal various speech acts, e.g. the common question tags of the type *is it? isn't it?*. An affirmative tag, which is used in order for the speaker to confirm the content of the matrix clause is presented in (1).

- (1) Pappa kan hämta dig vid stationen, **kan han nog** (#1435) (Swedish)
dad can fetch you with station.DEF can he probably
'Daddy can pick you up at the station, he probably can'

The Negative Polarity Item (hence NPI) *nå* 'anything' in (2) has developed from the neuter indefinite pronoun/determiner *något* 'something/anything'.

- (2) Moster Lisa har nog inte kommit än **nå** (#1436) (Swedish)
aunt Lisa has probably not come yet NPI
'Aunt Lisa probably hasn't arrived yet'

The distribution of the affirmative sentence tag and the NPI *nå* in Scandinavia has not been subject to many studies, but it is present to a great extent in the Scandinavian languages. In the following, we will make an attempt to give a survey of the use of tags and NPI's in the varieties of Swedish. We disregard the other Scandinavian languages.

2. Results

2.1 Nordic Syntax Database (NSD)

Sentence (1) and (2) above were tested among the Swedish-speaking informants. The affirmative sentence tag in (1) is univocally accepted only in the Western Swedish province of Dalarna (Särna); everywhere else it is regarded as ungrammatical or, at best, as questionable, see Map 1 below.



Map 1: Acceptance of affirmative sentence tags.

(#1435: *Pappa kan hämta dig vid stationen kan han nog. 'Daddy can pick you up at the station, he probably can.'*)

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).

The negative polarity item *nå*, exemplified in (2) above, is judged as grammatical in Western and Central Sweden, in the provinces of Bohuslän (Ovanåker), Västergötland (Floby and Torsö), Dalarna (Särna), and Örebro (Viby), as well as in one location in Northern Sweden, Delsbo (the province of Hälsingland). In Finland, the construction is judged as grammatical only in the province of Åland (Brändö). This is shown on Map 2 below.



Map 2: Acceptance of the NPI tag

(#1436: *Moster Lisa har nog inte kommit än nå. Aunt Lisa probably hasn't arrived yet.*)

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).

3. Discussion

Broadly speaking, an NPI can only appear in the scope of negation, or - in some cases - in non-veridical contexts like questions and conditional clauses (cf. Lawler 2011). Constructions with an NPI can be recognized as a kind of Negative Concord, and Lawler (2011) speculates on whether languages that do not display Negative Concord, use more structures with NPIs as a compensational strategy. Munther (2007) discusses the NPI *e* in the Swedish dialect of Delsbo (in the province of Hälsingland), and she characterizes it as a discourse marker that signals that the speaker holds the proposition of the sentence for true. The hypothesis that the NPI *nå* has some of the same characteristics fits well with the categorization in Israel (2001:303), who considers it an emphatic, low-scalar NPI.

3.1 Age variation in NSD

It seems that at least the affirmative sentence tag is more often accepted by the older informants than by the younger speakers. This is shown in Map 3 and Map 4 below.



Map 3: Affirmative sentence tag, older informants

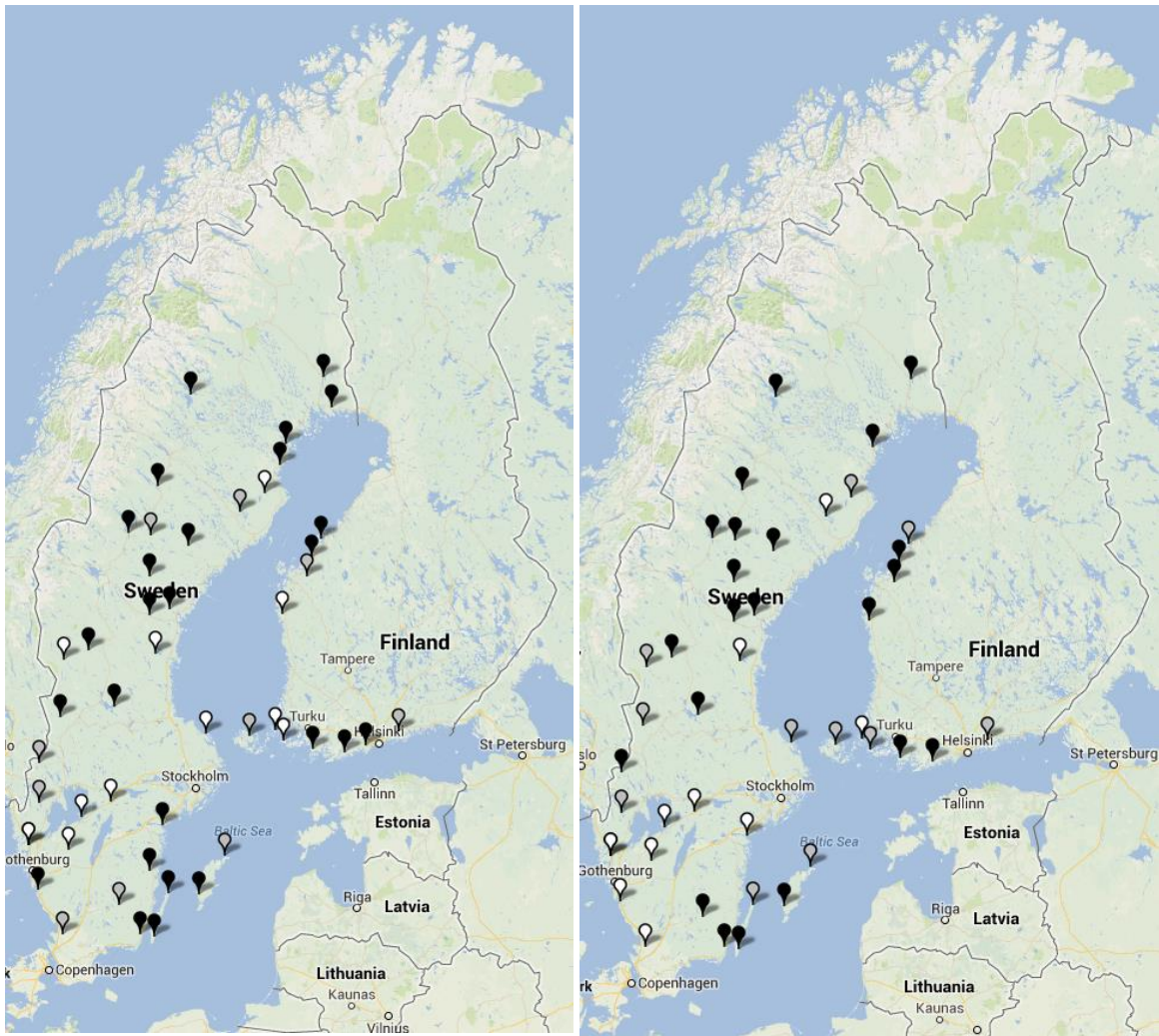


Map 4: Affirmative sentence tag, younger informants

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score)

The older informants in the West Swedish locations of Torsö (Västergötland), Särna (Dalarna), and Lillhärdal (Härjedalen), as well as at the Finnish location of Brändö, accept the constructions, whereas the younger informants at the same locations reject it.

There is less age variation in the case of acceptance of the NPI *nå*. The judgements among the younger and the older speakers are very similar, see Map 5 and Map 6.



Map 5: The NPI *nå*, older informants

Map 6: The NPI *nå*, younger informants

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score)

3.2 Other data sources

During the NORMS fieldwork on the Swedish dialects of Northern Ostrobothnia (Finland) in June 2006, the following sentences, all of them containing the NPI *na*, were tested by Christine B. Østbø. The judgments are indicated on the sentences.

- (3) a. **Int** har jag drukkit kaffe **na** (Swedish)
not have I drunk coffee NPI
 ‘I haven’t drunk coffee’
- b. ***Int** har jag drukkit kaffe **int na** (Swedish)
not have I drunk coffee not NPI
 ‘I haven’t drunk coffee’

- c. %**Int** har jag drukkit kaffe **na int** (Swedish)
not have I drunk coffee NPI not
 ‘I haven’t drunk coffee’
- d. Jag har **int** drukkit kaffe **na** (Swedish)
I have not drunk coffee NPI
 ‘I haven’t drunk coffee’
- e. *Jag har **int** drukkit kaffe **int na** (Swedish)
not have I drunk coffee not NPI
 ‘I haven’t drunk coffee’
- f. %Jag har **int** drukkit kaffe **na int** (Swedish)
I have not drunk coffee NPI not
 ‘I haven’t drunk coffee’

The results show that the NPI *na* can occur in final position in this dialectal area. There were some differences, however, between the judgments of the sentences (3a,d). The majority of the informants accepted both sentences, however the test sentence in (3a) was accepted by even more informants than the sentence in (3d). This indicates that the clause-initial negation is preferred over the negative marker in the canonical position. None of the informants accepted the clauses with the order *int > na*, cf. 3b,e, and less than the half of the informants accepted the order *na > int*, cf. (3c,f).

The results of this questionnaire suggest that there may be some variation across the Northern Ostrobothnian dialects as to the order between the negation and the NPI, but the number of informants from each place is too small to make any robust generalizations. It seems however that the negative marker cannot be doubled in final position, and that the order between the clause final NPI and negation is *NPI – Neg*, not **Neg – NPI*.

In Norwegian dialects (cf. Norsk Ordbok 2014), one finds a few examples with the NPI *noko* (pronounced and spelled differently in different dialects) used in questions, cf. (7) below.

(7) a. har du sett gutten **noko?** (No.)

have you seen boy.DEF anything

‘Have you seen the boy?’ (Vemundvik)

b. dåkk hi vel **itj** sjett **nåkka** te (Nor.)

you.PL have MOD.PRT not seen anything to

mamman å pappan minj **nåkka nei?**

mum.DEF and dad.DEF mine anything no

‘Have you seen my mum and dad, have you?’ (Namdalen)

In (7a) *noko* ‘something’ appears after the object, and in (7b) *nåkka* ‘something’, with the complement *te mamman å pappan minj* (to my mum and dad’), occurs in object position and after the object. The last occurrence of *nåkka* may be interpreted as a repetition of the object *nåkka*. In (7b) the interjection *nei* ‘no’ follows *nåkka*, and it is a negative element functioning as a question particle in this context.

3.4 Origin

The indefinite pronoun/determiner *noko/något* ‘anything/something’ appears commonly in negative contexts in Scandinavian, when the canonical position for negation and the position for the indefinite object are separated by another (visible) element, commonly the lexical verb. When the canonical position for negation and the position for the indefinite object are adjacent, the negative pronoun *ingenting* ‘nothing’ can appear.

(8) a. Jag har **inte** sett **något** (Swedish)

I have not seen anything

‘I haven’t seen anything’

b. Jag såg **ingenting** (Swedish)

I saw nothing

‘I didn’t see anything’

In (8a) the lexical verb participle *sett* ‘seen’ intervenes between *inte* and the object, and in most varieties of Scandinavian only an indefinite object is licit then. In (8b) however, the lexical verb appears in the second position, and then the canonical position for negation and the object is adjacent, and the negative pronoun *ingenting* ‘nothing’ can appear. See also [Garbacz 2014](#) on Quantifier Movement.

References

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Web sites:

- Nordic Atlas of Language Structures (NALS) Journal: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nals>
- Nordic Dialect Corpus: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html>
- Nordic Syntax Database: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html>