

Not (just) any licensors cause negative polarity illusions

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Key take aways

- Negative polarity items (e.g. ever, any, in years) are only acceptable in negative contexts. One hypothesis for their online computation is that comprehenders seek a c-commanding negative word.
- Two previously observed phenomena - the impact of distance and licensor type on NPI illusions - are puzzling under this account.
- We suggest, instead, that comprehenders evaluate NPIs' local context for negative meanings.

Background

NPI Basics:

NPIs = Negative polarity items, e.g. ever, any, and in years. They are only grammatical in negative (or similar) environments:

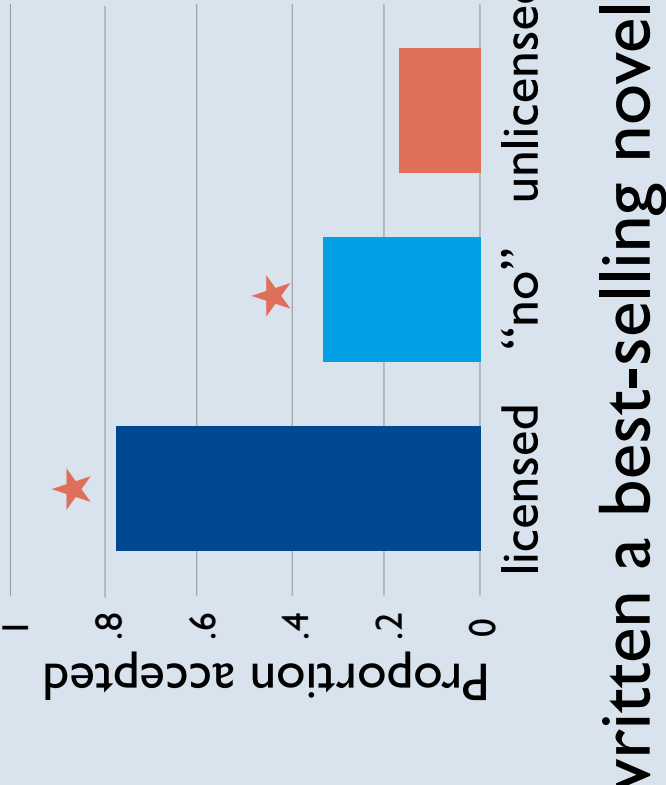
- I don't think John has ever been to Paris.
- * I think John has ever been to Paris.

The negative word must be in a structurally relevant position:

- * The boy [Mary doesn't like] has ever been to Paris.

The NPI Illusion:

Comprehenders are disproportionately likely to accept a sentence with an unlicensed NPI when an irrelevant negative quantifier is present.



... critics recommended] have **ever** written a best-selling novel.
Drenhaus, Saddy, & Frisch 2005; Vasishth, Bruscow, Lewis, & Drenhaus 2008; Xiang, Dillon, & Phillips 2009; among others

The Licensor Effect:

NPI illusions do not arise when the intrusive licensor is sentential negation, instead of a negative quantifier.

{ No
The
The } authors [that the critics { have
haven't
have } ... recommended] have **ever** written a best-selling novel.

De Dios Flores, Muller, & Phillips 2017

The Distance Effect:

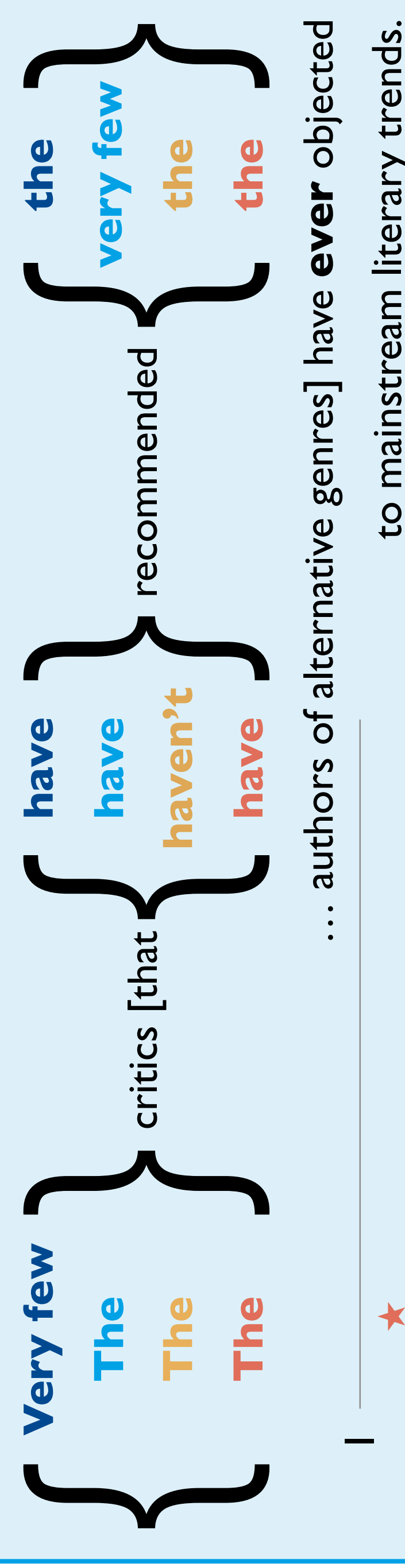
NPI illusions do not arise when the NPI is sufficiently far from the relative clause containing the intrusive licensor.

{ No
The
The } authors [that { the
no
the } critics recommended ... for the assignment] thought that the readers would **ever** understand the complicated situation.

Parker & Phillips 2016

Experiment 1

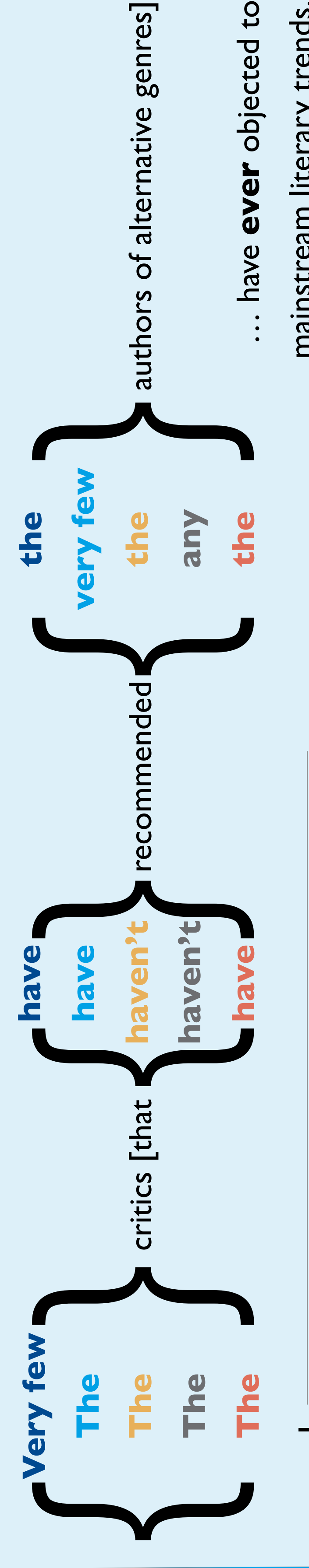
Question: Is the licensor effect due to differences in syntactic position?



Finding: The licensor effect cannot be an artifact of differences in syntactic position of the licensor, because it arises in subject relative clauses as well as object relative clauses.

Experiment 2

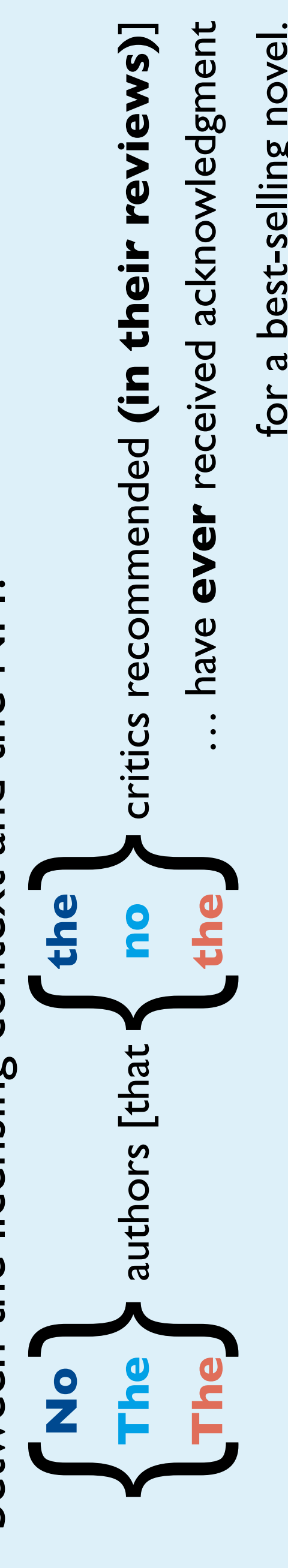
Question: Is the licensor effect due to lexical differences or differences in clause-level meanings?



Finding: The illusion reappears for intrusive *didn't* when the clause-level meaning is sufficiently strong, so the licensor effect cannot be a consequence of differences in the licensing lexical items themselves.

Experiment 3

Question: Does the distance effect arise because of added distance between the intrusive licensor and the NPI or added distance between the licensing context and the NPI?



Finding: Follow-up studies are needed, but the lack of a distance effect for added material inside the RC is consistent with an effect of distance from a licensing context, not distance from the licensor itself.

Discussion

- Existing accounts of NPI illusions assume that licensing is computed as a dependency between an NPI and its licensor, and attribute the illusion to properties of memory retrieval processes [6]. Alternative explanations point to the influence of contrastive implicatures [7], or silent exhaustification operators [4]. None of these hypotheses predicts the licensor effect or the distance effect.
- If, however, NPI licensing is computed as a relation between an item and its local context, we might expect nearby contexts with strong negative meanings to give rise to an impression of increased acceptability.
- We find that proximity to the licensing context (not proximity to the licensor) is crucial, and that the whole RC's meaning (not the licensor or its syntactic position) drives illusions.

References & Acknowledgments

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