Skeptical Linguistic Essays

Chapter 5 The Structure of One Type of American English Vulgar Minimizer

Section 1 Background

In the summer of 1995, Haj Ross and I began jointly looking into the grammar of the vulgar American English slang forms in (1):

(1) *SQUAT* = Vulgar Minimizers = {beans, crap, dick, diddley, diddley-poo, diddley-squat, fuck-all, jack, jack-shit, jack-squat, piss-all, poo shit, shit-all, squat}

Some examples of some uses of these forms are given in (2):

(2)a. Olmstead didn't say dick about the new dean.

b. Olmstead knows fuck-all about Botswana.

c. Olmstead didn't contribute jack to the emergency fund.

d. Olmstead doesn't understand squat about topology.

In naming these expressions as I have, I intend to bring out what I take to be a genuine connection with other *minimizers*, a standard category of negation studies; see Horn (1989/2001: 452-453). Generally, a minimizer is a type of DP which denotes minimal elements on some scale.

(3) Minimizers which are not *vulgar* minimizers include e.g. a drop/a word/a red cent/a finger, as in (4):

(4)a. Sally didn't drink a drop. (minimal amount of liquid)

b. Stan didn't say a word. (minimal amount of linguistic utterance)

c. Sarah didn't have a red cent.. (minimal amount of money)

d. Steve didn't lift a finger. (minimal amount of effort).

One key difference between vulgar minimizers and others such as those in (4) is that mostly the former are *not* narrowly restricted to *particular* dimensions, but can express minimality along many dimensions not specifically invoking animate things. Because, like most minimizers, all those of (1) form exclusively inanimate nominals. A few English minimizers, specifically those highlighted in (5), do not:

(5)a. Spiro didn't see *a soul* on Sunday. (minimal number of people)

b. Spiro didn't see *a living soul* on Sunday. (minimal number of people)

c. The police didn't find *a fucking soul* alive in the crack house. (minimal number of people)

In discussing a linguistic subject, one normally references the literature on it, which is easy in this case, given that, as far as I know, grammatical/semantic works devoted to, or containing detailed analyses of, English vulgar minimizers are nearly nonexistant. See though Horn (1997/2001) for some discussion and nexus search examples.

While (1) lists many forms, no doubt most Americans use or even know only a proper subset. I assume though that most American speakers are familiar with at least one member of SQUAT and thus have introspective access to the phenomenon. [1] Various vulgar minimizers are mentioned in slang dictionaries. There they appear to uniformly be said to mean 'nothing', as are other forms not listed in (1) like those in (6):

(6) Z-minimizers = {zero, zilch, zip, zippo}

See for instance Spears (1996: 374), which mentions squat and diddly-squat and gives only the meaning 'nothing'.

However, something key is missed by such dictionaries. As already in effect illustrated in (1), while vulgar minimizers do have uses in which they seem to mean 'nothing', and in this respect are like the forms of (6), many of them for many speakers also have different uses in which they function as *negative polarity items* (NPIs), that is, items which cannot occur in simple non-negative clauses, but which do occur with negation. This polarity property is illustrated for the animate minimizer in (5c) in (7).

(7)a. Claudia did not see a fucking soul.

b. *Claudia saw a fucking soul.

c. Claudia did so see someone.

d. *Claudia did so see a fucking soul.

Notably, none of the Z-minimizers occurs as an NPI in the NPI licensing environment of (7a), as (8) illustrates:

(8) ??Claudia did not see zilch/zip/zippo.

If (8) is acceptable at all, it can only be as a non-NPI instance of denial negation, with strong stress on not, representing rejection of a previous claim that Claudia saw zilch. Seemingly, even in an NPI accepting environment, the Z-minimizers can only have the non-NPI meaning 'nothing'.

But for vulgar minimizers, the situation is different, as illustrated in (9) and (10):

(9)a. Claudia saw squat.

b. Claudia did not see squat.

(10)a. Claudia discovered dick.

b. Claudia did not discover dick.

While the *a*. forms are consistent with the behavior of Z-minimizers and with the slang dictionary claim that vulgar minimizers mean 'nothing', the *b*. cases seem to indicate that they can also mean 'anything'. [2] In fact, although Spears (1996) gives only 'nothing' as the meaning of squat, one of his two example sentences is of the type in (9b), where squat would naturally be taken to mean 'anything' rather than 'nothing'.

(11) Spears (1996: 374)

I worked all day on this, and she didn't pay me squat.

Besides raising a problem for slang dictionary meaning claims, pairs like (9) and (10) are truly extraordinary in one clear respect. For they illustrate forms occurring in a fixed position where the presence versus absence of an *overt negation* seems to make no semantic difference. That is, (9a, b) and (10a, b) are logical (truth functional) equivalents. There are few other such forms. [3] The standard and expected situation where presence of a negative yields distinct meanings is seen in (12):

(12)a. Claudia discovered many treasures. ≠

b. Claudia did not discover many treasures.

c. Claudia violated every rule. ≠

d. Claudia did not violate every rule.

Focus then on a logically equivalent pair like (13a, c):

(13)a. Irma understands dick about clones =

b. Irma understands nothing about clones.

c. Irma does not understand dick about clones. =

d. Irma does not understand anything about clones.

Given the apparent perfect equivalences here, it is overwhelmingly tempting to attempt to reduce the patterns in the vulgar minimizer cases to that of the standard cases with anything and nothing. The obvious way to do this would be as follows. First, assume that each of the vulgar minimizer pieces of morphology represents a noun stem. Second, claim that the vulgar minimizers are ambiguously analyzable in exactly the same way as either nothing, or anything. Assuming that no forms like nothing involve a negative determiner consisting of a syntactic negative (NEG) + some, this means taking one term of the ambiguity for vulgar minimizers to involve something like (14), the other something like (15):

(14)a. nothing = $[_{DP}[_{D}$ NEG + some] + $[_{N}$ thing]]

b. squat/dick/... = $[_{DP}[_{D}$ NEG +some] + $[_{N}$ squat/dick/...]]

(15)a. anything = $[_{DP}[_{D}$ any] + $[_{N}$ thing]] [4]

b. squat/dick/... = [$_{DP}$ [$_{D}$ any] + [$_{N}$ squat/dick/...]]

The idea for (14b) and (15b) would then be that the determiners no and any are obligatorily *invisible* when they occur with a vulgar minimizer noun.

Let me distinguish terminologically two forms of vulgar minimizers; those of (9a) and (10a) I will refer for reasons that will emerge as *type Z*, and those of (9b) and (10b) I will refer to as *type A*, this intended to suggest a link with anything. The central goal of this chapter is to argue for the following (at least to me) quite amazing conclusion. Any equation like that in (14b), that is, any analysis which treats the nonpolarity variant of each member of SQUAT as in effect a negative form like nothing is *completely wrong*. Z-type vulgar minimizers cannot be analyzed as forms having negative quantifiers for determiners and, even more generally, can not be correctly analyzed as containing any syntactic negatives at all.

Section 2 What Type Z Vulgar Minimizers Are Not

2.1 Remarks

Thus the goal of this section is to show that in sentences like (13a), the vulgar minimizer dick does not contain a negative quantifier and, more generally, that such sentences contain no syntactic negation whatever. Admittedly, it is unclear that anyone has publicly claimed that they do contain such. The few remarks in the literature about such forms seem quite equivocal about their analysis:

(16) van der Wouden (1997: 78)

"For instance, one of the many possibilities to affectively strengthen negation doesn't use negation at all."

The author then cites the type Z vulgar minimizer case (17a) and notes that "A variant of this sentence does use negation.", citing (17b):

(17)a. He knows shit about GB.

b. He doesn't know shit about GB.

One might take these remarks to deny that (17a) involves negation, but the conclusion is hardly solid. Similarly:

(18) Hoeksema, Rullman, Sánchez-Valencia and van der Wouden (2001: viii-ix)

"The paper includes a discussion of *squat* and similar expressions of scatological origin, which have recently undergone part of the Jespersen Cycle, rendering them negative in force even in the absence of any overt negation: *They told him squat = The didn't tell him squat*."

Again it is unclear what inference to draw about the authors' view of the role of syntactic negation in the analysis of the first, type Z, example. Finally:

(19) Horn (2001: 185)

"The key fact here, as recognized by the OED, is that *squat* can appear either in the scope of a licensing negation as the equivalent of *anything*, or on its own as the counterpart of *nothing*."

Horn refers to the former usage as *licensed* squat, the latter as *unlicensed*. Once more though, it is not evident whether the remarks should be read as a claim that the correct synchronic analysis of type Z vulgar minimizers involves negation, or not.

But regardless of whether anyone *else* has assumed type Z vulgar minimizers involve a syntactic negative, the position to be criticized here is not a straw man since I myself adopted it as a working hypothesis for many months, struggling vainly to keep the view consistent with the collection of contrary data which kept accumulating. I will try to indicate why such consistency is not possible by documenting a variety of ways in which type Z vulgar minimizers behave as if syntactic negation was entirely *absent*. It turns out, I believe, that only two indications even *suggest* that type Z vulgar minimizers involve negation. The first is simply the morphological parallelisms between type Z and type A minimizers; the second is the logical equivalence between pairs like (9a, b) and (10a, b). A logic which leads from these facts to a view that type Z vulgar minimizers do contain negation might go something like this. Relevant pairs like (9a, b) and (10a, b) are clearly related morphologically and yield logical equivalents. Given that the type A variants do involve syntactic negation, which is easily shown, then assuming that the logical equivalent of something negative is (double negations aside) something negative, the conclusion is reached. It should be of some general interest that this pattern of reasoning fails, as I will now argue.

2.2 Double Negatives

First, despite what one heard in school about the evils of double negatives, even standard American English allows double negative cases like (20a), to be sharply distinguished from exclusively substandard cases like (20b); see Postal (in press).

(20)a. No professor favors NO proposal/NOTHING. (caps = contrastive stress)

b. substandard: No professor favored no proposal/nothin. = 'No professor favored any proposal/anything'

The substandard (20b) involves so-called *negative concord*. But the standard (20a) involves something else, and is equivalent to (21):

(21) Every professor favors SOME proposal.

See also the fine (22a) contrasting with the only substandard (22b):

(22)a. The professor did not favor NO proposal = 'favored SOME proposal'.

b. substandard: The professor did not favor no proposal = 'did not favor any'.

Now, since standard English no forms like nothing permit non-negative concord structures like (20a) and (22a), if Z type vulgar minimizers were disguised no forms, they also would presumably permit that; but they do not, as (23a, b) indicate:

(23)a. *No professor favored SQUAT.

b. *The professor did not favor JACK.

I believe such examples are ill-formed; but in any event, there is no way they can be interpreted like parallel cases with stressed NOTHING. That is, type Z vulgar minimizers do not show the double negative behavior of standard no forms.

2.3 Positive versus Negative Interrogative Tags

Second, a well-known test for the presence of negation first introduced in Klima (1964: 263-265) involves the possibility of a *positive* (negation free) interrogative tag. Notably though, in this respect, type Z vulgar minimizer structures behave like positive forms and contrast both with no forms and type A vulgar minimizer structures:

(24)a. Janet read some book, *did/didn't she?

b. Janet read no book, did/*didn't she?

c. Janet didn't read squat, did/*didn't she?

d. Janet read squat *did/didn't she?

2.4 Emphatics: too/so versus (n)either

Third, another known test for negation also found first in Klima (1964: 261-262) involves the possibility of emphatics of the form (n)either, as opposed to positive emphatics of the form too/so. And with respect to this test too, type Z vulgar minimizer cases behave like positive forms and not like clear negative forms including no forms and type A vulgar minimizer expressions:

(25)a. Janet read some book and Hilda read some book too/*either.

b. Janet read no book and Hilda read no book *too/either.

c. Janet didn't read squat and Hilda didn't read squat *too/either.

d. Janet read squat and Hilda read squat too/*either.

e. Janet read some book and so/*neither did Hilda.

f. Janet read no book and *so/neither did Hilda.

g. Janet didn't read squat and *so/neither did Hilda.

h. Janet read squat and so/*neither did Hilda.

2.5 The not even + X Strengthener

A third known test for negation also introduced in Klima (1964: 262-263) involves the possibility of the strengthening expression not even + X, which requires inter alia a syntactically negative 'antecedent'. Again type Z vulgar minimizers contrast with type A ones and manifest the behavior of nonnegatives:

(26)a. Jane read some book yesterday (*, not even the assigned book).

b. Jane read no book yesterday (, not even the assigned book).

c. Jane didn't read squat yesterday (*, not even the assigned book). [5]

d. Jane read squat yesterday (*, not even the assigned book).

2.6 I don't believe/think Parentheticals

A fourth test for negation involves parenthetical clauses with negation, which only can modify negation containing clauses. And once more, type Z vulgar minimizer structures contrast with those containing type A vulgar minimizers or uncontroversial negation containing expressions:

(27)a. Jane read some book yesterday (*, I don't think).

b. Jane read no book yesterday (, I don't think).

c. Jane didn't read squat yesterday (, I don't think).

d. Jane read squat yesterday (*, I don't think).

2.7 'Expression of Agreement' Clauses: so versus not

A perhaps less known test for negation, suggested to me by Haj Ross, involves elided clauses expressing agreement with the content of a preceding clause. Such clauses manifest an initial yes + so if the clause 'agreed with' is positive, but an initial no and final not if it is negative. Again, type Z vulgar minimizer structures manifest positive behavior:

(28)a. Jane read some book yesterday. Yes, I guess so/*No, I guess not.

b. Jane read no book yesterday. *Yes, I guess so/No, I guess not.

c. Jane didn't read squat yesterday. *Yes, I guess so/No, I guess not.

d. Jane read squat yesterday. Yes, I guess so./*No, I guess not.

2.8 Negative Polarity Licensing

Finally, as the now common jargon has it, no forms can *license* NPIs, a few of which are highlighted in (29):

(29)a. Helga gave no magazines to *anyone*.

b. Helga has said nothing to me *in years*.

c. Helga learned nothing in any convent *at all*.

If then, Z type vulgar minimizers were no forms, they would be expected to also license NPIs. But the contrast between (29) and (30) shows they do not: [6]

(30)a. *Helga gave squat to anyone.

b. *Helga has said squat to me in years.

c. *Helga learned squat in any convent at all.

2.9 Summary

Overall then, the evidence seems quite consistent and compelling. With respect to a range of fact types which independently differentiate negative from positive clauses, type Z vulgar minimizer forms fail to reveal any syntactic indication of involving negation and their containing clauses behave rigorously like positive clauses. Given their

relation to type A minimizer forms, logical equivalences, etc., this might seem to yield a bit of a paradox. But the next section argues that it does not.

Section 3 What Type Z Vulgar Minimizers Are

Taking it now as justified that type Z vulgar minimizers are *not* analyzable in the same way as nothing and do not even contain negatives, let us return to logically equivalent pairs like:

(31)a. They don't understand squat.

b. They understand squat.

While a priori it could have well seemed plausible to make sense of such pairs by taking type Z vulgar minimizers to be like nothing and type A ones to be like anything, it has been shown that the former assumption is untenable. How then should one analyze type Z vulgar minimizers? My suggestion, stimulated by an idea in Déprez (1995) about certain French forms, is that they should be analyzed as containing a determiner which is not an invisible negation + some, but rather an invisible cardinal numeral zero, as in (32): [7]

(32) type Z squat = $[_{DP}[_{D}$ zero] + $[_{N}$ squat]]

This analysis motivates the terminology 'type Z vulgar minimizers' that has been adopted.

Analysis (32) permits capturing two crucial aspects of type Z vulgar minimizers. First, without any grammatically present negation, they end up, as required by the facts, being logically equivalent to nothing, given the independent existence of truth functional equivalences like (33):

(33)a. Joanne read no books ↔ b. Joanne red zero books.

Second, the zero determiner analysis of type Z vulgar minimizers accounts for the fact that they behave grammatically like they contain no negatives, since they simply don't. More generally, type Z vulgar minimizer structures are seen to essentially share most of the properties of independently occurring DPs with the zero determiner, as (34) shows:

(34)a. No woman drank *SQUAT/ZERO martinis.

b. Penelope drank zero martinis/squat, did/*didn't she?

c. Penelope drank zero martinis/squat and Francine drank zero martinis/ squat too/*neither.

d. Penelope drank zero martinis/squat and so/*neither did Francine.

e. *Penelope drank zero martinis/squat yesterday, not even weak martinis/ones.

f. *Penelope drank zero martinis/squat yesterday, I don't think.

g. Penelope drank zero martinis/squat yesterday. Yes, I guess so.

h. *Penelope drank zero martinis/squat yesterday. No, I guess not.

The only real contrasts for my idiolect are that in (34a) and that, while as seen earlier, type Z vulgar minimizers cannot license NPIs, zero DPs can:

(35)a. *Hector sent squat to any of his ex wives.

b. Hector sent zero presents to any of his ex wives.

But as suggested in note 6, some speakers accept cases like (35a), so this may well be an idiosyncracy of marginal significance. The difference in (34a) shows that type Z vulgar minimizers are more restricted than explicit zero forms with respect to such contrast structures. Since I do not understand such expressions very well, I will not try to say anything more about them.

Section 4 McCawley's Puzzle

4.1 The Puzzle

McCawley (1998: 607) presented some observations about the distribution of the word nothing with respect to certain sentence properties often, as in Section 2, taken since Klima's (1964) work to provide tests for the presence of negation. Specifically, McCawley discussed the contrast between (n)either and so/too, noting as I did in Section 2, that the former is only possible if the clause actually containing it is negative in a relevant sense.

McCawley's currently relevant observation is that, unexpectedly, with nothing as an object (see below for clarifications), but *not* with no forms in general, it is possible to have either too or either, apparently without meaning difference.

(36)a. = McCawley (1998: 607)

John said nothing, and Mary said nothing too.

b. John said nothing and Mary said nothing either.

In general, these forms are, of course, not *both* possible in the same context:

(37)a. Jane cooked no reptile meat and Sheila cooked no reptile meat either/*too.

b. Ferdinand chased neither student and Otto chased neither student either/*too.

Why (36a, b) are both possible is then quite mysterious and McCawley, noting the problematic character of (36a) for his assumptions, simply said "I will leave this problem unresolved." The distinction in (36) is not isolated but illustrates a systematic possibility for the form nothing. Note initially:

(38)a. John contributed *no idea/nothing and so did Mary.

b. John contributed no idea/nothing and neither did Mary.

4.2 A Novel Proposal

The analysis of type Z vulgar minimizers proposed in Section 3 offers a new and intriguing way to look at the relevant exceptional alternation. For there is evidently an abstract similarity between the data of section 4.1 and that already encountered. In the case of type Z vulgar minimizers, one finds forms which in some vague sense seem to be negative or equivalent to negatives like nothing but which behave according to syntactic tests for negation like non-negatives. Arguably, that is just what is found in (36a) and (38a). I suggest then that the two versions of (36) and (38) differ in that the one which can occur with either contains a negation, specifically, an ordinary no form, while the one which can occur with too, fails to contain a negation.

What is it then? The answer which previous sections suggest at this point is that it has the structure of a type Z vulgar minimizer. This means that one could allow for a certain cases in which the determiner zero + some vulgar minimizer stem is pronounced nothing, which then might have at least the two distinct analyzes in (39):

(39)a. nothing = $[_{DP}[_{D}$ NEG + some] + $[_{N}$ thing]]

b. nothing = $[_{DP}[_{D}$ zero] + $[_{N,\ \text{vulgar minimizer}}$ thing]]

Required then would be that at least one usage of thing be a member of the class of regular noun stems and also a member of the restricted class of vulgar minimizer nouns, one which only takes the zero determiner. [8] A problem with (39b) though is that it requires taking the vulgar minimizer stem underlying the positive nothing to be an exception to the general rule that the D associated with a vulgar minimizer is phonologically null. A superior alternative would then be to retain the view that that rule is absolute, and to analyze the nonnegative nothing instead slightly differently as in (40):

(40) nothing = $[_{DP}[_{D}$ zero] + $[_{N,\ \text{vulgar minimizer}}$ nothing]]

Analysis (40) has the advantage over (39b) of not complicating the general rule for D invisibility with vulgar minimizer nouns.

Beyond the fact that the proposal to analyze the positive-behaving nothing as a type of vulgar minimizer DP immediately reduces McCawley's (1998) observation (36a) to regularity, it is strongly supported by a variety of other evidence, all of which shows that on one analysis nothing in positions like that of (36) behaves like a negative form and on another like a positive one.

4.3 Evidence for Treating Some Instances of nothing as Type Z Vulgar Minimizers

First, recall that at least in my idiolect, type Z vulgar minimizers cannot license NPIs. If then the nothing which goes with too/so is not negative and has the structure of a type Z vulgar minimizer, while that which goes with (n)either is negative, one would expect that NPI licensing is possible for speakers like me only with the latter, which is correct:

(41)a. Claudia said nothing/*squat at any time and I said nothing at any time either.

b. *Claudia said nothing at any time and I said nothing at any time too.

c. Claudia said nothing at all and I said nothing at all either.

d. *Claudia said nothing at all and I said nothing at all too.

e. Claudia said nothing to anyone and *so/neither did I.

Second, while no forms can freely be the targets of so-called *negative fronting*, type Z vulgar minimizers cannot be. Notably, when nothing is a negative fronting target, only behavior consistent with the negative analysis is possible:

(42) Nothing/*Squat did Claudia say to Henry and nothing did Louise say either/*too.

Third, as seen earlier, type Z vulgar minimizers do not, in contrast to negative forms, permit positive tags in questions but, again, in contrast to negative forms, do permit negative tags. Notably, tags don't combine freely with too/either; when either is present, only the tag appropriate for a negative clause is possible:

(43)a. Jerome ate nothing and Stan ate nothing either *didn't/did he?

b. Jerome ate nothing and Stan ate nothing too didn't/*did he?

Fourth, no forms but not type Z vulgar minimizers can be strengthened with not even phrases. Strikingly though, in the present context, that is possible only with either, not with too:

(44)a. The president said nothing and the vice president said nothing either/*too, not even goodbye.

Fifth, no forms but not type Z vulgar minimizers permit negative parentheticals of the form I don't believe/think. And once more, such are compatible with either but not with too:

(45)a. The president said nothing and the vice president said nothing either/*too, I don't think.

b. The president said nothing and the vice president said nothing either/too, I think.

Sixth, no forms but not type Z vulgar minimizers permit the negative version of the 'agreement' clause structure.

(46)a. Karen sent no gifts to them did she?. *Yes, I guess so/No, I guess not.

b. Karen sent squat to them didn't she? Yes, I guess so/*No, I guess not.

And once more, in this context, nothing can behave like a type Z vulgar minimizer:

(47)a. Karen sent nothing to them did she? *Yes, I guess so/No, I guess not.

b. Karen sent nothing to them, didn't she? Yes, I guess so/*No, I guess not.

A different class of arguments can also support the claim that the positive-behaving instances of nothing should be analyzed in the same way as type Z minimizers. These arguments depend on various distributional restrictions on vulgar minimizers that are independent of negation.

First, such minimizers cannot appear as passive by phrase complements and indeed not in many types of PPs.

(48)a. Jerome was shocked by nothing/*squat.

b. The riot was caused by nothing/*dick.

c. That claim is supported by nothing/*jack.

Notably then, when found in these environments, occurrences of nothing show only negative behavior not the positive behavior associated with type Z vulgar minimizers:

(49)a. Jerome was shocked by nothing was/*wasn't he? [9]

b. Jerome was shocked by nothing and Irma *was too/wasn't either.

c. Jerome was shocked by nothing, (I don't think) (not even the deception).

d. Jerome was shocked by nothing. *Yes, I guess so/No, I guess not.

(50)a. Herb sat on top of nothing/*squat.

b. Herb leaned against nothing/*jack-shit.

(51)a. Herb sat on top of nothing did/*didn't he?

b. Herb sat on top of nothing and Jane *did too/didn't either.

c. Herb sat on top of nothing (I don't think) (not even the table).

d. Herb sat on top of nothing. *Yes, I guess so/No, I guess not.

Further, vulgar minimizers cannot occur as the *first* object of double object constructions:

(52)a. Cynthia gave nothing/*squat that sort of attention.

b. Cynthia gave nothing/*jack shit a glance.

And again, when nothing occurs in this environment, it cannot manifest positive behavior:

(53)a. Cynthia gave nothing that sort of attention did/*didn't she?

b. Cynthia gave nothing that sort of attention and Jane *did too/didn't either.

c. Cynthia gave nothing that sort of attention (I don't think) (not even her finances).

d. Cynthia gave nothing that sort of attention. *Yes, I guess so/No, I guess not.

In addition, vulgar minimizers do not permit modifying adjectives, relative clauses or PPs.

(54)a. They sent nothing/*squat useful/which I liked/of interest.

b. They discussed nothing/*jack-shit important/which I was concerned with/from your book.

And when nothing appears with modifiers, it cannot show positive behavior:

(55)a. They sent nothing useful/which I liked/of interest did/*didn't they?

b. Sally sent nothing useful/which I liked/of interest and Jerome *did too/didn't either.

c. Sally sent nothing useful/which I liked/of interest (I don't think) (not even a book).

d. Sally sent nothing useful/which I liked/of interest. *Yes, I guess so/No, I guess not.

Next, vulgar minimizers are incompatible with so-called *A-adverbs* like absolutely, almost, nearly, just about, practically, virtually; see Horn (2000: 161); all of these combine happily with ordinary no forms:

(56)a. Harriet saw (*absolutely/*almost/*vitually) squat.

b. Stan regrets (*just about/*practically) jack.

c. Harriet saw (absolutely/almost/vitually) no cormorants.

d. Stan regrets (just about/practically) no decision.

As expected at this point, when nothing is modified by an A-adverb, it can only show negative behavior.

(57)a. Harriet saw absolutely/almost nothing and Ruth saw absolutely/almost nothing *too/either.

b. Harriet saw absolutely/almost nothing did/*didn't she?

c. Harriet saw absolutely/almost nothing and *so/neither did Ruth.

d. Harriet saw absolutely/almost nothing. *Yes, I guess so/No, I guess not.

Other environments for some reason preclude clear vulgar minimizers and when nothing appears in these environments, it must show negative behavior:

(58)a. Ted was near nothing/*squat.

b. Ted was fond of nothing/*squat.

(59)a. Ted was near nothing was/*wasn't he?

b. Ted was near nothing and Irma *was too/wasn't either.

c. Ted was near nothing (I don't think) (not even a water fountain).

d. Ted was near nothing. *Yes, I guess so/No, I guess not.

(60)a. Ted was fond of nothing was/*wasn't he?

b. Ted was fond of nothing and Irma *was too/wasn't either.

c. Ted was fond of nothing (I don't think) (not even poetry).

d. Ted was fond of nothing. *Yes, I guess so/No, I guess not.

It is also the case that for me, type Z vulgar minimizers cannot appear as predicate nominals. And when nothing does, it must show negative behavior:

(61)a. As for that scratch, it is nothing/*squat

b. It turned into nothing/*jack-shit.

(62)a. That scratch is nothing is/*isn't it.

b. The first scratch was nothing and the second *was too/wasn't either

c. The scratch was nothing (I don't think) (not even an annoyance).

d. The scratch was nothing. *Yes, I guess so/No, I guess not.

Finally, vulgar minimizers seem to be barred from *subject* positions; and when nothing appears there, it cannot display positive behavior:

(63)a. Nothing/*Squat happened.

b. For nothing/*squat to go wrong would be surprising.

c. Nothing happened, did/*didn't it?

d. Nothing happened yesterday and nothing happened today *too/either.

e. Nothing happened yesterday. *Yes, I guess so/No, I guess not.

4.4 Conclusion

I hope to have shown in this section that the curious behavior of the form nothing noted by McCawely receives a rather elegant account if it is recognized that in addition to a standard analysis as a DP with a negative quantifier D, nothing has a distinct analysis under which it is in effect a type Z vulgar minimizer based on a noun stem nothing taking the same zero D as other type Z vulgar minimizers. If this account is viable, it shows that the study of vulgar minimizers is not only of interest in itself but impacts in a positive way the treatment of more standard English forms.

Notes

**I dedicate this chapter to the memory of James D. McCawley, whose loss at a much too early age leaves an enormous gap and whose many and perceptive observations about negation have been a great aid in achieving what little understanding I have of this domain.

I would like to thank William Ladusaw and Laurence Horn for a good deal of early advice and instruction about minimizers and vulgar minimizers in particular. Their input was particularly useful and required considerable indulgence as it came at a time when I could hardly have distinguished a minimizer from an atomizer. Needless to say, they bear no blame whatever for any inadequacies of the present text.

Finally, much of anything that is of value in this chapter owes a great deal in ways which mere citations fail to indicate to observations of, and discussions with, Haj Ross over a number of years.

1 In the fall of 2000, I found that a class of twenty three undergraduates all met this condition. Most could use squat in particular, also the form I am most comfortable with and which I hence use in most examples. My speculative sociology is that these forms were until fairly recently restricted to sub-standard and regional dialects, and were quite vulgar. But some of them have become part of standard American English, and their vulgarity aspect is notably diminishing or vanishing, as indicated by their use even by elegant middle class women in television dramas and by such data as a cartoon which appeared in the New Yorker of July 19, 1999.

The cartoon shows a rhinocerous with an impressive horn talking to a tiger or leopard. The caption read:
(i) It's supposed to be some kind of aphrodisiac, but it hasn't done jack for me.

First, I am confident that the New Yorker editors, producers of a publication with a rather genteel style, saw no special vulgarity in the caption. Second, the rhino is clearly speaking standard American English; no special inferences about his social status, class, educational background, etc. are possible. Contrast that with a situation where, instead, the caption had been (ii):
(ii) It hasn't done nothin(g) for me.
This could have expressed the same meaning, but would have revealed that the rhino was, or was trying to pass for, a substandard speaker, and hence was not the sort of rhino who could, for instance, reasonably be assumed to have been a Yale graduate.

2 The alternative types property has been recognized by previous commentators; see (16), (18) and (19) below. But some speakers seem to allow only one or another usage of at least some vulgar minimizers. So David

Perlmutter has informed me that for him, squat only has usages of the 'anything' type. And for me, fuck-all only seems to have uses of the 'nothing' type.

3 Examples (ia, b) illustrate one other case of apparent irrelevance of negation:

(i)a. She could not (*at all/*ever) care (*at all) less about their/*anyone else's agenda (*at all) (could/*couldn't she?). =

b. She could care less about their /*anyone else's agenda (*at all) (?could/*couldn't she?).

It is a challenge to explicate why the real negative in (ia), its reality indicated inter alia by its ability to determine a positive confirmation tag, and total inability to permit a negative tag and its power to permit the negation sensitive (n)either (see Section 2), is strangely impotent to license negative polarity items like anyone/at all. Compare the more regular use of care in (ii):

(ii) She did not (at all) care about their/anyone else's agenda.

4 I do not at all intend (15a) to preclude the possibility of a still deeper analysis of any. In fact, I think that such can be justified and that the matter bears heavily on the proper analysis of type A vulgar minimizers. But these issues are way beyond the scope of the present remarks. See Postal (in preparation).

5 Neither type A nor type Z vulgar minimizers accept modifiers, including parenthetical modifiers like not even + X. This fact weakens any support derivable from (26d) for the non-negative structure of type Z vulgar minimizers.

6 During a lectur on these forms at the Ohio State University in March, 1999, a number of audience members seemed to accept examples like (30a), which I and others (e.g. Haj Ross) robustly reject.

7 I take no position here on the correctness of Déprez's suggestion for the French facts which motivated it.

8 The justification for this claim is nonobvious and depends on issues of the analysis of type A vulgar minimizers, matters beyond the scope of this discussion.

9 I ignore here and throughout another possible reading of nothing which, when present, renders the starred version of (49a) irrelevantly grammatical. This is a reading in which the DP nothing is equivalent to one of roughly the form something which was nothing, that is, with the meaning 'something insignificant/trivial'. Notably, this reading yields semantically an increasing (upward entailing) DP, rather than the decreasing DP yielded by ordinary no forms or zero forms. Now, in general, it is impossible to topicalize decreasing DPs. Notably then, the reading under discussion permits topicalization, normally banned for no forms, yielding contrasts like:

(i)a. Nothing, he will often be shocked by.

b. *No problem/outrage/joke/quip/remark, he will often be shocked by.

The same point holds for the construction in (ii), which also is in general impossible with decreasing DPs:

(ii)a. Nothing, that is what he was shocked by.

b. *No problem/outrage/joke/quip/remark, that is what he was shocked by.

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