Negative Inversion

Daniel Büring (UCLA)  
buring@humnet.ucla.edu

Negative Inversion (NI), illustrated in (1) (from Huddleston and Pullum (2002)), has been discussed widely in the syntactic literature, but has received very little attention from semanticists:

(1)  
a. None of them did he find useful.  
b. Nowhere does he mention my book.

By exploring NI in detail, this paper sheds some light on the semantic properties of the preposed elements that trigger (and don’t trigger) NI, as well as on the semantic properties of the construction itself.

To a first approximation, NI is triggered whenever a constituent denoting a downward entailing function (or perhaps less theoretically: an NPI licensing constituent) is fronted. Cases in which apparently negative elements are fronted without triggering inversion all lack this property (cf. the discussing in McCawley (1988)):

(2)  
b. *Nowhere, he mentioned my book.

(3)  
b. *Not long ago did he buy a book.

What does this imply for cases in which inverted and non-inverted versions of sentences with fronted adverbials exist alongside each other?

(4)  
a. With no job, John would be happy.  
b. With no job would John be happy.
a. Not even 10 years ago, you could buy a house for less than 50K.
b. Not even 10 years ago could you buy a house for less than 50K.

(6) a. In less than 5% of these sentences can you see a truth conditional difference.
b. In less than 5% percent of these sentences, you can see a truth conditional difference.

(7) a. None of them did he find useful.
b. None of them he found useful.

It appears that all the cases without NI are in fact not downward entailing, while the inverted versions are; we are thus not dealing with true optionality. Other differences regard their status as negative sentences as per test like tags, neither/as continuations etc., as well as their intonational properties.

In cases like (4) and (5), there are furthermore clear truth-conditional differences. It is shown how the apparent optionality can be traced back to a straightforward lexical and/or structural ambiguity. This is harder for examples along the lines of (6) and (7), which seem synonymous.

I nonetheless explore the hypothesis that these involve different logical forms; and that at least in some cases, like (8), they differ in truth conditions as well:

(8) a. We found over 50 adult magazines in less than 20 lockers.
b. In less than 20 lockers, we found over 50 adult magazines.
c. In less than 20 lockers did we find over 50 adult magazines.

Exploring these differences, I attempt to delineate the compositional semantics of the various fronting constructions involved.

References
