Cross-linguistic comparison of scalar NPIs

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This study investigates the cross-linguistic distribution and licensing environments of scalar negative polarity items (NPIs) across English, German, and Spanish. Specifically, we aim to answer the research question: *Are scalar NPIs licensed in the same environments across these three languages?*

To address this question, we conduct a quantitative corpus-based analysis using large web corpora—enTenTen21 for English, deTenTen23 for German, and esTenTen23 for Spanish. The NPIs under examination include "say a (single) word," "lift a finger," and "have (a) red cent," and their equivalent translations in German and Spanish ("Sterbenswörtchen," "decir una palabra," "einen Finger krumm machen," "mover un dedo," "(einen) roten Heller haben," "tener un centavo"). We profile the occurrence patterns and syntactic environments of these expressions across the corpora, focusing on their licensing conditions in negative, interrogative, and conditional contexts, as well as other potential triggers of NPI usage.

Preliminary findings suggest significant cross-linguistic variation, with certain NPIs exhibiting broader licensing conditions in English compared to their German and Spanish counterparts. The results contribute to a deeper understanding of the typology of scalar NPIs and the cross-linguistic universals and differences in polarity licensing, highlighting the role of language-specific constraints and semantic-pragmatic factors.