Much ado about something
Polarity, widening and N-of-N

Jeroen van Craenenbroeck
NYU/CRISSP/HUB
jc3474@nyu.edu
www.jeroenvancraenenbroeck.com

MAIN GOAL OF THIS TALK
- to provide an analysis of a previously undiscussed subtype of the N-of-N-construction

ADDITIONAL RESULT
- a decompositional syntactic analysis of polarity sensitivity in terms of domain widening

OUTLINE OF THE TALK
1. The basic data: something of N (SoN)
2. Dissecting the SoN
   2.1 Properties of iets ‘something’
   2.2 Properties of N
   2.3 External syntax of SoN
   2.4 Data summary
3. Towards an analysis: SoN vs. enig(e) N
4. The analysis: existential quantification and widening
5. Further research: kinds, plurals and mass nouns, variation in licensing contexts
6. Summary and conclusions

1. The basic data: something of N (SoN)

(1) Moeten we voor die cursus iets van boek lezen?
   must we for that course something of book read
   ‘Do we have to read any book for that course?’

→ in certain ( southern) dialects of Dutch¹, the combination something of N (henceforth SoN), where N is a singular count noun, can be used to signify ‘any N’ or ‘some N or other’

2. Dissecting the SoN
2.1 Properties of iets ‘something’

(i) iets ‘something’ cannot be replaced by a lexical NP

(2) * Moeten we voor die cursus een roman van boek lezen?
   must we for that course a novel of book read

(3) * Moeten we voor die cursus een boek van roman lezen?
   must we for that course a book of novel read

(ii) iets ‘something’ cannot be replaced by iemand ‘someone’

(4) * Was er iemand van verkoper in de winkel?
    was there someone of salesperson in the store
    INTENDED: ‘Was there any salesperson in the store?’

(iii) iets ‘something’ cannot be combined with zo ‘so’

(5) * Moeten we voor die cursus zoiets van boek lezen?
    must we for that course so.something of book read

   compare: the comparative something of a N-construction
(6) Is dat ook weer zoiets van een teken des tijds?
    is that also again so.something of a sign of the time
    ‘Is that also something like a sign of the times?’

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, all examples are from Wambeek Dutch, but with normalized spelling.

http://www.vrijzinnighumanisme.be/5_radio-tv/513_radio050627.htm
(iv) * iets ‘something’ can fuse with clausal negation into niets ‘nothing’

(7) Moeten we voor die cursus iets van boek lezen?
must we for that course something of book read
‘Don’t we have to read any book for that course?’

*compare: no fusion in the comparative something of a N-construction

(8) * Zouden we voor haar verjaardag niet iets van een boek kopen?
should we for her birthday not something of a book buy
‘Shouldn’t we buy something like a book for her birthday?’

(9) * Zouden we voor haar verjaardag niets van een boek kopen?
should we for her birthday nothing of a book buy

(v) * iets ‘something’ cannot be topicalized, but it can be wh-moved

(10) Hij kan iets van boek kopen.
he can something of book buy
‘He can buy some book or other.’

topicalization
(11) * Iets kan hij kopen van boek.
something can he buy of book

wh-movement
(12) Wat kan hij kopen van boek?
what can he buy of book
‘What kind of book can he buy?’

2.2 Properties of N

(i) * N cannot be preceded by determiners, demonstratives or possessive pronouns

(13) * Moeten we voor die cursus iets van de/een/mijn boek lezen?
must we for that course something of the/a/my book read

*compare: ‘regular’ PP-modifiers inside a DP

(14) * Heb je gisteren iets van de/een/mijn Zweedse componist gekocht?
have you yesterday something of the/a/my Swedish composer bought
‘Did you buy something by the/a/my Swedish composer yesterday?’

(ii) * N cannot be replaced by an R-pronoun

(15) * Moeten we er voor die cursus iets van lezen?
must we there for that course something of read

(16) * Daar moeten we voor die cursus iets van lezen.
there must we for that course something of read

*compare: ‘regular’ PP-modifiers inside a DP

(17) Heb je er gisteren iets van gekocht?
have you there yesterday something of bought
‘Did you buy something by him yesterday?’

(18) Daar heb ik gisteren iets van gekocht.
there have I yesterday something of bought
‘I bought something by him yesterday.’

(iii) the PP van N ‘of N’ cannot be topicalized, wh-moved or extraposed

(19) Hij kan iets van boek kopen.
he can something of book buy
‘He can buy some book or other.’

topicalization
(20) * Van boek kan hij iets kopen.
of book can he something buy

wh-movement
(21) * Waarvan kan hij iets kopen?
where of can he something buy

extraposition
(22) * Hij kan iets kopen van boek.
he can something buy of book

*compare: ‘regular’ PP-modifiers inside a DP

(23) Ik heb gisteren iets van Bach gekocht.
I have yesterday something of Bach bought
‘I bought something by Bach yesterday.’

(24) Van Bach heb ik gisteren iets gekocht.
of Bach have I yesterday something bought
‘I bought something by Bach yesterday.’
(25) Van wie heb je gisteren iets gekocht?
of who have you yesterday something bought
‘Who did you buy something by yesterday?’

(26) Ik heb gisteren iets gekocht van Bach.
I have yesterday something bought of Bach
‘I bought something by Bach yesterday.’

(iv) N can be animate

(27) Heb jij iets van coureur gezien?
have you something of racer seen
‘Did you see any racer?’

2.3 External syntax of SoN

(i) SoN is a constituent

fronting to V2-position

(28) Iets van boek moeten we niet lezen.
something of book must we not read
‘A book we don’t have to read.’

fragment answers

(29) Q: Wat kunnen we voor Jan kopen?
what can we for Jan buy
‘What can we buy for Jan?’
A: Iets van boek.
something of book
‘Some book or other.’

pseudoclefts

(30) Wat dat Jan niet gekocht heeft is iets van boek.
what that Jan not bought has is something of book
‘What John didn’t buy was any book.’

(ii) SoN is a nominal constituent

or or-coordination

(31) We kopen voor Jan óf een cd óf iets van boek.
we buy for John or a cd or something of book
‘We’ll buy either a cd or some book or other for John.’

(iii) SoN is a non-specific indefinite

there-expletives

(32) Er liggen twee koeien in de wei. → non-specific
there lie two cows in the meadow
‘There are two cows lying in the meadow.’

(33) Twee koeien liggen in de wei. → specific
two cows lie in the meadow
‘Two cows are lying in the meadow.’

(34) Jan had niet gezegd dat er iets van boek zou verkocht worden.
Jan had not said that there something of book should sold become
‘John hadn’t said that any books would be sold.’

(35) * Jan had niet gezegd dat iets van boek zou verkocht worden.
Jan had not said that something of book sold should become

scrambling

(36) Ik heb gisteren twee boeken gelezen. → non-specific
I have yesterday two books read
‘I read two books yesterday.’

(37) Ik heb twee boeken gisteren gelezen. → specific
I have two books yesterday read
‘I read two books yesterday.’

(38) Heb je gisteren iets van boek gelezen?
have you yesterday something of book read
‘Did you read any book yesterday?’

(39) * Heb je iets van boek gisteren gelezen?
I have something of book yesterday read
(iv) SoN has the distributional properties of N, not of iets ‘something’

selection by V

iets ‘something’
(40) Niemand vertelde iets.
‘Nobody told anything.’

boek ‘book’
(41) Niemand vertelde (een) boek.
‘nobody told a book’

iets van boek ‘something of book’
(42) Niemand vertelde iets van boek.
‘nobody told something of boek’

phrasal comparatives

iets ‘something’
(43) Ik krijg liever een dvd als iets.
‘I get rather a dvd as something’

boek ‘book’
(44) Ik krijg liever een dvd als een boek.
‘I’d rather get a dvd than a boek.’

iets van boek ‘something of book’
(45) Ik krijg liever een dvd als iets van boek.
‘I’d rather get a dvd than some boek or other.’

(v) pronouns agree with iets ‘something’, not with N

(46) As ge iets van boek kupt, bringt { * da / daunen} dein
if you something of book buy bring that then
with
‘If you buy some book or other, bring it with you.’

compare

(47) As ge nen boek kupt, bringt { * da / daunen} dein mee.
if you a book buy bring that then with
‘If you buy a book, bring it with you.’

(vi) SoN is polarity sensitive

→ SoN is an affective polarity item (API) in the sense of Giannakidou (1998, 1999, 2001)

SoN is licensed in/by:

negative sentences

(48) Jan heeft nooit iets van boek gekocht.
‘John has never bought any book.’

before-clauses

(49) Voordat je iets van boek koopt, kom je best bij mij.
‘Before you buy any book, you’d better come to me.’

without-clauses

(50) Zonder iets van boek kom je er niet.
‘Without any book you’ll never get there.’

yes/no questions

(51) Heb je iets van boek gekocht?
‘Did you buy any book?’

constituent question

(52) Wie heeft iets van boek gekocht?
‘Who bought any book?’

protasis of conditionals

(53) Als je iets van boek ziet, roep mij dan.
‘If you see any book, call me then’
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**restriction of universal quantifier**

(54) Iedereen die iets van boek koopt mag gratis binnen.
    ‘Everyone who buys any book can enter for free.’

**restriction of definite descriptions**

(55) De studenten die iets van boek kopen mogen gratis binnen.
    ‘The students who buy any book can enter for free.’

**restriction of at most**

(56) Maximum vijf studenten die iets van boek kopen mogen gratis binnen.
    ‘At most five students who buy any book can enter for free.’

**too**

(57) Jan is te zat om iets van boek te kopen.
    ‘John is too drunk to buy any book.’

**comparatives**

(58) Jan gaat meer naar de cinema dan dat ik iets van boek koop.
    ‘John goes to the cinema more often than I buy a book.’

**superlatives**

(59) Dat was de laatste keer dat ik iets van boek heb weggegeven.
    ‘That was the last time I gave any book away.’

**future**

(60) Ik zal iets van boek kopen.
    ‘I’ll buy some book or other.’

**modals**

(61) Hij kan iets van boek kopen.
    ‘He can buy some book or other.’

**imperatives**

(62) Koop iets van boek.
    ‘Buy some book or other.’

**habituals**

(63) Als ik ga slapen lees ik meestal iets van boek.
    ‘When I go to bed, I usually read some book or other.’

**disjunctions**

(64) We kopen voor Jan een cd of iets van boek.
    ‘We’ll buy either a cd or some book or other for John.’

**downward entailing QPs**

(65) Niemand heeft iets van boek gekocht.
    ‘Nobody bought any book.’

**complement of negative verbs**

(66) Hij weigert iets van boek te lezen.
    ‘He refuses to read any book.’

**SoN is not licensed in/by:**

**episodic affirmative sentences**

(67) * Gisteren om drie uur kocht ik iets van boek.
    INTENDED: ‘Yesterday at three I bought some book or other.’

**generics**

(68) * Iets van vogel heeft een snavel.
    INTENDED: ‘A bird has a beak.’

**restriction of at least**

(69) * Minimum vijf studenten die iets van boek kopen mogen gratis binnen.
    ‘At least five students who buy any book can enter for free.’
3. Towards an analysis: SoN vs. enig(e) N

→ the combination of the indefinite determiner enig(e) with singular count nouns bears an interesting resemblance to SoN:

(i) both SoN and enig(e) N can mean ‘any N’ or ‘some N or other’

(72) Heeft iemand enig bezwaar?

has anyone any objection
‘Does anyone have any objections?’

(73) Hij moet toch enige vorm van straf krijgen.

he must PRT some.or.other form of punishment get
‘He should receive some form of punishment or other.’

(ii) both SoN and enig(e) N are indefinite

(74) Is er enig bezwaar tegen zijn komst?

is there any objection against his coming
‘Is there any objection against him coming?’

(iii) enig(e) N is polarity sensitive

Hoeksema & Klein (1995), Hoeksema (2005): when followed by a singular count noun, enig(e) is licensed by/in:

- negative sentences
- without-clauses
- yes/no-questions
- wh-questions
- protasis of conditionals
- restriction of a universal quantifier
- too
- comparatives
- superlatives
- downward entailing QPs
- complements of negative predicates
and in slightly older [as well as non-standard, jvc] stages of Dutch by/in:

- modals
- imperatives
- habituals
- disjunctions

On the other hand, *enig(e) + singular count noun* is not licensed in/by:

- episodic affirmative sentences
- generics
- restriction of *many*

⇒ *enig(e) + singular count noun = API*

→ the parallelism between SoN and *enig(e) N* will form the starting point of the analysis

4. **The analysis: decomposing a polarity item**

4.1 **The meaning components of *any***

Kadmon & Landman (1993): *(75) any N* = the corresponding NP *a N*, with additional semantic/pragmatic characteristics contributed by *any*, in particular:

**WIDENING:** in an NP of the form *any N*, *any* widens the interpretation of the NP along a contextual dimension

**STRENGTHENING:** *any* is licensed only if the widening that it induces creates a stronger statement, i.e. only if the statement on the wide interpretation entails the statement on the narrow interpretation

**example**

(76) a. An owl hunts mice.
   b. Any owl hunts mice.

→ in (76)a the NP *an owl* quantifies over a contextually determined set of owls (e.g. it excludes sick owls)
→ the NP *any owl* in (76)b widens that domain: it displays reduced tolerance to exceptions

(77) A: A sick owl doesn’t hunt mice.
    B: Right. Of course. Still, it’s true that an owl hunts mice.

(78) A: A sick owl doesn’t hunt mice.
    B: Wrong. ANY owl hunts mice. (It’s just that if an owl is very sick, he doesn’t do very well on the hunt.)

(79) *Any owl hunts mice* entails *An owl hunts mice*, so the use of *any* is licensed (strengthening)
    → strengthening ensures that *any* only shows up in the appropriate licensing contexts

4.2 **Enig = een + ig**

**proposal:** the two central meaning components (existential quantification and widening) are morphologically expressed in *enig*:

**een = existential quantification**

(80) Ik heb een boek gekocht.  = ∃ x : book(x) & bought(I,x)
     I have a book bought
     I bought a book.'

-ig → widens the domain provided by N

(81) a. Deze auto is groen.
    b. Deze auto is groenig

   ‘This car is green.’ ‘This car is greenish.’

→ in the transition from (81)a to (81)b, the domain provided by the adjective is widened, as the set of green things is a subset of the set of greenish things
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→ the use of van in (84)A2 widens the domain provided by the N acid, as substances that are perhaps not acids in the strictest sense of the word are now also taken into consideration

4.3 iets van = iets + van

proposal: the two central meaning components (existential quantification and widening) are syntactically expressed in SoN:

\[
\text{iets} = \text{existential quantification} \\
\text{van} \rightarrow \text{widens the domain provided by N}
\]

(83) Ik heb iets gekocht. = \( \exists x : \text{bought(}x) \)
I have something bought
I bought something.

\[
\text{A1: } \text{I believe an acid} \\
\text{A2: I believe of an acid} \\
\text{I think it is an acid of some sort.}'
\]

"What kind of substance is that?"
"I think it is an acid of some sort."

→ the use of van in (85)(86) widens the domain provided by the embedded clause, as utterances that are similar but not identical to the embedded clause are now also taken into consideration (cf. also Van Craenenbroeck 2002)

(87) \( \text{D}' \)
the analysis: - iets and the NP start out in a small clause (FP) - iets raises to specDP - F° raises to D° and D°+F° is spelled out as van (cf. also Bennis, Corver & Den Dikken 1997)
4.4 The basic properties of SoN revisited

(88) Properties of iets ‘something’
(i) cannot be replaced by a lexical NP
(ii) cannot be replaced by iemand
(iii) cannot be combined with zo ‘so’
(iv) can fuse with clausal negation
(v) cannot be topicalized
(vi) can be wh-moved

(i) & (ii) → follow from the fact that iets is a ‘pure’ existential quantifier in SoN, without any further lexical meaning

(iii) → assuming zo ‘so’ to be a predicate (Bennis, Corver & Den Dikken 1997:87), its absence in SoN follows from the fact that iets ‘something’ is not a predicate

(iv) → follows from the fact that iets is situated in the highest position of the extended nominal projection of the N (cf. Den Dikken 2006:184 for a comparable and compatible view)

(v) → follows from the fact the SoN is necessarily non-specific; compare indefinite wat:

(89) a. Ik heb gisteren wat gedaan. → non-specific
I have yesterday what done
‘I have done something yesterday.’

b. * Ik heb wat gisteren gedaan. → INTENDED: specific
I have something yesterday done

(90) * Wat heb ik gedaan.
what have I done
INTENDED: ‘I have done something.’

(vi) → iets merely quantifies over the widened set provided by van boek ‘of book’. As such, we expect it can be replaced by other quantifiers such as the wh-word wat or (though more marginally) the universal quantifier alles:

(91) Zie dat je alles van medicijn in een aparte doos bewaart. see that you everything of medication in a separate box keep
‘Make sure you keep all your medication in a separate box’

(92) Properties of N
(i) cannot be preceded by determiners/demonstratives/possessive pronouns
(ii) cannot be replaced by an R-pronoun
(iii) the of N-PP cannot be moved
(iv) can be animate

(i) → follows from the fact that the string iets van ‘something of’ takes up the determiner domain

(ii) & (iii) → follows from the fact that there is no PP in the structure in (87): van is the spell-out of a SC-head (cf. Bennis, Corver & Den Dikken 1997)

(iv) → the N simply provides a contextual domain to be widened and iets is a pure existential operator → there is no feature mismatch between the two

(93) External syntax of SoN
(i) is a nominal constituent
(ii) is a non-specific indefinite
(iii) has the distributional properties of N, not of iets ‘something’
(iv) pronouns agree with iets ‘something’, not with N
(v) is an API

(i) → SoN = DP

(ii) → APIs are “dependent existential quantifiers” (Giannakidou 1998:70), i.e. they cannot introduce a discourse referent in the actual world ⇒ they cannot be specific

(iii) → follows from the fact that the N is the lexical head of the entire structure, i.e. iets ‘something’ and van ‘of’ are in the extended nominal domain of the N

(iv) → follows from the widening analysis: given that the widened set van boek ‘of book’ possibly contains entities that are not books in the strictest sense of the word, the noun’s masculine gender is not warranted

(v) → it expresses a combination of existential quantification and domain widening
5. Further research: modifiers, plurals & mass nouns, variation in licensing context

5.1 Kinds

→ modification of N suggests that what follows van ‘of’ in SoN is actually a kind:

(94) Moeten we voor die cursus iets van boek lezen?
    must we for that course something of book read
    ‘Do we have to read any book for that course?’

(95) ??Moeten we voor die cursus iets van Engelse boek lezen?
    must we for that course something of English book read
    ‘Do we have to read any English book for that course?’

(96) ??Moeten we voor die cursus iets van taalkundeboek lezen?
    must we for that course something of linguistics book read
    ‘Do we have to read any linguistics book for that course?’

(97) Heb je gisteren iets van Duitse herder gezien?
    have you yesterday something of German shepherd seen
    ‘Did you see any German shepherd yesterday?’

(98) ??Heb je gisteren iets van Duitse auto gezien?
    have you yesterday something of German car seen
    ‘Did you see any German car yesterday?’

→ it is unclear:
   a. why there is this restriction to kinds
   b. how bare singular count nouns can denote kinds in southern Dutch
   c. how a kind can yield the necessary domain for van to widen (seems to require/involve type shifting)

5.2 Plurals and mass nouns

→ at first sight, SoN is also possible with plurals and mass nouns:

(99) Heb je onderweg iets van problemen gehad?
    have you on the way something of problems had
    ‘Did you have any problems along the way?’

(100) Heb je iets van therapie moeten volgen?
    have you something of therapy must follow
    ‘Did you have to follow any therapy?’

however, they pattern differently in a number of respects:

(i) distribution: there are dialects allowing SoN only with mass nouns and plurals, not with singular count nouns

(ii) modification by bijna ‘almost’

(101) * Ik heb bijna niets van boek gekocht.
    I have almost nothing of book bought.

(102) Ik heb bijna niets van problemen gehad.
    I have almost nothing of problems had
    ‘I hardly had any problems.’

(103) Ik heb bijna niets van therapie gevolgd.
    I have almost nothing of therapy followed
    ‘I hardly followed any therapy.’

    note: almost normally modifies FCI s and universal quantifiers:
    (104) You can pick almost any card.
    (105) Almost every student participated.

(iii) modification by ook maar ‘also only’

(106) ?? Niemand had ook maar iets van boek gekocht.
    nobody had also only something of book bought

(107) Niemand had ook maar iets van problemen gehad.
    nobody had also only something of problems had
    ‘Nobody had had any problems.’

(108) Niemand had ook maar iets van therapie gevolgd.
    nobody had also only something of therapy followed
    ‘Nobody had followed any therapy.’
(iv) with stress on *iets* ‘something’ plurals and mass nouns can occur in non-API-licensing contexts

(109) * Gisteren om 3 uur heb ik IETS van boek gekocht. yesterday at 3 hour have I something of book bought.

(110) Gisteren om 3 uur heb ik IETS van problemen gehad. yesterday at 3 hour have I something of problems had ‘Yesterday at three I had a little bit of problems.’

(111) Vorig jaar in maart heb ik IETS van therapie gehad. last year in March have I something of therapy had ‘Last year in March I took a little bit of therapy.’

**possible clue: enig(e) has a non-polarity-sensitive use when combined with plurals and mass nouns (Hoeksema & Klein 1995)**

(112) a. Enige tijd geleden was hij hier. SOME time ago was he here
   ‘Some time ago he was here.’
   
   b. Enige minuten geleden was hij hier. SOME minutes ago was he here
   ‘Some time ago he was here.’
   
   c. * Enige minuut geleden was hij hij hier. SOME minuut ago was he here

5.3 Variation in licensing contexts

→ SoN does not have the exact same set of licensing environments as Giannakidou’s (1998, 1999, 2001) APIs:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>APIs</th>
<th>SoN</th>
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<td>phrasal comparatives</td>
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<td>ok</td>
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<td>DP-complement of negative verbs</td>
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<td>weak intensional verbs</td>
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6. Summary and conclusions

- certain dialects of Dutch possess an as yet undiscussed instantiation of the N-of-N-construction, whereby the first N is *iets* ‘something’ and the second a bare count noun

- I have analyzed this construction as a DP, with *iets* moved to specDP, *van* in D°, and the NP (contained in a NumP) in complement position

- this construction has the distribution of an API

- its polarity sensitivity comes about through a combination of existential quantification (lexicalized by *iets*) and domain widening (expressed by *van*)

References


