Litotes and downward monotonicity

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1 Introduction

This paper deals with the linguistic analysis of the rhetorical figure of litotes. In litotes, a positive statement is expressed by means of the not uncommon strategy of negating a negative one. Taking the analysis of Horn (1989, 1991) as a starting point, I will argue that litotes is not restricted to negation per se, as it occurs in other negative-like contexts as well. It will be shown that Horn's analysis of the phenomenon can be augmented and extended in a natural way to cover these other contexts as well.

The paper is organized as follows. In section 2, I supply a working definition of litotes, arguing that litotes is not to be confused with related phenomena such as understatement. Next, I summarize the semantico-pragmatic analysis of Horn's in section 3. Section 4 contains the main contribution of this paper, viz., that litotes is not triggered by negation alone, but rather by all downward entailing expressions, at least in principle. Apparent or real counterexamples to this claim are dealt with in section 5. The last section contains some concluding remarks.[1]

2 What is litotes?

Litotes is the rhetorical figure in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative of the contrary (Jespersen 1917:62–3). The phenomenon is exemplified below in (1):

(1)   a. He's a *not un*happy man

       b. He lifted his hat with respect, and *not without* gallantry

c. She does*n't* look *too bad*

In each of the examples, the meaning of the expression containing a double negation is not completely equivalent to the one without negations: sentence (1a) does not precisely mean 'he is a happy man' but is somewhat vague as regards the subject's position on the happiness scale: it may be anywhere between reasonably happy and absolutely ecstatic. A comparable vagueness is found in the other examples: it is left unspecified in (1b) whether the subject is rather gallant or extremely gallant. Finally (1c) can be used to describe both a stunning beauty and an average female person. This type of vagueness seems to be an essential feature of litotes (cf. below).

Note that this usage of the term 'litotes' is not the only one to be found in the literature (Hoffmann 1987; Horn 1991): the term is also used for logical double negations as exemplified below:

(2)   a. It is *not impossible* that we will visit you tomorrow
         'It is possible that we will visit you tomorrow'

      b. You are wrong: she is *not un*married!
         'She is married'

Logically, the first example is fully equivalent to 'it is possible', as there exist no degrees of possibilities in standard modal logic — although people may tend to try and interpret the double negation as a litotes construction after all (cf. below). The unmarked interpretation for the second example is as an explicit denial of an (explicit or implicit) statement that the subject might be unmarried (cf. van der Wouden (1994:2.4)).

Moreover, the term 'litotes' is also used as a synonym for 'understatement' or 'meiosis', in which the speaker uses a weaker term than (s)he might without violating the truth, and the listener is aware of this (Berg 1978; Hübler 1983):

(3)   a. The performance is *satisfactory*
         'superb'

      b. He is *rather well off*
         'filthy rich'

In this paper, however, I will restrict my attention to cases where a negative term occurs in a negative context (to be defined below) and the resulting meaning, although affirmative, is not (necessarily) completely equivalent to the expression without negation.[2]

3   Horn's analysis of litotes

Horn's analysis has two parts, a semantic one and a pragmatic one. These parts will be dealt with in the following sections.

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[2]As Larry Horn pointed out to me, the phenomenon of (so-called) Neg-Raising — as in *I don't want to eat it* — might be subsumed under the general heading of litotes, at least to some extent. This suggestion will be pursued at another occasion.

3.1 The semantic part

The semantic part of Horn's explanation of litotes crucially involves the distinction between contradictory and contrary opposition, which dates back as far as Aristotle. Schematically, the difference may be depicted as follows:

	contradictory opposition		contrary opposition		
	not G	not F	not G		
				not F	
(4)	F	G	F		G
	white	non-white	white	neither F nor G	black
	odd	even	poor		rich
	male	female	happy		unhappy

This schema should be read as follows: the contradictory opposites *odd* and *even* cannot be both true of an individual, nor can they be false at the same time of such an individual. The contrary opposites *white* and *black*, however, can again not both be true of an individual, but they can both be false of such an individual — for instance, if it is red or blue. In other words (Horn 1989; Horn 1991):

(5)   a. contradictory opposites are mutually exhaustive as well as mutually inconsistent

   b. contrary opposites do not mutually exhaust there domain

And in yet other words we can say the following — again following Horn very closely:

(6)   a. contradictory opposition is governed by the Law of Contradiction (LC) and the Law of Excluded Middle (LEM)

   b. contrary opposition is governed by LC but not by LM.

(7)   a. LC: for any x in the relevant domain, $\neg(Fx\&Gx)$

   b. LEM: for any x in the relevant domain, $(Fx \vee Gx)$

(8)   a. contradictory (contrary (P)) $\neq$ P

   b. contradictory (contradictory (P)) $=$ P

That is to say, in all cases *not P* refers to everything that is not P. In the case of a contradictory opposition such as *odd–even*, everything that is *not even* is *odd*, and everything that is *not odd* is of course *even*. In the case of a contrary opposition such as *poor–rich*, however, someone who is *not poor* is not necessarily *rich*, and someone who is *not rich* doesn't have to be *poor*: (s)he may very well be somewhere between these two extremes. Thus, the intersection of *not even* and *not odd* necessarily denotes the empty set, whereas the intersection of *not rich* and *not poor* may have a considerable number of members. And this difference explains the contrast between the following two sentences. The first one is a contradiction, or necessary false, and therefore the continuation *it's somewhere in between* is odd (to say the least); the second, however, may be true or false; the continuation *they're somewhere in between* only makes the reference to the grey area between the two extremes explicit.

(9)   a.   This number is neither odd nor even (*it's somewhere in between)

b.   These people are neither rich nor poor (they're somewhere in between)

Only in the case of (nonclassical) contrary negation can we get litotes readings, which explains why *not impossible* and *not unmarried* cannot get a litotes reading in sentences like (2).[3]

3.2   The pragmatic part

The pragmatic part of Horn's explanation of litotes is explained by means of a variation on Grice's maxims (Grice 1989):

(10)   **Division of Pragmatic Labor** The use of a longer, marked expression in lieu of a shorter expression involving less effort on the part of the speaker tends to signal that the speaker was not in a position to employ the simpler version felicitously. (Horn 1991)

Let me explain the interplay semantics pragmatics in litotes first, before adding complications. Assume that a speaker utters sentence (11):

(11)   It is not unwise to take precautions

Upon hearing this utterance, the cooperative listener will reason as follows. Literally, the speaker says that it is 'not not-wise' to take precautions. Logically, this is equivalent to saying that it is wise to take precautions. But the speaker doesn't say this, so, according to (10), and assuming he is reasonable and cooperative as well, he'll have his reasons for saying what he wants to say in this roundabout way. So probably he doesn't want to claim that it is wise to take precautions. Evidently, he doesn't want to claim that it is unwise to take precautions either, given the fact that that statement is explicitly denied. Presumably, then, the speaker wants to refer to the grey zone (Sapir 1944), somewhere between *wise* and *unwise*, comparable to expressions such as 'it is rather wise to take precautions', 'it is pretty wise to take precautions', 'it is reasonably wise to take precautions', 'it is neither wise nor unwise to take precautions', etc.

The following picture may help to see what is going on (the dotted areas are not available for interpretation):

(12)

a	unwise	. . . .	wise
b	not wise		. . . .
c	. . . . . .	not unwise	
d	. . . . . .	not unwise	. . . .

The a-row depicts a scale of wisdom, going from unwise on the left to wise on the other extreme. There is an area in between the two extremes where neither *wise* nor *unwise* apply (of course, there is no sharp boundary between the extremes and the middle part). The b-row shows the logical denotation of *not wise*: it covers all of the scale that is not covered by *wise*. The c-row is a picture of the logical denotation of *not unwise*: that expression covers all of the scale that is not covered by *unwise*. The d-row, finally, depicts the pragmatic possibilities of *not unwise*: the principle in (10) restricts the usage of the expression to the middle area, the grey zone in between the two extremes.

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[3]Compare, however, the next section.

Do not think that this approach predicts that the meaning of *not wise* is either the same as that of *not unwise*, or of *wise*. To see this, note that *not unwise* refers only to the middle area in the picture above and *unwise* only refers to the left column, whereas *not wise* covers the two columns to the left, i.e., the complete area not covered by *wise*.

From this analysis, it follows that negated nongradable or absolute predicates cannot function as litotes, as no middle area is available between the predicate and its opposite. Consider the following cases:

(13)   a. ?A *not unmarried* woman entered the room

        b.   That girl is *not unmarried*

        c.   It is *not impossible* that I will attend the meeting

The oddity of example (13a) is caused by the fact that a person is either married or unmarried, and that there is no grey zone in between the two for the litotetic construction to allude to. Hence the sentence forms an unfelicitous utterance. The following picture may help:

(14)

married	unmarried
not unmarried	not married

The truth conditions of (13b), already discussed above, are the same as that of the simple expression *that girl is married*. The only difference between the doubly negated variant and the simple one is that (13b) explicitly denies expectations or presupposition of the opposite. For these purposes the sentence is fine, but not for conveying a meaning along the lines of 'that girl is somewhere in the grey area between married and not married' or 'that girl is lightly married', i.e., a litotetic meaning, since such a grey area does not exist. In terms of usage possibilities, this means that this statement can be used felicitously as a case of denial (van der Wouden 1994), i.e., to react to a certain statement:

(15)   You are wrong: that girl is *not unmarried*!

In order to be able to make sense of (13c) the listener must (and usually will) construct a nonlogical scale of possibilities on which 'not impossible' is somewhat less possible than 'possible'. That is to say, *impossible* doesn't have its logical meaning ($\diamond$) here but rather refers to a certain degree of (im)probability.

3.3   On the meaning of litotetic expressions

There is some uncertainty about the exact meaning of litotes. The rhetorical tradition (e.g. Erasmus (1512), Lausberg (1973)) states that the litotes construction is strongly positive, whereas the linguistic tradition (Jespersen 1917; Bolinger 1972; Horn 1991) tells us that the doubly negated expression is somewhat weaker than the straightforwardly positive one. The analysis of litotes that is adopted here points in the direction of the correctness of the latter option. The truth-functional meaning of a lexical item such as *unwise* is vague: it covers the area between *rather wise* and *extremely wise*. The independent mechanism of understatement (Berg 1978; Hübler 1983) that was already mentioned must be held responsible for the fact that litotes constructions may be used occasionally to express strong positive statements. Thus, via understatement, weakly positive expressions such as *nice* and *not bad* can be used

to express a very positive attitude of the speaker: "extremely beautiful" or something along these lines.

To get a clear view on the way litotes and understatement interact, consider the following (Dutch) example:

(16)   Het is niet niks
         It is not nothing

Truthfuctionally, this sentence is either equivalent to 'it is something' or 'it is everything'. Via Horn's principle (10) these are not the readings we get, as there are simpler ways to express them. The readings we do get are 'it is at least something' and 'it is quite a lot'. Analogously to the case of *not impossible* in (13c), *niks* 'nothing' is not read as member of any of the binary oppositions *everything – nothing* or *something – nothing*, but rather as the lower end point of a scale such as the following:

(17)
nothing	something	a lot
	not nothing	

In other words, the interpretation of *niet niks* 'not nothing' is vague as regards the exact location to the right of 'nothing'. We typically get the 'something' reading in a context such as the following: My friend desperatately needs 1000 dollar by tomorrow. I offer to help him with a $ 100 bill. He then can say *Het is niet niks, alle beetjes helpen, dankjewel* ('it is not nothing, all small bits help, thank you'). The other reading, 'a lot' we get, for example, in the following situation. I am being interviewed just after having finished my first marathon. Gasping for air, I say, with tongue in cheek, i.e., with a lot of understatement: *Het is niet niks, zo'n marathon* 'it is not nothing, such a marathon', before I collapse.

4   More than negation

It is often assumed that litotes is restricted to negative particles such as *not*. This position is also taken in a recent monograph on Latin litotes (Hoffmann 1987). The relevant part of Hoffmann's view on litotes is given below (Hoffmann 1987:216):

(18)   **Hypothesis** (Hoffmann):   In litotes, the process of negation is effected by NEG particles only

According to this hypothesis, the second of the following construction types is excluded from the discussion: only the first one is supposed to be an instance of litotes:

(19)   a.   I do*n't deny* she is right   litotes
            'Of course she is right'

       b.   *Nobody denies* she is right   no litotes
            'Of course she is right according to everyone'

The restriction to NEG is unsatisfactory for several reasons. The first problem is already noted by Hoffmann herself (Hoffmann 1987:229 n.41):

> For [...] expressions in other languages adaptations will be necessary. In e.g. English, Dutch and German, litotes expressions are used that contain zero-quantifiers, for instance: *He is no fool, Dat is geen gek idee* ('That's no foolish idea'), *Er ist kein Tor* ('He is no fool'). In Latin, expressions of the form *nullus stultus est* are ungrammatical if used as [litotes] expressions.

Although Latin expressions of the form *nullus stultus est* are ungrammatical if used as litotes expressions, constructions of the type *nemo negat* ('nobody denies') are perfectly well-formed (Erasmus 1512). They are, however, still excluded from the discussion. The following table depicts this ad hoc and unsatisfactory division between what counts as litotes and what not:

(20)

Hoffmann (1987)	
litotes	no litotes
He is *not* a *bad* guy	He is *no fool*
Non nego	*Nemo negat*
I do*n't deny*	*Nobody denies*

The second problem is that negative adverbs such as *never, nowhere* and *not at all* show the same effect, just like the negative conjunct *neither*; these are also left out from Hoffmann's discussion:[4]

(21) a. I never denied his claim.

b. Of course, some acts may be *neither unjust nor immoral*

c. A fact *nowhere* conceded in this series

To see that we are indeed dealing with litotes, note that the possible readings of (21a) cover the whole range from not explicitly contradicting the claim to strongly affirming it, i.e., the vagueness we met in earlier cases of litotes is present here as well. The same holds for example (21b): the sentence denies that the acts are unjust or immoral, but whether they are very just and completely moral or rather somewhere between the extremes is left open. A comparable story holds for (21c): according to this sentence, the fact is never admitted in this sentence, but neither is it denied expressly.

A third argument against restricting discussion of litotes to negation *not* and *n't* is constituted by the fact that weak negatives such as *seldom, hardly* and Dutch *weinig* 'little, few' may also trigger the effect of litotes, with the by now well-known vagueness in meaning:

(22) a. I recognize that this is *scarcely tightly* formulated
'This is rather/very loosely formulated'

b. The weather was *seldom uncomfortable*
'The weather was pretty/very comfortable most of the time'

c. This is *scarcely little less* than infanticide
'This is almost the same as/worse than infanticide'

d. Met deze soep is *weinig mis*   (Dutch)
With this soup is little wrong
'This is (extremely/rather) nice soup'

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[4]Many examples in this paper, including the ones below, were not made-up for the present discussion but found in actual texts. Most are from Jack Hoeksema's text corpora.

A fourth argument against this approach needs some background. An analysis in terms of an abstract negative operator NEG used to be quite popular, among other things for the explanation of other natural language phenomena that seem to involve negation. For example, this is essentially the type of analysis Klima (1964) and Baker (1970) propose for the distribution of so-called negative polarity items (NPIs). Such NPIs, for example the indefinite *any*, verbal idioms such as *have a hope in hell* and 'minimizers' (Bolinger 1972) like *a red penny*, only occur in the scope of negation (and some other things, cf. below and McCawley (1988:562)). Consider the following examples:

(23) a. *John drank *any* beer tonight
      b. John didn't drink *any* beer tonight

(24) a. *Victor has *a hope in hell* of solving this puzzle
      b. Victor doesn't have *a hope in hell* of solving this puzzle

(25) a. *Sue wanted to *give a red penny* to help the refugees
      b. Sue didn't want to *give a red penny* to help the refugees

Sentence negation *not* or *n't* is not the only possible licenser of NPIs, as the sentences below demonstrate:

(26) a. *Nowhere* did John drink any beer
      b. *Neither* author was a scientist, *nor* had they made any pretense of investigating
      c. Victor *never* had a hope in hell of solving this puzzle
      d. Sue *scarcely* wanted to give a red penny to help the refugees

One might suggest that elements such as *never*, *nowhere* and *scarcely* contain a negative particle after all, as they are more or less equivalent in meaning to *always not*, *everywhere not* and *not quite*, respectively. This, however, may easily lead to circular reasoning. Moreover, this analysis becomes more problematic in the case of certain other contexts that license NPIs, such as comparatives, conditionals, and relatives depending on universal quantifiers:

(27) a. John drank *more* beer *than* any of his friends
      b. *If* I'd had a hope in hell of solving this puzzle, I would have continued
      c. *Everyone who* gives a red penny to help the refugees deserves a medal

Rather than trying to force all these cases into the Procrustean bed of an analysis involving underlying negations, Ladusaw (1979) was the first one to point out that all contexts that license NPIs possess the logical property of being downward entailing.[5]

(28)   **Definition** An expression δ is downward-entailing if and only if
         $\forall X \forall Y (X \subseteq Y) \rightarrow (\delta'(Y) \subseteq \delta'(X))$.[6]

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[5]Ladusaw built on earlier work by Fauconnier (e.g. his 1975). In the literature this property is also known as 'downward monotonic', 'monotone decreasing' (Hoeksema 1983) and 'antitone' (Dunn 1993).

[6]δ' denotes the interpretation of δ.

Ladusaw hypothesized that this property is crucial in the distribution of negative polarity items. In other words (Ladusaw 1979:113):

(29) δ is a trigger for NPIs if and only if δ is downward-entailing.

This generalization – let me call it Ladusaw's hypothesis – is attractive for its elegance. Although not completely unproblematic (Linebarger 1980; von Bergen & von Bergen 1993; Progovac 1994), it has defined a very fruitful research paradigm (Zwarts 1981; Kas 1993; Kadmon & Landman 1993; Sánchez Valencia *et al.* 1994; van der Wouden 1994; Israel 1994).

Downward entailing contexts allow one to reason from sets to subsets. The validity of the following reasoning shows that the prototypical trigger of NPIs, sentence negation, is downward entailing:

(30)   John doesn't eat vegetables
          [[spinach]]$\subseteq$[[vegetables]]

          _____

          John doesn't eat spinach

Application of this test shows that the adverb *scarcely* denotes a DE function as well (in the other contexts, an analogous test applies):

(31)   John scarcely eats vegetables
          [[spinach]]$\subseteq$[[vegetables]]

          _____

          John scarcely eats spinach

Now the time has come to give my fourth argument against an analysis of litotes in terms of a negative particle: given that the same contexts may license negative polarity items and give rise to litotes readings, and given that downward monotonicity has been used to explain other phenomena that seem to be governed by negation as well (van der Wouden & Zwarts 1993), let us assume that the same logical principles govern both phenomena. Ladusaw's hypothesis in terms of downward monotonicity is quite successful in explaining a lot of the intricacies connected with natural language negation (van der Wouden 1994). Why not investigate whether the same approach works for litotes as well? That is to say, let me pursue the possibility that litotes may in principle occur in all types of negative contexts. In other words, I will assume that the hypothesis in (18) be replaced by the following :

(32)   **Hypothesis**   Downward monotonicity triggers litotes

If this is anywhere near correct, I have to explain how Horn's analysis of litotes may be revised and expanded in order to cope with the monotone decreasing contexts that trigger litotes. Before doing so, however, I will further investigate the parallels between contexts that license polarity items and those that may function as negatives for litotes.

4.1 Other negative contexts

The hypothesis in (32) predicts that litotes may occur in all downward entailing contexts. This is not completely born out by the facts: although litotes certainly occurs in many monotone decreasing contexts, it doesn't show up in all. Two options are possible here: either one takes the point of view that litotes occurs with negation only — but then one needs a story about the cases of litotes in other monotone decreasing contexts — or that litotes may, in principle, occur in all monotone decreasing contexts — and then one needs to explain why it doesn't always do so. I will defend the latter option.

In order to stress the parallels between polarity phenomena and litotes, I will now discuss various contexts where negative polarity items may show up, whereas many positive polarity items do not occur there. Litotes occurs in these contexts as well. It is a well-known fact that not all NPIs have the same distribution (Klima 1964; Zwarts 1981; van der Wouden 1994): there is not only variation in the type of negative context the elements are sensitive to, there are additional restrictions that must be held responsible for the fact that certain NPIs do not collocate with all downward entailing expressions of the appropriate type.

It will turn out that a comparable situation exists in the case of litotes. Not all negative predicates give rise to a litotetic meaning when they are combined with just any MD operator. An account will be given for several of such cases.[7]

4.1.1 Conditionals

Conditionals are well-known places for negative polarity items. Not all predicates, however, give rise to litotes in this context. Let me illustrate this with the adjective *onverdienstelijk* 'unmeritorious', that occurs in litotes constructions only (cf. the large *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* or *WNT* (1882–)). The following examples show that *onverdienstelijk* is a negative polarity item, but that it yields ungrammatical results in the antecedent clause of a conditional:

(33) a. Hij is een niet *onverdienstelijk* schilder
          He is a not unmeritorious painter
          'He is a painter not without merit'

      b. *Hij is een *onverdienstelijk* schilder
          He is a unmeritorious painter

      c. *Als hij een *onverdienstelijk* schilder is, ontsla hem dan
          If he is a painter without merit, fire him!

The meaning of sentence (33a) shows the vagueness we met in earlier cases of litotes: the sentence can be used to express both a moderate and a high estimation of the subject's pictorial abilities.

A lexical item comparable to *onverdienstelijk*, *onbetuigd*, is also restricted to litotes constructions. As could be expected, sentence (34a) covers the whole range between minimal and maximal activity.

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[7]The examples discussed are mainly Dutch because the judgements are sometimes rather subtle and my judgements concerning Dutch are more trustworthy — although not all informants agree on all of them — than those concerning English. The results, however, seem to carry over to English and other languages.

(34) a. Hij liet zich *niet onbetuigd*
          He left himself not un-testified
          'He acquitted himself well'

      b. *Hij liet zich *onbetuigd*

A difference, however, between *onverdienstelijk* and *onbetuigd* is that the latter word is acceptable in conditionals, with the litotetic meaning vagueness.

(35)   Als je je onbetuigd gelaten had waren er ongelukken gebeurd
          If you hadn't acquitted yourself well accidents would have happened

It is not totally surprising that only some *on*-formations give rise to litotes readings in conditionals, as not all negative polarity items are well-formed in this context either: *hoeven* 'need' and *meer* 'anymore' do not occur here. On the other hand, the fact that the NPI *ook maar* 'at all' is fine in this context suggests that the context is monotone decreasing (Sánchez Valencia *et al.* 1994).

(36) a. Als er *ook maar iets* gebeurt moet je me bellen
          If there at all something happens must you me call
          'If anything happens at all, call me'

      b. *Als je *hoeft* te werken, kun je daar gaan zitten
          If you need to work, can you there go sit

      c. *Als je koffie *meer* wilt, daar is de thermoskan
          If you coffee anymore want, there is the thermos

To complicate matters even more, note that *hoeven* does occur in conditional sentences, provided a negation is present as well (van der Wouden 1994). One can also get litotes in the antecedent of a conditional if an extra negation is present:

(37) a. Als je *niet hoeft* te werken morgen kun je nog wat drinken
          If you not need to work tomorrow can you still something drink
          'If you don't have to work tomorrow you can take another drink'

      b. Waarom ontsla je hem als hij *geen onverdienstelijk* werk aflevert?
          Why fire you him if he not undeserving work produces?
          'If he is doing a good job, why fire him?'

The data involving *onbetuigd* leave no other conclusion than that the conditional construction may, in principle, trigger litotetic effects. Often, however, it doesn't: in the following example the readings 'somewhere between good and bad' and 'neither wise nor unwise' are very hard to get:

(38) a. If this is a *bad* idea, don't do it

      b. If it is *unwise* to take precautions, why bother?

In section 5, I will return to the question why not all occurrences of a negative element in a downward entailing context lead to litotes readings.

4.1.2 Before

Litotes isn't found too often in *before*-clauses, although they are provably downward entailing (Landman 1991) and even anti-additive (Sánchez Valencia *et al.* 1994). The Dutch NPI *ooit* 'ever' is fine in *before*-clauses, whereas *meer* 'anymore' cannot occur there:

(39) a. Voordat je *ooit* naar Frankrijk gaat moet je dit boek lezen
          Before you ever to France go must you this book read
          'You must read this book before you ever go to France'

      b. *Voordat de gasten koffie *meer* willen moeten we maar bijzetten
          Before the guests coffee anymore want must we but more-make

The next example shows that this context may produce litotetic effects in principle too: although it doesn't work with *onverdienstelijk*, it does with *slecht* 'bad' (van der Wouden 1995):

(40) a. *Voordat je *onverdienstelijk* werk levert word je ontslagen
          Before you undeserving work produce are you fired

      b. Voordat Frans *slecht* werk aflevert moet er heel wat gebeuren
          Before Frans produces inferior work, a lot has to happen
          'Frans will never produce work that is below standards'

The *before*-context is averidical in the sense that it follows from sentence (40b) that Frans will not produce inferior work (Sánchez Valencia *et al.* 1994). However, we again find the vagueness in meaning which is typical for litotes constructions: the exact quality of Frans's work is not articulated in this sentence nor can it be calculated from it.

4.1.3 Without

Without-clauses trigger negative polarity items and litotes alike:

(41) a. Karel verliet het gebouw *zonder ook maar* iets te zeggen
          Karel left the building without at all something to say
          'Karel left the building without saying anything'

      b. Karel verliet het gebouw *zonder* zijn pasje te *hoeven* laten zien
          Karel left the building without his badge to need let see
          'Karel left the building without having to show his badge'

      c. We zullen u helpen *zonder* een middel *onbeproefd* te laten
          We will you help without a means untried to leave
          'We will help you with all means'

Many negative polarity items are fine in clauses headed by *zonder* 'without'[8] Certain items that flourish in other litotetic constructions are hard to get in *zonder*-clauses; others, however, seem to create a litotetic effect in this context:

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[8]Certain negative polarity items require that their context possess additional logical properties that *zonder* 'without' lacks, which explains why a class of negative polarity items does not occur in this context cf. Zwarts (1993) and van der Wouden (1994).

(42) a. *?Zonder* een *onverdienstelijk* schilder te zijn krijg je geen prijs
         Without an unmeritorious painter to be get you no prize
         'Without being an unmeritorious painter you'll get no prize'
      b. *Zonder* te willen beweren dat Jan een *slecht* mens is, zou ik toch geen tweedehands auto van hem kopen
         Without to want say that Jan a bad man is, would I no second-hand car of him buy
         'I would say that Jan is a reasonable guy, but I don't want to buy a second hand car from him'

The vagueness of the last sentence (we know that Jan is 'not bad' , but we do not know, and we cannot know, whether he is 'a reasonable guy' or 'an angel') shows that we are once again dealing with litotes here.

In section 5, I will address the question why litotes sometimes doesn't occur in *without* clauses.

4.1.4   Comparatives

Negative polarity items occur in (certain) comparatives as well (Hoeksema 1983; Rullmann 1994) (cf. sentence (27a)). Litotes seems to be possible here as well:

(43)   Het is beter dan niks   It is better than nothing

This last sentence is quite a striking case of litotes without anything negative. Depending on the context in which it is uttered, it may both convey an extremely positive meaning and refer to somewhere in the middle area. In a situation where my friend needs $ 1000, my offer of helping him with a $ 100 dollar bill may elicit this utterance, and then the message is 'well, it's not exactly what I wanted, but it's at least something'. But if my friend wins $ 1000000 in a lottery, the same sentence can be used (with the help of understatement or conventionalized irony) to express the meaning 'it is an erormous amount of money'. In other words, the sentence exhibits exactly the same vagueness which is typical for litotes constructions and which I discussed in section (3.3).[9]

4.2   Extending Horn's hypothesis

If it is indeed the case that litotetic effects may be caused by weak negations, i.e., if the hypothesis in (32) is correct, the explanation of the semantics and pragmatics of litotes needs some revision.

First an approach that is incorrect. Consider a combination such as *hardly doubt*. Given a scale on which *doubt* is an end point, the modification with *hardly* might mean that the term *doubt* is hardly applicable to the situation. That is to say, this analysis boils down to metalinguistic negation (Horn 1989), in which the appropriateness of (parts of) an utterance is denied.

To see that this cannot be the right way of looking at things, take a look at an uncontroversial case of metalinguistic negation, in which the speaker corrects the pronunciation of a proper name (44a), and compare this to an undisputable case of litotes (44b):

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[9]Compare also a sentence such as *His performance was less than ideal*, which can be used to criticize the subject's behavior both mildly ('it was rather good') and severely ('it was terrible').

(44) a. It is not *BernstEEn*, it is *BernstAIn*

b. It is not unwise to take precautions

Firstly, the reference to a grey area in between two extremes that is typical for litotes readings is completely lacking in the case of example (44a): the sentence just cannot be used to express the meaning 'it is somewhere in the grey area between *BernstEEn* and *BernstAIn*.

Note secondly that the intonation in the two examples is different: in (44a) the proper name necessarily bears stress, whereas this negated constituent is unstressed in (44b).[10] If it is stressed in the latter case, one feels the need to offer an alternative, which yields a metalinguistic reading. That reading, however, is radically different from the original one, as is illustrated by the schemes in (45b) and (45d).

(45) a. It is not unwise to take precautions

b.

unwise	. . . .	wise
. . . . . .	not unwise	. . . .

c. It is NOT UNWISE to take precautions, it is downright stupid

d.

stupid	unwise		wise
NOT UNWISE	. . . . . .	. .	. . . .

That means that the litotetic interpretation is different from the one where the presence of metalinguistic negation is beyond doubt. But if the interpretations are different, it cannot be metalinguistic negation in both cases, which implies that metalinguistic negation is not the crucial factor in litotes.

A more fruitful approach may be to attack the problem of why weak negations may trigger litotetic readings from the semantic side. Consider the scale in (45b) and assume we want to find a place for the term *stupid* on it. The result would be something like the following:

(46)

	unwise	more or less wise	wise
stupid	unwise but not stupid	more or less wise	wise

All downward entailing environments, that is, negations weak and strong, allow for reasoning from sets to subsets, i.e., from predicates to more specific predicates. In other words, logic allows the following reasoning:

(47) It is hardly unwise to take precautions
$[\![unwise]\!] \Rightarrow [\![stupid]\!]$

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It is hardly stupid to take precautions

From this, it follows that the interpretation of litotetic constructions involving weak negations such as *hardly* must be unambiguous, in principle. Notwithstanding the fact that the double negation is not on an end point of a scale, logic excludes reasoning away from the extreme, so only the other direction is left over. That is to say: *hardly unwise* is completely comparable to *not unwise* in as far as the two expressions denote the same degree of wisdom.

This state of affairs is depicted in the following illustration:

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[10]Cf. Seuren (1976) on the role of intonation in metalinguistic readings.

	a	stupid	unwise	more or less wise	wise
(48)	b	hardly unwise	. . . . . .	hardly unwise	
	c	. . . .	. . . . . .	hardly unwise	

The a-row just repeats the scale of wisdom already familiar from (46). The b-row shows the interpretations of *hardly unwise* that are logically possible: all intervals of the scale that are not *unwise*. The c-row depicts the inference that is allowed according to (47): because of the fact that *hardly* creates downward entailing, *hardly unwise* entails *hardly stupid*. That leaves only the right hand part of the scale as a possible interpretation. That is to say, the meaning of *hardly unwise* exhibits the well-known vagueness in that it ranges from *more or less wise* to *wise*.

If this is the right approach to litotes under weak negation, an obvious question to ask is: if *not unwise* and *hardly unwise* refer to the same part of the scale of wisdom, that is, if pragmatics causes them to mean the same, why would one ever prefer the more complex form *hardly unwise* over the simple *not unwise*?

The answer to this question will be pragmatic. Consider a linguistic context where litotes is used very often. A "normal" litotes construction such as *not unwise* may become fossilized in such a way that it is hardly appropriate anymore. For example, frequent use of such a combination may have weakened its subtilities; if a pragmatic principle — such as tact (Leech 1980) — asks for a very subtle wording, the expression *hardly unwise* may be useful, although it is more costly and more elaborate than *not unwise*, but also more friendly and less worn out. But these situations are rare, and so are litotes constructions with weak negations such as *hardly*.

Another obvious question to ask is whether this reinterpretation of Horn's theory is also applicable to downward monotonous contexts that are less obviously negative. The answer to this question is positive, and can be derived from the fact that the monotone decreasing contexts are a subset of the nonveridical contexts.[11] In other words, the occurrence of a statement p in a nonveridical context implies *not p*. Now given that, in the cases we are talking about, p is a negative element, this results in a double negation, which is a rather roundabout, or marked, way of saying things. This markedness is noticed by the listener, and (s)he will therefore apply Horn's principle (10), which will lead him/her to a litotes interpretation.

5   Some problematic cases

It is clear from the last section that litotes might occur in all monotone decreasing contexts. Often, however, it doesn't. Why not?

To get a clear view of the situation, compare the distribution of litotes over various downward entailing environments with that of several negative polarity items. Consider the following chart, in which data from the last section (with subtleties put aside) are combined with findings concerning NPIs from van der Wouden (1994:Ch. 1):

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[11]See Zwarts (1994) in this volume.

	item →	*hoeven* 'need'	*ook maar* 'at all'	*meer* 'anymore'	*een beetje* 'a bit'	litotes
(49)	↓ context					
	DE operators	ok	*	ok	*	ok
	conditionals	*	ok	*	ok	ok
	relatives to *alles* ('everything')	ok	ok	*	ok	*
	comparatives	ok	ok	*	ok	ok
	before	ok	ok	*	ok	ok

Clearly, there is no complete parallelism between the distributional pattern of any negative polarity item and that of litotes. That means that either various types of litotes have to be distinguished, or that an explanation for the restricted distribution of litotes should be found elsewhere.

Note firstly that collocational effects play a role.[12] Many litotetic expressions are subject to fossilization or grammaticalization, sometimes even to the degree that the negated element becomes a negative polarity item (Hoeksema 1994). Cases such as *not bad*, *it is beyond doubt* and *weinig mis* 'little wrong' have developed into fixed cliches or idioms.

Apart from that, an explanation of the remaining cases (or even most cases) may be found along the following lines. Horn's analysis of the semantics and pragmatics of litotes, which I follow here, crucially involves scales: an expression such as *not unwise* means what it means because of the fact that a scale can be constructed on which *wise* and *unwise* are end points, and the double negation denotes a grey area in the sense of Sapir (1944) between these end points.

The negated predicate, however, is not the only element that is associated with a scale. Negation or, in general, any downward entailing context, is associated with a scale itself. In the case of simple negation (*not, n't*) this is a trivial scale of truth values on which 0 ('not') and 1 ('true') are end points. This scale is compatible with almost any scale a predicate may be associated with, which explains why litotes with normal negation is the unmarked case (Hoffmann 1987). The weak negations *hardly, scarcely, barely* are associated with the same scale of truth values, so these elements may occur in litotetic constructions with many predicates as well. There exist, however, pragmatic restrictions on litotes with these elements: I discussed these at the end of section 4.2. These restrictions explain why litotes with weak negations is comparatively rare.

Most other downward entailing operators, however, have more semantic content. They are associated with scales that may be incompatible with the scale of the negated predicate. It appears to be reasonable to assume that this scale clash or category mistake is responsible for the fact that one often cannot make a litotes construction by putting some negative predicate in just any downward entailing context.[13] If this is right, this is an explanation for the observation of Jespersen (1924:332) that the two negations in the double negation construction known as litotes have to refer to the same idea. This can be restated as follows:

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[12]Langendoen & Bever (1973) and Aitchison & Bailey (1979) discuss a number of syntactic restrictions on the usage of *not un-* formations. Bolinger (1980) re-interprets these restrictions in pragmatic terms. Perhaps some of them carry over to other types of litotes as well, which would offer a partial explanation of this instance of collocational behavior (cf. van der Wouden (1994:Ch. 3)).

[13]Cf. also van der Wouden (1995) on incompatible scales in the case of polarity items.

(50)   **Hypothesis**   In litotes constructions, the two negations have to be associated with compatible scales.

6   Concluding remarks

Just like other types of multiple negations in natural language, litotes is found in almost any downward entailing context. I have shown that a slight reinterpretation of Horn's analysis of litotes accounts for this in an elegant way. The fact that litotes is traditionally seen as an instance of double negation has various reasons: firstly, negation is the most frequent, prototypical type of monotone decreasing context; secondly, pragmatic reasons may forbid usage of a weak negation in many cases where a normal negative is already effective, thirdly, collocational effects play a role in the sense that many litotes constructions involve rather fixed combinations of lexical elements, and finally, the semantics of downward entailing context and negated expression may be incompatible. These factors notwithstanding, the possibility of litotes in these context cannot be denied. The main conclusion, therefore, must be that it is hardly unwise to extend the study of litotes beyond the cases that involve double negations.

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