A corpus-based analysis of some Neg-intensifying expressions

This paper focuses on the adverb or the adverbial phrases in italics in the following:

(1) Naturally I do not give Mr Labez any tumble whatever.
(2) I am not concerned with fame in the least.
(3) He says that the government should not celebrate religious holidays at all.

They are similar in that (i) they always co-occur with a negative element Neg and semantically intensify it, and (ii) they are syntactically c-commanded by Neg (i.e. they can be called Negative Polarity Items). Despite these common characteristics, however, a closer investigation of mainly the British English Corpora (LOB, BNC, Bank of English, ICE-GB, OED2, etc.) shows different syntactic characteristics as shown in the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Adjacency with Neg Noun</th>
<th>Adjacency with Neg</th>
<th>Separation from Neg</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>whatever</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
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<tr>
<td>in the least</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
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<tr>
<td>at all</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>OK</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Examples of “Adjacency with Neg Noun” and “Adjacency with Neg” are shown in (5) and (6) respectively, while examples of “Separation from Neg” are found in (2) and (3):

(5) a. ... regrettably Liudprand knew nothing whatever about a female pontiff.
    b. It obstructs our knowledge of a great deal of music that would present no difficulty at all if we could only hear it.
(6) a. Considerations of defense, in addition to mobilizing offensive strength, do not in the least imply softness or lack of viability.
    b. Privately, though, Herr Brandt is not at all convinced that the Russians see eye to eye with the East Germans over a change in the status of West Berlin.

This study will make clear that in the least shows the same syntactic behavior as other prepositional phrases consisting of P + any + N, e.g. in any way, in any sense, in any circumstances, by any means and so on. As for the three syntactic characteristics in (4), whatever and in the least have complementary distributions, and at all is a common expression that has all the three syntactic properties. Finally, examining the tree structure scheme employed in the ICE-GB project, this paper will propose a feasible tree structure analysis which explains the syntactic differences observed in (4).