Negative concord in English and Romance: syntax-morphology interface conditions on the expression of negation

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Abstract

In the present dissertation, Negative Concord (NC) is analysed as a syntax-morphology interface phenomenon. NC, which can be defined as the fact that negation is semantically interpreted only once despite being apparently expressed by more than one element in the clause, can be classified as Strict, (1), or Non-Strict, (2), depending on whether n-words must necessarily co-occur with the sentential negative marker in all contexts or not. In Non-Strict NC, only post-verbal n-words must co-occur with the sentential negative marker; pre-verbal n-words, by contrast, cannot occur with the negative marker without yielding a Double Negation reading.

(1) a. *(*Nie) zniszczyłem niczyjej książki
   not destroyed-1.SG.MSC n-person’s book
   ‘I didn’t destroy anybody’s book’

   b. Nikt *(nie) dał Marysi książki
      n-person-NOM not gave Mary-DAT book-GEN
      ‘Nobody gave Mary a/the book’

(2) a. *(No) ha visto a nadie.
    not has seen to n-person
    ‘He hasn’t seen anybody’

   b. Nadie *(no) compró el periódico
      n-person not bought the newspaper
      ‘Nobody bought the newspaper’

Adopting the Minimalist Program and the Distributed Morphology model as the theoretical framework, it is argued that a post-syntactic operation determines the distribution of n-words with respect to the sentential negative marker (SNM) in English, both Standard and Non-Standard, and in a number of Romance languages.

In chapter 1, a number of different approaches to NC are reviewed, showing that all of them try to give an answer to two independent questions: (i) are n-words inherently negative? and (ii) are n-words quantificational? In this dissertation, n-words are assumed to be non-negative indefinites.

In chapter 2, the main tenets of the MP and the DM model are outlined. The MP and DM diverge with respect to the conception of the Lexicon and to the role that is assigned to the Phonetic Form. In a nutshell, DM does not commit to the assumption that the Lexicon contains pairs of sound and meaning. Rather, the relation between
sound and meaning is ultimately decided in the PF branch, where PF operations that repair the syntactic output on the basis of morphological constraints are central.

In chapter 3, it is assumed that Standard English n-words such as nobody, nothing and the like are not inherently negative, nor quantificalional. Rather, they are non-negative indefinites. These assumptions allow us to put forward an analysis of Standard English as having the structure of an NC language. However, two PF operations prevent n-indefinites from co-occurring with the SNM. It is argued that these operations, Obliteration, (4a), and Impoverishment, (4b), are triggered by the existence of a language-particular Filter, (3), that disallows the accidental repetition of negative features in the same Spell-Out domain.

(3) */negative marker/ /polarity morpheme/ if

(i) /negative marker/ and /polarity morpheme/ are adjacent, and

(ii) NEGATIVE MARKER and POLARITY MORPHEME agree.

(4) a. [+Neg] → Ø / {_____ [+polarity: negative]} Spell-Out

b. [+polarity: negative] → [polarity] / {_____ [+Neg]} Spell-Out

Impoverishment can delete the negative value of the polarity feature that an n-inverse carries. Obliteration eliminates the negative marker syntactic terminal from the morphological structure. While Impoverishment results in the insertion of a default form of the any-set, as defined by the Vocabulary that is assumed for Standard English indefinites, Obliteration results in the negative marker escaping lexical insertion.

The expression of Double Negation in Standard English is claimed to follow from the presence of a second negative syntactic terminal in the derivation. It is assumed to be head-adjoined in Focº.

Data from language acquisition showed that English children go through a stage during which they produce n-indefinites with an overt negative marker. This is taken as evidence in favour of the presence of NegP in constructions that involve n-indefinites.

Chapter 4 is devoted to explaining the crucial difference that exists between n-indefinites in Standard English and in Non-Standard varieties of English. As has been often reported in the literature, post-verbal n-indefinites can co-occur with the SNM in Non-Standard varieties of English regardless of whether they implement Strict or Non-Strict NC, as shown in (5a) and (5b) for Strict and Non-Strict NC

\[ \text{(5a)} \quad \text{[+polarity: negative]} \rightarrow \text{[+polarity]} / \{_____ [+Neg]} \text{Spell-Out} \]

\[ \text{(5b)} \quad \text{[+Neg]} \rightarrow \text{Ø} / \{_____ [+polarity: negative]} \text{Spell-Out} \]
respectively. Data from the FRED corpus show that Obliteration (5b) is also attested in those varieties of British English that implement Non-Strict NC as, like Standard English, these are constrained by the Filter that prevents two negative features from being accidentally repeated in the same Spell-Out domain, which is defined according to Phase Theory.

(5) a. And uncle Albert, he wouldn’t do nothing, hardly. (FRED, CON_005)  
b. Nobody’d got nothing, that’s the way it was. (FRED, NTT_005)

The conclusions for Non-Standard British English can be extended to African American English (AAE), which is renowned for its extensive use of NC. It is shown that while AAE mostly implements a system of Strict NC, for some AAE speakers NC is Non-Strict.

Such variability in the type of NC makes the study of negative inversion (NI) in AAE extremely interesting as Obliteration and Impoverishment seem to be suspended in NI constructions even for those speakers with a system of Non-Strict NC. This is unexpected, as the n-indefinite and the negative marker are in the same Spell-Out domain.

(6) a. Doesn’t nobody really know that it’s a God, you know. Larry H., 15, Jets  
b. Ain’t no white cop gonna put his hands on me! Jesse H., 16, Jets

(Labov 1972a: 187-188)

Finally, in chapter 5, a number of Romance languages are also considered. For those which implement Non-Strict NC (e.g. Italian and Spanish among others), it is argued that Obliteration applies when n-words occur pre-verbally, as they are in the same Spell-Out domain as the SNM. Post-verbal n-words, by contrast, co-occur with the SNM due to the fact that negation is merged on top of TP in Romance Null Subject Languages.

Like for English and French, some dialectal and diachronic data of Spanish are taken as evidence in favour of an Obliteration analysis of the negative marker. Basque Spanish and Old Spanish both show that it is possible for pre-verbal n-words to co-occur with the negative marker. Double Negation readings are also analysed as involving an extra negative operator in Focus.

In this chapter, it is shown that the case of Standard French bears striking similarities with Standard English. Pas, which is assumed to be the SNM, cannot co-occur with n-indefinites in any contexts, and is affected by Obliteration. It is argued
that a uniform analysis of Standard French and Standard English is possible, which explains the similarities between the two languages, as well as the differences between Standard French and other Romance languages.

(7) a. Jean *(n’) a (*pas) vu personne                    (French)
     Jean  ne  has not  seen  n-person
     ‘Jean hasn’t seen anybody’

b. Personne *(n’) est (*pas) venu
     n-person  ne  is not  come
     ‘Noone came’

(Rowlett 1998: 178 and 182)

Strict NC languages (e.g. Romanian) do not display the effects of PF-operations because they are not sensitive to the Filter that prevents two negative features from accidentally occurring in the same Spell-Out domain. Catalan, by contrast, is shown to be a case of intra-speaker variability: it is not easy to classify it as either a Strict or a Non-Strict NC language because the negative marker is optional.

In general lines, it is assumed that a connection exists between the interpretability vs. non-interpretability of the SNM, which yields the Non-Strict vs. Strict NC distinction (Zeijjistra 2004) and obedience to the Filter. It is speculated that only Non-Strict NC languages are constrained by the Filter because Obliterated interpretable material can be recovered when co-occurring with identical uninterpretable features.