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

The study of negation and Negative Concord, which is thoroughly discussed in chapter 1, has been of interest to researchers of the most diverse disciplines for centuries. In the particular field of linguistics, recent attempts have been made to explain the intricacies of NC by scrutinising the interfaces: some scholars have explored the possibility that the expression of negation and NC is a syntax-semantics interface phenomenon, some others have advocated for negation being a syntax-phonology interface product.

The purpose of the present dissertation is to explore yet another possibility: the phenomenon of NC across (many) languages can be accounted for by looking at the syntax-morphology interface. Such an approach is possible within Distributed Morphology, a generative model that assumes the relation between syntax and phonology to be direct. Any mismatches between syntax and the PF representation of a syntactic output are attributable to particular PF operations that determine the final phonological realisation of a given syntactic terminal.

By assuming that Phase Theory (Chomsky 2001, 2005) regulates what and when is sent to the interfaces after syntax has assembled a series of morphemes, I attempt to provide a uniform account of NC and the expression of negation in Standard English, Non-Standard varieties of English and a number of Romance languages. Two main assumptions are at the heart of the hypothesis that unfolds throughout six chapters.

First, n-indefinites / n-words (i.e. the elements that participate in NC constructions), are non-negative in the sense that they do not contribute negative meaning on their own. In the particular case of Standard English, indefinites of the any-set and those like nobody or nothing, which display overt negative morphology, are related in that they share most of their featural characterisation. It is assumed that the set of any-words are specified as polarity items, while nobody, nothing and the like are negative polarity items. This is why the former can occur in a wider range of contexts than the latter.

Second, it is argued that certain languages contain a Filter that prevents the co-occurrence of two negative features, which are marked, in the same Spell-Out domain. The latter is defined according to Phase Theory.

To ensure compliance with the Filter, two haplology rules are claimed to be operative to a different extent in the languages considered in this dissertation. These haplology rules come in the form of two basic PF operations, known as Obliteration and Impoverishment, which repair the syntactic output when it violates the Filter.

In the particular case of n-words in Standard English, Non-Standard varieties of English and Romance, Obliteration is responsible for the removal from the
morphological component of the syntactic terminal that would eventually be Spelled-Out as the sentential negative marker. Such an operation prevents two negative features from being morphophonologically realised in a particular context. Impoverishment, on the other hand, deletes just a feature of a particular syntactic terminal in a given structural configuration, which results in the insertion of a default form.

As argued in chapter 3, the combination of a three-way system of indefinites and the two PF operations that are claimed to be involved in the expression of negation in a number of languages hide the NC-character of Standard English. Likewise, as discussed in chapter 4, the fact that n-indefinites do not necessarily raise to Spec, NegP in Non-Standard varieties of English, together with the Vocabulary Items of English n-indefinites and the aforementioned PF rules account for the differences, as well as the similarities between Standard and Non-Standard English.

In fact, the present proposal also allows us to capture the striking similarities between the expression of negation in Standard English and Standard French, a Romance language. This is a welcome result, for Standard French n-words display a puzzling distribution that sets them apart from other Romance n-words. However, their behaviour is easy to accommodate as a result of the syntax-morphology interaction.

In chapter 5, Obliteration is shown to be responsible for a number of intriguing asymmetries in the distribution of n-words in Romance. Besides, it is also claimed that while the effects of Impoverishment are not generally observed in the morphology of Romance n-words, they are indeed attested in a particular construction in Spanish.

To end up, let us stress that the use of NC in (Non-Standard) English is still rather stigmatised and often leads to the assumption that the speaker does not use ‘proper’ English. It is sometimes argued that the constructions where NC is observed violate a basic rule of logic which establishes that two negatives make a positive.

However, in Catalan—and in many other natural languages such as Spanish, Italian or Czech, just to name a few—NC is perfectly grammatical. Are we to assume that the rules of logic are suspended in several languages of the world?

Implausible as this conclusion may seem, it has had to be dismissed through linguistic research in different occasions. The present dissertation is yet another attempt to show that dialect syntax is a genuine object of study that can be described, compared and systematised on a par with the grammar of Standard languages. As Trudgill (1990: 79) puts it,

‘...all dialects of English are grammatical. They all have their individual rules of grammar and their grammatical structures.’
Finally, apart from characterising NC in various languages as resulting from the interplay of syntax and morphology, this piece of research also has a more general implicit goal, which is showing that it is possible to account for formal aspects of language variation in generativist models. In other words, the Minimalist Program (MP) (Chomsky 1992, 1995, 2000, 2001 and 2005), and the Distributed Morphology (DM) model (Halle and Marantz 1993, Embick and Noyer 2007), offer a suitable formal apparatus to characterise the syntactic and morphological mechanisms that make NC possible in the languages / varieties under study.

The dissertation is organised as follows: chapter 1 defines the phenomenon of NC and how n-words have been semantically and quantificationally characterised in the literature. Chapter 2 outlines the main assumptions in the MP and DM, while chapter 3 describes and analyses the expression of negation (and NC) in Standard English. In chapter 4, Non-Standard British English corpus data on NC are presented and analysed in depth, stressing the similarities and differences with respect to the distribution of n-indefinites in Standard English. Chapter 5 extends the analysis in chapter 4 to Romance. The result is an overarching account of NC across languages that relates this phenomenon to language-particular Spell-Out rules. Chapter 6 contains the main conclusions of this piece of research.