

Non-negative negations in Catalan. A problem for compositionality?

Prince Charming: You! You can't lie... Where is Shrek?

Pinocchio: Well... I don't know where he's not

PC: You don't know where Shrek is...

P: On the contrary...

PC: So you do know where he is...

P: I possibly more or less not definitely reject the idea that I undeniably do or do not know where he shouldn't possibly be... if that indeed wasn't where he isn't.

Shrek the Third

1. One item or two? That is the question.

In (1), there are two *different* sentences in Catalan:

- (1) a. Tenia por que **no** escollissin un nou director.
I.had fear that NEG they.elected.SJV a new director
I was afraid that a new director wasn't elected
- b. Tenia por que **no** escollissin un nou director.
I.had fear that NEG they.elected.SJV a new director
I was afraid that a new director would be elected

In (1a), the negative item *no* is interpreted as a real negation. You can continue the sentence by saying, “*but fortunately they finally did elect one*”. Contrarily, the negative item in (1b) is not interpreted as a negation. You can continue the sentence by saying, “*but I am relieved finally they didn't*”. That means that the presence of the negative item in (b) does not affect the interpretation of the sentence. Actually, if we omitted the negative item, the meaning of the sentence would be the same:

- (2) a. Tenia por que escollissin un nou director.
I.had fear that they.elected.SJV new director
I was afraid that a new director would be elected

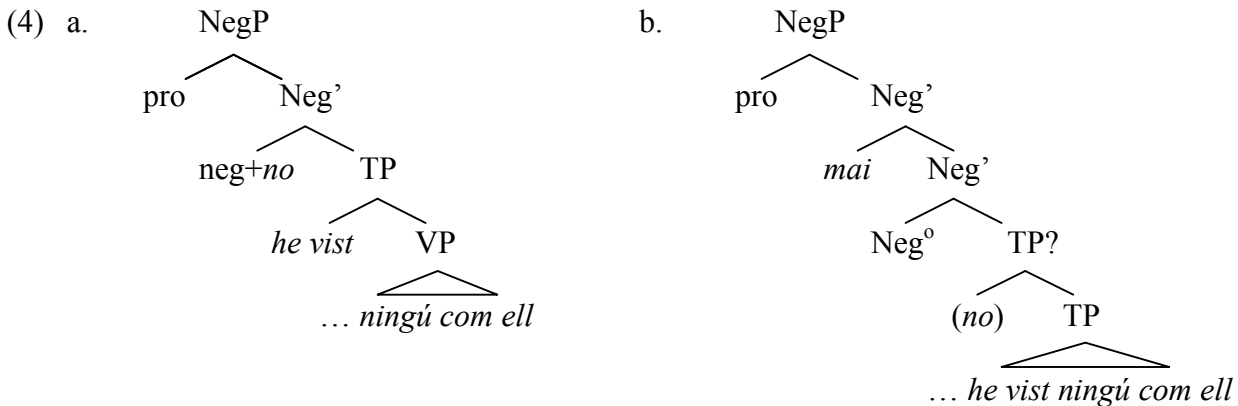
It is then crystal clear that the presence of the negative item is optional. Its presence or absence does not change the compositional interpretation of the sentence. We are in front of a clear case of expletive negation (EN).

But the question then is, how is it that what seems to be the same item, has a so different interpretation? How can we have an element that is not interpreted? Is this not a problem for the principle of semantic compositionality, which states that the meaning of a whole sentence is a function of the meaning of its component parts, and the way they are put together? This is the single question I examine in this squib.

2. First attempt: only one item.

A possible solution to this (apparent?) problem for compositionality is to assume that we only have one negative item in Catalan, but that it is negative or non-negative in function of how it is licensed within the sentence. According to Ladusaw (1992), the existence of negative concord (NC) is evidence in favor of conceiving negative items as inherently non-negative. Rather, they are indefinites in the sense of Heim (1982): they contribute lexical meaning and a variable, but lack quantificational force, and have thus to be bound by some operator, which occupies the head of a NegP. If a negative item adjoins to that head, or is in its specifier, it becomes a real negation, i.e. a negative quantifier: a negative item in the adjunction case, and a truly negative n-word in the latter. If, contrarily, the negative item is c-commanded by the operator in Neg⁰, it becomes a non-negative item. I show that difference in (3), and their syntactic (minimalist) representation in (4):

- (3) a. **No** he vist **ningú** com ell
 NEG I.have seen nobody like he.NOM
I haven't seen anybody like him
 b. **Mai (no)** he vist **ningú** com ell
 never (NEG) I.have nobody like he.NOM
I have never seen anybody like him



Following Ladusaw (1992: 257), we consider that the whole sentence is a Neg(ative) P(hrase), because negation is the main operator of the proposition expressed. Notice further that in (4a), the negative item *no* is incorporated to the negative operator in the head of NegP, and thus ends up being a real negation. The lower n-word *ningú* ‘nobody’ is c-commanded by the negative operator, and it is thus an NPI (i.e. it does not receive a negative interpretation). In (4b), we see how the negative word *mai* ‘never’ c-commands the head position, and it is interpreted negatively. Note also that the optional EN *no* is c-commanded by the operator, just as the lower NPI *ningú*, and therefore these two items are not negative.

As further support for the conclusion that we are dealing with one single item, notice how even though (3a) and (3b) only differ for the presence of the sentence initial negative adverb *mai* ‘never’ in (3b), that presence affects the interpretation of the negative item in both sentences, a real negation in the former, an EN in the latter. Such thing suggests that those items are underspecified for quantificational force, and their function is to check the [neg] features of the silent operator. If the checking takes place in a Spec-Head relationship or by head-adjunction, they gain quantifica-

tional force. If, on the contrary, they do the checking in a Probe-Goal configuration, they do not gain quantificational force and then remain as variables in need of a c-commanding binder.

This first theory seems to be a very neat and parsimonious explanation for the fact that we can interpret differently the sentences in (1), repeated:

- (1) a. Tenia por que **no** escollissin un nou director.
I.had fear that NEG they.elected.SJV a new director
I was afraid that a new director wasn't elected
- b. Tenia por que **no** escollissin un nou director.
I.had fear that NEG they.elected.SJV a new director
I was afraid that a new director would be elected

The difference between both sentences is due to the different position the negative item *no*, occupies in both sentences: incorporated to the silent operator in the head of NegP in (1a), and c-commanded by that operator in (1b). Such a proposal might also explain the presence of a slight prosodic emphasis in the *no* in (1a) with respect to (1b). The former is a head, while the second is an adjunct. However, I think this proposal has some problems that render it problematic.

3. Some problems for the first attempt.

The first problem concerns the fact that NPIs in Catalan always need a licenser, as showed by the sentences in (5), which are negations of the sentences in (3):

- (5) a. *He vist **ningú** com ell
I.have seen nobody like he.NOM
Intended: *I have seen somebody like him*
- b. *Alguna vegada (**no**) he vist **ningú** com ell
Some time (NEG) I.have nobody like he.NOM
Intended: *I have sometimes seen somebody like him*

However, the licenser in Catalan does not always need to be negation (*cf.* Vázquez-Rojas & Martín 2007 for details). In the following sentences, the absence of a negative meaning does not prevent the NPI *res* 'nothing' to be licensed:

- (6) a. Dubto que en Joan faci **res** per millorar.
I.doubt that the John he.do.SJV nothing for improve.INF
I doubt that John would do anything to improve
- b. Són massa testarruts per fer **res**.
they.are too-much stubborn for do.INF nothing
They are too stubborn to do anything

The problem is then whether we have to consider this sentence a NegP. Must we argue that the negative operator is there, for the NPIs to be licensed even though these sentences are not negative? It does not seem a good solution. Espinal (2000) proposes a way out of this problem by saying that the feature that licenses expletive negations as those in (6) is not negation (i.e. downward entailingness, anti-veridicality, or any other proposal), but rather non-veridicality, a property that the under-

lined items in (6) do have. If we do that move, it seems that we can maintain the proposal of a single negative item, licensed under different syntactic conditions.

However, such proposal rapidly runs into problems. If this were the case, we would expect any expletive negation to be licensed in any non-veridical context (Op(p) \neg \rightarrow p). But this is far from being true. Though antecedents of conditionals (7), and yes/no questions (8) provide non-veridical contexts that do license expletive n-words, the negative item *no* is not licensed, and has to be interpreted as a real negation. Witness:

- (7) a. Aquí, si vols anar **enlloc** has de tenir cotxe
 here if you.want go.INF nowhere you.have of have.INF car
Here, if you want to go anywhere you need a car
- b. *Aquí si **no** vols anar a classe has d'avisar al professor
 here if NEG you.want go.INF you.have of warn.INF the instructor
 Intended: *Here, if you want to go to class you have to prevent the instructor*
 (possible with negative meaning: If you don't want to go to class, you have to prevent the instructor)
- (8) a. Vols que et porti **res**?
 You.want that you.ACC I.bring nothing
Do you want me to bring you anything?
- b. *Vols que **no** et porti una tassa de cafè?
 you.want that NEG you.ACC I.bring a cup of coffee
 Intended: *Do you want me to bring you anything?*
 (possible with negative meaning: do you want me to NOT bring you a cup of coffee?)

A final problem is related to the fact that sometimes a clear case of EN can license an n-word in its domain, as we see in (9a):

- (9) a. Tinc por que *(**no**) vingui **ningú** mentre som fora i ens enxampi
 I.have fear that NEG comes.SJV nobody while we.are away and us.ACC catch
I'm worried someone could come while we're gone and catch us
- b. Tinc por que (**no**) vingui en Joan mentre som fora i ens enxampi
 I.have fear that NEG (s)he.come.SJV the John while we.are away and us.ACC catch
I'm worried John could come while we're gone and catch us

(9a) poses a big problem for the account with one single negation reviewed above. The only interpretation available for *no* in (9a) is as EN, in parallel with the one in (9b). EN needs of course a licenser, and that is provided by the complex verb *tinc por* 'I'm worried' in both (9a) and (9b). Strangely enough, in (9a) the licenser *tinc por* 'I'm worried' is not able to license the lowest n-word *ningú* 'nobody' in its domain. This is quite surprising, because in principle it should be able, according to the theory just reviewed. Moreover, it is still more surprising that for (9a) to be grammatical, we need to license the lowest NPI by means of the EN, an element which does not receive interpretation, and it is of course neither non-veridical nor anti-veridical. If we only had one kind of negation, how could we possibly explain this?

As I am going to show in the following section, all these problems can be solved if we consider that instead of only having one single negation, we have two.

(i) If $X^0 = \text{Neg}^0$, it has anti-veridical properties, which remember that are stronger than mere non-veridical properties (anti-veridicality \subseteq non-veridicality). Then, if the lower Neg is a SNI, with inherent quantificational force and anti-veridical properties on its own, nothing happens, and it is interpreted in its place. This explain why there are cases where under a negative head with anti-veridical features, a negation can still be fully negative, as we see in (11):

- (11) *No* és cert que *no* hagi vingut *mai*
 NEG it.is true that NEG I.have.SJV come never
It isn't true that I haven't ever come (It is true that I do have come at least once)

In (11), the second *no* is under the scope of the first *no*: we have a double negative reading, and it is impossible an EN reading. Additional evidence that the second *no* is strong is the fact that its absence leads to positive interpretation of the embedded sentence: *No és cert que hagi vingut mai* (= it is true that I have never come).

(ii) If the higher $X^0 = \text{Neg}^0$ and the lower Neg is a WNI, then two things happen: first, the higher X^0 binds the variable contributed by the WNI; and second, the anti-veridical features of the higher Neg^0 attract the negative feature of the lower, which thus becomes non-negative. In that case, we have a standard case of NC. This was the case of for example (3a), repeated here:

- (3) a. *No* he vist *ningú* com ell
 NEG I.have seen nobody like he.NOM
I haven't seen anybody like him
 b. [_{NegP} No [_{TP} he vist [_{NegP} ningú com ell]]]

(iii) the higher $X^0 \neq \text{Neg}^0$, and has non-veridical features, and the lower Neg is a SNI. If the lower head is a SNI, it has anti-veridical features. Then, it is interpreted as a true negation. This explains something the older theory was unable to explain, namely why under the same kind of non-veridical context some expletive negations (n-words) can be licensed but others cannot. In (7a) we have a WNI, whereas in (7b) we have a SNI, which can only be interpreted negatively:

- (7) a. Aquí, si vols anar *enlloc* has de tenir cotxe
 here if you.want go.INF nowhere you.have of have.INF car
Here, if you want to go anywhere you need a car
 b. *Aquí si *no* vols anar a classe has d'avisar al professor
 here if NEG you.want go.INF you.have of warn.INF the instructor
 Intended: *Here, if you want to go to class you have to prevent the instructor*

(iv) Finally, the case where the higher $X^0 \neq \text{Neg}^0$, but has non-veridical features, and the lower Neg is a WNI. In this case, again the higher Neg binds the variable contributed by the WNI, and it attracts the negative meaning of the lower Neg. This can yield two possibilities: if the lower Neg is the item *no* it can be erased or not, without loss of information, because the only information it can add its superfluous. This is a standard case of EN.

- (1) b. Tenia por que *no* escollissin un nou director.
 I.had fear that NEG they.elected.SJV a new director
I was afraid that a new director would be elected

On the other hand, if the lower Neg is a n-word, it still is an expletive negation, but since the lexical meaning they have is not only negation, then they cannot be erased. This is the case of (6a):

- (6) a. *Dubto* que en Joan faci **(res)* per millorar.
 I.doubt that the John he.do.SJV nothing for improve.INF
I doubt that John would do anything to improve

It is also important to notice that if no interaction of veridicality properties, and negation takes place, and there is a single negative element in the sentence, it can only be a SNI. If it is a WNI, this yields ungrammaticality, as in (5) above, repeated:

- (5) a. *He vist ningú com ell
 I.have seen nobody like he.NOM
 Intended: *I have seen somebody like him*
 b. *Alguna vegada (no) he vist ningú com ell
 Some time (NEG) I.have nobody like he.NOM
 Intended: *I have sometimes seen somebody like him*

Indeed, we want our new theory to explain not only the facts the older was unable to explain, but also the ones the older was able to explain. It is easy to see that this is so. For example, if there are two different types of negative elements, we expect that there will be contexts where the same superficial element will be interpreted as negative sometimes, and as non-negative some other times. This is exactly what we saw in our examples in (1):

As final support for the existence of two kinds of negative items, I want to introduce the fact that French shows an overt counterpart of these two types of negation.

As in Catalan, n-words in French are for the most part identical in their negative and non-negative interpretation, as for example in (15):

- (15) a. *Personne n'a rien* vu
 nobody neg has nothing seen
Nobody has seen anything
 b. *Rien* est fait
 Nothing is done
Nothing is done
 c. Si tu veux *rien*, dis-le-moi
 if you want nothing, tell-it-to.me
If you want anything, tell me

However, it is widely assumed that in (colloquial) French, the real negative element is *pas*. The also negative element *ne* can be in a sentence or not without loss of meaning, and hence it is an EN:

- (12) a. J'ai pas mangé du chocolat
 I have neg eaten of chocolate
I haven't eaten chocolate
 b. Je n'ai pas mangé du chocolat
 I neg have neg eaten of chocolate
 I haven't eaten chocolate

The status of *ne* as an EN is doubtless, as evidenced by (14), French version of our sentences in (1):

- (14) a. J'étais inquiet qu'ils (ne) choisissent un nouveau président
 I was worried that they neg choose.sjv a new president
I was worried they would choose a new president
- b. J'étais inquiet qu'ils ne choisissent pas un nouveau président
 I was worried that they neg choose.sjv neg a new president
I was worried they wouldn't choose a new president

As in Catalan, if a single negative item is involved in those cases, how do we explain this difference? My claim, then, is that this French case is an overt counterpart of the same difference I am advocating for in Catalan, i.e. two different kinds of negative items. Moreover, this case, where an expletive negation licenses NPIs might open the door to an understanding of the problematic case I presented in (9a):

- (9) a. Tinc por que *(no) vingui ningú mentre som fora i ens enxampi
 I.have fear that NEG comes.SJV nobody while we.are away and us.ACC catch
I'm worried someone could come while we're gone and catch us

The actual state of my knowledge, however, may not be enough to account for this licensing by an expletive negation. I leave it then as a subject of further research. A possible way to follow, though, is suggested by den Dikken (2005), and Irwin (2007) who talk about what they call respectively *secondary triggering*, or *parasitic licensing*. The topic seems promising, and of course would deserve another squib or paper.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to answer to one single question: if what seems to be a single kind of negative elements behaves differently under same contexts, can we conclude that there are two items, instead of only one? Such a question is important, because it involves what I think is the most important principle of formal semantics: the principle of compositionality. To deal with that problem, I have put forward a theory building on Ladusaw (1992) and Espinal (2000) where I propose two kinds of negative items: strong negative items and weak negative items. This theory with two kinds of negative items does to my mind a longer way than the only-one-single-item one. Not only does it deal with the same problems the latter does, it also goes beyond, to problems the latter was unable to cover. My theory then saves compositionality in cases of non-negative negation, because everything derives from the features of the lexical items involved in the syntactic-semantic computation. Indeed, having two different kinds of item for what seems to be a surface simple one should be avoided by standard scientific practice, such as Ockham's Razor. Though I admit that this is true, and even desirable, what I deny is that these two kinds of item are the same, but only similar at a very superficial level, as facts concerning intonation seem to suggest. It is then high time that linguists in general, especially syntacticians and semanticists, base its work in more than mere segmental content, and look also at the prosody. If we do that, we see that the matter of empirical coverage of both theories is not the same, and in that, I think two items clearly cover more than only one.

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