



7th International Conference on Corpus Linguistics: Current Work in Corpus Linguistics: Working with Traditionally-conceived Corpora and Beyond (CILC 2015)

The Particular Negative: a Distributional Study on Some Aspects of Meaning Contradicting Logical Equivalence

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to reflect upon some aspects of meaning related to two different ways of expressing the same proposition type in English. The proposition type under discussion is the particular negative, and it is accounted for as introduced by either *not all* or *some* followed by a verbal negation. Two statements serving as examples of the two expressions are:

1- Not all birds can fly;

2- Some birds cannot fly.

The theoretical assumption underlying this paper is that two logically equivalent quantified expressions might not be equivalent from certain semantic and conversational points of view, and that, conversely, two expressions that are equivalent from a conversational point of view might not be equivalent from a logical one. The research has been carried out by means of a distributional study: by exploring the contexts of occurrence of our two particular negative expressions throughout the ukWaC corpus we have detected some systematic use and aspects of meaning specific to each of them.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Universidad de Valladolid, Facultad de Comercio.

Keywords: negation; quantifiers; logical equivalence; context analysis; distributional evidence.

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1. Introduction

The possible conversational equivalence between the two subcontraries of the traditional square of opposition – the particular affirmative and the particular negative – has been pointed out by various scholars over the last century. Focusing on the particular negative only, let us state the problem as follows: can two different expressions belonging to this category convey different meanings if they are expressed through different kinds of negation? In other words, can expressions which are supposed to be logically equivalent differ from a conversational point of view? If they can, some triggering factors might help find out the differences: the context of the conversation, the epistemic qualifications of the speaker and/or the listener, and the kind of negation which is used, with particular regard to the position of the negative.

2. Logical Equivalence and the Square of Opposition

In the traditional square of opposition, each vertex represents one of the four propositions of the system of Aristotelian logic. The four proposition types - namely, the universal affirmative (A), the universal negative (E), the particular affirmative (I) and the particular negative (O) - are interrelated as shown in Figure 1:

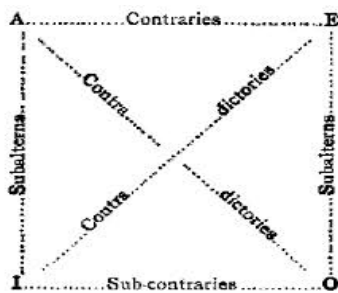


Fig. 1: The Square of Opposition

The four proposition types related to each vertex involve the use of quantifiers (words like *all*, *every*, *no*, *some*). Following are example-statements for each type:

- A – All birds can fly
- E – No birds can fly
- I – Some birds can fly
- O – Not all birds can fly

With regard to the last example, the statement relative to vertex O – which includes an outer negation – could also be rewritten as *some birds cannot fly*, a sentence which, instead, includes an inner negation; in the latter case, the logical opposition between the two subcontraries – I and O – is enhanced.

However, from a conversational point of view, such opposition might disappear, and the O and I vertex may thus become one single vertex of a triangle.

2.1. The Conjunction of Subcontraries

By using *some* in a sentence like *some birds can fly* one might mean either *some at least* or *some but not all*. Degen (2013: 2) defines the first interpretation as semantic and the second as pragmatic: if the speaker uses *some* instead of a stronger alternative, s/he does so for a reason. In 1924, the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen had already made a distinction between the two different interpretations related to *some*: 'the ordinary meaning it has in natural

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