Description versus rejection in the analysis of negation: Evidence from Romanian and English

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Abstract

Found at the interface between cognition, language and logic, this paper discusses the mental representation of negation in natural language. Following the framework provided by Relevance Theory, it suggests that different types of negation represent actualizations of either the descriptive or the metarepresentational use. An account of descriptive negation and metarepresentational negation is offered based on the logical, semantic and pragmatic relations between the negative utterance and its formal affirmative correspondent, on the one hand, and semantic affirmative correspondent, on the other. Metarepresentational negation is defined as the rejection of a formal affirmative correspondent, always an instance of a second-order interpretation while descriptive negation represents the assertion of a negative content in the form of a semantic affirmative correspondent, always an instance of a first-order interpretation. This investigation is supported by a large corpus analysis represented by authentic Romanian and English data.
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1. Introduction

Characterised by multi-functionality, negation is associated with different interpretations: as a *logical connective*, it has a wide scope, reversing the truth value of a proposition *p* in *p* (Horn and Wansing, 2015), at the *linguistic level*, it represents a narrow scope constituent negation (Moeschler, 2013), while its *processing* is said to be non-incremental, involving a two-step interpretation (Kaup et al., 2007) and activating different regions in the brain (Tettamanti et al., 2008). That it is not a homogeneous phenomenon is also indicated by the variety of negative utterances that contribute differently to meaning identification and interpretation. For instance, a negative utterance can be used alone or can be followed by a follow-up clause and the relation between negation and its positive follow-up can be of downward or upward nature, as illustrated by the following examples:

(1) He is not the president of the party anymore.
(2) I have not promoted him.
(3) She is not beautiful; she is gorgeous.
(4) She is not beautiful but ugly.
(5) She is not driving but walking.

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The mental operations triggered when computing these negative utterances and their constitutive elements as well as the argumentative impact they have on the hearers' cognitive environment play an important role in the correct interpretation of the negative utterances. Following the research initiated in Albu (2012a,b), the aim of this paper is to discuss the mental structure and interpretation of such negative utterances in natural language. The claim is that these negative utterances can be accounted for in terms of the dichotomy between 'descriptive and interpretive use' developed in Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1995) and complemented by studies on the phenomenon of metarepresentation (Sperber, 2000; Wilson, 2000). In light of these criteria, the cognitive and communicative behaviour of *descriptive negation* (DN) and *metarepresentational negation* (MetNeg) will be discussed. This study is based on the premise that DN and MetNeg represent two distinct negative types that have predetermined mental structures, i.e. they are the output of particular cognitive mechanisms. On the contrary, despite their predetermined mental structure, they can have multiple context-dependent roles and functions in accordance with the speaker's communicative goals.

A metarepresentation-based approach will set clear criteria of delimitation between DN and MetNeg in terms of what inferences are triggered and what cognitive effects are yielded. The theoretical proposal is supported by a large corpus analysis provided by authentic Romanian[1] and English[2] political discourses. The prototypical way of negating the sentence in Romanian is by means of a negative morpheme in pre-verbal position, i.e. *nu* (Eng. *not*) while in English negation is formed by adding the free-standing adverb *not* or the bound inflectional form *n't* after an auxiliary verb. Although Romanian and English display different structural properties, the comparative perspective on two different languages attempts to indicate which features are stable cross-linguistically and which features are language specific. The contextual approach will highlight the elements that triggered negation in the first place and emphasize its constitutive elements in order to offer a more comprehensive explanation of how the interpretation of negation is reached in natural language.

For the purposes of the argument, I shall proceed as follows. In section 2 a brief overview on previous accounts on negation will be offered, with an emphasis on the dichotomy between descriptive and metalinguistic negation. In the next section, the theoretical framework used is discussed, the focus being on the distinction between the descriptive and interpretive use. Based on the singular square of opposition and on the contextual data analysis, in section 4 the logical, semantic and pragmatic properties of the two possible positive correspondents of a negative utterance: the formal affirmative correspondent and the semantic affirmative correspondent are presented. In section 5 I elaborate on two working hypotheses, according to which DN is the actualization of the descriptive use and MetNeg is the actualization of the metarepresentational use and claim that the activation and rejection of a formal affirmative correspondent represents an essential condition for MetNeg. In contrast, DN represents the assertion of a negative content, always a first-order interpretation. Conclusions will be drawn in the last section.

2. Previous accounts on negation

There are different classifications of negation based on various criteria suggested in the literature. Russel (1905) distinguishes between *external* vs. *internal* negation. External negation is said to have in its scope a full logical proposition, containing no free variables, while internal negation takes in its scope a propositional function, i.e. a nonpropositional form containing free variables (cf. Moeschler, 2010). Jespersen (1917) suggests *nexal* vs. *special negation* defined in terms of position of negative morpheme. Nexal negation is the negation of the proposition corresponding to the given nexus, which is defined as ''a combination of a predicate element with the arguments that it is predicated of'' (cf. McCawley, 1995). Special negation includes: 'incorporated negatives', contrastive negation and the negation in derived words, such as unhappy, impossible, disorder. Klima (1964) differentiates between *sentential vs. constituent negation*, i.e. negation taking action on the sentence as a whole vs. on a constituent, respectively. This syntactic classification has more semantic correlations. First, it can correspond to the distinction between *wide* vs. *narrow-scope*, i.e. taking scope over the entire sentence or over a constituent. Second, syntactic sentential negation is said to semantically express a *contradictory* proposition while constituent negation gives a *contrary* proposition (cf. Borschev et al., 2005).

Another illustration of the multiple interpretations negation can have is represented by the dichotomy between 'descriptive negation' (DN) and 'metalinguistic negation' (MN) (Carston, 1996, 1999; Ducrot, 1972, 1984; Horn, 1985, 1989/2001; Moeschler, 1993, 1997, 2010, 2013, to name but a few). Distinct views were advocated, some of them defending the view that the distinction between DN and MN is rather a distinction between a truth conditional operator vs. a metalinguistic one (Horn, 1985, 1989). In contrast, there are views according to which there is no ambiguity at the level of the negative operator and the different uses of negation are the consequence of the humans' cognitive ability for metarepresentation (Carston, 1996, 1999; Noh, 2000).

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[1] The Romanian corpus of data is collected from the websites of different politicians and political parties: http://www.psd.ro/transcripte.php and http://www.crinantonescu.ro/Public/cat/14/Noutati.html.
[2] The English data are collected from the UK Parliament website.