

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of Pragmatics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

Prosody and the meanings of English negative indefinites

Frances Blanchette*, Marianna Nadeu

Penn State, United States



ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 September 2017

Received in revised form 19 March 2018

Accepted 20 March 2018

Keywords:

Double negation

Negative concord

Prosody

Denial negation

Standard English

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the acoustic correlates of single and Double Negation (DN) readings of English negative indefinites in question–answer pairs. Productions of four negative words (*no one*, *nobody*, *nothing*, and *nowhere*) were elicited from 20 native English speakers as responses to negative questions such as “What didn’t you eat?” in contexts designed to generate either a single negation reading or a logically affirmative DN reading. A control condition with no negation in the question was employed for comparison. A verification question following each item determined whether tokens were interpreted as expected and, therefore, produced with the target interpretation. Statistical analysis of the f_0 curves revealed a significant difference: DN is associated with a higher fundamental frequency than single negation. In contrast, the single negative and control conditions were not significantly different with respect to f_0 . Analysis of the verification question responses showed significant differences between all three conditions (Control > DN > single negation), suggesting that single negation is more difficult to interpret than DN as a response to a negative question. The results are compared with previous work on Romance, and we demonstrate how English behaves like a prototypical Negative Concord language in that DN is the prosodically marked form.

© 2018 Published by Elsevier B.V.

1. Introduction

Consider the following context: A professor assigns a student a lengthy and challenging set of readings, but later realizes the assignment may have been too difficult. They meet, and the dialogue in (1) ensues.

- (1) Professor: So, what didn't you read?
Student: Nothing.

The negative indefinite *nothing* in (1) is ambiguous between a single and a double negation reading. On the double negation (DN) reading, *nothing* means ‘everything’: The student implies that, contrary to expectation, there is nothing she did not read. On the single negation reading, *nothing* simply means ‘nothing’: The student confirms the professor’s expectation and implies that in fact she did none of the assigned reading.

Previous studies have shown that, under certain pragmatic and prosodic conditions, DN readings exist in the prototypical Negative Concord (NC) languages. [Espinal and Prieto \(2011\)](#) demonstrate how Catalan speakers reliably associate DN readings

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: fbk1@psu.edu (F. Blanchette).

with negative words used as responses to negative questions as in (1) when pronounced with a contradictory intonation contour (Lieberman and Sag, 1974). Espinal et al. (2016) examine Spanish and Catalan, showing that manipulations in both syntax and prosody can independently and reliably yield DN interpretations in these languages, and Déprez and Yeaton (to appear) find similar results for French. Prieto et al. (2013) show how gesture works in conjunction with prosody to enhance the accessibility of DN readings in Spanish and Catalan.

The current study builds on previous experimental findings for prototypical NC languages to examine the acoustic correlates of DN readings in English of negative indefinites in negative question–answer pairs such as (1). This introduction lays the background for the two experiments we present in Sections 2 and 3, as well as for our results discussion in Section 4. In Section 1.2 we briefly review aspects of the syntax of negative question–answer pairs, and in 1.3 we introduce and discuss their pragmatics. Section 1.4 discusses the relationship between prosody and negative meanings, in English and crosslinguistically, and includes a brief discussion of the related phenomenon of polar particle answers to polar questions. Section 1.5 concludes the introduction by laying out the objectives for our two experiments. We begin first in 1.1 with a discussion of the related phenomenon of two negatives sentences in English, which have the unique property of being heavily conditioned by language-external prescriptive pressures and norms.

1.1. Negative concord and double negation in English

In NC sentences, which in English are typically observed in so-called “non-Standard” varieties, two or more syntactic negations mark a single semantic negation, as the following example and its prose translation show:

- (2) The student didn't do none of the assigned reading.
'The student did none of the assigned reading.'

English is historically an NC language, but, in present day English, NC is heavily socially stigmatized. At the time of prescriptive grammarian Bishop Lowth's 1762 edict that, in English, two negatives should equal a positive (Horn, 2010), the presence of NC in formal written texts had already diminished significantly (Nevalainen, 2006).¹ Despite its proscription, English NC has persisted and has come to be associated with “non-Standard” varieties including Appalachian (Wolfram and Christian, 1976) and African American English (Green, 2002) in the United States, as well as varieties of British (Anderwald, 2002, 2005; Tubau, 2016), Scottish (Smith, 2001), and Irish English (Henry, 2016).

In contrast with these so-called “non-Standard” varieties, it is widely accepted that, synchronically, “Standard English” is a DN language, which does not have NC (Ladusaw, 1992; Déprez, 2000, 2011; Watanabe, 2004; Zeijlstra, 2004; Kallel, 2007; De Swart 2010; Espinal and Prieto 2011; Wallage, 2012; Puskás, 2012; Prieto et al., 2013; Longobardi, 2014; Déprez et al., 2015; Espinal et al., 2016; Thornton et al., 2016; Tubau, 2016; and others). More generally, models of DN and NC fall under the category of macroparametric approaches, in which languages are either DN or NC (Zeijlstra, 2004), or that of microparametric approaches (Déprez, 2011), in which particular (morpho-)syntactic and pragmatic conditions yield DN and NC readings in a single language. Both types of approach have typically modeled Standard English as having a distinct grammatical system from “non-Standard” Englishes as well as other NC languages with respect to negation (e.g. Espinal and Tubau, 2016; Ladusaw, 1992; Tubau, 2016; Zeijlstra, 2004).

A growing body of work demonstrates that DN readings are possible in NC languages (Espinal and Prieto 2011; Prieto et al., 2013; Déprez et al., 2015; Espinal et al., 2016; Déprez and Yeaton, to appear).² These authors have demonstrated that speakers of prototypical NC languages reliably interpret both NC and DN given predictable combinations of prosodic and pragmatic features. In a similar spirit, Blanchette (2017) asks whether speakers of Standard English, thought to be a DN language, can be shown to have reliable intuitions about NC. She hypothesizes that in traditional forms of data such as binary acceptability judgments, the heavy social stigma associated with English NC may mask speakers' natural intuitions about its grammatical properties, and conducts a series of quantitative gradient acceptability judgment studies aimed at uncovering those intuitions. Blanchette's results show that Standard English speakers display a clear syntactic preference for NC constructions with a negative object over those with a negative subject. In addition, her results demonstrate a clear preference for single negation (NC) contexts (3a) over DN contexts (3b) for constructions with a negative object following a negative marker, as in the following example:

- (3) She didn't do no reading last night.
(a) NC context: Maria fell asleep before she could even start her assignments.
(b) DN context: Maria usually skips the reading assignments, but last night was different.

The result that participants preferred NC contexts for items like (3) contradicts theories that assume Standard English is strictly a DN language, and suggests that the negation system in this English variety is more similar to prototypical NC languages than previously thought.

¹ See Nevalainen (2006) on the social motivations for this shift.

² See also De Swart and Sag (2002) and Longobardi (2014).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7297343>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7297343>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)