

The pragmatics of marked configurations: Negative doubling in French[☆]

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Abstract

A recurrent assumption is that marked grammatical configurations associate to pragmatic values that differentiate them from the default option in a category. How do we know whether a marked configuration indeed has a pragmatic value, and what the nature of that value is? An answer to these questions is proposed in this article by the analysis of the pragmatic value of negative doubling in four varieties of French. Whether the joint use of post-verbal negation with a *n*-word—illustrated by *There wasn't nobody* meaning that nobody was there—is amenable to pragmatically-relevant contextual constraints is examined on the basis of real usage. The results demonstrate that negative doubling is characterised by a pragmatic value, that there is a need to distinguish two types of pragmatic values (activation and emphasis), and that the absence of a categorical pragmatic value is linked to the relatively higher frequency of the configuration in a variety.

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1. Background

It is often assumed that marked grammatical options have a pragmatic value that justifies their use and existence. But do marked options have a pragmatic value? And what is the precise nature of that pragmatic value? These questions are rarely raised, and still more rarely answered from a usage-based perspective. A contribution to answering these questions is provided here by the corpus study of the pragmatic dimensions of negative doubling in four varieties of one language where such a configuration is decidedly marked. The corpus study of negative doubling in one historical and three contemporary varieties of French demonstrates that a pragmatic value is significantly associated with negative doubling in all varieties, although not categorically in the variety where negative doubling is the more frequent.

Pragmatic values have been suggested to associate with different marked grammatical configurations. These comprise interrogatives (e.g. in situ *wh*-questions, Cheng and Rooryck, 2000; Old French total question marker *est-ce que*, Rouquier, 2003), focus particles (Remberger, 2010), Verum Focus (Batllori and Hernanz, 2015 *inter alii*) and of course negation. Various negative markers have been described as having a pragmatic value in Athabaskan languages (Gelderen, 2008), Swahili (*ku* and *ja*, Contini-Morava, 1989), Tibetan (*re*, Zeisler, 2004: 317–319), and Jordanian Arabic (the absence of the

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expected post-verbal marker, Al-Momani, 2011). Some items apparently maintain a pragmatic role through all their uses such as English *like hell*, and European Portuguese *lá* and *uma ova* (Martins, 2014). Only some uses are pragmatically relevant for others such as English *never* with punctual past events (*I never missed that meeting!*, Lucas and Willis, 2012), and France French *rien* following intransitive verbs (*J'ai rien dormi* 'I slept nothing', i.e. not at all). A pragmatic value has been alleged for items that are marked as a result of a presumed historical development. They include the declining preverbal negative – contemporary West Flemish *en* (Breitbarth and Haegeman, 2010), Old English *na* (Kemenade, 2011), Old and Middle French *non* (Larrivé, 2010) –, and the emerging post-verbal negative elements – in Italian (Cinque, 1991; Zanuttini, 1997 for studies of contemporary *mica*, Hansen and Visconti, 2009 for its historical evolution), Old and Middle French (Hansen and Visconti, 2009; Larrivé, 2010), Old and Middle English (Wallage, 2016) and through the history of Greek (Kiparsky and Condoravdi, 2006). The cooccurrence of that post-verbal marker with a n-word in languages that do not call for it as a matter of course has similarly been described as associating to some pragmatic value. The literature identifies Dutch (van der Wouden, 1997:145–149; Zeijlstra, 2010 on Dutch *niemand niet* 'nobody not' and *nooit geen* 'nothing no'; Haegeman and Lohndal, 2010 on West Flemish; Biberauer, 2008 on Afrikaans; Huddleston, 2010 on Afrikaans *g'n* with a n-word), Italian (*no* with complementiser *che*, Poletto and Zanuttini, 2012; a n-word concurring with preverbal *non*, Godard and Marandin, 2006), and Brazilian Portuguese (the post-verbal negator *não* adding to the preverbal one in Brazilian Portuguese, Schwenter, 2005; a post-verbal *nada* doubling a preverbal negative in Brazilian Portuguese, and also in Argentinian Spanish, Schwenter and Johnson, 2011). To summarise the view of most authors, "the usage of redundant negation always leads to an emphatic effect" (Zeijlstra, 2010). Other unexpected cooccurrences have been proposed to be pragmatically relevant such as *not ever* and *not some* (see Larrivé, 2012 and references therein).

The diversity of configurations involved suggests that if they do have a pragmatic value, it is likely to be of a different nature. But is it? And if so, how different is it? An answer can only be proposed on the basis of operational criteria. Criteria are proposed by Larrivé (2014a) that identify two types of pragmatic values for the behaviour of marked negatives, that is emphasis and activation. Emphasis concerns assertions without mitigation (Israel, 2011; Detges and Waltereit, 2002). It is illustrated by English marker *not at all*, and tested by the fact that it cannot subsequently be hedged or toned down. Witness the following contrast:

- (1) I didn't sleep. Maybe a little, but not much.
 (2) * I didn't sleep at all. Maybe a little, but not much.

where mitigation of the emphatic negative in (2) yields infelicitous results, unless self-correction applies as in (2').

- (2') I didn't sleep at all. Well, ok, maybe I did sleep a little, but not much.

Thus, West Flemish negative doubling case (*k'en-een nie vee (geen) boeken* '(I don't have) not many (no) books' (Haegeman, 2010:860) cannot be an emphatic configuration since it involves the downtoning expression *not much*.

Activation characterises contextually-primed, presupposed, discourse-old information, that is accessible both to the speaker and hearer (Dryer, 1996; Schwenter, 2005; Larrivé, 2012). An example is the post-verbal Brazilian Portuguese negative, which can be used only in activated sequences, as in (3).

- (3) A: *Você desligou o fagão, né?*
 'You turned off the stove, right?'
 B: *Nossa! Eu não desliguei o fagão não!*
 'Damn! I didn't turn it off!' (Schwenter, 2005:1435, example (2b))

In this exchange, B's assertion is activated by virtue of the sequence *turn off the stove* being explicitly used in the preceding context. This condition on the use of the post-verbal negative accounts for the unacceptability of the same assertion out of the blue.

- (3') [Speaker walking down the street and suddenly remembers she forgot to turn off the stove]
Nossa! Eu não desliguei o fagão (#não)!
 'Damn! I didn't turn off the stove!' (2005:1434, example (2a))

Activation comes in three varieties (Larrivé, 2012).

1. The first one is explicit activation with propositions primed by being explicitly used in the antecedent context. This typically occurs in reactive denials, as illustrated by the use of the post-verbal *não* in Brazilian Portuguese (3).

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