

Double Negation in a Negative Concord language: An experimental investigation



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Abstract

This paper investigates the interpretation and processing of simple transitive Catalan sentences with multiple negative expressions experimentally. Our results provide empirical confirmation that Negative Concord (NC) is the preferred and faster interpretation for negative sentences that either omit or contain the overt negative marker *no* 'not'. However, they also reveal that, in contrast to traditional descriptions of Catalan and independently of particular favouring contexts, a non-negligible amount of Double Negation (DN) readings arises, mainly when the negative marker co-occurs with pre-verbal Negative Concord Items (NCIs), and when these NCIs have a complex DP structure. Our results further suggest that two populations could be distinguished: one for whom the negative marker is optional and leaves the favoured NC reading essentially unaffected, and another where the co-presence of *no* significantly increases DN readings. We account for these findings within a micro-parametric approach that features ambiguous NCIs (non-negative vs. negative) and a possible ambiguous negative marker *no* (negative vs. expletive) variably available for Catalan speakers. The nuanced empirical NC landscape that our experimental work reveals serves to stress the importance of taking DN readings into consideration for a better understanding of the nature of negative constructions in Catalan and cross-linguistically.

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Keywords: Negative Concord; Double Negation; Experimental approach; Micro-parametric account; Ambiguous Negative Concord Items; Catalan

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1. Introduction

Within the charted landscape of Negative Concord (NC) languages, Catalan is often cast as a misfit because it presents the peculiarity of optionally allowing the co-presence of a sentential negative marker *no* ‘not’ with pre-verbal Negative Concord Items (NCIs)⁴ (Fabra, 1912, 1918, 1956; Badia i Margarit, 1962, 1994; Solà, 1973; Quer, 1993; Vallduví, 1994; Espinal, 2000a, 2002). The central goal of the present paper is to report the results of an experimental research that sought to test when, and to what extent, native speakers of Catalan prefer to interpret negative sentences of various types with a single negation interpretation as a Negative Concord (NC) reading, and whether, in some circumstances, with specific syntactic combinations of Negative Concord Items (NCIs), with and without a sentential negative marker, a Double Negation (DN) reading could emerge in simple transitive clauses as it has been claimed to emerge in other NC languages like Romanian.

We report on two experiments that aimed at investigating the following four questions. First, we tested whether it is correct, as standardly assumed by Catalan grammarians, that NC is systematically and consistently the default interpretation for sequences of multiple negative terms; second, we asked whether the processing of negative sequences in Catalan could be overall faster, and hence presumably easier to parse, under a NC reading than under a DN one. The latter is commonly assumed to be cross-linguistically marked (Corblin et al., 2006; de Swart, 2010; Puskás, 2012), but has recently been shown, in equivalent experimental settings, to be sometimes equally fast, and even sometimes faster in distinct languages; third we verified whether the co-presence of the sentential negative marker *no* with pre-verbal NCIs could influence the readings of negative sequences and increase DN readings and fourth, we investigated whether the morpho-syntactic nature of the NCIs involved in a negative sequence could influence the readings preferred by native speakers, increasing or decreasing a putative preference for a NC vs. DN reading.

Regarding the first question, we aimed at investigating to what extent the default nature of NC readings in Catalan can be confirmed, and whether Catalan sequences of NCIs in simple transitive clauses are essentially always unambiguous, radically favouring NC readings in neutral discourse and prosodic contexts across native speakers, as expected from the literature.⁵

Regarding the second question, we aimed to experimentally test whether speakers process NC readings more easily and faster than DN readings, and whether the common belief that DN readings have a higher degree of parsing complexity than NC/single negation readings can be correlated with a longer reaction time.

Finally, regarding the third and fourth questions, our experiments were designed to explore whether native speakers of Catalan have a preference for NC readings irrespectively of the co-presence or absence of a sentential negation marker with pre-verbal NCIs. One of our goals in raising this precise question was to seek to establish an experimental base line for further investigation of the properties of Catalan NC, and in particular of the factors that can bring about the emergence of DN readings, if any. A second goal was to provide an experimental assessment of the strength of NC interpretations in Catalan, for the purpose of cross-linguistic comparison with other Romance languages, such as French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. A third goal was to investigate the effects, if any, of the morpho-syntax of DP NCIs on the interpretation of negative sequences. In this respect, we considered simple NCI pronominal forms vs. full DPs (with both partitive and non-partitive forms), and their parallel vs. non-parallel distribution in subject and object position.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents a summary of the relevant background facts about the interpretation of negative sequences in Catalan, centring on the properties of this language as a NC one, and on the contexts where the negative marker *no* seems to be optional. We then present some theoretical accounts of these known facts from the literature, focusing more specifically on the required ingredients of a micro-parametric approach to Catalan NC. In section 3, we present our experimental design and methodology. Section 4 details the results of our experiments. Finally, section 5 discusses these results and assesses their consequences within a general theory of NC.

2. Background

2.1. Catalan as an NC language

Negative doubling (den Besten, 1986), in which multiple occurrences of morphologically negative constituents are interpreted as a single logical negation, is a common synchronic phenomenon in Catalan. Characteristic Catalan

⁴ In this paper we opt to use the descriptive term Negative Concord Item (NCI) (Watanabe, 2004) instead of the more frequently used term *n-word* (Laka, 1990) to refer to expressions that can participate in Negative Concord constructions, sharing the semantic property of being licensed both in negative and in non-negative contexts and of appearing sometimes negative by themselves. This choice seeks to steer away from the cultural connotations that the term *n-word* has taken on in the language of North Americans.

⁵ See references above.

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