

Interpreting argumental n-words as answers to negative wh-questions



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Abstract

This paper aims to provide an explanation of the lexical characterisation and final semantic interpretation associated with isolated argumental n-words in Question-Answer pairs in Negative Concord languages, namely Catalan and Spanish. We argue that there are two competing lexical variants of n-words in these languages: a polarity variant and a negative existential quantifier variant. Accessibility to these two lexical characterizations of n-words is correlated with one of the two possible final interpretations of isolated argumental n-words when used as fragment answers to negative wh-questions. Following a Structured Meaning approach to the semantics of Question-Answer pairs, we present a new analysis of n-words as focus constituents with respect to background wh-questions according to which a final single negation reading can only be inferred from n-words conceived as indefinite polarity items, whereas a Double Negation reading is inferred from negative quantifiers.

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1. Fragment answers, compositionality and ellipsis

In this paper we investigate why in Negative Concord (NC) languages such as Catalan and Spanish isolated argumental n-words (e.g., Spanish *nadie* 'nobody', Catalan *res* 'nothing') (Laka, 1990) may be interpreted as conveying both single negation and Double Negation (DN) when used as fragment answers to negative wh-questions. To contextualise this puzzle, in Section 1.1 we briefly introduce the behaviour of negative quantifiers (e.g., *nobody*, *nothing*) in this same context in languages like Standard English and German, and show that they are expected to yield only a DN interpretation. By contrast, in Section 1.2 we present the empirically and theoretically challenging fact that Catalan and Spanish isolated n-words can yield both a single negation reading and a DN reading, a property that is not expected and, furthermore, is not explained under current syntactic and semantic approaches to the distribution of n-words and the interpretation of NC readings.

The rest of the article is organised as follows. In Section 2, a number of theoretical assumptions about the lexical and syntactic status of argumental n-words in Catalan and Spanish are introduced. In Section 3, we show that neither the combination of a formal analysis of NC as syntactic Agree (Zeijlstra, 2004 and ff.) with an ellipsis analysis of fragment

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answers (Merchant, 2001, 2004), nor a semantic ellipsis account (Giannakidou, 2000, 2006) can accommodate the two potential interpretations that Catalan and Spanish n-words may have when used as fragment answers to negative wh-questions. In Section 4, we offer a new analysis within a Structured Meaning approach (von Stechow, 1991; Krifka, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2011) that allows us to derive both the single negation and the DN reading that Catalan and Spanish isolated argumental n-words used as answers to negative wh-questions may have. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper.

1.1. Negative quantifiers in DN languages

In DN languages such as Standard English, German, Dutch and Afrikaans, when negative indefinites such as *nobody* or *nothing* and their equivalents in the aforementioned languages are used in isolation as answers to a negative wh-question, a DN reading obtains, as shown in (1) and (2). Notice that the negative questions in (1) and (2) are biased in the sense that they require non-neutral contexts: a contrast set (of individuals who indeed did the homework, or of things they read) needs to be established in order to make them felicitous questions (cf. Han, 1999; Romero and Han, 2004; Asher and Reese, 2005; Reese, 2006). On the other hand, these negative questions are felicitous if there is compelling contextual evidence against *p*, in the sense that, in (1), not everybody did the homework ($\neg\forall$), that is, that someone didn't, or, in (2), they have not read everything, that is, something was not read.

- (1) Q: Who didn't do the homework? (English)
 A: *Nobody*. (= Nobody didn't do the homework;
 → Everybody did the homework)
- (2) Q: Was haben sie *nicht* gelesen? (German)
 what have they not read
 'What didn't they read?'
 A: *Nichts*.
 nothing
 'Nothing' (= They didn't read nothing;
 → They read everything)

Negative indefinites such as *nobody* and *nichts* are commonly assumed to contribute negation on their own in so-called DN languages, but this idea has been implemented in various ways within the generative tradition.¹ In the 90s some well-established proposals analysed these lexical items as negative quantifiers (Zanuttini, 1991; Haegeman and Zanuttini, 1991, 1996; Haegeman, 1995; Haegeman and Lohndal, 2010). In more recent analyses they are argued to be either non-negative indefinites associated with a licensing abstract negative operator (Op \neg) that carries an interpretable negative feature [INEG] (Penka, 2011; Penka and Zeijlstra, 2005, 2010; Zeijlstra, 2011), or inherently negative words bearing an [INEG] feature (Biberauer and Zeijlstra, 2012). Discussing which position is superior is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, it will be assumed that negative indefinites in DN languages always carry one instance of logical negation (\neg).

Within the generative tradition the analysis of the answers in (1) and (2) has been claimed to support an ellipsis account of fragment answers, according to which part of the question is copied into the syntactic structure corresponding to the answer. Since sentential negative markers in English and German (*not/n't* and *nicht*, respectively) are also assumed to introduce an instance of logical negation, the copy operation depicted in the answers is predicted to result in DN (since the negative quantifier takes wide scope over negation) and is hence expected to receive a positive reading ($\neg\exists\neg\rightarrow\forall$). This is indeed the case, as indicated by the paraphrases included in parentheses in (1) and (2).

In the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995, 2001 and ff.), fragment answers with a negative quantifier seem to be necessarily derived by means of ellipsis (Merchant, 2001, 2004). This analysis postulates that the negative indefinite moves at narrow syntax to Spec, Foc(us) P(hrase) and that, finally, part of the structure is PF-deleted. This movement-then-deletion approach is illustrated – although somewhat simplified – in (3a, b), where the copied material and ellipsis are indicated by the square brackets and the strikethrough, respectively. According to this analysis of the answers in (1b) and (2b), represented in (3), a focused constituent is assumed to have syntactically moved to the left periphery of the clause, to a position above the c-command domain of the ellipsis-licensing head. [E] refers to a formal feature that Foc⁰

¹ See Longobardi (2014, and previous work) for a criticism of the typological macroparametric distinction between DN and NC languages.

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