

Double Negation, Negative Concord and Metalinguistic Negation

1. BACKGROUND. In Negative Concord languages of the Spanish and Italian variety, so called *n-words* (after Laka 1990) like *nessuno/nadie* and *niente/nada* behave as Negative Existential Quantifiers (NEQs) in sentence initial position and as Negative Polarity Items (NPIs) in postverbal position, as (1) illustrates. Herburger (in press) points out previously unnoticed exceptions to this generalization. According to the judgements she reports, under special circumstances, postverbal *n-words* can also be interpreted as NEQs (see (2)). Accordingly, when a sentence like (2) is negated, as in (3), the result is ambiguous between a negative reading and what appears to be a Double Negation (DN) reading.

Herburger analyzes the NEQ readings of postverbal *n-words* as cases where a negative existential quantifier has narrow scope relative to the event quantification. Therefore, a sentence like (2) states the existence of an event that does not involve a theme that is looked at. Since many events vacuously satisfy this description, the sentence is not of much use. The restricted availability of the DN-readings is due to the limited number of predicates that select a complement in the syntax but do not require the existence of a theme.

2. THE PROBLEM. Herburger's analysis predicts the availability of NEQ readings for postverbal *n-words* to be dependent on the type of event description at issue. Events of seeing, unlike events of looking-at, do not necessarily involve the existence of a theme. According to her analysis, the alleged DN-reading must be more accessible in (4a) than in (4b), contrary to the facts.

While, according to our informants, the grammaticality of cases like (2) is at best very marginal, the ambiguity of (3) provides strong support to the hypothesis that *n-words* are ambiguous between an existential and a NEQ reading, as Herburger claims. Any alternative analysis of *n-words* must provide an explanation for this ambiguity.

3. THE PROPOSAL We claim that *n-words* are unambiguously existential quantifiers. However, due to their negative morphology, they are always associated with the presupposition (perhaps a conventional implicature) that the speaker believes that there is no individual satisfying the predicate these quantifiers apply to (see (5)). This amounts to saying that these items are indefinites at a truthconditional level, but NEQs at the level of the speaker's presuppositions. Leaving aside for the moment the sentence initial occurrences of these words, it is easy to see how this peculiar property of *n-words* accounts for their limited (NPI-like) postverbal distribution. Only in affirmative sentences does the implicature clash with a well-known implicature associated with assertions (contrast (6) with (7)).

Assuming this analysis, the ambiguity of sentences like (3) follows from the well-known ambivalent nature of sentential negation. Negation in (3) can be the usual truth-functional operator (as in (8)). This is the case when (3) is uttered under neutral intonation. In this case the sentence is interpreted as a negative existential statement. The alleged DN-reading is predicted to come about if negation is used meta-linguistically to target the implicatures associated with the *n-word*. According to the view on negation endorsed in this paper, if negation targets exclusively this presupposition, the resulting assertion does not make a negative existential statement, but simply denies a presupposition (see (9)). Importantly, the paper shows that this second reading emerges exclusively when (3) is uttered with the specific intonation that is typical of meta-linguistic uses of negation.

Support for our analysis comes from (i) the absence of DN readings when the *n-word* is a genuine NPI (10), (ii) the dependence of the DN reading on the existence of a specific intonational pattern associated with metalinguistic negation, and (iii) the distribution of concessive *but* (Spanish *sino*), which is known to be excluded when the previous utterance contains a meta-linguistic negation (Horn 1984) (see(11)).

- (1) a. It: Nessuno è venuto / Sp: Nadie vino
N-body came
'Nobody came.'
- b. It: *(Non) è venuto nessuno. / Sp: *(No) vino nadie
Not came n-body
- (2) It: Questo bebe dev'essere autistico perche [stá guardando nessuno (tutto
This baby must be autistic because he is looking at nobody all
il giorno)].
the day
- (3) a. Il bebé non STÁ guardando NESSUNO
b. El bebé no ESTÁ mirando a NADIE
The baby not is looking n-body
'The baby isnt looking at anybody.' / 'It is not the case that the baby is
looking at nobody.' \Rightarrow 'The baby is looking at somebody.' (By sentential logic,
 $\neg\neg\phi \rightarrow \neg\phi$)
- (4) a. Sp: El bebé no está viendo a nadie
The baby not is seeing to nobody
'The baby is not seeing nobody.'
- b. Sp: El bebé no está mirando a nadie
'The baby not is looking at nobody'
'The baby is not looking at nobody.'
- (5) *Disbelief.* For every predicate P , $\llbracket N - word(P) \rrbracket^w$ is felicitous iff the speaker believes
in w that there is no individual that verifies P ($\llbracket P \rrbracket^w = \emptyset$).
- (6) It: *È venuto nessuno. / Sp: *Vino nadie
Truth conditions: Somebody came. *Presupposition triggered by assertion:* The
speaker believes that somebody came. *Presupposition triggered by the n-word:* The
speaker believes that nobody came.
- (7) It: Non è venuto nessuno. / Sp: No vino nadie.
Truth conditions: Nobody came. *Presupposition triggered by assertion:* The speaker
believes that nobody came. *Presupposition triggered by the n-word:* The speaker
believes that nobody came.
- (8) a. Assertion: $\neg\exists[the - baby - is - looking - at(x)]$
b. Pres.: $\forall w[w \in Bel(spkr, w) \rightarrow w \in \{w' : \neg\exists x the - baby - is - looking - at(x) in w'\}]$
(The speaker believes that the baby is not looking at anybody)
- (9) a. Assertion: $\exists x[the - baby - is - looking - at(x)]$
b. Pres.: $\neg\forall w[w \in Bel(spkr, w) \rightarrow w \in \{w' : \neg\exists x the - baby - is - looking - at(x) in w'\}]$
(There is at least one world among the speaker's doxastic alternatives in which
the baby is looking at somebody.)
- (10) It: *Il bebé non HA mangiato UN GRANCHÉ
The baby not have eaten that much.
- (11) Sp: *El bebé no está mirando A NADIE, sino a Juan
The baby not is looking at nobody, but at John.

REFERENCES

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