

A Constraint on Double Negation

1. Claim. We present evidence showing that the distinction between the word and the morpheme is epiphenomenal. The evidence concerns the fact that positive adjectives may be prefixed with *un-*, but negative ones cannot, though they can be negated with *not* (Zimmer 1964, Horn 2005):

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|-----|------------|------------|-------------|
| (1) | a. unhappy | b. *unsad | c. not sad |
| | unfriendly | *unhostile | not hostile |
| | untrue | *unfalse | not false |

A classical account of these facts runs like this (Zimmer 1964:15):

- (2) “Negative affixes are not used with adjectival stems that have a ‘negative’ value.”

We argue that (2) is not correct for two reasons. First, we show that the restriction in (1) is not only observed with morphological negation, but also with certain cases of syntactic negation. Second, we argue that it is no coincidence that certain *negative* markers are excluded with *negative* adjectives. We present a principled account for the data pattern in (1), which explains (1b) in terms of a ban on double negation.

2. Evidence. French and Dutch not only show the pattern in (1), but the same pattern with a case of syntactic negation, in particular with the negative Q-adjectives *peu* and *weinig* ‘little’. These can modify positive adjectives, but not negative ones, whether they be lexically negative or *un-*prefixed:

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|-----|--------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| (3) | peu actif | weinig actief | ‘little active’ |
| | peu probable | weinig waarschijnlijk | ‘little likely’ |
| | peu crédible | weinig geloofwaardig | ‘little credible’ |
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- | | | | |
|-----|-----------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
| (4) | *peu passif | *weinig passief | ‘little passive’ |
| | *peu improbable | *weinig onwaarschijnlijk | ‘little unlikely’ |
| | *peu impatient | *weinig ongeduldig | ‘little impatient’ |

This shows that the relevant restriction does not care about the word-morpheme distinction.

3. A nanosyntactic analysis.

a. Size matters. The difference between positive and negative adjectives is a difference in the size of the tree, i.e. in the number of features they spell out: positive adjectives spell out the structure in (5a), negative ones the larger structure (5b):

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|-----|---|
| (5) | a. $[_{QP} Q [_{aP} a [\checkmark]]] \Rightarrow tall, intelligent, happy, \dots$ |
| | b. $[_{NegP} Neg [_{QP} Q [_{aP} a [\checkmark]]]] \Rightarrow short, stupid, sad, \dots$ |

b. The feature Q. Positive gradable adjectives are the phrasal spellout of the features Q, *a*, and the root feature. Q is a feature which denotes a positive quantity. Evidence for Q is found in the semantics (*John is tall* is in fact *John is MUCH tall*; Bresnan 1973), and in the phenomenon of *much*-support (Corver 1997):

- (6) John is fond of Mary. Maybe he is too *much* so.

c. **The feature Neg.** Different negative markers all spell out a Neg-feature, but package it with various other features, like T, Foc, Class, and Q (De Clercq 2013):

- (7) a. $[_{\text{NegP}} \text{Neg} [_{\text{TP}} \text{T} [_{\text{FocP}} \text{Foc} [_{\text{ClassP}} \text{Class} [_{\text{QP}} \text{Q}]]]]] \Rightarrow \textit{not}$ (sentential scope)
 b. $[_{\text{NegP}} \text{Neg} [_{\text{FocP}} \text{Foc} [_{\text{ClassP}} \text{Class} [_{\text{QP}} \text{Q}]]]] \Rightarrow \textit{not}$ (low scope)
 c. $[_{\text{NegP}} \text{Neg} [_{\text{ClassP}} \text{Class} [_{\text{QP}} \text{Q}]]] \Rightarrow \textit{non}$
 d. $[_{\text{NegP}} \text{Neg} [_{\text{QP}} \text{Q}]] \Rightarrow \textit{un-}$

The clausal spine features the exact same functional sequence, including the potential presence of a NegP at each successive level:

- (8) $\langle (\text{Neg}), \text{T}, (\text{Neg}), \text{Foc}, (\text{Neg}), \text{Class}, (\text{Neg}), \text{Q} \rangle$

By default, the functional heads are interpreted affirmatively, but they can be made negative by adding a NegP on top of them. The internal make-up of each negative marker determines its scope position: *not* takes scope in TP or FocP, whereas *un-* takes scope in QP, etc.

4. A constraint on double negation. Negative gradable adjectives are like positive ones, but add a Neg feature (see (5b)). Prefixing a negative adjective with *un-* yields (9):

- (9) $[_{\text{NegP}} [_{\text{NegP}} \text{Neg} [_{\text{QP}} \text{Q}]]] \text{Neg} [_{\text{NegP}} \text{Neg} [_{\text{QP}} \text{Q} [_{\text{aP}} \text{a} [\checkmark]]]]]$

This structure arises by putting (7d) *un-* in the Spec of the NegP that immediately dominates QP in (5b). The problem with (9) is that it violates the constraint in (10), which bans the occurrence of two structurally adjacent [Neg]-features in the functional sequence:

- (10) $*\langle \text{Neg}, \text{Neg} \rangle$

This constraint also explains the data in (3) and (4): *peu/weinig* ‘little’ are the phrasal spellout of the features Neg and Q, and merging these in the Spec of a negative adjective leads to the same violation of (10) as in *unsad* (9). In contrast, *not* takes scope over TP or FocP, a projection in the left periphery of vP (Belletti 2004). Because of this intervening structure, (10) is respected in *not sad*:

- (11) $[_{\text{NegP}} [_{\text{NegP}} \text{Neg} [_{\text{FocP}} \text{Foc} [_{\text{ClassP}} \text{Class} [_{\text{QP}} \text{Q}]]]]] [_{\text{FocP}} \text{Foc} [_{\text{ClassP}} \text{Class} [_{\text{NegP}} \text{Neg} [_{\text{QP}} \text{Q} [_{\text{aP}} \text{a} [\checkmark]]]]]]]]$

This more complex structure, though involving double negation, respects (10).

5. Conclusion. Different negative markers all contain a Neg-feature. The restriction in (10) is shown in both morphological and syntactic negation, suggesting that the distinction between words and morphemes is epiphenomenal.

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