The markedness of the negative: 
Analysing negation in a spoken corpus

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This paper confronts the applicability of the posited distinction between straightforward, descriptive negation and more marked cases of negation; termed metalinguistic (cf. Horn, 1989). Faced with real spoken data from the International Corpus of English (ICE-GB), many cases do not lend themselves to a ‘pure’ characterisation as one form or the other. This leads one to reconsider the apparently clear-cut distinction between these posited types of negation. Indeed, the corpus data instead gives rise to the introduction of a finer grained classification in terms of what is being represented, enabling the identification of some clear cases of each form, whilst permitting a number of cases to serve as both descriptive and metalinguistic.

This study supports a basic distinction between ‘descriptive’ and ‘metalinguistic’ negation, but attempts to overcome some of the theoretical muddle that has arisen since then. The current theoretical ramifications appeal to a web of semantic and pragmatic factors which include backgrounding of information, focus and prosodic features in the search for a better understanding of the nature of negation in everyday language.

1. METALINGUISTIC NEGATION AND DENIAL

This paper addresses the markedness of negation in everyday conversation. Typically, the most familiar understanding of negation is an inversion of some descriptive property in a bivalent world, giving rise to a non-contradictory rejoinder [as in (1)-(3)]:

(1) Adam’s brother isn’t tall - he’s short
(2) That joke wasn’t funny - it was awful
(3) I don’t play soccer - it’s a stupid game

In such cases, logical bivalence is preserved by treating the negation as expressing a ‘less than’ relation, whilst affirmation expresses an equivalence (or greater) relation with respect to the predicated quality. In such cases, the target of the negation is invariably the straightforward propositional content of the negated clause. However, Horn (1989:397) claims there exists an alternative use for negation as operating on another level; termed metalinguistic negation. Indeed, there appears to be an intuitive distinction between cases of straightforward (descriptive) negation [as in (1)-(3)] and a class comprising of more marked (‘metalinguistic’) forms [as in (4)-(6)]:

(4) ‘Adam’s brother’ isn’t tall - Adam doesn’t have a brother!
(5) That joke wasn’t ‘funny’ - it was absolutely hilarious
(6) I don’t play ‘soccer’ - I play ‘football’
On the basis that we may quite plausibly object to any of a number of interpretive features of the spoken utterance, Horn (1989:363) ultimately characterises metalinguistic negation as “a device for objecting to a previous utterance on any grounds whatever.” However, Geurts (1998) objects to Horn’s ‘homogenous’ treatment of this special class and instead provides a finer-grained account of denials characterised by the distinctions identified between (4)-(6), identifying between proposition denials [as in (1)-(3) and now B’s rejoinder in (7)], presupposition denials [as in (4) and (8)], implicature denials [as in (5) and (9)] and form denials [as in (6) and (10)]:

A: You have a ladder in your tights

(7) B: I do not have “a ladder in my tights” – they are perfectly intact!
(8) B: I do not have “a ladder in my tights” – I’m not wearing any tights!
(9) B: I do not have “a ladder in my tights” – I have three ladders and a gaping tear in them!
(10) B: I do not have “a ladder in my tights” – I saw an adder in my lights(!)

But now consider (7) in terms of Horn’s distinction: the proposition denial functions as a straightforward negation and yet clearly acts as a direct denial of A’s preceding assertion, thus qualifying as metalinguistic by Horn’s earlier definition. On this basis, the gulf between descriptive (straightforward) negation and metalinguistic negation becomes greatly reduced – perhaps even obliterated: could (7) qualify as both descriptive and metalinguistic? If this is possible, what is the utility of Horn’s basic distinction? We now find ourselves dependent on clarifying what is actually meant by ‘metalinguistic.’ Geurts (1998:277) claims that his own “form denials are the only ones that are genuinely metalinguistic, in the sense that in the meaning of a form denial reference is made to a linguistic object,” and Noh (1998:616) refers to denials echoing linguistic form as the “true cases of metalinguistic use.” But Horn’s original characterisation appears to act more as a loose blanket expression identifying any marked case: what, then, is metalinguistic negation?

2. A REFORMED CLASSIFICATION

I adopt a new approach to the descriptive/metalinguistic debate by considering the empirical plausibility of such current theoretical accounts. Faced with recordings of everyday conversation from the International Corpus of English (ICE-GB), I aim to identify the nature of negation most typically occurring in everyday conversation, in the hope that the identification of real life examples may shed some light on the issues at stake.

ICE-GB is a one-million word corpus, with approximately seventy-two hours of digitised spoken material accompanying the written component. I began by assessing the semantic and pragmatic character of each token recognised by the corpus, by identifying the nature of the target or content of the negation. The corpus data consequently appeared to lend itself to four main general categories of negation in terms of what was being represented (cf.

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1 In light of current space constraints, I keep my exposition of metalinguistic negation remarkably brief. For a more detailed exploration and a wider variety of examples and explanation, see Pitts (2007a).
2 For more detailed information on the corpus and procedure, see Pitts (2007c).
Wilson, 2000) by the denial. The present paper provides a summary of the classification that arose from addressing this corpus material in §2.1ff.

2.1 Type-A: targeting some [verbatim] linguistic token

The first and most identifiable case of metalinguistic negation responds directly to some previous utterance in the discourse context. I term such cases type-A negation:

(11) A: … there’s lots of deers and lots of rabbits
    B: It’s not deers - it’s deer

(12) A: At uhm one of the girls’…
    B: Well she’s not a girl - she’s about forty two or something

Examples (11) and (12) further illustrate the compatibility between type-A negation and the fundamentally echoic nature of metalinguistic negation discussed by Carston (2002:298). Indeed, it seems perfectly natural to place the target of the negation in quotation marks:

(11) It’s not “deers”
(12) Well she’s not a “girl”

On this basis, type-A negation can be considered a case of metalinguistic negation proper - in the strictest sense of interpreting the term. But in order for this to be upheld, any mention of the previous utterance (or select part thereof) must be a strict repetition of the foregoing utterance. If, however, the negation targets some (any) pragmatic inference over and above the basic Gricean said content of an utterance, it instead falls within the remit of type-B negation.

2.2 Type-B: targeting some presumption or inference arising from propositional content

Type-B negation targets the content of a previous linguistic utterance qua type-A, but whilst type-A is verbatim, type-B addresses any derivable inferences in the given discourse context. In other words, type-B negation typically pre-empts likely [Gricean] implicatures:

(13) He does look sort of – well contemplative … not sad, but ...
(14) A: That’s not to say that there aren’t in inverted commas ‘therapeutic side effects’ …

By these terms, I deem type-B to be meta-pragmatic, by virtue of targeting pragmatic inference: hence type-B negation may often involve a metacommentary [as in (14)] as an attempt to clarify the speaker’s intended or conveyed meaning.
2.3 Type-C: targeting some societal norm or salient expectation

The speaker of a type-C negation makes reference to some salient phrase, common predisposition or societal norm. Intuitively similar to type-B, we can nevertheless distinguish between the two on the basis of backgrounding of information, since the target of type-C is new to the discourse domain. Whilst there is no evidence of previous mention in the given context [either explicit qua type-A, or implicit qua type-B], the introduction of the target within the negation does not appear to jeopardize coherence:

(15) [discussing relationships]
   - And even if it’s not sexual and even if it’s … a friendship
   [Not493]

(16) It’s not OK just being who you are
   [Not601]

The postulation of this metaconceptual category may be further supported by accounts proposing default-type inference, such as those put forth by Giora (1998) and Jaszczolt (2005).

2.4 Type-D: targeting some descriptive state of affairs or situation in the world

Type-D negation targets some descriptive situation or state of affairs, but with no evidence to suggest that the target has previously been introduced in the discourse domain (either explicitly or implicitly). By this I permit the negation and its content in the extensional category of type-D to qualify as relevant to the discourse exchange without alluding to some established (embedded) thought or utterance: instead, these instances describe a state of affairs by virtue of quite simply what is not:

(17) A: I don’t know whether to check whether it’s working or not
   [Not76]

(18) A: I do not need this lighthearted humour at the moment
   [Not411]

Type-D negation can be viewed as representational on account of the fact that it describes some given state of affairs in the world. However, such cases have no reason to qualify as anything higher-level in terms of cognition; so type-D negation does not qualify as metarepresentational, but rather presents a straightforward case of descriptive negation:

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8 The motivation for this category originally came from Sperber & Wilson (1981:312), who claim “standards or rules of behaviour are culturally defined, commonly known, and frequently invoked,” so are consequently always available for echoic mention.
2.5 Challenging the descriptive/metalinguistic dichotomy

In her discussion of possible lower-order representations, Wilson (2000:414) establishes a tripartite distinction between public representations (utterances), mental representations (thoughts) and abstract representations (propositions), which might be seen to correspond with the current formulation of type-A, type-C and type-B negation in Figure 1 respectively. However, it is important to observe that in contrast with Wilson’s categories, I propose types A-C as characteristically higher order metarepresentations: my account of a lower-order representation corresponds with the basic linguistic reference to some state of affairs (qua type-D). It is on this basis that I wish to retain the four-way classification as introduced and summarised briefly here.

In addition to the two intermediate tiers between type-A (i.e. metalinguistic) and type-D (descriptive) negation in the present classification, it is also important to acknowledge the necessary recognition of mixed forms in the allocation procedure, a common situation heavily influenced by the apparent pervasiveness of type-D in interaction with the remaining three tiers. The primary combinations emerging from the corpus data are therefore type-AD negation, which combines a response to a previous overt linguistic token with describing a straightforward state of affairs [as in (19)], type-BD negation, occurring particularly in cases where the speaker wishes to make quite clear that they are ‘not saying’ something [as in (20)], and type-CD negation, in which the negation presents some non-situation, accounting for an absence of some ‘standard’ expectation [as in (21)]:

(19) A: She’s got a small garden  
B: Actually it’s not a small garden … it’s quite big  
\[Not253\]

(20) … and I’m not exaggerating  
\[Not403\]

(21) When she used to come into a room he used to not even speak to her  
\[Not373\]

3. OVERVIEW

The present difficulty in conclusively distinguishing between metalinguistic and descriptive negation arises from the theoretical confusion of what one may actually mean by metalinguistic negation. Truly metalinguistic negation (as the most marked case) may be most clearly typified by type-A negation, but then extends in a downward cline through to type-C negation. The problem in rigidly demarcating between these forms occurs on account of the fact that the metaconceptual nature of C extends upwards through to types B and A, in the same fashion as the metapragmatic nature of type-B extends upwards to incorporate type-A negation. On this basis, one may observe how truly metalinguistic negation (qua type-A) and straightforward descriptive negation (qua type-D) typify extremities along the scale; reinforcing the clear intuitive basis for Horn’s original dichotomy.

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\[9\] This provides a clear illustration for the evident overlap of descriptive negation and metalinguistic negation as akin to the Geurts’ proposition denial [cf. example (7)]

\[10\] I do not make allowances for type AB, BC or AC negations in the given venture. Although the most thorough account may demand their incorporation, the current data set did not give rise to the identification of such forms: therefore for the sake of brevity they are presently disregarded.
A more thorough explanation of the current venture requires a far more detailed incorporation of a web of semantic and pragmatic factors, characterised by a feature analysis for each individual example, specifically in relation to backgrounding of information, echoic nature, location of primary stress, terminal contour, structure [as in the ‘not X (but) Y’ format], and periphrasis (not unconnected to the expression of two negatives). I trust that acknowledging these features in conjunction with the present classification will enable a better understanding of the reference and nature of negation in everyday language.

REFERENCES

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