Negative Concord in Standard English and the syntax-morphology interface

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In the present paper, I defend the idea that Standard English has, contrary to what is often assumed, the structure of a Negative Concord (NC) language. This fact, however, is masked by two post-syntactic operations that determine the distribution of n-indefinites with respect to the sentential negative marker (SNM) and that are located at the syntax-morphology interface.

NC describes the fact that negation is semantically interpreted only once despite being apparently expressed by more than one element in the clause. This is shown in (1) with examples from Non-Standard English.

(1) a. **Nobody** said **nothing** about it. [FRED, KEN_002] (Non-Standard English)
   b. 'Cause **nobody** did**n't** have a terrible lot of cows. [FRED, CON_005]

Following Zeijlstra (2004), it is assumed that n-words are non-negative indefinites that are syntactically dependent on a negative syntactic terminal. That is, n-indefinites carry an uninterpretable negative feature, [uNeg]. In the case of Standard English, I assume that n-words such as *nobody*, *nothing* and the like are not inherently negative, nor quantificational, which is a view that largely relies on the work by Weiss (2002) and Penka (2007).

The PF operations that mask the fact that Standard English is ultimately an NC language are triggered by the need that derivations fulfil a morphological requirement, which has been formulated as a Filter. This is in line with the Distributed Morphology assumption that the relation between sound and meaning is ultimately decided in the PF branch, where PF operations may repair the syntactic output on the basis of morphological constraints.

The two PF operations that prevent n-indefinites from co-occurring with the SNM in Standard English are Obliteration, in (2a), and Impoverishment, in (2b). These are triggered by the existence of a language-particular Filter, in (3), that disallows the accidental repetition of negative features in the same Spell-Out domain.

(2) a. [+Neg] $\rightarrow$ Ø /{_____ [+polarity: negative}$_{\text{Spell-Out}}$
   b. [+polarity: negative] $\rightarrow$ [+polarity] / {_____ [+Neg]}$_{\text{Spell-Out}}$

(3)   */negative marker/ /polarity morpheme/ if
   (i) /negative marker/ and /polarity morpheme/ are adjacent and,
   (ii) NEGATIVE MARKER and POLARITY MORPHEME agree.

While Impoverishment can delete the negative value of the polarity feature that an n-indefinite carries, Obliteration eliminates the syntactic terminal of the negative marker from the morphological structure. Thus, Impoverishment results in the insertion of a default form of the *any*-set, as defined by the Vocabulary that is assumed for Standard English, (4), and Obliteration results in the negative marker escaping lexical insertion.

(4) a. [+polarity: negative] $\leftrightarrow$ /n≅Y/ /___ √Root
   b. [+polarity: assertive] $\leftrightarrow$ /sçm/ /___ √Root
   c. Elsewhere: [+polar] $\leftrightarrow$ /EnI/ /___ √Root

In Standard English, the Filter in (3) is violated whenever n-indefinites raise out from their VP-internal base-generated position to Spec, NegP via the outer Specifier of *v**P. It is

assumed that the polarity feature of Neg° is endowed with the EPP-property, which forces the closest n-indefinite to move to Spec, NegP. Assuming NegP to be at the edge of $v*$P, the negative marker and the n-indefinite are in the same Spell-Out domain after movement. Standard English can repair the violation of the Filter in (3) in two possible ways: the application of (2a) results in the deletion of the negative marker, as in (5a), and the application of (2b) in the insertion of the Elsewhere form *any-*, as in (5b).

(5) a. I saw nobody.
    b. I didn't see anybody.

When more than one n-indefinite is present in the structure, Impoverishment can apply simultaneously to every indefinite, resulting in (6a). However, a combination of Obliteration and Impoverishment is possible as well, which would result in (6b). The SNM can be Obliterated in co-occurring with the closest polarity morpheme with a negative value; but since the output would still contain a sequence of identical syntactic features, a repair operation would be needed. Impoverishment eliminates the negative value of the polarity feature of the second indefinite, which surfaces with the default form *any*.

(6) a. I didn't say anything to anyone.
    b. I said nothing to anyone.

The movement of n-indefinites to Spec, NegP obeys the principle of Attract Closest, as shown by the examples in (7), which contain two object n-indefinites. English allows two different orderings in double object constructions: indirect object (IO)-direct object (DO), as in (7a), and DO-IO as in (7b). Only the n-indefinite that occurs highest in the structure can trigger Obliteration of the SNM.

(7) a. I gave nobody anything.
    b. I gave nothing to anybody.
    c. *I gave anybody nothing.
    d. *I gave anything to nobody.
    e. *I gave noone nothing.
    f. *I gave nothing to noone.

The facts above fall into place if a VP-shell analysis is assumed: only the closest n-indefinite moves to Spec, NegP through Spec, $v*$P to satisfy the EPP-feature of Neg°, but the two n-indefinites are in the same Spell-Out domain as the SNM. Obliteration cannot totally repair the violation of the Filter, so that Impoverishment is triggered as well. Whenever both operations apply, Obliteration necessarily precedes Impoverishment, as seen in the ungrammaticality of (7c) and (7d).

References
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