

Re-evaluating French Negative Concord

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Introduction: So far, French has been considered to have a system of negative concord (NC) that is unique crosslinguistically. It deviates from “true” NC found in languages such as Czech and Italian, that is, NC relations between both multiple Neg-Words (NWs), and NWs with negative markers (NMs), in two respects: **i.** in French, any combination between Neg-words and negative markers always leads to a double negation reading, while in “true” NC, double negation readings are hard to tease out, if at all possible. **ii.** French NC between multiple NWs is ambiguous between a concord and a double negation reading, while Czech and Italian NC is obligatory. This leaves French as a typological oddity, since no other language has been shown to have this pattern. My goal in this abstract is to re-analyze French as a member of a set of languages that are traditionally considered to be double negation languages, such as German, making it non-exceptional. As a side effect, this will also simplify the French NC system, along with the general landscape of negative concord languages.

Data: In French, NC has been taken to involve two different constructions: **i.** NWs and (optionally) the obsolete, former NM *ne*. Interestingly, *pas*, which is the proper negative marker in modern French, triggers double negation:

- (1) a. *Personne (ne) mange.*
N-body NEG eats
'Nobody eats.'
- b. *Personne mange pas.*
N-body eats NEG
'Nobody doesn't eat.'
- c. *Marie (ne) mange pas rien*
Marie NEG eats NEG n-thing
'Marie does not eat nothing.'

ii. Multiple NWs. Such constructions are ambiguous between a NC and double negation reading:

- (2) *Personne (ne) mange rien.*
N-body NEG eats n-thing.
'Nobody eats anything.'
'Nobody eats nothing.'

Application: Zeijlstra (2009) offers an explanation of French NC based on syntactic agreement: NWs are non-negative and receive their negative feature from an operator upstairs: $OP_{\neg}^{[iNeg]}$ *Personne*_[uNeg] *mange rien*_[uNeg]. He accounts for the double negation in (1b) by taking *pas* to carry a semantic negative feature – making it inherently negative. He further explains *pas*'s inability to license NWs with it lacking a formal negative feature– NWs are always licensed by OP_{\neg} . Finally, Zeijlstra assumes *ne* to be a non-negative NPI not participating in NC at all. All of this resolves the grammaticality of NC-like constructions, however, the main problem with an agreement-based approach to French NC is that multiple-NW constructions are in fact ambiguous between NC and a double negation reading, as seen in (2). Agreement is a fairly all-or-nothing operation: either a feature agrees with another, or it does not– following Zeijlstra's system of non-negative NWs being valued by OP_{\neg} , (2) should only have a concord reading.

De Swart & Sag (2002)'s account of NC as resumptive quantification works quite well with regards to multiple-NW constructions. They assume a rule of quantification parallel and

equivalent to functional application that turns two unary quantifiers into a single, binary one. This parallelism also accounts for the semantic ambiguity in (2). In the case of multiple NWs ($\neg\exists x$), this obviates a double negation reading: $\neg\exists x\neg\exists y$ becomes $\neg\exists x, y$. The case of NC between NWs and negative markers is problematic for a resumptive quantification analysis: de Swart and Sag have a hard time accounting for the fact that resumptive quantification is limited to multiple-NW constructions. While they do offer a reason why the NM *pas* does not participate in NC, when NMs in other NC languages can and do, it requires them to assume a special rule that only applies to French—also becoming victims to French’s apparent typological uniqueness.

But if *ne* does not participate in NC, and *pas* triggers double negation just like a NM in any double negation language (Zeijlstra 2009), the only NC-like construction that remains to account for is the one with multiple Neg-words, which agreement cannot fully handle due to its semantic ambiguity. Crucially, French is not unique in this. Other languages, such as German, also show concord only between NWs:

- (3) a. Niemand sieht niemanden.
 n-body sees n-body
 ‘Nobody sees anybody.’
 ‘There is nobody that nobody sees.’
- b. Marie sieht nicht niemanden.
 Marie sees NEG n-body
 ‘Marie does not see nobody.’
 # ‘Marie does not see anybody.’

Since a NW triggers a double negation reading with a NM in (3b), German NWs must be inherently negative. In that case, the concord reading in (3a) should never arise—unless a quantifier resumption operation à la De Swart & Sag (2002) is at work. Following de Swart and Sag however, there would be no reason not to extend the possibility for concord readings to (3a): Resumptive quantification is an option in all languages, but the non-negative nature of NWs in “true” NC languages removes the ambiguity in readings. Since in these languages, NWs are non-negative, and the only available source of negative force is the negative operator, only a single-negation reading can ever arise. Crosslinguistically, this allows us to simplify the picture: instead of “true” NC languages like Czech and Italian, double negation languages like German, and French, we only have “true” NC languages and double negation languages, with French being a member of the latter. The upshot for French is that we can treat it like German, which gets rid of Zeijlstra’s complex operator/feature apparatus while allowing us to better account for the phenomena in (1) and (2).

Conclusion: A theory that unifies multiple-NW and NW-and-NM concord can not explain the data from the French NC system: the issue of ambiguity will always be a point of separation. Zeijlstra-style agreement can not handle the ambiguity in NC between multiple NWs in double negation languages, and resumptive quantification will overgenerate when it comes to NC between NMs and NWs. In fact, comparison with double negation languages shows a need to account for both types of NC separately, with de Swart and Sag handling the former and Zeijlstra handling the latter. This view from double negation allows us to see French as a nonexceptional member of the same category as the Germanic languages as far as NC is concerned. It also provides a leaner theoretical picture of French negation than the one found in Zeijlstra (2009).

References: de Swart, Henriette & Ivan A Sag. 2002. Negation and Negative Concord in Romance. 25(4). 373–417. Zeijlstra, Hedde. 2009. On French Negation. In Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society, vol. 35, 447–458.