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Not just constituent negation

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Interrogatives like (1) are ambiguous between a constituent negation reading and a sentential negation reading for some English speakers.

(1) Did you not shut the window?

On the constituent negation reading, (1) asks if the addressee left the window open (i.e. *not* adjoins to the verb phrase). The sentential negation reading is equivalent in meaning to (2), asking if it is not the case that the addressee shut the window (i.e. *not* takes sentential scope).

(2) Didn't you shut the window?

Some speakers, however, report that the sentential negation reading of (1) akin to (2) is absent (cf. Potsdam 1995, Bresnan 2001, Frampton 2001). It is tempting to conclude that in some English dialects (or idiolects), *not* is restricted to constituent negation in polar interrogatives, and that sentential negation can only be expressed as in (2), but this seemingly straightforward interpretation of the native speaker judgments is incorrect. In fact, the availability of the sentential negation interpretation for *not* emerges in (3), even for speakers who reject the possibility in a sentence like (1).

(3) Did you or did you not shut the window?

The constituent negation reading for (3), i.e. 'did you or did you leave the window open?', is incoherent. The only coherent interpretation of (3) is the sentential negation reading shared with (4), i.e. 'is it or is it not the case that you shut the window?'

(4) Did you or didn't you shut the window?

If the sentential negation interpretation of *not* were truly unavailable, then only the incoherent constituent negation interpretation of (3) should be available for speakers who reject the sentential negation reading in (1). Yet the judgments are the exact opposite of this prediction – the sentential negation reading is the only acceptable interpretation for (3), even for speakers who deny that (1) shares an interpretation with (2). For such speakers, the constituent negation reading of (1) may be so salient that it obscures the availability of the sentential negation reading to the extent that they reject it completely, but the availability of the sentential negation reading does emerge in

examples like (3), in which the disjunctive structure disfavours constituent negation. Therefore, (3) illustrates that any claim that interrogatives like (1) are incompatible with a syntactic representation that includes a sentential negation projection is problematic.

With respect to the empirical facts about English negation, (3) provides evidence that not in polar interrogatives is not just constituent negation. More generally, the contrasting intuitions reported with respect to the availability of a sentential negation reading for (1) illustrate that native speaker judgments do not always provide reliable data for assessing the availability of multiple structural representations and associated interpretations for a given clause type.

References

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