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Against heterogeneous origins for n’t and not
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Zwicky and Pullum (1983) claim that English n’t is an inflectional affix as opposed to a reduced form of not derived via cliticization. However, following through on the implications of this claim actually yields a new way to frame one of the main puzzles it purports to solve – the incompatibility of n’t and reduced auxiliaries/modals – rather than an explanation for that puzzle.

The clitic/affix distinction is meant to explain the contrasting status of (1) and (2).

(1) I'd've made my point by now. (from 'I would have made my point by now.')
(2) *I'dn't be so sure of that. (from 'I would not be so sure of that.')

According to Z&P, ’ve comes to be attached to ’d via cliticization in the syntax in (1); ’ve and ’d, reduced forms of have and would, are simple clitics. In (2), n’t is barred from similarly attaching to ’d; n’t seems not to behave as a simple clitic form of not. The ungrammaticality of *I’dn’t is attributed to the proposed affixal status of n’t. Since concatenation of inflectional affixes takes place in the lexicon, it cannot follow concatenation via syntactic cliticization in word formation.

If n’t is indeed an inflectional affix, then on the model of the grammar Z&P assumed, negative and non-negative auxiliaries/modals should exist alongside one another in the lexicon. Take has and hasn’t in (3a-b) as examples.

(3) a. He has seen the light.
   b. He hasn’t seen the light.

Note now that while has in (3a) can reduce to clitic ’s, as in (4a), ”has” in hasn’t can’t, as in (4b).

(4) a. He’s seen the light.
   b. *He’sn’t seen the light.

The contrast in (4) is rather mysterious if has and hasn’t are truly counterparts, since both ought to be able to behave as simple clitics. Z&P’s treatment of n’t thus raises the following question: why can’t a negative auxiliary/modal cliticize?

This question was obscured in the discussion of (2) because the only derivation considered for *I’dn’t involved illicit affixation of n’t following cliticization of would. The ques-
tion emerges clearly once (5), with the negative modal wouldn’t, is properly recognized as the source of (2) under an approach in which n’t is an inflectional affix.

(5) I wouldn’t be so sure of that.

Z&P’s conclusion that n’t is an affix has gained wide currency, and has become a source of support for the notion that the semantics of sentential negation can be distributed between heads and affixes in a grammar. However, at least one argument in support of heterogeneous origins for n’t and not is internally inconsistent.

Reference