Negative Concord as a feature of all English varieties
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1 The phenomena

1.1 Sentential (vs. constituent) negation

**Sentential negation** operates on a proposition to reverse its truth value.

So, if the affirmative declarative in (1) is true, then the negated declarative in (2) is false, and vice versa. (Throughout this handout, negative elements in the examples are marked in **bold**.)

(1) John ate breakfast today.
(2) **It is not the case** that John ate breakfast today.

**Constituent negation**, exemplified in (3), does not reverse the truth value of the proposition it embeds.

(3) It is so warm out today that you can go outside with **no coat**.

As I will illustrate, **Negative Concord** (the focus of this talk) constructions are interpreted as **sentential** negations.

1.2 Negative Concord: What is it, and who uses it?

**Negative Concord** (henceforth NC) constructions are single sentential negations with two or more negatively marked elements.

The following are two examples of NC:

(4) They **don’t** have **no work** in the winter. (Wolfram & Christian 1976)
   ‘They don’t have (any) work in the winter.’

(5) I **don’t never** have **no problems**. (Green 2002)
   ‘I don’t ever have (any) problems.’
   (= ‘I never have (any) problems.’)

Both examples contain more than one negative element, and both are interpreted as **single sentential negations**.

NC is realized in many of the world’s language groups and varieties, including (but not limited to):

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• Romance
• West Flemish
• Hungarian
  (cf. Puskás 2012)

• “Non-standard” varieties of American English, such as:
  ➢ Appalachian English (AppE)
  ➢ African American English (AAE)
    (cf. Wolfram and Fasold 1974; Sells et al. 1996; Green 2002; Coles-White 2004)

In fact, standardized English varieties like Standard American English (SAE) are apparently the only varieties of English in which NC is not realized! Let us keep this fact in mind as we continue…

1.2 Double Negation in English

The term Double Negation (henceforth DN) is used to describe constructions in which, as distinct from NC, two negative elements in a sentence yield two semantic negations.

In English, DN constructions come in a variety of types. Today I will discuss only one of these types, which I will call “Long Distance DNs”.

**LONG DISTANCE DNs:** DNs that result when the two negative elements in a sentence are (structurally) far apart from each other (in a manner to be discussed in detail).

(6) The man didn’t paint the house with no windows.
   ‘It is not the case that the man painted the house that has no windows.’

**IMPORTANT OBSERVATION:** Long distance DNs of the type in (6) are available in all English varieties, including both SAE and so-called “NC-varieties”. (We will return to this point further on in the talk.)

1.3 BACK TO NEGATIVE CONCORD: Locality restrictions

NC constructions are subject to restrictions on locality. Specifically, if two or more negative elements are to enter into a NC relation, they must reside within the same significant syntactic domain (in a sense I later define in more detail).
When the two negative elements are separated by a significant syntactic boundary, such as a clause marker, a DN results. The following AAE examples from Coles-White (2004: 213) illustrate this point:

African American English

(7) He don’t have **no friends**. 
   ‘He doesn’t have (any) friends.’ (= ‘He has no friends.’)

(8) He don’t like going there with **no friends**. 
   ‘He doesn’t like going there without (any) friends.’

**INTERESTINGLY, the fact that the negative marker and the negative noun phrase are too far apart for NC in (9) does not render the sentence ungrammatical** in AAE. It simply results in DN.

2 Standard assumptions and further considerations about NC in English

2.1 Standard assumptions

Linguists often assume, either explicitly or implicitly, that **NC is not grammatical in SAE**. This assumption has manifested itself in the following ways:

(i) **RULE-BASED APPROACHES**: These approaches implicitly presuppose that NC grammar is theoretically non-basic, such that NC is derived from an underlying representation, which is the “standard” (cf. Wolfram & Fasold 1974; Wolfram & Christian 1976; among others).

(ii) **MARGINALIZATION OF THE FACTS**: In these cases, while the existence of NC in English may be mentioned, the facts of NC in “non-standard” English are generally not accounted for in the models provided. (cf. Herburger 2001; Horn 2001; Puskás 2012; among many others).

(iii) **TWO DIFFERENT GRAMMARS**: This approach is most clearly exemplified by the Minimalist approach in Zeijlstra (2004), who explicitly provides two **distinct grammatical models**, one for SAE, and another for “sub-standard” English varieties.

2.2 Three considerations regarding NC in English

There are three additional considerations regarding NC in English that suggest the need for an alternative to the standard approaches.

**CONSIDERATION #1**: The use of NC and Negative Polarity Item (NPI) constructions is **variable** among speakers of ‘non-standard’ varieties.
As noted by Wolfram and Fasold (1974) and Wolfram and Christian (1976), most groups of English speakers (excluding, for example, SAE speakers) variably use both of the following:

- **NC CONSTRUCTIONS** as in ‘John didn’t eat nothing’, and also…
- **NEGATIVE POLARITY ITEM (NPI) CONSTRUCTIONS** as in ‘John didn’t eat anything’.

CONSIDERATION #2: Until the late 18th century, NC was part of the “standard” variety.

- In the late 18th century, there was a conscious and intentional stigmatization of NC constructions on the part of prescriptive grammarians (Nevalainen 2006).
- This fact about NC distinguishes it from other grammatical phenomena known to have undergone diachronic change, such as the shift away from V-to-I movement (as documented in Kroch (1994)).
- *The social stigmatization of NC is alive and well today.* It is not coincidental that standardized varieties are the only English varieties that do not employ NC.

CONSIDERATION #3: Like speakers of “non-standard” varieties such as AAE and AppE, SAE speakers readily and correctly interpret NC constructions as single sentential negations, and not as DN.

In an experimental study aimed at contributing to our knowledge base regarding the trajectory of child AAE acquisition, Coles-White (2004) tested both AAE and SAE speakers aged five to seven on their comprehension of NC and DN.

**RESULTS OF COLES-WHITE (2004):**

- There were *no significant differences* between SAE and AAE speakers in their interpretation of NC and DN.
- For both groups, DN constructions were significantly harder to interpret.

TAKEN TOGETHER, #1, #2, and #3 have led me to explore the following hypothesis, which I will call Hypothesis A.

**HYPOTHESIS A:** NC is grammatical (=*generated by the grammar*) in all English varieties (including SAE), but is simply not *realized* (in the sense of Barbiers 2005, to be discussed) in the standardized variety.

This hypothesis contrasts directly with the hypothesis previously pursued by Zeijlstra (2004) (and either explicitly or implicitly assumed by others), which I will call Hypothesis B, and which can be stated as follows:
HYPOTHESIS B: NC is not grammatical (=generated by the grammar) in SAE. NC-varieties of English are grammatically distinct from SAE in this regard. In SAE, constructions with two marked negations can only be generated as DNs.

I now illustrate how one particular (and popular) instantiation of the Hypothesis B approach cannot account for all of the facts of English varieties.

2.3 Zeijlstra (2004): The Agree Approach to NC

WHAT IS “AGREE”?

- Agree (Chomsky 1995 et seq.) is a relation between a probe (= a c-commanding head with “uninterpretable” features) and a goal (= a subordinate head with matching but “interpretable” features).

- In Chomsky’s original proposal, uninterpretable features are:
  - Abstract case features on noun phrases
  - Agreement features on functional heads (such as T)
  - So-called “EPP-features”

*Note that the “uninterpretability” of these features is rather intuitive, as none appears to make any independent contribution to semantic interpretation.

CRUCIALLY, if a structure is sent off to an interpretive module unvalued uninterpretable features, the derivation will not be legible and will “crash”. As such, a fully formed construction with unvalued uninterpretable features is ungrammatical.

IN HIS SEMINAL DISSERTATION, Zeijlstra (2004) applies the Agree model to NC constructions. The following ideas are central to his proposal:

- In the realm of sentential negation, Universal Grammar (UG) makes possible the following two grammatical options:
  - NC-GRAMMARS: These grammars instantiate NC constructions.
  - DN-GRAMMARS: These grammars do not generate NC constructions.

- Languages with NC-grammars (i.e. “NC languages”) have syntactic sentential negation, while DN-grammars have only semantic negation and no NC.

- Only grammars with syntactic negation project a syntactic Negative Phrase (NegP).
  - In these grammars, NegP is the projection of an uninterpretable [\( u^{NEG} \)] feature (\( u \) stands for uninterpretable).
  - (NOTE: Application of Chomsky’s notion of uninterpretability seems rather counterintuitive here given that, unlike abstract case, for example, negation clearly contributes to semantic interpretation.)
• Crucially, only grammars with syntactic negation can generate NC.

• NC is realized as “Multiple Agree”.
  ➢ Negative elements within a structure are specified for \([u_{\text{NEG}}]\), and they probe upward to Agree with a matching but interpretable \([i_{\text{NEG}}]\) feature on the negative operator.

The structure in (10) illustrates Zeijlstra’s proposal for the “sub-standard” English NC construction in (9) (Zeijlstra 2004: 258; \(\neg = \text{negative operator}\)):

(9) John didn’t do nothing.
    NC: ‘John did nothing.’

(10) \([\text{NegP} \neg [u_{\text{NEG}}] [\text{Neg} \ n't [u_{\text{NEG}}] [\text{VP} \ do \ nothing [u_{\text{NEG}}]]]]\]

2.3.1 A problem for the Agree approach to NC

Consider the following NC and DN constructions from the Coles-White (2004) study, both of which are acceptable and (by hypothesis) grammatical in AAE:

(11a) The boy didn’t cut down the fence with no axe.
    NC ‘It is not the case that the boy used an axe to cut down the fence.’

(11b) The boy didn’t cut down the fence with no gate.
    DN ‘It is not the case that the boy cut down the fence that has no gate.’

**Problem**: The Agree approach cannot account for the coexistence of these two sentence types within the same grammar, and thus makes incorrect predictions for “non-standard” English varieties.

• If negative elements in ‘NC-Grammars have only \([u_{\text{NEG}}]\), then a grammar that can generate (11a) should not be able to generate (11b). The logic that leads to this conclusion is as follows:
  ➢ Under the Agree approach, (11a) is NC because the negative DP ‘no axe’ has \([u_{\text{NEG}}]\), and it agrees with a silent operator (with \([i_{\text{NEG}}]\)) on the NegP in its clause.
  ➢ In (11b) the negative DP ‘no gate’ is embedded inside the more complex DP ‘the fence with no gate’.
  ➢ The edge of this complex DP represents a significant syntactic boundary (i.e. a phase boundary; to be discussed), across which Agree cannot happen.
The DP-external negative operator, the only element in the structure with [$\text{i neg}$], is excluded from the probing domain of [$\text{u neg}$] on no gate.

AS SUCH, the Agree approach incorrectly predicts that one of the following will happen in (11b):

(i) If [$\text{u neg}$] on no gate cannot Agree with [$\text{i neg}$], the construction should crash (i.e., it should be unacceptable for AAE speakers because it is ungrammatical).

(ii) If, on the other hand, it is somehow possible for [$\text{u neg}$] on no gate to Agree across the phase boundary, then an NC reading is predicted.

Neither (i) nor (ii) is borne out.

The Agree approach relies on the positing of uninterpretable [$\text{u neg}$] features. However, if we model NC with uninterpretable negative features, we cannot capture the grammatical coexistence of NC and DN in English varieties. If we wish to capture the facts, we must pursue a different approach.

3 Grammaticality vs. realization in usage (Barbiers 2005)

Barbiers (2005) proposes the concept of “unrealized” (vs. “ungrammaticalized”) structures, on the following grounds:

- Dutch varieties have a substantial amount of variation in the ordering of three-verb clusters (i.e., modal + auxiliary + participle).

- A principled account of the phenomena can be provided:
  - Of the six logical possibilities, only five are attested across all varieties.

- Crucially, Barbiers’s syntactic analysis successfully rules out the unattested order.

- The remaining five orders are shown to be grammatical and realized with varying degrees of frequency.

- The orders a speaker uses are the orders realized in her variety.

How does this apply to NC?

- For NC the issue at hand is not word order but rather the number of negative elements that are acceptable in a single sentential negation. (Recall, this restriction does not apply to DN.)
• Because SAE is the only variety of English in which NC is not realized, it is likely that most (if not all) SAE speakers have been exposed to NC.

• There is a heavy social stigma associated with the use of NC.

• SAE speakers have no trouble identifying and comprehending NC constructions in out of the blue contexts, and there are few instances in which NC constructions are misinterpreted as DN (M. Montgomery, personal communication).

So, on the basis of these facts, let us assume Hypothesis A, that NC is grammatical in all English varieties, but just not realized in the standardized variety (in the sense of Barbiers 2005), as a working hypothesis, and see where it leads us…

4 A Hypothesis A approach
In this portion of the talk I illustrate elements of my Hypothesis A approach, which assumes that NC is grammatical in all English varieties.

4.1 Feature spreading à la Tortora (2009; to appear)

Tortora (2009; to appear) observes the following unidirectional entailment in Romance: If a language has ‘low’ object clitic placement in simple tense clauses, then it has ‘low’ object clitic placement in compound tense clauses.

Tortora’s explanation for this entailment pattern appeals, in part, to her “feature spreading hypothesis”.

FEATURE SPREADING IN TORTORA (2009, In press): The feature [finite] spreads downward from T (where it is merged) to the heads of lower functional projections.

Tortora proposes that:
• The object clitic is incompatible with the feature [finite], and cannot attach to a head specified for this feature.

• In Borgomanerese simple tense clauses (12), the feature [finite] cannot spread into the verbal domain (demarcated by XP), hence the object clitic can enclicize there.

(Throughout this handout, the impact of feature spreading is highlighted, and the vertical line ( | ) shows where feature spreading stops.)

\[(12) \ [\text{CP1} [\text{TP1} T_{[finite]} [\text{FP2} F_{2\text{[finite]}]} \ldots [\text{XP} X_{[\ldots]}] \ldots \text{ (Borgomanerese)} \Rightarrow \Rightarrow | ] \]

In Piedmontese (13), the feature [finite] spreads into the verbal domain and object clitic enclisis is impossible:

\[(13) \ [\text{CP1} [\text{TP1} T_{[finite]} [\text{FP2} F_{2\text{[finite]}]} \ldots [\text{XP} X_{[finite]}] \text{ [finite]}] \ldots \text{ (Piedmontese)} \Rightarrow \Rightarrow \Rightarrow ] \]
CRUCIALLY, this proposal correctly rules out the non-existent grammar that has low object clitic placement in simple tense clauses but not in compound tense clauses.

NOTE: The trajectory of feature spreading can be throughout, but **no further than, the heads residing in extended projection of the verb** (in the sense of Grimshaw 2000). This fact will become important when I apply feature spreading to sentential negation.

4.2 Sentential negation and feature spreading

Tortora’s (2009; to appear) feature spreading hypothesis captures the following intuitive idea:

> Features essential to a proposition or event, such as [finite], are shared by the functional projections within a clause, not just the one on which they are merged.

- Like finiteness, **sentential negation also applies to a set of proposition-forming elements**. (Recall that sentential negation reverses the truth value of the proposition to which it applies.) It follows, then, that in sentential negation we might also find feature spreading.

I propose that in sentential negation, a [+NEG] feature that is merged on the head of NegP spreads downward as follows. (Grey highlighting indicates the trajectory of feature spreading.)

\[ \text{CP} \left\{ \text{NegP} \rightarrow \text{NEG} \right\} \rightarrow \text{TP} \rightarrow \text{NEG} \rightarrow \text{vP} \rightarrow \text{NEG} \rightarrow \text{VP} \rightarrow \text{V} \rightarrow \text{NEG} \rightarrow \ldots \]

Downward feature spreading of [+NEG] as in (14) from the head of NegP results in the formation of a feature chain, which I call **The [+NEG] chain**:

**THE [+NEG] CHAIN**: \{NEG, TNEG, vNEG, VNEG\}

The head of this chain is on Neg (the head of NegP), and its foot is on V.

(NOTE: The idea that a verb might have a negative feature in the context of sentential negation should not be controversial, given that many of the world’s languages have sentential negation morphemes that attach directly to verbs.)

4.3 Feature spreading and NC

To account for NC constructions by way of feature spreading, I also adopt the notion of syntactic **phasehood** and **spell-out domains**, as proposed in Chomsky (2001).

**PHASES** are syntactic objects that are propositional (such as vP), and/or introduce force (such as CP).
(Phases are also subject to the **Phase Impenetrability Condition (PIC)**, which stipulates that only the head and specifier of a phase are visible to the outside and hence accessible for further computation.)

A **Spell-out domain** is a chunk of syntactic structure that is transferred to the interpretive modules independently of the rest of the structure that contains it.

- Spell-out domains are therefore interpreted, in some sense, by themselves.
- Spell-out domains are *the complements of phases*. (For example, VP, the complement of v, is a spell-out domain).

With these tools in place, we can derive NC in English as follows:

- If feature spreading and sentential negation go hand in hand, then where we have sentential negation, the [+NEG] has spread into the vP phase.
- The structure of the vP in (11a) (‘The boy didn’t cut down the fence with no axe.’) would therefore be as in Figure 2:

![Figure 2: Structure of vP for (11a)](image)

In this structure, the foot of the [+NEG] chain and the [+NEG] feature on the vP-embedded DP reside in the same spell out domain.

- Therefore, they are interpreted together as part of the same *sentential* negation.

This proposal for English NC constructions makes the following **two clear predictions:**
(i) If sentential negation entails feature spreading, then *NC should be possible in all English varieties.*

- As discussed above, this prediction appears to be supported by the considerations in #1 through #3.

(ii) If a [\(+\text{NEG}\)] feature (like the one on ‘no axe’ in (11a)) resides in a spell-out domain that contains *no members of the [\(+\text{NEG}\)] chain,* it should *not* be interpreted as part of the sentential negation.

- This configuration is predicted to result in a DN and, crucially, *not* ungrammaticality (in contrast with the Agree approach)!

I now illustrate exactly how the prediction in (ii) is borne out.

4.3 Feature spreading and DN

Recall (11b), which is a DN in both SAE and AAE:

(11b) The man didn’t cut down the fence with *no gate.*

Under the feature spreading hypothesis, as applied to sentential negation, the structure of the vP in (11b) is as follows:

*Figure 3: Structure of vP for (11b)*

Assuming that phases are propositional (as in Chomsky 2001), *the complex DP in this structure represents its own phase.*

**THEREFORE:**

- PP, the complement of DP in which [+NEG] resides, will be spelled out separately from the foot of the [+NEG] chain on V, resulting in a *grammatical* DN.
• This proposal thus accurately captures the facts of AAE and SAE as established and in Coles-White (2004).

Note: This approach captures the grammatical coexistence of NC and DN without appeal to uninterpretable negative features. As we saw, appeal to uninterpretable [\textsuperscript{hNEG}] incorrectly predicts ungrammaticality for DN like (11b).

5 Conclusion
Applying Tortora’s (2009; to appear) feature spreading hypothesis to sentential negation and NC allows us to:

• Account for the facts of NC and DN in English varieties simultaneously
• Abandon the counterintuitive appeal to an uninterpretable negative feature
• Model NC in English in a way that acknowledges its existence and accounts for its distribution among speakers
• Gain new insight into the representation of sentential negation

HOWEVER, one can (and should) raise the following question:

If structures can be grammatical but simply not realized (as in Barbiers 2005), then how can we, as linguists, know if any given unacceptable construct is ungrammatical or simply not realized?

Put differently, is the claim that NC structures are grammatical in SAE falsifiable?

I believe the answer is yes: We can attempt to falsify this claim by testing the predictions made by the Hypothesis A approach in the following ways:

• Experimental tasks of the sort administered in Coles-White (2004) (but that employ a wider range of NC and DN constructions) can be administered to adult speakers of SAE and other “non-standard” varieties.

• We can ask American English speakers to compare the status of a wide range of acceptable and grammatical through unacceptable and ungrammatical constructions, and observe how NC constructions pattern as compared to other constructions with a clearer status.
  ➢ In this regard, a Hypothesis A approach would predict that NC constructions should pattern similarly to preposition-stranding constructions, for example, given that these constructions are believed to be grammatical (cf. Chomsky 1986) but unacceptable in certain contexts (such as academic prose) for sociolinguistic reasons.

Claims that make testable predictions are indeed falsifiable. We thus have reason to consider the Hypothesis A approach of \([+\text{NEG}]\) feature spreading as applied to NC as a viable candidate for modeling NC in English.
References