

The Italian negative system: expletiveness as a consequence of a diachronic change in the syntactic status of negation



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Abstract

In this poster I will focus on the **Modern Italian negative system** showing that it depends on a crucial change occurred in Archaic Latin: Latin negative morpheme **nōn** ("not"), which initially displayed a maximal projection status (Gianollo, 2016), became a syntactic (negative) head (**Spec-to-head principle** / **Head Preference Principle**, cfr. van Gelderen, 2004).

This change, which has been inherited by Italian and many other Romance languages, also determines the availability of the **expletive reading** of negation.

More specifically, I will support the **generalization** that only languages (and structures) displaying a negative head allow the expletive interpretation of negation (some issues with languages like German).

Introduction

Negation characterizes all and only human languages (Horn 1989) and it represents a **one-place operator** reversing the truth-value conditions of the sentence in which it occurs. Crucially, **Latin** and **Italian** instantiate two very different negative systems — although Italian comes from Latin: respectively, a **double negation (DN)** system (1a) — where the co-occurrence of two negative elements generates an affirmative meaning—and a **negative concord (NC)** one (1b) — where the co-occurrence of two, or more, negative elements constitute a single instance of negation:

- (1) a. Nemo nōn videt (Cic. Leal. 99.6)
nobody not sees
'Everyone sees'
b. Non vede nessuno
neg sees nobody
'Nobody sees'

Crucial Data

- (2) a. **ne** ningulus mederi queat. (3rd century BC - Aes Rapinum)
not nobody to.heal can.subj.3rd.sg
'S/he does cannot heal anybody'
b. **Neque** ego homines magis asinos **numquam** vidi (Plautus, Pseud. 136)
not-and I human-beings.Acc. more donkies.Acc.plu never saw
'I've never seen any men who were more like donkeys'
c. **ne** legat id **nemo**... (Tibullus 3, 13)
neg read.Subj.Pres.3rd.sg. it nobody
'to avoid the risk that anyone read it....'

Latin shows several cases of **NC constructions**, particularly in the language of uses and in the colloquial style since the **Archaic** period

- (i) simplifying the discussion in **Zeijlstra** (2004), I assume that if there is a syntactic negative head—which projects the structure of the negative phrase NegP—then NC construction occurs, otherwise DN construction occurs;
(ii) in the Latin system *nōn* should be, at the same time, a negative **head** instantiating a case of negative concord construction, and a **maximum projection**, instantiating a case of double negation construction since negative morpheme *ne* has only acquired a head status over time, as an effect of **Jespersen's Cycle** (Gianollo 2016) (see also *Non-ne* & *Num-ne*)

- Stage 1:** simple negative morpheme *nē* (negative head); (taken from Gianollo, 2016)
Stage 2: reinforced negative morpheme formed by *nē* + *oinom* (*ūnus*) (head + max. projection)
Stage 3: new simplified negative morpheme *nōn* (negative head).

An emerging phenomenon: the Expletive Negation (EN)

- (3) a. Timeo **ne** aborem augeam (Cic, Leg, 1.4)
Fear.Pres.1st.Sg neg work-Acc increase.Subj.1st.Sg.
'I'm afraid that I shall increase my work.'
b...et non è da fidare in loro infin che **non**
and neg is to to.trust in them until that EN
son conosciuti
are known
'... and do not trust them until they have been well known'
c. Rimarrò alla festa finché **non** arriva Gianni (Modern Italian)
stay.1stSG.FUT to-the party until neg arrives John
'I will stay at the party until John arrives'
d. Je **ne** nie **pas** [que je **n'** aie ètè bien reçu] (French, in Muller 1978)
I NEG deny NEG that I neg have been well receive
'I do not deny that I was received well.'
e. I drede **not** pat **ne** pe curs of God [...]wolde (van der Wurff 1999)
I doubt not that EN the curse of God [...]would
brynge me into a ful yitel eende if I contynuedepus
bring me into a very evil end if I continued.thus
'I do not doubt that God's curse would bring me to a very evil end if I continued like this'.
f. I will stay at the party until John (***not**) arrives

The French morphemes **ne** and **pas** constitute a single instance of negation by being generated in the same NegP (Zanuttini 1997 and references): *pas* in (*Spec*, *NegP*) and *ne* in *Neg^o*. Crucially, EN in the subordinate clause 'je *n'ai* ètè bien reçu' only displays the **negative head** *ne*, excluding the element with the maximal projection status *pas*. Similarly, the Late Middle English sentence displays two negative markers syntactically different: the adverb **not** with a maximal projection status, and the negative marker **ne** with a head status: only **ne** realizes EN

Generalization

only languages (and structures) displaying a **negative head** allow the expletive interpretation of negation, languages without negative heads do not.

This generalization moves in the same direction of **Zeijlstra's (2011)** observation that "there is no language without Negative Concord that exhibits a negative marker that is a syntactic head" (p. 136).

From this point of view, **two apparently distinct phenomena**, i.e., negative concord and EN, seem to be the **reflex of a single parameter**: the syntactic nature of a negative element.

Focusing on a special type of EN: Exclamatives

- (4) Che cosa **non** ha mangiato Gianni!
what neg/EN has eaten John
a. 'What has John eaten!' (Expletive Negation Exclamative, thus **ENE**)
b. 'What has not John eaten!' (Negative Exclamative, thus **NE**)

According to Zanuttini and Portner (2003), exclamatives are **factive** and, therefore, can only be embedded under factive predicates (5a). However, focusing on a specific sub-class of factive predicates, i.e., **to know-verbs** (4b), only the NE interpretation is possible, and the **ENEs one is ruled out**:

- (5) a. È incredibile [che cosa **non** abbia mangiato Gianni]!
is incredible what neg/EN had.Subj.3rd.Sg eaten John
'It is incredible what John did not eat!' (NE)
'It is incredible what John ate!' (ENE)
b. Luca **sa** [che cosa **non** ha mangiato Gianni]!
Luke knows what neg/EN has eaten John
'Luke knows what John did not eat!' (NE)
'#Luke knows what John ate!' (#ENE)

Analysis

When the negative marker is merged in the **TP-domain**, as it is generally assumed (Zanuttini 1997; Poletto 2008), it gives the standard negation reading; when it is merged in a higher position, i.e. **the CP-domain** (à la Laka 1990 and à la Greco 2020), it gives the expletive negation reading since the v*P-phase has already been closed – (phases are underlined) (see Greco 2020 for Surprisal Negative Sentences)

- a. [CP ... [v*P [X⁰ non] ...] (NE)
b. [CP ... [X⁰ non] ... [v*P ...] (ENE)

Crucially, the high position of negation in ENEs can also explain why they cannot occur under factive predicates: they select a **reduced CP**, leaving no space for several functional phrases including, arguably, negation (Grewendorf 2002; Haegeman 2012)



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