

Subject-Object Asymmetries in the Acceptability of English Sentences with Two Negatives
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English sentences with two negatives have two possible interpretations: a Negative Concord (NC) interpretation ((1a) and (2a)), where the two negatives form a singly negative meaning, and a Double Negation (DN) interpretation where each negative makes an independent contribution to the sentence's meaning. Consider the examples in (1) and (2):

(1) **Negative Object**

(1a) NC: Sam went to Lisa's favorite store with her, but he just stood there while she shopped. He didn't buy **nothing** in that store.

(1b) DN: Sam said he walked out of the store without buying anything, but I know better. He didn't buy **nothing** in that store.

(2) **Negative Subject**

(2a) NC: The teacher forgot to get the classroom ready for the first day. **Nothing** wasn't ready before the students arrived.

(2b) DN: The teacher worked all night to prepare the classroom for her students. **Nothing** wasn't ready before the students arrived.

Note that in (1) the negative constituent 'nothing' is in object position and in (2) it is in subject position. Previous researchers have made two interesting and related observations about English NC. The first pertains to usage: While NC is found in almost all English varieties (Wolfram and Christian 1974), not all English NC users employ both types in (1a) and (2a): Only a subset of NC speakers who use Object NC (e.g. (1a)) use Subject NC (e.g. (2a)) (Smith 2001). Usage patterns thus indicate that Object NC is a more basic form of English NC, and that Subject NC has a special status (see also Green 2002, 2011, among others). The second interesting observation pertains to NC interpretation: Standardized English speakers who apparently do not use NC nevertheless interpret strings like (1) out of the blue as NC (and not DN) (Coles-White 2004), but they interpret strings like (2) out of the blue as DN constructions. English Subject NC thus appears to have a special status in both usage and interpretation patterns.

Blanchette (2013) provides a syntactic model of English NC that predicts that English NC is grammatical in all English varieties, including standardized English, attributing the degraded acceptability of English NC to sociolinguistic factors (cf. Nevalainen 2006). However, Blanchette's syntactic model fails to incorporate previously observed subject-object asymmetries in NC usage discussed above. In this paper, we exploited these usage and interpretation patterns to test the hypothesis that NC is grammatical though unacceptable for some speakers. Given the special status of Subject NC, we predicted that speakers who do not accept NC will nevertheless detect a difference between Object and Subject NC. To test this hypothesis, we asked 105 participants to rate the naturalness of sentences with two negatives using a Likert scale of one to seven (Study I). Following Keller (2000), we divided participants into two groups: Group A (n = 53) did not receive a context for interpretation while Group B (n = 52) did. (Examples (1) and (2) above include test items (underlined) and sample contexts.)

Overall our Study I participants did not accept English sentences with two negatives: Mean scores for all test items in Groups A and B were less than four. Confirming our prediction, a two (negative subject vs. negative object) by two (NC context vs. DN context) ANOVA revealed an effect of the position of the negative constituent (object vs. subject) on acceptability: Group B disliked items significantly more when the negative constituent was in subject position

($F(1, 51)=12.64, p=.001$). (Group A also disliked negative subjects ($Mean=3$) more than negative objects ($Mean=3.3$), but this difference was not significant; ($t(52) = 1.75, p = .08$.) Further confirming our prediction, we found a significant interaction in Group B between the position of the negative constituent (object vs. subject) and context (NC vs. DN) ($F(1,51)=30.15, p < .001$). This interaction means that Group B participants disliked items with a negative object significantly more when presented in a DN context than when presented in an NC context, and they disliked items with a negative subject significantly more when presented in an NC context than when presented in a DN context.

To check that the effect of the position of the negative constituent in sentences with two negatives was not simply due to an increased processing load presented by the sentence-initial negative, we conducted a follow-up study (Study II) with identical design but with a single negative per item (e.g. ‘he bought nothing in that store’, and ‘nothing was ready before the students arrived’). These results also revealed a significant effect of the position of the negative constituent, but in the opposite direction. In Study II, participants in Group A (the no-context group) significantly preferred sentences with the negative in subject position ($Mean=5.93$) over sentences with the negative in object position ($Mean=5.2; t(100)=9.33, p<.001$). The introduction of a context improved overall acceptability ratings for participants in Group B, but the effect was the same. Group B participants also preferred negative subjects ($Mean=6.06$) over negative objects ($Mean=5.76; t(100)=4.72, p<.001$).

The novel experimental data we report in this paper not only replicate the results of previous studies of usage and interpretation for English NC with respect to observed subject-object asymmetries in English NC, they do so with a previously unobserved group of speakers: speakers who do not accept or use NC (as ascertained by a series of questions following the survey). If our participants had no grammatical knowledge of NC then either they would not detect a difference between Object and Subject NC (i.e. they would dislike them both equally), or they would prefer negative subjects over negative objects, as they did in Study II. Our results thus support the hypothesis that speakers who do not accept NC nevertheless have grammatical knowledge of it.

References

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