دلالات تراكيب النفي في اللغة الإنجليزية

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ملخص

النفي هو أسلوب لغوي يُستخدم في اللغات البشرية كلها دون غيرها للتعبير عن التضاد الدلالي وله عدة وظائف أخرى. يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة بعض القضايا الرئيسة المتصلة بدلالات تراكيب النفي في اللغة الإنجليزية ويقدم تحليلاً لهذه التراكيب مع التركيز على كيفية اختلافها عن تراكيب الإثبات في الوظيفة والمعنى، إذ يُمكن استخدام جمل النفي لغايات شتى منها الرفض والإنكار والنهي أو الحظر. كما ويُسلط هذا البحث الضوء على مسألة النفي المتعدد والنفي المزدوج ويوضح كيف يمكن استخدام ذلك أحيانًا لإضعاف النفي وأحيانًا أخرى للتأكيد عليه. ويدرس البحث أيضا أثر النفي في بعض الجمل التي يُصبح لها معنيان عند نفيها. وأخيرًا، سيتم مناقشة القطبية السلبية والإيجابية وأثر ذلك في فهم معاني تراكيب النفي وأخيرا لا بد من التمييز بين نوعين من نطاق النفي أحدهما الواسع وهو على مستوى الجملة كلها والآخر الضيق ويشمل بعض مكونات الجملة.

كلمات مفتاحية

التضاد الدلالي، جمل النفي، النفي المتعدد، النفي المزدوج، القطبية السلبية، القطبية الإيجابية، نطاق النفي.

On the Semantics of Negative Structures

in English

Abstract

Negation is a universal property of all human languages used to express semantic oppositeness. This paper aims at studying some major issues that are related to the interpretation of negative constructions in English. It presents an analysis of these structures focusing on how they differ from affirmative or positive constructions in function and meaning. Negatives can be used to reject an offer, deny an allegation, or prohibit an unwanted action. The issue of multiple negation, including double negatives, is explained showing how they can sometimes be used to weaken negation and at other times to emphasise it. The paper also considers how negation may affect sentence interpretation as a sentence may become ambiguous due to negation. Finally, negative polarity and scope of negation are discussed. The distinction between wide (sentential)

scope negation and narrow (constituent) scope negation will be discussed.

Key Words:

Semantic oppositeness, negative constructions, affirmatives, double negation, multiple negation, negative polarity, scope of negation.

On the Semantics of Negative Structures

1. Introduction

Understanding the meaning of sentences has to do with the understanding of the role that grammatical rules play during the interpretation of clauses and language in general. This paper is mainly concerned with aspects of interpreting negation in the English language. Thus, it will focus on the semantic properties of negative structures including the various functions that negation fulfills in addition to some other properties of negatives such as ambiguity and scope.

Negation as a linguistic phenomenon is so rich in its manifestations. It is so important to all human beings because it helps us to express not only what we want but also what we do not want. As Horn and Kato (2000) put it, negative constructions are central to any system of human communication but it is not that important to any system of animal communication. Negation can be understood as being a process or operation that expresses the opposite meaning of its affirmative counterpart. It is a "phenomenon of semantic opposition. Negation relates an expression \(e\) to another

expression with a meaning that is in some way opposed to the meaning of \(e\)" as stated by Horn (2001, p. 1). Thus, a negative sentence will be true if its affirmative equivalent is false and it is false if its negative counterpart is true. Consider the following example:

1) a. Mary came to the party.

   b. Mary did not come to the party.

Anyone who knows English will agree that if example (1a) is true, then its negative equivalent in (1b) is definitely false and that if (1a) is false, then (1b) is true. This means that (1b) is, indeed, a negative form of example (1a).

2. Differences between affirmatives and negatives

Affirmative and negative constructions differ in various ways. One difference between the two types of clause is that an affirmative form is the unmarked structure whereas a negative structure is the marked one. Affirmative sentences have less words and they are therefore more economic while negative ones have more words (at least a negator to express negation) or affixes (*happy* / *unhappy*):

2) a. Mary was late.

   b. Mary was not late.

The negative sentence in (2b) is more complex in structure than the affirmative one in (2a). This makes the first sentence unmarked while the second one marked. This is consistent with what Leech (2006, p.62) concluded when he says that whenever "there is a contrast between two or more members of a category, one of them is called 'marked' if it contains some extra elements, as opposed to the 'unmarked' member which does not."

Moreover, it is argued that negative sentences are less informative than their affirmative counterparts. Let us consider the following examples and focus on the semantic content of both of them:

3) Damascus is the capital of Syria.
4) Aleppo isn't the capital of Syria.

It is clear that the first sentence provides more information than the second one. This shows that affirmative clauses are indeed more informative than negative ones.

Furthermore, an affirmative structure is usually used to express the validity or truth of an assertion whereas a negative one expresses the falsity of what this structure conveys. Consider examples (5) and (6):

5) Mary is at home.

6) Mary is not at home.

The first sentence is affirmative and it conveys that Mary is at home indeed, while the second one is negative and states that it is false that Mary is at home. In this sense, as argued by Dahl (1979, p. 80), negation is "a means for converting a sentence S1 into another sentence S2 such that S2 is true whenever S1 is false, and vice versa." Similarly, Miestamo (2007, p. 552) defines negation as "an operator that reverses the truth value of a proposition. Thus, when p is true, not-p is false, and vice versa." However, there are cases where negation may not give the exact opposite meaning of an affirmative clause. This is the case in sentences with a particular modality. In fact, the meaning or semantic effect of negation in examples (7) and (8) is rather different:

7) She must leave.

8) She must not leave.

In fact, there is a difference in meaning apart from the negation issue. 'Must' and 'must not' are not exact opposites. The opposite of *'She must leave'* has a meaning like '*She does not have to leave'* or *''She needn't leave'*. As for *'She must not leave'*, it has a stronger meaning than *'does not have to'*. It may mean that 'She should not leave'

Furthermore, Quirk et.al. (1985) list some additional properties that differentiate negative clauses from positive ones. One of these properties is that a clause negative may be followed by a positive checking tag question as in (9):

9) They don't speak Japanese, do they?

The tag "do they" has a semantic function of checking the point being made. Positive clauses, on the other hand, are followed by a negative tag question as in the following example:

10) They speak Japanese, don't they?

Another property of negative clauses is that they may sometimes be followed by a negative tag to provide some additional information as in (11) and (12):

11) He doesn't speak Japanese, neither does his wife.

12) He doesn't speak Japanese, nor does his wife.

Negative clauses, however, may be followed by positive tag clauses with no subject-Auxiliary inversion as in (13) and (14), which are taken from Quirk et.al. (1985, p. 777):

13) I haven't finished, but you HAVE.

14) I've finished, and YOU have TOO.

In discourse, negative clauses may be followed by negative agreement responses as in (15):

15) A. She doesn't speak English.
B. No, she doesn't.

A further property of negative clauses is that they may be followed by a non-assertive expression such as *any* as in the following example:

16) They won't have any activities next week.

Positive clauses do not accept the occurrence of such items as indicated by the ungrammaticality of the following sentence when containing the word *any*:

17) They will have some/ *any activities next week.

Finally, negative and positive clauses differ in that the former may not contain expressions with a positive orientation such as *pretty*, *quite*, *rather*, etc. as in (19):

18) He is rather old.

19) *He isn't rather old.

The two sentences in (18) and (19) are identical except in negation. But the former is grammatical while the latter is not. This means that the expression *'rather'* cannot be used in negative clauses.

3. Functions of negation

Negation can be used to convey various functions. This section is dedicated to the investigation of the functions that negative structures may have including describing (or informing), rejecting, prohibiting, and denying (Alnawaisheh, 2015). In other words, the purpose of using negation may vary according to the context and function.

3.1. Describing negation

Negation in general is used to describe or to inform about the lack or unavailability of something, or some person, or some event. Consider the following example which is taken from Alnawaisheh (2015, p. 4):

20) Is Naglaa good at Math?

No, she isn't.

According to this example, Naglaa being good at Math is non-existent. Another example is:

21) Mary isn't here! She's gone.

The informing function of the negative sentence in (21) is so obvious.

3.2. Rejecting Negation

A rejecting negation is used to claim that some idea or judgment is wrong. It means that we use this type when we want to be against an idea or to reject a claim as in the following examples:

22) a: Naglaa is good at Math.

b: Naglaa isn't good at Math at all

It is clear that the sentence in example (22b) is a rejection of what is stated in the sentence in (22a). Another example of a negative sentence conveying a rejection of an offer is found in (23):

23) a. Do you want a biscuit?

b. No, I don't want it.

Sentence (23b) expresses a rejection of the offer to have some biscuits as understood from (23a).

3.3. Prohibiting Negation

Negative clauses fulfilling this function are usually in the imperative form as in the following example:

24) Stop! Don't touch; it's mine.

Here, the addressee is prohibited from doing something, namely touching something that belongs to someone else.

3.3. Denial Negation

Finally, negative clauses may also have the function of denying an accusation or an assumption as in (25):

25) a. Is this your pen?
b. No, I did not take it.

One uses this kind of function in order to deny an allegation and it is similar to a rejecting negative.

4. Semi-negatives

There is a set of expressions in English that do not completely negate the clause in which they appear. In other words, they are not full negators. These expressions can be referred to as semi-negatives (Nordquist 2019). They are also referred to as almost negatives, near negatives, or broad negatives. In fact, Jespersen (1917) used the term incomplete negation and they include words like: *hardly*, *barely*, *seldom*, *scarcely*, *little*, *few*, etc.

26) The train hardly leaves on time.

It scarcely rains in the desert.

Although semi- negatives are not strictly negative, yet they have the effect of a negative particle because they behave like negative elements in a number of ways as argued by Nordquist (2019).

First, according to Nordquist (2019), a sentence with a semi-negative will usually take a positive tag question as in the following examples:

27) a. It is not possible, is it?

b. It's scarcely possible, is it?

c. Few people know this, do they?"

The fact that these three sentences have positive tag questions indicates that the almost negative expressions *scarcely* and *few* in (27b & c) have the same effect as the full negator in (27a). thus, constructions with semi-negatives are a special case of negatives and they have to be treated as examples of negative elements since they take positive tag questions.

Furthermore, semi-negatives behave exactly like full negatives in that they invert with auxiliary when they occur at the beginning of a sentence as in these examples:

28) He has never come to class on time. (Negative)
Never has he come to class on time. (Negative)
Hardly has he come to class on time. (Semi-negative)

29) They don't know about the accident. (negative)
They know little about the accident. (Negative)
Little do they know about the accident. (Semi-negative)

It is clear from the examples above that semi-negatives behave in the same way as full negatives because they invert with auxiliaries when they come at the beginning of a sentence.

However, as stated by Jespersen (1917, p. 40), "while *little* and *few* are approximate negative, *a little* and *a few* are positive expressions":

30) He has little money.
He has few friends.

These two sentences convey the opposite of *much* money and *many* friends. In fact, they mean almost the same as *no* money and *no* friends. However, the situation is different in (31):

31) He has a little money

He has a few friends

In the last two sentences in (31), *a little money* and *a few friends* mean the opposite of *no money*, and *no friends* in (30). In fact, they have a positive meaning. They mean something like they have *some money* and *some friends*, as pointed out by Jespersen (1917).

5. Interpretation of multiple negation

Multiple negation is a general term that refers to the occurrence of more than one negator in a sentence. This is seen in some colloquial dialects in America, Africa, some parts of UK, and elsewhere. A native speaker of English may produce a sentence like the one in (32a), which has the same meaning as (32b):

32) a. I didn't never do nothing to nobody.

b. I didn't ever do anything to anybody.

In example (32a), there are four negative markers though in interpretation they count as one as can be seen from the equivalent example in (32b).

In this section, I try to explore the interpretation of various types of multiple negative constructions focusing on different forms of double negation, weakening negation, emphatic negation and negative concord.

5.1. Double negation

Double negatives are quite common in some languages such as French (see Matyiku, 2011; Dryer, 2013; Miestamo, 2017). As for English, double negation also exists in some dialects of this language but it is usually considered incorrect. Such structures usually involve the use of two negative elements such as *not, no, or never* in the same sentence as in the following example:

33) *She doesn't like nothing.

Double negative clauses are incorrect as the two negatives lead to a positive meaning of the construction.

According to Dryer (2013), the term double negation refers to the case where clausal negation is formed via using two different negative markers as can be seen in the French *ne ... pas*. Double negation can also be seen in English as demonstrated by the following examples taken from Quirk et.al (1985, p. 798):

34) a. Not many people have nowhere to live. meaning
[*Most people have somewhere to live*.]
b. Nobody has nothing to eat. meaning
[*Everyone has something to eat*.]

To interpret double negative sentences, we follow the rule used in logic where two negatives make a positive. That is, each negative element cancels the other leading to a lack of positive or assertive meaning as indicated by the paraphrases, above.

However, according to Quirk et.al. (1985, p. 799), there are cases where double negative sentences are treated as negative, rather than positive, sentences as the following example demonstrates:

35) Not all imperatives have no subject, do they?

The fact that the tag question is positive indicates that the main clause in (35) is negative.

5.2. Weakening negatives

This is another case of multiple negation where there are two negative markers in the clause, yet in interpretation the two negatives count as one. However, negation in such cases is

weakened in the sense that it is between a negative and a positive according to Siek, (2016). This is demonstrated by the following example:

36) Mary is not unhappy.

This sentence does not mean that Mary is really unhappy or sad but it does not mean that she is not happy either. Thus, she is between the two states. Zeijlstra (2004, p. 60) argues that this type of negation "applies in particular in sentences containing a scalar predicate … that forms a continuum of meaning rather than a binary". It is clearly noticeable that the adjective *unhappy* is a gradable predicate and this fulfills Zeijlstra's requirement for a weakened interpretation of the negative clause. This is not the case in (37):

37) The recording was not incomplete.

The sentence in example (37) means that the recording was complete and there is no doubt about this. Here, there is no weakening negation because there is no scalar predicate. The adjective 'incomplete' in the example is not gradable but binary (i.e., the recording is either complete or incomplete) and this is consistent with Zeijlstra's requirement.

It has to be pointed out, however, that weakening negatives are usually common in a context where the preceding sentence is a negative one as in example (38):

38) Mary is unhappy.

Thus, the sentence in example (36) can be a reply to someone who produced the sentence in example (38). According to Siek (2016), it is more convenient to use the double negative structure in (36) than to use a sentence like (39):

39) Mary is neither happy nor unhappy.

It is clear that the construction in (36) is simpler and more common in English than the example in (39).

5.3. Emphatic negation

Emphatic double negation, like negative concord below, is not very common in English. However, the idea of this form of multiple negation is that one negator emphasises the use of another negative marker as argued by Siek (2016). Let us consider the following examples:

40) a. I can't not go to the meeting.

b. I can go to the meeting.

c. I have to go to the meeting.

The sentence in (40a) is a case of double negation used for emphasis. This sentence has the same meaning as (40c), which expresses necessity and not usual double negation. In most double negative sentences, a sentence like (40a) will have the same meaning as (40b) because two negatives make a positive. But this case is different because double negation expresses necessity. Thus, double negation in this example is used to intensify the need to go to the meeting.

5.4. Negative concord

Like emphatic negation, this type of multiple negation is not very common in English but it is a common linguistic phenomenon in some languages where a negative indefinite pronoun (like *nobody*) occurs with another negator (like *not* or *no*) to produce sentence negation. Negative concord is not common in Modern English, but Jespersen (1917, p. 35) provides an example which is taken from George Eliot:

41) There was niver nobody else gen (gave) me nothin.

It has been suggested that concord of negatives are used to emphasize the negation by repeating various negative markers.

Like other types of multiple negation, clauses with negative concord are interpreted like other clauses with a single instance of negation. Thus, the example in (41) has the same meaning as (42):

42) Nobody gave me anything.

Thus, a negative concord sentence will have a single negative reading. In fact, Zeijlstra (2004, p. 244-45) goes a step further and argues that one of the negative elements in negative concord languages is not a genuine negator but it is an instance of syntactic agreement, similar to subject-verb agreement.

6. Negation and Ambiguity

Negation may cause syntactic ambiguity in some sentences because the negative particle *not* can be understood as modifying either a preceding modal (or auxiliary) or a following verb or VP. Consider the following example which is taken from Radford (1988, p. 66):

43) The President could not ratify the treaty.

According to Radford (1988), this sentence is ambiguous because it has the following two interpretations:

44) a. It would not be possible for the President to ratify the treaty.

b. It would be possible for the President not to ratify the treaty.

Radford (1988) explains the structural ambiguity here in terms of the scope of the negative particle *not* in the sentence. In other words, ambiguity here has to do with which constituent or phrase being modified or affected by the negative particle. Thus, in the first interpretation of (43a), the negative particle *not* modifies the modal *could* and the modal occurs within the scope[1] of the negative particle while according to the second interpretation in (43b), the negator *not* modifies the whole Verb Phrase [$_{VP}$ not ratify the treaty] so VP is within the scope of the negator.

Finally, it is possible that some English sentences which are unambiguous may become ambiguous if they are turned into negative, as can be seen in the following in (44) examples taken from Alnawaisheh (2015, p. 4):

44) a. John ran until dark.

b. John didn't run until dark.

The sentence in example (44a) is affirmative and there is no ambiguity in its interpretation, but its negative counterpart in (44b) is ambiguous. The only difference between the two

[1] . The Scope of a negator is the same as the constituent of phrase which it negates.

sentences is that the second one is negative. This means that ambiguity in (44b) is because of negation and this sentence may mean either (45a) or (45b):

45) a. John didn't run until it became dark.

b. John stopped running before it became dark.

This shows how negation may lead to ambiguity particularly in cases where the sentence contains a modal auxiliary as seen in the examples, above.

7. Negative Polarity

Polarity is a grammatical term that is used to differentiate between affirmative and negative sentences in a language in order to show the truth or falsity of a statement in this language. Polarity items, as pointed out by Kadmon and Landman (1993), are generally "used to strengthen the statements in which they appear".[2] A polarity item is a word or phrase that appears in clauses associated with a particular affirmative or negative sentence (Baker, 1970). If a polarity item occurs in an affirmative clause, it is referred to as

[2] . Polarity in this way is similar to double negation in some sentences when it is used to emphasise the negation.

a positive polarity item (hence, PPI).[3] An example is *somewhat*. And if the polarity item comes in a negative clause, it is called a negative polarity item (hence, NPI). An example of an NPI is *at all*. As for the clause where a positive or negative polarity item appears, it is referred to as the licensing context. So a polarity item needs a licensing context. An affirmative clause provides an appropriate licensing context for a PPI, while a negative clause provides the right licensing context for an NPI. Let us consider the following examples:

46) a. I liked the film somewhat.
b.*I didn't like the film somewhat.
c. I didn't like the film at all.
d. *I liked the film at all.

The PPI *somewhat* in (46a) occurs in an affirmative clause; therefore, it is used in its licensing context. On the other hand, the same polarity item in (46b) appears in a negative clause which is not a licensing context. So the sentence in (46b) is

[3] . This is a list of negative polarity items and it includes: *anybody/anyone, anything, any, ever, anywhere, any longer/anymore*, etc. while a list of positive polarity items includes: *nobody/no one, nothing, no/none, never, nowhere, and no longer/no more*, among other.

ungrammatical. Similarly, the NPI in (46c) is used in its correct licensing context because the clause is negative but this is not the case in (46d), so it is ungrammatical.

According to Huddleston (1984), polarity refers to a situation where an item or an expression tends to occur in a negative construction rather than a positive or an affirmative one or it tends to occur in an affirmative construction, rather than a negative one. This means that there are words and expressions that favour other words and structures according to the licensing environments for both PPIs and NPIs as explained above. Huddleston (1984) uses the polarity item *no longer* as in the following examples:

47) They don't sell new cars any longer.
48) *They sell new cars any longer.

The expression *any longer* is correctly used in the first negative sentence but it is ungrammatical to have it in the second sentence. In other words, this item is a negative polarity item because its licensing context is negative clauses. This explains why the sentence in (47) is grammatical while the one in (48) is ungrammatical. Similar negative polarity

expressions include *anything, anyone, anybody, ever, yet, at all,* etc.

It has to be noted that some of these expressions can be used in interrogative clauses as in:

49) Have you ever been to London?
50) I haven't ever been to London.
51) *I have ever been to London.

The occurrence of the polarity item *ever* in (49), which is an interrogative construction, and in (50), which is a negative clause, but not in the positive sentence in (51) indicates that it is an NPI. It is clear that this negative polarity expression appears in both negative and interrogative clauses, but not in affirmative ones; therefore, it will be more appropriate to use the term 'non-affirmative polarity' item as an alternative as suggested by some linguists.

8. Scope of negation

An important issue concerning the interpretation of negative clauses is to decide what part of this sentence is negated and this is referred to as the scope of negation. So determining the

scope of negation means finding out exactly what is being negated in a construction and this may vary depending on different factors such as the subject, the context, background information, etc. Let us consider the following examples which are possible negations of the sentence: (*Many students took the exam*).

52) Not [many students took the exam].

53) Many students didn't [take the exam].

The structural difference between the two negative sentences lies in the fact that the quantifier word *many* in the sentence in (52) is within the scope of the negative particle *not* but this is not the case in the sentence in example (53).[4] In fact, this structural difference between the two sentences (due to the position of the negator *not*) leads to a significant difference in the interpretation between the two. The sentence in (52), where the scope of *not* is the whole clause including the quantifier *many*, means something like:

54) The number of students who took the exam was not large.

[4] . In fact, *not* in (52) comes at the beginning of the sentence and it has the whole sentence within its scope so it negates the whole sentence.

while the second sentence, where the scope of the negative element involves only the VP [*took the exam*] and excludes the quantifier *many*, has the meaning in (55):

55) The number of students who didn't take the exam was large.

In other words, in the first sentence, the negative particle *not* has scope over the quantifier *many* while in the second, the quantifier *many* has scope over the negative element *not*. This explains the difference in meaning between the two possible interpretations of the negative form of the construction in (*Many students took the exam*). However, as Huddleston and Pullum (2002) point out, it is not always the case the scope can be determined in a linear way or according to the position of the negative particle. Consider the examples in (56) and (57), which are taken from Huddleston and Pullum (2002, p. 19):

56) You need not answer the questionnaire.
57) You must not answer the questionnaire.

The two sentences are identical in structure particularly in the order of the negative particle *not* and the modal *need/must*. However, according to Huddleston and Pullum, the two sentences differ in meaning. In the first one, *need* is

understood to be within the scope of negation, so it means that [*there isn't any need for you to answer the questionnaire*] so *need* falls within the scope of *not* while *must* in the second sentence may fall outside the scope of negation and it means [*it is necessary that you do not answer the questionnaire*]. In other words, what is negated in this case is the VP and not the modal *must*. Furthermore, there are cases where the two interpretations are possible as in the following example, also taken from Huddleston and Pullum (2002, p. 19):

58) I didn't go to the party because I wanted to see Kim.

Huddleston and Pullum argue that this sentence is ambiguous because it allows both interpretations of scope. It means either [*the reason why I didn't go to the party was that I wanted to see Kim]*, where the *because* clause is outside the scope of negation, or [*it is not the case that I didn't go to the party because I wanted to see Kim*], where the *because* clause is within the scope of the negative *not*.

Lasnik (1972, p. 10) argues that there is a restriction that blocks subject NPs with initial *not* from passivisation and uses the following examples to explain this point:

59) Not all of the problems were solved by the students.

60) *The students solved not all of the problems.

To account for the contrast between the two constructions, Lasnik (1972) suggests that the passivisation rule is obligatory in the example (59) because the object NP has the negator *not* in initial position. Lasnik also uses the examples in (61) and (62):

61) Not everyone saw the play.

62) *The play was seen by not everyone.

The problem in (62) lies in the use of the negative particle in the logical subject in a passive construction. This example follows the restriction that prevents logical subject NPs with initial *not* from passivisation.

Finally, let us consider some facts about scope in the following examples taken from Kim (2001, p. 272):

62) a. Kim seems [never [to be alone]].

b. Pat considered [always [doing the assignment]].

c. Pat considered [not [doing the assignment]].

A native speaker of English has no problem identifying the negation scope of *never* and *not* in these examples at all because the VP modifier *never* in (62a) excludes the higher

verb *seem*. Similarly, in (62c) the main verb *considered* falls outside the scope of the negator *not*. The scope of negation would be very different if the negative particle preceded the main verb in these constructions.

9. Pedagogical remarks

As argued by Dimroth (2010), it is evident that a "word for negation is typically one of the first words children learn, … it is also one of the most consistently used words throughout the single word utterance period". Children's early negative words are limited, but as they grow older, they acquire the ability to negate full sentences and learn the skills to understand the meaning of negative sentences where a negator may have scope over different parts of the sentence and this leads to a change in the meaning of the sentence. This acquisition takes place through a complex process that has to do with Language Acquisition Device (LAD) and Universal Grammar (UG). According to this, there is a built-in grammar within all human beings, and through being exposed to sentences and observing their meanings, a child develops the mechanism to analyse these sentences and comprehend their meanings. An

explanation of this mechanism involves an overlap between the syntax and semantics of negation in language.

As for adult non-natives learning English as a foreign language, they lack the ability to understand some negative sentences that involve polarity and scope due to poor learning they had at school or even in college. Thus, something should be done about this to develop the learners' skills in learning and comprehending negation. Present school and university textbooks of English in Syria focus on form, showing interest basically in the negator *not* without clear treatment of other forms and types of negation such as almost negatives, polarity, multiple negation, and ambiguity in negative clauses. Therefore, there is a need to emphasise the variation in meaning that negative constructions have as in negatives and semi-negatives. I believe that this can be achieved by teaching the whole list of negators because this will lead to better learning and understanding of negation. For example, the effect that scope of negation may have, in a negative sentence, is such a complex issue for many learners to comprehend. Therefore, there is a need that the teacher should explain the issue of scope in simple terms and through using English examples that show that the scope of a negator actually

involves the constituent or phrase or clause which it affects. So, in sentences where a negator precedes a constituent, it will have this constituent within its scope and so on. It is hoped that what has been presented in this paper will help not only in reaching a better understanding of the negation process in English but also in making the teaching of negative structures easier and clearer.

10. Conclusion

This paper presented a study of the main semantic features of negative constructions in English. It starts by highlighting the differences between positive and negative structures in use and function. Negative structures are used to deny, prohibit and reject. Then the paper discusses the class of semi-negatives and their meanings before I explain the interpretation of double and multiple negatives. Negation and its role in creating ambiguity or duality in the meaning of some sentences is demonstrated. The concept of polarity, both negative and positive, is presented before studying the scope of negation, where the negative element may affect different parts of the sentence or even the whole sentence causing a change in its meaning. Finally, I present some pedagogical remarks about

the acquisition and learning of negative expressions and their constructions.

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