"Expletive negation" as a decomposed NPI in Québec French

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Across languages, we find instances of sentential negation that do not always make a straightforward contribution to meaning, so-called "expletive negation" (ExN). In this paper, we investigate such an instance of negation in Québec French. We argue that ExN *pas* is a dependent negative polarity item (NPI) that appears nowadays only in specific environments. Our work casts doubt on a uniform analysis of ExN across languages (see also Greco 2019) and supports alternative-based accounts of negative polarity (Lahiri, 1998; Chierchia, 2013, a.o.).

Data. As in other variants of French, Québec French propositions are negated with *pas* (1). But a "non-negative" use of *pas* is reported in sentences like (2) and (3) (Kemp, 1982, a.o.).

(1)   J'aime **pas** les rats.   (2)   J'ai   fait tout ce   que je pouvais **pas** faire.
      I.like   NEG the rats   I.have did $\forall$ that C   I   could   ExN do
      'I don't like rats.'   'I did all I could.'

(3)   C'est le   pire   livre {que tu   peux **pas** lire} / {qu'il y a **pas**} / {#qu'il aime **pas**}.
      it.is   the worst book that   you can   ExN read / that.$\exists$ ExN / that.he   loves ExN
      'It's the worst gift you could ever give me / there is / that he likes.'

In (2) and (3), *pas* does not negate the proposition expressed by the embedded clause. For instance, (2) does not need to express (though it could) that I did everything I was not allowed to. Instead, the intuitive meaning is that I did everything that was possible for me to do (Kemp, 1982). Assuming that superlatives encode universal quantification over sets of degrees (Heim, 1999), we show that the conditioning environment for ExN *pas* boils down to (4):

(4)   (i) ExN *pas* appears inside a relative clause (RC), when
        (ii) the head of the RC contains a universal quantifier, quantifying either over
             individuals (2) or sets of degrees (3), and
        (iii) the RC contains an expression conveying existential quantification, either
             via an ability modal, plain existential, or verb of existence (see # with *aimer* 'love').

Analysis. NPIs like English *any* have been argued to be semantically complex. On alternative-based accounts of negative polarity (Krikfa 1995; Lahiri 1998; Chierchia 2013), NPIs are existential items that obligatorily activate alternatives. For instance, *any* has the same denotation as a plain indefinite (5a) but also activates a set of domain alternatives (ALT) (5b) consisting of subsets of the relevant quantificational domain. These alternatives are factored into meaning through the insertion of an exhaustification operator EXH, defined in (6).

(5)   a. $[\![any]\!] = \lambda P.\lambda Q.\exists x \in D[P(x) \wedge Q(x)]$
       b.   ALT: $\{\lambda P.\lambda Q.\exists x \in D'[P(x) \wedge Q(x)], D' \subseteq D\}$

(6) $[\![EXH]\!]^{g,w}(\phi) = \phi_w \ \wedge \forall p \in ALT(\phi)\, [p_w \rightarrow \phi \subseteq p]$

We propose that ExN *pas* is just one of the two ingredients in the composition of an NPI. Specifically, it requires the predicative existential expression it co-occurs with to involve a set of ALT. Unlike *any*, *pas* does not also contribute existential meaning. Our proposal is illustrated in (7). Sentence (2) has the LF in (7a) and asserts (7b). ExN *pas* signals that the (existential) ability modal *pouvoir* triggers a set of ALT given in (7c). All the ALTs are entailed by the assertion, and therefore not negated. Exhaustification is vacuous and simply returns the assertion, as shown in (7d). That Québec French can encode the two pieces of an NPI separately – existential quantification and ALT trigger – provides evidence in favor of alternative-based accounts.

(7) $[\![(2)]\!] =$

    a. EXH [tout [1 je pouvais pas faire t_1]] 2 [j'ai fait t_2]]

    b.   Assertion: $EXH \; \forall x[\exists w \in W[$I have done x at $w] \rightarrow$ I have done x at $w_0]$
         where $W = ACC(w_0, w)$

    c.   ALT: $\{\forall x[\exists w' \in W'[$I have done x at $w'] \rightarrow$ I have done x at $w_0], W' \subseteq W\}$

    d.   After exhaustification: $\forall x[\exists w \in W[$I have done x at $w] \rightarrow$ I have done x at $w_0]$

Our analysis of ExN *pas* correctly captures many of its distributional properties described in (4). ① **Licensing environments** (4ii): ExN *pas* occurs in the restrictor of *tout* and superlatives because these are (Strawson) downward-entailing (DE) environments that license NPIs, as shown in (7). ② **ExN *pas* only with 'tout'** (4ii): ExN *pas* is not possible with RCs headed by *quelque chose* 'something' (8). Since RCs headed by *quelque chose* are upward entailing, the ALT are predicted not to be entailed by the assertion. The exhaustification operator thus negates them yielding an inference that contradicts the assertion.

(8)   *J'ai   fait   **quelque   chose** que je pouvais **pas**   faire.
      I.have done something   C   I   could   ExN do
      (could mean 'I did something I couldn't do', but no ExN)

③ **Necessity of existential** (4iii): ExN *pas* does not contribute existential meaning by itself (unlike *any*). As one part of a complex NPI, it requires the presence of an existential and triggers a set of ALT which will be used by EXH. This explains why ExN *pas* must co-occur with an existential predicate. Our proposal also captures why ExN *pas* can co-occur with the ability modal *pouvoir*, but not with necessity *devoir* (9): only *pouvoir* involves existential quantification.

(9)   *C'est le   pire   cadeau que tu   devais **pas**   me faire.
      It.is   the worst gift   that you must   ExN me make

Discussion. Our analysis captures many of the distributional properties of ExN *pas*, however it remains puzzling why *pas* is limited to only two DE environments: superlatives and the restrictor of *tout*. ExN *pas* cannot be used, for example, in the antecedent of a conditional, even in presence of an existential predicate, where we would expect a complex NPI to be possible:

(10)   *Si il y a **pas**   de poisson, je vais être surpris.
       If $\exists$ ExN of fish   I will be   surprised
       (could mean: 'If there's no fish...')

We hypothesize that this limited distribution results from the progressive loss of *pas* as an NPI. *Pas* once existed as an indefinite equivalent to *any*, occurring in all types of NPIs licensing environments (Muller, 1991). We assume that the loss of preverbal negation *ne* in 19th century Québec French (Martineau and Mougeon, 2003), and the subsequent grammaticalization of *pas* as a negative morpheme, contributed to the slow degradation of its NPI uses. As such, the NPI uses of *pas* described in this paper are the last remains of *pas* as an NPI, which today has lost existential force of its own and is limited to only a subset of the original environments in which it once occurred. Why only these environments is a puzzle we leave for future work.

     Finally, our work suggests that at least some instances of ExN are NPIs (as already proposed in van der Wouden 1994). This questions recent work arguing for a uniform analysis of ExN across languages as epistemic modals (Makri, 2013) or as mood markers (Yoon, 2011), and supports work that views ExN as a non-unitary phenomenon (Greco, 2019).

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