

A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF SENTENTIAL AND CONSTITUENT-LEVEL NEGATION IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN

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Abstract: This paper presents a contrastive analysis of negation and negative polarity items in English and German, drawing on a range of linguistic data to explore the structural and interpretive differences between the two languages (see Lasnik 1972, Zeijlstra 2004). By examining both sentence-level and constituent-level elements that contribute to negative meaning, such as negative markers, quantifiers, semi-negatives, verbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and affixes, this analysis highlights the semantic flexibility and syntactic diversity of negation, showing that while English and German share certain typological features, they diverge significantly in how they each employ negative elements.

Keywords: negation, negative polarity items, sentential negation, constituent negation, contrastive analysis

1. Introduction

Negation as well as negative contexts in general are aspects which play a major role in influencing the way our mental lexicon perceives meaning. In a world of ideal positives, negation comes as a more approachable manner of seeing the world, it becomes the ‘*mind’s first freedom*’ (Cioran 1987:207).

Given its central role and significance in every language, negation has long been a rich and widely debated topic in linguistic research. Over the years, numerous influential scholars, such as Jespersen (1917), Lasnik (1972), Zeijlstra (2004), Zanuttini (1996), Horn (2010), Elspaß (2012), Brütsch (1990), and Zimmer (1964) have made important contributions to the study of negation, particularly in relation to languages like English and German. Their work has significantly advanced our understanding of how negation operates across different linguistic systems.

The aim of this paper is to classify and exemplify negative elements which, through their use and significance, take scope over a constituent or over the whole sentence and to provide a contrastive analysis of them in two Germanic languages, English and German.

Negation is a complex operation in all languages because it appears both as a syntactic and semantic category. In a semantic sense, negation is directly associated with the concept of opposition, creating antonyms. Therefore, pairs such as good/bad, beautiful/ugly, opened/closed become positive and negative attributes. This paper will focus mainly on the syntactical aspect of negation and how it can affect in a different way two languages from the same language family.

The first obstacle in understanding how negation affects the meaning of a sentence and how it can be systematically constructed in any context is the fact that, as Apostolatu (2012:6) states “negation is a process which is built upon other operations”. Negation is not a uniform process, defined by strict syntactic rules which can be applied in any context and receive the same interpretation. Negation is a process which has been deeply affected by the social environment, by the speakers themselves. This is why the study of negation can be, according to Apostolatu (2012:7) even considered “relegated to the background”, as it can raise several difficulties both in properly understanding the true meaning of the message conveyed by the speaker and in

classifying its elements. However, it has been in fact approached by many linguists who believed that this essential logical operation hasn't been fully analysed in all its complexity yet.

In order to understand how negation modifies the meaning of a sentence, one must first acknowledge the fact that negation is considered to be of a less importance than its positive counterpart. Negation is less informative in all the cases except when it is formulated as a contradiction of a previous statement. It does not offer the listener a specific information, but rather excludes one entity from a set of possibilities. Aristotle points out this hierarchical irregularity by stating that:

“The affirmative proposition is prior to and better known than the negative, since affirmation explains denial just as being prior to not-being.” (*Metaphysics* 996b14–16)

Following this path, linguists such as Otto Jespersen discussed the fact that the notion of the negative component is essential in conveying a message, if one looks at it through a logical perspective. However, syntactically, negation is a mere “subordinate to some other notion, it gradually becomes a mere proclitic syllable (or even less than a syllable) prefixed to some other word.” (Jespersen: 5). The contracted form of negation in English is proof of this habit:

(1) He didn't do it.

However, in this paper, this discussion can only be applied to English, as the contracted form of the negative marker is not common in German:

(2) Er hat es nicht getan.
he-have.3sg-it-S.NEG-make.past
He didn't do it.

The paradox between the significance of negation and its expression in language is a common topic for academic debate. However, one can certainly agree on one specific aspect, that of the language being able to mould around the context and around the speakers' needs in communication. That is why, if a speaker feels the need to stress the existence of a negative meaning in a sentence, he or she will either use the non-contracted form *not* or will insert other syntactical structures, such as question tags:

(3) He didn't do it, did he?

The question tags can also appear in the German language, but they are static, they do not change depending on whether the main clause is an affirmative or a negative sentence:

(4) Er hat es nicht getan, oder?
he-have.3sg.-it-SNEG-do.past-or?
He didn't do it, did he?
(5) Er hat es nicht getan, nicht wahr?
he-have.3sg.-it-SNEG-do.past-not-true?
He didn't do it, did he?

2. Elements which yield a negative meaning at sentence level

Negation finds itself at the threshold between syntax and semantics, it is not bound solely to one domain, as it uses both grammatical and lexical structures to convey a negative

meaning. In order to understand how negation builds itself around these domains, one must first classify the overt elements which yield a negative meaning. According to Zeijlstra (2004: 38) there are three negative overt elements which can be applied to the English and German language: *negative markers, negative quantifiers and semi-negatives*.

2.1. Negative markers

Negative markers are pure grammatical entities which are used to deny the truth claim of a clause in a sentence. The negative marker of the English language is *not* and its contracted form *n't*. In this form, negation is used after

The verb *be*:

- (6) It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the colored canvas, reveals himself. (Wilde, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, 8)

Auxiliaries:

- (7) As a child I had not been content with the results promised by the modern professors of natural science. (Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 236)

Modals (except for *may* and *might*, which do not accept the contracted form *n't*):

- (8) On the present occasion, though I was hungry, I dared not eat my slice. (Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 16)

When placed before a lexical verb, however, the negation cannot stand on its own in the representation, but it rather requires the support of an auxiliary.

- (9) I do not know when that Rebellion will come, but I know, as surely as I see this straw beneath my feet, that sooner or later justice will be done. (Orwell, *Animal Farm*, 5)

In both negative sentences and positive emphatic sentences in the past, the auxiliary *do* takes the past participle, turning into *did* and the lexical verb remains unaltered.

- (10) Mr. Dawkin's appearance did not say a vast deal in favour of the comforts which his patron's interest obtained for those whom he took under his protection. (Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 87)

- (11) You did live in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized. (Orwell, *1984*, 5)

The German grammar, however, has two negative markers: *nicht* and *kein*.

Nicht is a negative marker used in the following situations:

- a) After the verb in simple clauses such as the Present Simple (*Präsens*) or the Past Simple (*Präteritum*) :

- (12) Ich schwimme nicht.

I-swim-SNEG.

I'm not swimming.

- (13) Ich war nicht da.

I-be.past-SNEG-there.

I was not there.

- b) Before the lexical verb in complex clauses such as the Past Perfect (Perfekt) or in sentences containing a modal verb:

(14) Dass er sein bös Gelüsten nicht vollbracht, hat Gott und meine gute Axt verhütet.
(Schiller, *Wilhelm Tell*, 6).

that-he-his-evil-desires-SNEG-accomplish-have-have.pastAUX-God-and-my-ax-
prevent.past

That he did not accomplish his evil desires has prevented God and my good ax.

(15) Ich konnte mir nicht verhehlen, daß er in einem gefährlichen Beziehungszentrum stand.
(Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, 11)

I-can.past-REFLX.pronoun-SNEG-hide-that-he-in-a-dangerous-relationship-stand

I could not hide the fact that he was standing in the center of a dangerous relationship.

- c) Before definite articles:

(16) Er hat das Buch nicht gelesen, sondern die Zeitung.

he-have.3SG-the-book-SNEG-read.past-rather-the-newspaper.

He didn't read the book, but the newspaper.

- d) Before proper nouns:

(17) Das ist nicht Sarah auf dem Bild, sondern Maria.

that-be.3SG-SNEG-Sarah-in-the-photo-rather-Maria

That is not Sarah in the photo, but Maria.

- e) Before pronouns:

(18) Da ist kein Augenblick, der nicht dich verzehrte, da du nicht ein Zerstörer bist.

(Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 20)

there-be.3SG-SNEG-moment-that-SNEG-you.ACC-consume.past-that-you-SNEG-a-
destroyer-be.2SG

There is not a moment that has not consumed you, not a moment when you are not a destroyer.

- f) Before possessive pronouns:

(19) Er hat sein Auto nicht gesehen, aber ihres.

He-have.3SG-his-car-SNEG-see.past-but-hers.

He has not seen his car, but hers.

- g) Before numerals:

(20) Es gibt nicht zwei im Gebirge.

(Schiller, *Wilhelm Tell*, 8)

There-be.3PL-SNEG-two-in-the-mountains

There are not two people in the mountains.

- h) Before adjectives:

(21) Ich kann nicht müßig sein und kann doch auch nichts tun.

(Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, 21)

I-can-SNEG-idle-be-and-can-yet-also-nothing-do
I can not be idle and yet I can not do anything.

i) Before adverbs:

(22) Ich kann seine Hände nicht gut ansehen, sie sind wie Wachs.
(Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 14)
I-can-his-hands-SNEG-well-see-they-be.3PL-like-wax.
I can not see his hands well, they are like wax.

j) Before adverbials of place, time and manner:

(23) Ich kann die Hand nicht auf die Bücher legen, so schwör ich droben bei den ew'gen
Sternen. (Schiller, *Wilhelm Tell*, 35)
I-can-the-hand-SNEG-on-the-books-put-so-swear-I-on-the-eternal-stars.
I can not lay my hand on the books, so I swear by the eternal stars.

Kein is more problematic in interpretation because its placement either in the category of the negative markers or negative quantifiers is slightly ambiguous. In the given example

(24) Ich habe keine Zeit.
I-have-SNEG-time
I have no time.

Kein can be interpreted as a negative marker if the chosen translation is *I don't have time*, but if the translation is *I have no time*, then *kein* can be considered a negative quantifier. Because of the similar syntactic contexts in which *nicht* and *kein* can be inserted, I chose to place *kein* in both categories, as in different contexts they can play different roles.

In comparison to *nicht*, *kein* does not maintain an unchanged form in all contexts, but it rather receives the endings of the German indefinite pronouns and there is an agreement between the negative marker and the noun, depending on number, gender and case.

The negative marker *kein* is used in the following situations:

a) Before nouns without articles:

(25) Der Kaiser habe diesmal keine Zeit, er würde sonst einmal wohl an uns denken.
(Schiller, *Wilhelm Tell*, 40)
the-emperor-have.3SG-this-time-SNEG-time-he-would-otherwise-once-of-us-think.
The Emperor has no time on this occasion, otherwise he would probably think of us.

b) Instead of indefinite articles:

(26) Es ist ein Wunder, daß unser Unterstand noch keine Verluste hat.
(Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 91)
it-be.3SG-a-miracle-that-our-shelter-yet-SNEG-loses-have.3SG
It is a miracle that our shelter has no losses.

2.2.Negative quantifiers

Zeijlstra defined negative quantifiers as being “elements that do not only negate a clause or constituent but also bind a particular variable within that clause or constituent.” (Zeijlstra, 38) Therefore, negative quantifiers not only deny the truth value of a sentence but they also offer

details concerning one semantic aspect of the sentence. Examples of negative quantifiers in English are:

No	Nobody	Never	neither...nor
Nothing	None	Nowhere	

Their equivalents in German can be the following:

Kein	Nichts	nie, niemals	weder...noch
Niemand	Kein	nirgends, nirgendwo, nirgendwohin	

2.2.1 Semi-negatives

The semi-negatives are elements which do not necessarily express an absolute negative meaning but rather entail a negative connotation to the sentence. Semi-negatives are represented in English and German by the incomplete negators, a series of quantifiers which show that the truth value of an utterance can be acceptable only to an insignificant degree. In English, the incomplete negators are determiners such as *few* or *less* and adverbs such as *seldom*, *rarely*, *hardly*, *scarcely* or *barely*. Their equivalents in German are *wenige*, *selten* and *kaum*.

The incomplete negator *few* is an interesting semi-negative as it can be associated with *a few*, structure which placed in the right context in English can even offer a positive understanding, while in German it cannot.

(27) Last week we had quite a few problems with the system.

(The implication being that we had a lot of problems with the system.)

In German, this sentence will translate literally to: “not few problems”, “some problems” or even “quite a lot”:

(28) Letzte Woche hatten wir nicht wenige Probleme mit dem System.

(29) Letzte Woche hatten wir einige Probleme mit dem System.

(30) Letzte Woche hatten wir ziemlich viele Probleme mit dem System.

last-week-have.1PL-we-a-few/some/quite-many-problems-with-the-system

last week we had a few/some/quite a lot problems with the system.

Zeijlstra generalized that the positive counterparts of the semi-negatives and incomplete negators in combination with a negation can paraphrase the semantics of the semi-negatives:

(31) Not often-> seldom

Not many -> few

However, in his work: “Analyses on Negation”, Howard Laskin (1972:78) explained how incomplete negators such as *few* or *seldom* are not always interchangeable with the negated version of their positive counterparts. He states that, if an adverb such as *rather* is introduced, the two seemingly equivalent elements cannot be both grammatical:

(32) There are still rather few unifying common features in this proliferating domain of research. (Roland Omnès, *The Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics*, 154)

(33) * There are still rather not many unifying common features in this proliferating domain of research.

- (34) Since about 1914 in fact I have seen her rather seldom.
 (Forrester, *Virginia Woolf: A Portrait*, 122)
- (35) * Since about 1914 in fact I have seen her rather not often.

This association is also true in German, as constructions such as *eher nicht viele* or *eher nicht oft* are not grammatical:

- (36) Insbesondere bei transitiven Verben sind postverbale Subjekte eher selten.
 (Jansen, *Dislokation im bilingualen Erstspracherwerb*, 28)
 especially-with-transitive-verbs-be.3PL-postverbal-subjects-rather-rare.
 Especially with transitive verbs, postverbal subjects are rather rare.
- (37) * Insbesondere bei transitiven Verben sind postverbale Subjekte eher nicht oft.
- (38) In der Projektarbeit eher weniger erfolgreiches Lernen beobachtet werden kann.
 (Traub, *Projektarbeit – ein Unterrichtskonzept selbstgesteuerten Lernens?*, 123)
 in-the-project-work-rather-less-successful-learning-observe.past-be.PASS-can
 Rather less successful learning can be observed in the project work.
- (39) * In der Projektarbeit eher nicht viele erfolgreiches Lernen beobachtet werden kann.

Even though some incomplete negators cannot operate in the same manner in every context as their negated positive counterparts, they integrate in the class of semi-negatives and contribute to the expression of a negative feeling in a sentence. The speaker uses such elements to show that either the quantity or the quality of an event or argument tends to tilt toward a negative connotation. The semi-negatives behave like absolute negators (*nothing, nowhere, nobody*) in the sense that they do not accept *not* within the same linguistic environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, negation plays a pivotal role in shaping the meaning of sentences, influencing both syntactic and semantic structures in language. Negation is not just a grammatical function but a cognitive and communicative tool that allows speakers to express opposition, exclusion, and limitation. Through negative markers (*not, nicht, kein*), negative quantifiers (*nothing, nobody, nie, nirgendwo*), and semi-negatives (*few, seldom, kaum*), both languages offer varied strategies to convey negative meaning across different contexts.

While English relies heavily on auxiliary support for negation, German presents a more inflected system, where *kein* adjusts according to gender, number, and case. Semi-negatives further illustrate the nuanced role of negation, often implying limitation rather than absolute denial while diverging syntactically from their positive counterparts. As seen in both languages, negation is sensitive to syntactic position, scope, and context, reflecting speaker intention and communicative emphasis.

Despite surface similarities, English and German diverge in the use, form, and flexibility of negative elements, reinforcing the importance of contrastive linguistic analysis.

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