

ON THE SYNTACTIC REPRESENTATION AND MEANING IMPLICATIONS OF NEXAL AND SPECIAL NEGATION IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN

Andreea Codrina Tănase
PhD Student, National University of Science and Technology „Politehnica”
Bucharest

Abstract: This paper investigates the morphosyntactic and semantic properties of nexal and special negation in English and German. Following Jespersen (1917), Růžička (1999), and Hajicová (1974), the study explores how negation influences sentence interpretation, particularly through scope, verb type, and syntactic structure. The first section examines the implications of negation on meaning, emphasizing how different verb classes (e.g. factive, implicative) interact with negative contexts. The second part analyses syntactic representations, contrasting the fixed word order and do-support in English with the greater flexibility and scrambling phenomena in German. Additionally, the paper highlights the pragmatic effects of contracted versus full forms of negation in English. Finally, it applies Klima's tests to distinguish between sentential and constituent negation.

Keywords: nexal negation, special negation, flexibility, meaning entailment

1. Introduction

Negation, as a complex morphosyntactic phenomenon, reveals itself both overtly and covertly across languages and may impact the entirety of the clause or just a part of it.

In his pursuit of showing how negation affects differently a sentence and its components, Otto Jespersen explains in his work: 'Negation in English and other Languages' (1917:42) that negation can be either 'special' or 'nexal'.

Thus, negation has either a narrow scope, reaching only to the level of the constituents or a wider scope, affecting the predicate and therefore, the sentence as a whole.

Růžička (1999: 48) clarifies the difference between these two classes in his work: 'Some marginal notes on polarity and negation', where he states that:

'A negator does not negativize the sentence. In order to negativize it, it must be in such a position that it can act as a sentential operator.'

Therefore, if the negator acts as a sentential operator it will offer the sentence negative features:

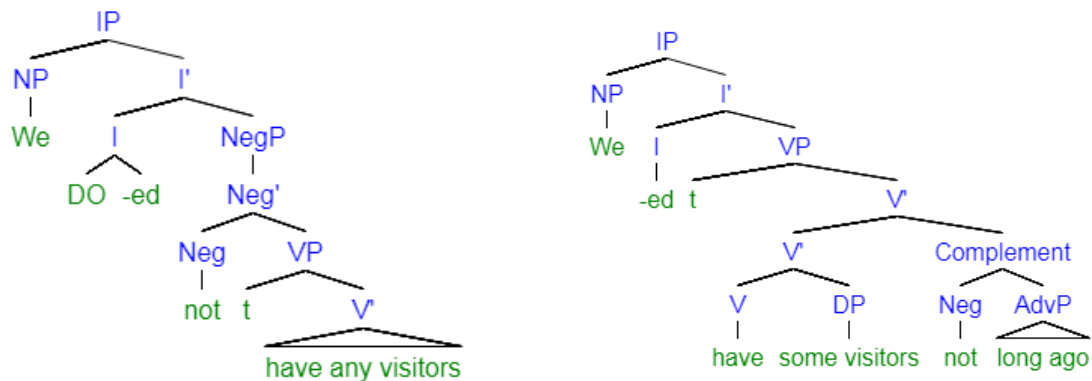
- (1) We did not have any visitors.
- (2) Wir hatten keine Besucher.
we-have.past-SNEG-visitor

The special or constituent negation affects the circumstances of the action but not the action at its core and, because of that, affirmative polarity items such as *some* can appear:

- (3) We had some visitors not long ago.
- (4) Wir hatten einige Besucher nicht lange her.
we-have.pat-some-visitors-SNEG-long-ago.

This difference between nexal and special negation can also be observed at the level of the tree representation. The syntax tree (on the left) for the sentence in (1) shows how negation is above the verbal phrase, has scope over it and therefore is defined as sentential or nexal.¹

The sentence in (3) is represented below and the syntax tree (on the right) shows how negation takes scope only over the adverbial phrase, but has no effect on the verb or the sentence as a whole.²



The following section of the article will examine issues concerning meaning implications in negatively entailed sentences, illustrating how negation can influence sentence interpretation. The second part will focus on the syntactic representation of both nexal and special negation, highlighting their differing degrees of flexibility in English and German.

2. Nexal negation and its impact on meaning

In the English language, negating a sentence does not only affect its core meaning, but also the way we perceive the context surrounding the utterance, the other components of the sentence, such as the complement. Hajiczova (1974:2-3) explains this difference in understanding the implications of a sentence by giving the following examples:

- (5) Harry caused our defeat.
- (6) Harry didn't cause our defeat.

The difference between these two sentences, apart from being affirmative and negative counterparts, is that in the first sentence, the idea of defeat is imposed, while in the second, the receiver of the information can never be sure whether the action that *was not caused* has attained. This fact becomes obvious when one associates sentence (5) with (7) and (6) with (8). The negative sentence can take both meanings, while the affirmative is bound only to one:

- (7) We were defeated.
- (8) On the contrary, he has helped a great deal to our victory.

In order to understand in detail this phenomenon, Hajiczova (1974:3) takes certain types of verbs and places them into categories, showing how they can offer a different connotation to the sentence. An adaptation of the table is the following:

¹ Representation made using the Syntax Tree Generator tool which can be found at the following link: <http://mshang.ca/syntaxtree/>
² Idm.

(9)

-S			
+S	+X	-X	? X
+X	FACTIVES	IMPLICATIVE	IF-VERBS

Factive verbs, such as *know*, *realize*, *regret*, *ignore*, *find out* no matter if they are affirmative or negative, will impose an established status on the object it determines.

- (10) I regret our defeat.
(11) I don't regret our defeat.
(12) We were defeated.

Both sentences (10) and (11) can be associated with (12).

With implicative verbs, 'the statement in the complement clause belongs to the meaning of the complex sentence; under negation, this statement is no longer entailed but denied.' (Hajiczoava: 3) Examples of implicative verbs may be the following: *manage*, *remember*, *dare*, *care*. In these examples, the sentence (14) cannot be associated with (15).

- (13) I managed to finish the paper.
(14) I didn't manage to finish the paper.
(15) The paper is finished.

If-verbs, such as *cause*, *force*, *make sure* differ from factive verbs in negative contexts, as they do not impose an entailed or a denied statement in the complement position. There is also a case of negative if-clauses, such as *prevent*, *discourage*, *keep from*, which behave in the same manner, with the distinction that the affirmative sentence offers a negative understanding of the complement, while the negated verb shows a positive outcome:

- (16) He prevented us from winning.
(17) We didn't win.
(18) He didn't prevent us from winning.
(19) He didn't prevent us from winning, he actually led us to our victory.

The same analogy can be applied for the German language, which offers the same variety in meaning depending on the verb in the matrix.

3. Flexibility variation of negation in English and German

Another difference in the way negation frames itself around the syntax of languages concerns flexibility in movement. In the German language, negation can occupy a sentence initial position if it serves the purposes of the prosody in literature, or if the speaker wants to emphasize the negative aspect of the sentence.

This phenomenon can also be found in the English language, but it can be accomplished only with specific negative elements placed in inversion:

- (19) Never have I seen such beautiful puppies.
(20) Nowhere else will I find another friend like you.

Haegeman (1995: 106) discusses these specific conditions by giving the following examples:

- (21) I would do that in no case.
- (22) *In no case I would do that.
- (23) In no case would I do that.

Because sentence (23) does not contain an inversion, the negative operator cannot be placed in sentence initial position, as it creates a ‘blocking effect’ which does not allow for adjunct extraction.

Brütsch (1990:5) explains the difference between Satznegation (German equivalent for sentence negation) and Sondernegation (type of negation able to move to sentence initial position for emphasis reasons) by giving the following two examples:

- (24) Ich liebe dich nicht. (Satznegation)
I-love-you-SNEG
I don’t love you.
- (25) Nicht ich liebe dich. (Sondernegation)

Furthermore, the flexibility of negation in German is not only restricted to sentence initial position. The negative marker can be placed either before or after adverbs, depending on the constituent the speaker wants to emphasize. For this case also, Brütsch (1990:4) offers examples:

- (26) Ich habe nicht lange geschlafen.
I-have.pastAUX-SNEG-long-sleep
I didn’t sleep for long.
- (27) Ich habe lange nicht geschlafen.

Both structures are grammatically correct, the only difference being in the emphasis placed on the duration of the action.

Haegeman (1995: 58) discusses this difference, stating that:

‘It is well known that the constituents of a clause in the Germanic languages exhibit relatively freer word order than their counterparts in English. (...) In the literature the permutation of arguments is referred to as scrambling.’

As the English language does not have this type of flexibility in regards to negation, sentences such as the following are ungrammatical.

- (28) *Not I love you.
- (29) *I long not slept.

However, this is understandable, as negation in the context of lexical verbs in English require do-support and is always placed before the verb, meaning that the negation will have to retain its position.

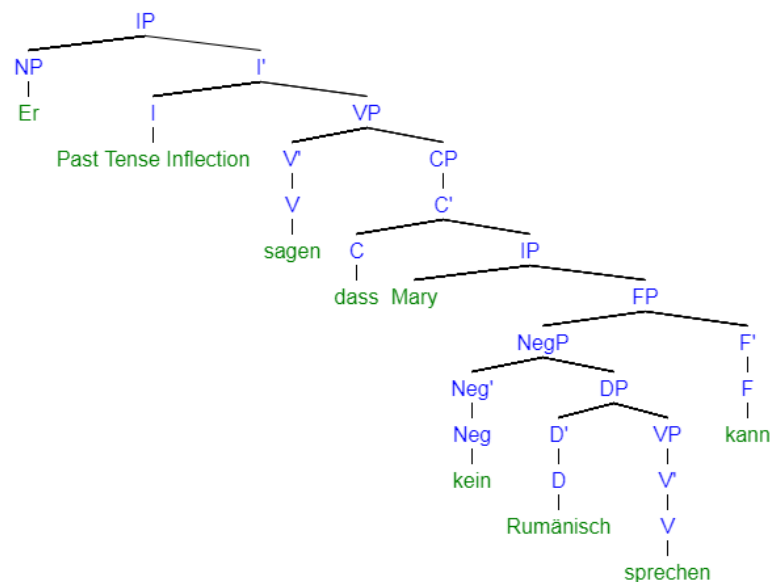
In case the clause containing the negative nexal marker is a subordinate clause, there is a major difference in the tree representation if a modal is inserted. First, one can observe that placing the negative clause in a subordinate won’t change the scope-representation configuration, meaning that the negation will take scope over the verb and it will precede it in the string of constituents:

- (30) He said that Mary does not speak Romanian.
 (31) Er sagte, dass Maria kein Rumänisch spricht.
 he-say.past-that-Maria-SNEG-Romanian-speak.

However, if we insert a modal in the subordinate clause, the English and the German version will have a different representation, as the German language requires a certain word order in subordinate clauses with multiple predicates. Therefore, in the English version, the modal will precede the negation and the negation will be external while in the German version, the negation will precede the modal.

- (32) He said that Mary cannot speak Romanian.
 (33) Er sagte, dass Maria kein Rumänisch sprechen kann.
 he-say.past-that-Maria-SNEG-Romanian-speak-can.

The fact that the sole reason for why the modal verb is placed at the end of the sentence is so that the established word order in German can be applied, makes it easier to overcome this problem when drawing the tree representation.³



A functional phrase (FP) is inserted so that the modal can attach to it and place itself at the end of the string. In the German language, the negation can take scope over the modal but can also precede it in a subordinate clause.

Another complex structure is one discussed by Müller (2018:79), who observed that in certain sentences in German, negation can take scope ‘over everything preceding the finite verb’:

- (34) Nicht ihrem Vater eine Blume hätte er geben sollen, sondern ihrer Mutter.
 SNEG-her-father-a-flower-have-he-give-should-rather-her-mother.
 He should not have given a flower to her father, but rather her mother.

³ Representation made using the Syntax Tree Generator tool which can be found at the following link: <http://mshang.ca/syntaxtree/>

This type of structure cannot be expressed in English, where the modal *should* takes scope over negation, paraphrasing the sentence as: ‘It would have been advisable that you didn’t give flowers to her father, but rather her mother.’

In English, the negative marker *not* is different for these two categories of negation. The functional *not* can be reduced to *n’t* and turn the whole sentence negative, while the adverbial *not* cannot be reduced and has a local effect. This discussion cannot be applied to the German language, as we do not encounter the contracted form.

The *n’t* form is extremely important in the English language as in conversational texts it seems more natural than the original form. The full form is introduced if the speaker believes that more emphasis is needed to show the fact that his or her statement is negative. According to González (2007:26):

‘Uncontracted and contracted negative forms are not randomly distributed in Present-Day English. Their choice is determined, in principle, by a number of factors, such as text-type, dialect, social stratification, gender and age distinctions and various structural factors.’

Therefore, depending on the context, certain speakers might choose to shorten the negative marker or not. There are however situations in which one form is preferred almost all of the times instead of the other.

The following example shows a situation in which the contracted form is preferred, while the normal form becomes odd:

- (35) It’s 8 o’clock. Shouldn’t you be in class by now?
(36) (?) It’s 8 o’clock. Should you not be in class by now?

While placing these two sentences side by side, one can observe another difference between the contracted and non-contracted form of the negative marker, not a semantical one, but rather syntactical. In questions, the non-contracted form remains after the external argument, while the contracted form attaches itself to the modal or to the auxiliary.

Another discussion which can be applied to the English language but not to German is the insertion of the do-support in a sentential negation containing a lexical verb. Without the insertion of the do-support, sentences such as the following one are incorrect.

- (37) *She sings not.

The reason for that is the disagreement between the presence of negation and the need of the verbal affix to lower from inflection and attach to the verb. In sentences containing a functional *not*, the affix cannot reach the verb, the verb cannot raise to inflection to attach to the affix and the latter cannot remain on its own.

Howard Lasnik discussed this last aspect in 1981, calling it the ‘stranded affix’ filter and stating that: ‘a morphologically realized affix must be a syntactic dependent of a morphologically realized category, at surface structure.’

Do-support intervenes as a last resort, so that the affix can attach to an unbound morpheme. This is not the case for the German language, as here, native speakers would say:

- (38) Sie singt nicht.
She-sing.3SG-SNEG
She doesn’t sing.

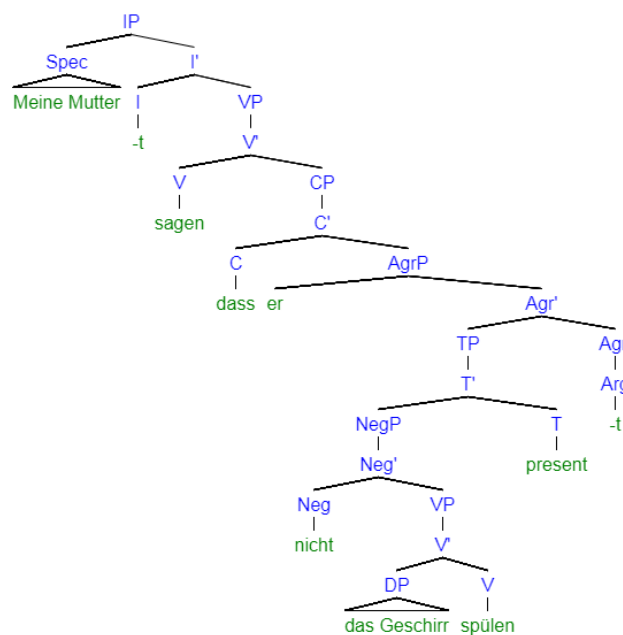
This sentence literally translates to *She sings not*, but because there’s no –s inflection to raise a problem in the representation, there’s no additional helping constituents needed. If one observes the present tense paradigm of two languages such as English and German, the

difference in inflection will become obvious. Take for example the verb *sing*, conjugated at all persons in the present:

Sing	Singe
Sing	Singst
Sings	Singt
Sing	Singen
Sing	Singt
Sing	Singen

The English language, with only two distinct endings, has a weak inflection compared to German. Haegeman (1995: 24) assumes that, because West-Germanic languages such as Dutch and German have an OV word order in embedded clauses and a strong inflection, movement in the tree representation must always be to a c-commanding position. Lowering in embedded clauses is prohibited, meaning that inflection is introduced in the representation after the verb. In order to offer a solution to this cross-linguistic disagreement, Haegeman (1995: 53) offers the following interpretation: she separates the inflection phrase into agreement and tense phrase and suggests that, unlike in English, where Agr and T lower to VP, in German, the verb moves to inflection. Take the following example:

- (39) Meine Mutter sagt, dass er nicht das Geschirr spült.
 My-mother-say.3SG-that-he-NEG-the-dishes-wash.
 My mother says that he isn't washing the dishes.



The verb raises to receive the present tense inflection in the opposite direction a normal movement would take place in the English language. This is the case because in embedded clauses, the order of the constituents differ, making it troublesome for a universal type of representation.

4. The Klima Tests

In order to make a distinct comparison between the nexal and special negation, Klima (1964) proposed a series of tests which, as Haan (1999:28-29) describes:

‘determine the status of negations and other negative elements, such as scarcely, hardly, seldom, rarely, etc. If a negative element passes a Klima test, it is said to be an instance of sentence negation, if not, the negative item is an instance of constituent negation.’

The Klima tests are as follows:

a) Sentence negation accepts the insertion of a *not... either* component.

(40) She didn't go to the party and her friend didn't go either.

(41) *She went to the party and her friend went either.

b) Sentence negation accepts the insertion of a *not... neither* component.

(42) She didn't go to the party and neither did her friend.

(43) *She went to the party and neither did her friend.

Consequently, affirmative sentences accept the insertion of a *so* component, while negative sentences do not.

(44) She went to the party and so did her friend.

(45) *She didn't go to the party and so did her friend.

c) Sentence negation accepts the insertion of a *not... not even* component.

(46) She didn't go to the party, not even for her friend.

(47) *She went to the party, not even for her friend.

d) Sentence negation accepts the insertion of a question tag of opposite polarity.

(48) She didn't go to the party, did she?

(49) She didn't go to the party, didn't she?

Although being one of the earliest theories concerning negation, Klima's tests remain valid and are used as guidance even today because they offer a clear, verifiable distinction between affirmative and negative sentences. One can assume that the difference in general is not hard to spot, but there are cases in which the difference between sentential and constituent negation is not that easily observed. A well-known example of this is the pair of sentences: 'He is not happy./He is unhappy.' The first one is the negative sentence, while the second one is affirmative, fact which can be verified using Klima's tests:

(50) He is not happy and neither/*so is Mary.

(51) He is unhappy and so/*neither is Mary.

There are however examples of sentences which not only differ in whether they are negative or positive but also in meaning:

(52) With no students can the teacher have an interesting conversation.

- (53) With no students, the teacher can have an interesting conversation.

The first sentence is negative and it means that ‘no matter the student, the teacher cannot have an interesting conversation with him or her’ while the second is positive and can be paraphrased as ‘the teacher can have an interesting conversation if there are no students around’. In the first case, *no* is a negative quantifier which creates a sentential negation and in the second case, the structure *with no students* represents a constituent negation.

Some of these tests cannot be applied to the German language because of the grammatical differences between the languages. The first test cannot be fully replicated in the German language as both elements require to be negative in the two German variants:

- (54) Sie ist nicht zur Party gegangen und ihre Freundin auch nicht.
she-be.pastAUX-SNEG-at-party-go-and-her-friend-also-SNEG.
She didn’t go to the party and neither did her friend.

- (55) Weder Sie noch ihre Freundin sind zur Party gegangen.
neither-she-nor-her-friend-be.pastAUX-to-the-party-go.
Neither her nor her friend went to the party.

The third test can be used in the German language, as the structure *not even* finds a similar translation:

- (56) Sie ging nicht auf die Party, nicht einmal für ihre Freundin.
she-go.past-SNEG-to-the-party-SNEG-once-for-her-friend.
She didn’t go to the party, not even for her friend.

The last test cannot be associated with the German language, as the question tags are replaced by a static structure:

- (57) Sie ging nicht auf die Party, oder?
she-go.past-SNEG-at-the-party-or?
She didn’t go the party, did she?

By looking at the Klima’s tests and observing them in parallel with the German language, one can realize how negation and constituents associated with it differ across languages not only in structure, but also in how they function in a phrase.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has explored the morphosyntactic and semantic nature of negation in English and German, focusing particularly on its classification into nexal (sentential) and special (constituent) negation. Following Jespersen, Ružička, and Hajicová, the article showed how negation’s position and scope significantly impact sentence meaning, especially in complex structures.

The study emphasizes the variability of negation's influence based on verb types (factive, implicative, and causative), highlighting its ability to alter presuppositions and entailments. Moreover, structural differences between English and German are analysed, especially regarding negation's placement, flexibility, and the necessity of auxiliary insertion (see do-support in English vs. verb movement in German).

The paper also discusses the syntactic and pragmatic distinctions between contracted and full forms of negation in English and shows how German allows for more positional

variation due to its stronger inflection and scrambling possibilities. Finally, Klima's tests are used to differentiate between sentence-level and constituent negation, illustrating both their properties and their limits in cross-linguistic application.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. Hajiczova, E. (1974). Negation and presupposition on the semantic structure of the sentence. *Trier: Univ., Linguistic Agency*, pg. 2-3
2. Haan, D. (1999) The Interaction of Modality and Negation: A typological study. pg. 28-29
3. Horn, L. (2010). Multiple negation in English and other languages. In: Horn, L. R. (ed.). *The expression of Negation*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter Mouton, pg. 3.
4. Jespersen, O. (1917). Negation in English and Other Languages. Volume 1, Edition 5, pg. 5-42.
5. Krifka, M. (2003) Negative Polarität, *Humboldt Universität zu Berlin*, pg. 1-10.
6. Labov, W. (1972) Language in the Inner City. The Logic of Nonstandard English. *Studies in the Black English Vernacular. University of Pennsylvania Press*. pg. 202-212.
7. Lakoff, G. (1966). A Note on Negation. In *Mathematical Linguistics and Automatic Translation. UC Berkeley*. pg. 34-36.
8. Lasnik, H. (1972). Analyses of Negation in English. *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, pg. 1-163.
9. Müller, S. (2018). German clause structure: An analysis with special consideration of so-called multiple frontings. *Language Science Press*, Berlin, 3.1.12. pg. 79
10. Quirk R., Greenbaum S., Leech G., Svartvik J. (1985) A comprehensive Grammar of the English Language. Ed. Longman, London & New York, 3.23. Negative and verb contractions. pg. 129.
11. Růžička, M. (1999). Some marginal notes on polarity and negation. *Brněnské University*. pg. 44-57.
12. Stechow, A & Penka, D. (2005-2006) Einführung zu Polaritätselementen. *Syntax und Semantik von Polaritätselementen*. pg. 1-4.
13. Szoke, J. (2010). Multiple negation in English today. *The Odd Yearbook 8 (2010)* pg. 139–153.
14. Wouden, T. (1997) Negative contexts: collocation, polarity and multiple negation. *Routledge studies in Germanic linguistics. London*, pg. 61-79