

SOME PRAGMATIC CONDITIONS ON APPLICATION OF NEG-MOVEMENT*

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Recently linguists have become strongly aware of the role that pragmatics plays in the syntax and semantics of natural languages. A critical examination of many pairs of sentences generally analyzed as derivationally related by an optional syntactic transformation, and therefore considered to be paraphrases, reveals that they are not in fact used interchangeably in all contexts, but rather there seem(s) to be some pragmatic condition(s) on the application of the rules. Two such syntactic rules are the optional Negative-Movement rules in English: NEG-Raising and NEG-Lowering, also known as NEG-Attraction, which move a NEG element up and down trees respectively. NEG-Raising relates sentences with the structure of (1) to sentences with structures like (2).

(1) I believe I didn't see anyone in the room

(2) I don't believe I saw anyone in the room

NEG-Attraction relates sentences like (1) with those like (3)

(3) I believe I saw no one in the room

NEG-Raising or NEG-Transportation has been motivated as a syntactic rule by Robin Lakoff (1969), Lindholm (1969), Horn (1971), et al., mainly by the acceptability of a negative polarity item in the complement of sentences, where the NEG element does not immediately command the negative polarity item in the sentence, as shown in sentence (2), for example (2) is grammatical even though the negative polarity item anyone is not immediately commanded by the NEG element. Horn describes NEG-Raising as a minor rule governed by three semantic classes of predicates: predicates of opinion such as believe, think, and imagine, predicates of expectation or intention such as want, intend, and choose, and predicates of perceptual approximation such as seem and appear and turn out. Bolinger has been accredited by Robin Lakoff, and George Lakoff (1970) with the observation that the negative force in the NEG-Transported version of a sentence is weaker than that in the non-NEG-Transported sentence. In other words NEG-Raised sentences convey more uncertainty on the part of the speaker than their corresponding non-NEG-Raised versions. Such pragmatic condition imposed on the

application of NEG-Transportation explains why factive verbs such as realize and regret do not trigger NEG-Raising.

(4) I realize that John is not alive.

(5) I don't realize that John is alive.

(4) does not have a NEG-Raised paraphrase in (5) (4) cannot undergo NEG-Raising, since it is impossible for the subject of a factive verb to be uncertain about the truth of a complement which he is presupposed to know to be true.

Horn (1974) points out the weaknesses of the polarity argument for NEG-Raising in English.³ However, he goes over some convincing arguments for motivating NEG-Raising as a syntactic transformation, the arguments being based on rules whose operation seem to involve the positing of a preraised NEG. Two such rules are the pronominalization of a Proposition as in (6)

(6) I don't think Bill payed his bills, and Mary is quite sure of it.

where it refers to the negative proposition Bill didn't pay his bills, and the Subject Auxiliary Inversion, as in (7)

(7) I don't think that ever before have the media played such an important role.

where the Subject-AUX inversion is triggered by the Negative Adverb Preposing of the phrase never before.

The question now arises as to why there seem to be three coherent classes of NEG-Raising predicates. Horn attempts to answer this issue by claiming that there is a more general distinction among the NEG-Raising verbs, and accordingly classifies NEG-Raising predicates into two semantic classes of epistemic--that is belief or knowledge based predicates, and deontic--that is obligation or permission based predicates, limiting both classes of verbs to what he calls the "mid-scalar strength" Thus the epistemic verb likely governs NEG-Raising, while its weaker and stronger counterparts, respectively possible and certain do not trigger NEG-Raising. The cooccurrence of a predicate or its contradictory negation with absolutely is diagnostic for non-Transportation.

(8)a. absolutely certain/absolutely impossible

b. *absolutely likely/ *?absolutely unlikely

where certain and impossible are non-Transportation epistemic verbs, and where likely is a NEG-Raising predicate

Since ideally, Horn wants to have a unitary "mid-scalar" class of NEG-Raising predicates, he prefers to do away with the epistemic/deontic distinction, and claims that both predicate classes may be considered as predicates of "opinion," the epistemics conveying an "opinion of the mind" and the deontics, an "opinion of the heart." By throwing out the semantic distinctions among the various classes of NEG-Raising verbs and positing a general unitary class of NEG-Raising predicates, Horn hopes to relate all NEG-Raised sentences to the pragmatic condition involving uncertainty on the part of the speaker about the truth of the proposition in the complement. Thus the applicability of NEG-Raising would be a direct function of the uncertainty of the speaker about his own opinion.

The present paper shows that by positing a single unified class of verbs governing NEG-Raising, Horn overlooks two very important pragmatic factors that NEG-Transportation is sensitive to, namely that of whether or not there is any control on the part of the matrix subject over the proposition in the complement, and whether the perception on the part of the speaker of the proposition in the complement is of a direct or remote nature. By maintaining the distinctions, originally posited by Horn, among verbs of opinion, verbs of intention, and verbs of perceptual approximation, one could easily accommodate the pragmatic condition of uncertainty on the part of the speaker, as well as the additional conditions of uncontrollability and direct perception mentioned above. Investigation of the NEG-Lowering rule reveals that the rule is subject to precisely the opposite pragmatic conditions to those imposed on NEG-Raising, so that NEG-Movement up or down trees seems to be a function of the same three pragmatic variables. Positing three distinct classes of NEG-Raising predicates provides one with a framework which readily allows for a unitary set of pragmatic parameters for the two NEG-Movement rules, thereby capturing significant generalizations about the rules.

NEG-Lowering or NEG-Attraction applies to lower the NEG-element from the direct dominance of the V to that of an unspecified NP within the VP, such as anyone, anybody, and anything. Look at sentence (9a-b).

(9)a. I didn't see anyone in the room

b₋ I saw no one in the room. (NEG-Lowered)

The examination of the acceptability distribution of NEG-Lowered sentences in various situational contexts reveals that NEG-Lowering is a function of certain pragmatic factors, one of them being emphasis. Sentences having emphatic or contrastive stress on any element of the proposition, but not on the unspecified NP, within it, do not undergo NEG-Lowering. That is to say, if a proposition happens to carry emphatic or contrastive stress, then NEG-lowering would apply only if the stressed element is the unspecified NP. See sentences (10 a-c) and (11 a-c).⁴

(10)a₋ I didn't see anyone in the room. (How could I? It was so dark!)

b_{??}? I saw no one in the room. (How could I? It was so dark!)

c₋ I saw no one in the room. (Everybody had left before I got there)

Not being NEG-Lowered, (10a) is acceptable, regardless of the position of the stress. (10b) is less acceptable due to the sentence having undergone NEG-Lowering when the stress is on saw (10c) is acceptable, the stress being on the NEG-NP in a NEG-Lowered sentence.

(11)a₋ I didn't see anyone in the room (but George saw someone there).

b_{??}? I saw no one in the room (but George saw someone there)

c₋ I saw no one in the room (but George saw someone there).

(11a) which has contrastive stress on I is acceptable in the non-NEG-Lowered construction, but not in its NEG-Lowered counterpart (11b). However (11c) with contrastive stress on the unspecified NP as well, can undergo NEG-Lowering.

The distribution of absolutely in sentences (12b-d) shows that the stress is generally indicative of the certainty of conviction on the part of the speaker

(12)a₋ I saw no one in the room.

b₋ I saw absolutely no one in the room.

c. I didn't see anyone in the room

d. ?I didn't see absolutely anyone in the room

(12a) where the NEG is lowered is acceptable with absolutely, as indicated in (12b), while (12c) where the NEG is not lowered, is unacceptable with absolutely, as shown in (12d)

It is clear that NEG-Lowering is pragmatically conditioned by the certainty factor on the part of the speaker, as opposed to the uncertainty condition for NEG-Raising.⁵ Thus NEG-Lowering is appropriate for contexts where the speaker is certain about the opinion expressed in the proposition, for example, in a context following stressed know as a higher predicate

(13)a. I know she doesn't eat anything for breakfast

b. I know she eats nothing for breakfast (NEG-Lowered)

c. I think she doesn't eat anything for breakfast

d. ?I think she eats nothing for breakfast (NEG-Lowered)

Using I think instead of I know would not permit NEG-Lowering, since NEG-Lowering conveys a strength of conviction that is contradictory to the weakness of conviction inherent in I think. (13d) is unacceptable, since NEG-Lowering has applied in a sentence containing a higher predicate which conveys uncertainty

Another case of pragmatic conditions on NEG-Lowering involves the distinction of controllability on the part of the subject of the clause, such that NEG-Lowering becomes necessary in order to convey the idea that the subject has control over the event in the proposition, as indicated by examples (15 a-b)

(14)a. I haven't dated anyone who is 6'6" tall (because such men happen to be rare)

b. I have dated no one who is 6'6" tall (because such men happen to be rare) (NEG-Lowered)

(15)a. ?I haven't dated anyone who is 6'6" tall (because I am only 4'7", and I try to avoid tall guys)

b. I have dated no one who is 6'6" tall (because I am only 4'7" and I try to avoid tall guys) (NEG-Lowered)

(15a) is not as appropriate as (15b) in such a controlled situation.

The application of NEG-Raising governed by predicates of intention is sensitive to whether or not the situation is controlled by the matrix subject. Notice that this pragmatic condition is reversed in value from the one operating on NEG-Lowering--that is to say that NEG-Raised sentences convey a lack of control over the event on the part of the matrix subject.

(16)a. John wants the secretaries not to leave early today

b. John doesn't want the secretaries to leave early today.
 (16a) is appropriate only in a situation where John is in a position of authority, let us say he is the director of a firm, where he can control the event in the complement. The NEG-Raised version of the sentence, (16b) conveys less control by the matrix subject, and is vague with respect to John's control over the event. This sentence can be used in a context where John is the director of a firm, having authority over the secretaries, as in (16a), but can be equally uttered in a situation where John is one of the janitors who expresses a vain wish that the secretaries keep him company after working hours

A third pragmatic condition on NEG-Lowering requires that the speaker be indirectly or remotely involved in the perception of the proposition in the complement, reflecting some measure of objectivity on the part of the speaker

(17)a. John seems to have said nothing insulting to his sister.
 (At least that's what everybody says!)

b. ?John seems to have said nothing insulting to his sister.
 (I tell you, I heard their argument myself!)⁶

c. John seems not to have said anything insulting to his sister.⁷

(17a), where NEG-Lowering has applied, is acceptable, the involvement of the speaker being of a remote, objective nature. However, (17b) is less acceptable, since the context implies that the perception is a direct one, at the same time that the NEG-Lowered complement conveys a remoteness on the part of the speaker. (17c), where NEG-Lowering has not applied, can be appropriate in either of two contexts: one, where the speaker is directly involved, and the other where he is remotely involved. NEG-Raising governed by predicates of perceptual approximation is pragmatically conditioned

such that it applies if the involvement of the speaker is a direct one. This condition, too, is opposite to the one imposed on NEG-Lowering. Consider a sentence like (18) for example

- (18) John doesn't seem to have said anything insulting to his sister (NEG-Raised)

conveys a direct involvement on the part of the speaker. Therefore (18) would be odd in a context where one adds That's what most people say⁸

The pragmatic conditioning on the rules of NEG-Movement can explain the acceptability distribution of structures involving more than one of these rules. It is not surprising that the incompatibility of some of the effects of NEG-Raising and NEG-Lowering renders unacceptable many constructions with two NEG elements, where both NEG-Movement rules have interacted

- (19)a. I don't think she doesn't eat anything for breakfast (NEG-Raised)

h??I don't think she eats nothing for breakfast (NEG-Raised, NEG-Lowered)

(19b) where both NEG-Raising and NEG-Lowering have applied, is not acceptable unless used as a strong denial of a previous statement. It is pragmatically impossible for a speaker to be simultaneously certain and uncertain about something¹⁰

Now consider (20)

- (20) I don't want her to eat nothing for breakfast⁹

(20) is acceptable since there are no conflicts of control: the matrix subject I does not control the event, which the underlying embedded subject has control over

Finally, consider (21 a-b)

- (21)a. John doesn't seem not to have said anything insulting to his sister (NEG-Raised)

h??John doesn't seem to have said nothing insulting to his sister (NEG-Raised, NEG-Lowered)

⁴Native speakers do not always have distinct intuitions about the distribution of the NEG in sentences of English. This paper reports the general tendency of English speakers' responses.

⁵It has been pointed out to me by a few native speakers that the NEG-Lowered sentences would not be used by them in spoken language, but rather in written work. This fact seems to go along well with the pragmatics of NEG-Lowering in that in written work people generally tend to be more assertive and "certain" sounding than in normal everyday speech.

⁶Some speakers claim that they would use (17b) in this context. Such a usage can be explained in terms of strategies that a speaker uses in order to convey some idea--in this case the NEG-Lowered form is used in order to convey a feeling of remoteness and objectivity on the part of the speaker.

⁷Native speakers do get this sentence, but admit that it is "somehow heavy" for them. This can be explained by the fact that sentences are generally uttered in context so that depending on the context, one of the two NEG-Movement rules should ordinarily apply.

⁸The non-Subject Raised versions of sentences (17a) and (18) reflect the same pragmatic distribution even more strongly for some native speakers.

- (1) It seems that John said nothing insulting to his sister (At least that's what everybody says')
- (11) It doesn't seem that John said anything insulting to his sister (I tell you, I heard them arguing myself')

Even though the complementizer that in such constructions generally tends to make the complement more factual, thereby implying remoteness and objectivity on the part of the speaker, the effect of NEG-Raising overrules the effect of that, and the involvement of the speaker comes through clearly.

⁹Some speakers find (19a) hard to get, unless some focus has been established on the negative event in the proposition.

¹⁰Georgia Green has noticed an interesting point about sentences like

(1) I don't think a bite got eaten.

where the source of the higher NEG is obviously a lower NEG since (11) is not grammatical.

(11) *A bite got eaten.

One may think at first that NEG-Raising as well as NEG-Lowering must have interacted in (11), with (111) as an intermediate derivation

(111) I think not a bite got eaten.

(111) is derived as a result of Passivization and NEG-Lowering operating on (1v):

(1v) I think she ate not a bite

On the other hand, if both NEG-Raising and NEG-Lowering have applied, with a predicate of opinion such as think, the resulting sentence must be ungrammatical because of the incompatibility of the pragmatic conditions on their application. However, we find that this is not the case. It seems to me that one can explain this seeming paradox by analyzing (1) as having undergone two NEG-Raising rules. one which yields (111) from (v):

(v) I think a bite didn't get eaten.

and the other deriving (1) from (111). It seems that both instances of NEG-Movement in this case are instantiations of the same rule that moves the NEG certain discrete distances to the right or to the left in the surface structure of sentences, such that all cases of NEG-Movement to the right in a sentence would be subject to the same pragmatic condition(s). Thus there would be no incompatibility of pragmatic conditions involved in (1). This notion will be discussed in greater detail in a forthcoming paper.

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