

The Role of Adverbs and Adjectives in English Negation

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المخلص

نحاول في هذا البحث ان نعالج النفي في اللغة الانجليزية بأعتباره أحد مجالات التحليل اللغوي الذي لم يزل بحاجة الى الدراسة. جرى تحليل احدى العبارات التي تحمل معنى النفي والتي لم يجري بحثها في كتب النحو الانجليزي بوصفها اداة نافية وفقا للمعايير التي وضعها النحويون. وكذلك تم تقديم شكلا اخر من ما يسمى النفي الموضوعي local negation لاثبات ان هذا شكلا اخر من يدعم فرضية ان النفي لايزال بحاجة الى الدراسة. ومن خلال دراسة مثل هذه الظواهر يبين البحث ان النحو لايمكن فصله عن الدلالة في دراسة اللغة. تظهر نتائج هذا البحث ان تحليل عبارة far from وأثر كلمة only بعد اداة نفي الجملة كشف اللثام عن حالة جديدة من النفي الموضوعي وكل ذلك يثبت أن النفي لم يأخذ حظه من الدراسة والبحث.

Abstract

The present paper tries to deal with English negation as an area of linguistic analysis that still needs to be investigated. A phrase that is negative in meaning which is not accounted for in books of grammar is analyzed as a negator according to the criteria set by grammarians and we might possibly find other parts of speech which carry negation. Another aspect of local negation is introduced to prove that this is another example in favour of the hypothesis that negation is yet to be studied. By studying such phenomena the paper also suggests that grammar cannot be separated from semantics in the study of language. The findings of the study show that the analysis of the phrase *far from* and the effect of *only* after a clause negator resulted in

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uncovered case of local negation all of which suggest that negation is understudied and under researched.

I-Introduction

The notion of negation itself is far from being as straightforward as it might appear to be at first sight(Lyons 1977: 776).It is one of the sentence processes that still needs to be analysed and studied in a more insightful way to bring to light the areas that are yet to be uncovered. Definitions of negation are too straight forward such that the reader might be misled into thinking that it is a simple issue in grammar while actually it is not. Crystal (2003:310), for example, defines negation as a process or construction in grammatical and semantic analysis which typically express the contradiction of some or all of a sentence's meaning. In English, he adds, negation is expressed by the presence of a negative particle not (or n't).We can discover, at a glance, that this definition lacks a lot and probably needs to be reformulated.

The semantic part of the negative sentence is not at all as straightforward as suggested before. When we explore the subject in the books of grammar and semantics (see Quirk et al 1985; Stageberg1971; Lyons 1977), we see that negation in English has three major axes viz the words that are either negative in form or meaning, scope of negation and double negation. The latter, which is the nearest to the present study, is usually divided between standard and non- standard English.

This study aims at adding a new dimension to the so-called local negation which is part of the scope of negation. This may sound for the first while common to the study of English

grammar, but when we look deeply onto the matter, we shall discover that it is not the case. It was found out that sentences might contain negative words such as "not" but can still be a semantically positive sentence due to the presence of certain adverbs and adjectives that are positive in form and negative in meaning and this is termed double negation. However grammarians when dealing with this issue make hints forwards and even leave the door open to new speculations into the variation in semantic negation, scope of negation and local negation, which make up the three major elements of the study of negation. It is also claimed in this paper that there is an expression in English meaning exactly "not" but, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, has not been classified as a negator by major grammarians: this expression is "far from" which can be an adjective or an adverb but in this paper it is dealt with as an adverb as can be seen in examples cited- apart from and away from are prepositions and their meaning and usage is different (see Stageberg 1971: 155).

II- Syntax and Semantics of Negation

Before presenting any evidence in favour of proving the hypotheses it is worth making a quick look at the major points of English negation. First, the logical view of negation is represented in the books of semantics as the negative connective by means of which out of any proposition *p* we can construct its negation $\neg p$ (read as not p or it is not the case that p). If *p* is true, then $\neg p$ is false, which is called the truth value in logical semantics (Lyons 1977: 775).

Negation is divided into two types: Clause negation and local negation (Quirk et al 1985:775-799). In clause negation the

whole clause is syntactically treated as negative while in local negation only part of the clause is negated.

A- Clause negation can be achieved by a number of ways.

1. Clause negation through negating the verb. In this instance , a simple positive clause or a finite clause within a complex sentence is negated by inserting the clause negator **not** between the operator and the predication:

I am happy.

*I am **not** happy.*

2. Clause negation by negating elements other than the verb by words that are negative in form and meaning:

That is no accident.

No honest man would lie.

I see no clouds.

They no longer stay with us.

3. Clause negation by words negative in meaning not in form: Words which do such a job fall into two types: adverbs and determiners. They are :

Seldom/ rarely/ barely/ ...etc.

Little/ few

These words can effect clause negation. All these groups when converting the clause to negative raise an important question: how do we know that it is clause negation rather than other types of negation. The answer is that grammarians such as Quirk et al (1985: ibid) have established a number of criteria that help us decide whether it is a negation issue or not. The criteria can be summarized as follows:

- a. Negative sentences can be followed by positive tag questions:

She doesn't work hard, does she?

- b. Negative sentences can be Followed by negative tag clauses with additive meaning:

They haven't arrived and neither she.

- c. Negative sentences can have nonassertive items;

She won't make any mistakes.

B- Local negation

Local negation negates a word or a phrase without making the clause negative. A famous example is:

She is a not unattractive woman.



where the scope of **not** includes the adjective with a negative prefix **unattractive**.

This type of negation is called local negation because the negated word or phrases are not clause elements but are **embedded** in noun phrases that are clause elements (Quirk et al 1985: 792).

The first aim of the present paper is to add a phrase to the list of those phrases that are negative in meaning not in form, which to my best opinion has not been listed in all the books of grammar which are available to student of English language. Probably the syntactic aspect of negation is simple and we can easily list the words that make a sentence negative. However, it is only natural that any grammarian is liable to miss a word or two in the process of listing certain groups of words, which usually depends on the research done by others.

The division of the words that convert a sentence to negative fall into two types: words negative in form and words negative in meaning but not in form. The former are words such as “not” and “never” while examples of the latter are the adverbs

and determiners such as *seldom*, *scarcely*, *little* etc. (Quirk et al 1985:780).

III- “Far from” as a negative word in meaning

Negation is not limited to the words that are negative in form, but it is achieved by another type of words that are negative in meaning as mentioned above. Most books of grammar follow this dichotomy and would probably attempt a listing of those words or expressions which represent both groups. However, a close look at this list or that can lead us to think of other words which might belong to the latter group in particular for the words that are negative in form make a closed system of a small number of words. One such expression which, to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, has not been included in any one of these books is “far from”. This is possible due to the wide range of linguistic details associated with this process which gives rise to even new findings every time we dig deep into texts. Let’s look at some examples from the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* 1989.

(1) *The problem is far from easy.* (in fact it is very difficult)

(2) *Your account is far from being true.* (It is not true)

In informal English this expression is widely used in the negative sense:

(3) *Are you happy here?*

No, far from it; I’ve never been so miserable in my life.

If we concentrate on the expression “*No, far from It*”, we can easily find out that the substitution of “*far from it*” by *I’m not* proves that it behaves like a negative expression.

If we apply the common tests of negation to this expression, we shall find out whether our hypothesis is correct or not. Quirk (1985:777) states that there are several adverbs and determiners which are negative in meaning but not in form. He lists a number of such words:

Seldom, rarely, scarcely, hardly, barely, little and few

These words, according to him, can effect clause negation: they are followed by non-assertive forms and sentences in which they occur generally require a positive tag question:

(4) *I seldom get any sleep.*

(5) *They scarcely seem to care, do they?*

If “far from” accepts these criteria, we can say that it is a negative expression:

(5) *He is far from being any good to the group.*

“any” can be used with “far from” which means that the first criterion of negation applies to this expression. While reading an article in a magazine, I came across an instance of having sentences which do contain negative words in meaning and in form but still the overall meaning of the sentence is not negative. Someone might say that this is not an unusual thing and that it is covered by the books of grammar. I think that this is not true for I searched for an answer to this question: “How can negation be negated” and the answer is only one possibility according to books of grammar. Let’s take Quirk for example. He (1985:798-9) suggests that two negators may occur in the same clause:

(6) *I can’t not obey her. (I have to obey her)*

(7) *He hasn’t ever not understood a lecture. (He hasn’t ever failed to understand a lecture)*

He also talks about other combinations of negation such as:

- (8) *Not many people have nowhere to live.* (Most people have somewhere to live)
- (9) *No one has nothing to offer to society.* (Everyone has something to offer)
- (10) *Nobody has nothing to eat.* (Everyone has something to eat)
- (11) *Not all imperatives have no subject.* (Some imperatives have subjects)
- (12) *Never before had none of the committee members supported the mayor.* (Some of the committee members had always supported the mayor)
- (13) *None of us had never told lies.* (All of us had told lies at some time)

I have intentionally mentioned all the examples cited by Quirk just to show that almost all the second elements of negation in the sentences are words that are negative in form: *nowhere, nothing, nothing, no, none, never* respectively.

What makes these examples significant to the study is the absence of any reference to elements that are neither negative in form nor in meaning.

IV- Only, uniquely and solely in local negation

Local negation is usually associated with dialectal stylistic variant of pure negation or a common way of achieving affirmation by double negation as many grammarians assume. However, Lobner (2002:61), for example, suggests that negation is formed by negating other parts of the sentence and cites quantifiers such as *all, every, some, always and like*, but he considers negation only when the clause negator immediately

precedes the negated part, which is not similar to when the negator is attached to the operator. In this instance it is attempted to show how some adverbs and adjectives can reverse the negation process into an affirmation one in spite of the presence of a negative particle attached to the operator and the absence of any other type of negative morpheme or word.

(14) He is not far from being a good teacher.

It can only be interpreted as some male person does not have the qualities of a good teacher. The scope of negation in this example covers the adjective *good* only, which is an important thing in the coming analysis as the scope of negation might not stay as it is when the negative meaning is reversed into an affirmation by adding an adverb or an adjective. It is not hypothesized here that all adverbs and adjectives are capable of reversing the negative into an affirmative but only a small number of them. Some of these are *only*, *uniquely*, *solely*. Look at sentence (14):

(15) He is not (far from being) the only good teacher in the school.

The sentence can only be interpreted as *He* is a good teacher in the school, but mind you Mr Hearer he is not the only good teacher in the school. In this sentence, “*not*” does not negate the quality of being good nor being a teacher in the school, but rather adds him to the other good teachers in the school. First, the insertion of the adverb “*only*” reversed the anticipation of a negative sentence into an affirmative one: he is a teacher, he is a good teacher and he is a good teacher in the school. However, a subtle type of negation is present in this sentence: the exception suggested by “*only*” or any other similar element is the part of the sentence which is affected by the localized negation. The effect of the adverb on the function of not is clear. Similar

processes are found in the books of grammar such as the additive structure "not only..., but also", but we can see that the second element is located outside the clause borders. And what is more is that the word or phrase coming under the scope of negation is not an element as suggested before but an embedded in a sentence element, in this case a subject complement. Another example should make the argument clearer:

(16) He is far from being uniquely capable of doing the job.

Such sentences are widely found in the English text; however, they do not cover it in a comprehensive way which accounts for all the examples found in this language. Some books of grammar account for such a semantically oriented type of negation where negation is formally present but the meaning remains positive but not all of them. In this example expressions such as *far from*, as established earlier, is a negative tool which is negative in meaning not in form. It is dealt with in Quirk et al (1985: 663) under complex prepositions not under negation and even without any reference to it as a negator. Reading the sentences to the point where the word "*being*" is located gives the impression of having a negative sentence for which grammarians use the term anticipating negation, but as soon as we read the word *uniquely* things change and the meaning shifts suddenly into an additive one in the sense that the scope of negation is halted and the expected quality which is to come in the course of the sentence starts to move into two directions forward and backward to include both the subject and the object in having this quality: he is capable of doing the job and others are also capable. (Of course this meaning has a clear pragmatic dimension in the part of the speaker which can be handled pragmatic studies).

What is to be emphasized here is that these types of structures where negative elements are present have not been studied in the chapters of grammar books where negation occupies an important part. This could be good justification for reviewing even more and more areas of grammar and probably prove that those who think that syntax, and grammar in general, are exhausted areas are not right in their claim.

Among the nearest trends in the study of negation are the scope of negation and local negation. Quirk et al (1985: 787) define the scope of negation as the stretch of language over which the negative item has a semantic influence. However, it is not always the case that the negative influence includes all the part of the sentence coming under its influence. This led to the introduction of what has been termed local negation by grammarians. Quirk et al (ibid: 790) state that local negation means negation of a word or phrase without making the clause negative. Let's go back to the sentence:

(17) *She is a not unattractive woman.*

In this sentence not negates *unattractive* but not the whole clause for as Palmer (1981:168) puts it the assertion not the presupposition that is denied by negation and the denial of the presupposition is unusual and marked. Quirk et al (ibid) list the cases of local negation in English none of which applies to the examples which include the adverbs *only*, *uniquely*, *solely*. If we study the examples which contain such words with negative items, we shall immediately discover the difference.

(18) *He is far from being uniquely capable of doing the job.*

The scope of negation is locally focused on the adverb uniquely which in turn reverses the meaning of the sentence into a positive

one. What supports this hypothesis is the fact that the substitution of this adverb by another one does not have the same effect:

(19) He is far from being *adequately* capable of doing the job.

The meaning of this sentence is completely changed- he is not adequately capable and no other people are implied by this sentence as also capable, which gives this group of words a special status when used after a negator.

What this paper tries to show is that adverbs and probably other groups of words cannot be accounted for on the basis of lexical category only when we deal with negation but other semantic feature the member of a word-group. This is because, as shown in (19), a word of the same word-group and in the same position resulted in different interpretation of the same sentence.

To sum up, we can say that negation is not an exhausted area and that more can be revealed from studying this linguistic process. Moreover, according to the findings of this paper, the separation of grammar and semantics is not possible if we were to present an exhaustive tool for studying language as seen from the semantics of the adverbs *only*, *uniquely*, *solely*. Finally, local negation is another area which needs more study.

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