

When negation goes mad: on the puzzle of expletive negation

Hebrew allows instantiations of the sentential negation *lo* which seem to make no contribution to meaning (EXPLETIVE NEGATION; ExN). Environments in which ExN occurs are quantificational free relatives (FRs), both in argument (1) and adjunct (2) positions, embedded polar questions (3), and *until*-clauses (4).

- (1) *mi Se lo yaSav b-a-xacer kibel ugiya*
who that NEG sat in-the-yard received cookie
– ‘Whoever did not sit in the yard got a cookie.’
– ‘Whoever sat in the yard got a cookie.’
- (2) *mi Se lo tarce b-a-pgiSa, yihiye me’anyen*
who that NEG lecture.FUT.F in-the-meeting.F, be.FUT.3SG.M interesting
‘Whoever talks at the meeting, it will be interesting.’
- (3) *miri tahata im yoni lo nimca b-a-bayit biglal ha-or ha-daluk*
Miri wondered if Yoni NEG present in-the-house due the-light the-turned
‘Miri wondered whether Yoni was in the house, because of the turned-on lights.’
- (4) *yonit yaSan ad Se ha-Sxenim lo hidliku muzika*
Yoni slept until that the-neighbors NEG turned on music
‘Yoni was asleep until the neighbors turned some music on.’

ExN is *expletive*

In addition to the most striking observation, namely that ExN does not reverse truth conditions, the following observations support the idea that it does not contribute to meaning.

- (a) ExN is not required in FRs for getting a quantificational interpretation (Rubinstein and Doron (2015), pace Eilam (2007)). One can use special prosody: stress the *wh* word introducing the FR and eliminate any prosodic break between the constituent headed by the *wh* word and the complementizer *Se*. Additionally, ExN is not required in polar questions to allow the question to be embedded.
- (b) Unlike interpreted negation, ExN cannot bear contrastive stress (Eilam, 2007). Stressing negation forces its interpretation.
- (c) Expletive negation does not license Negative Concord Items (NCIs) (Rubinstein and Doron, 2015). Interpreted negation is required in order to license NCIs.

Possible analyses

What follows is a coarse representation of major approaches and a brief discussion of why they are not sufficient.

The most parsimonious approach would be to argue that ExN is not expletive at all – it is the ordinary compositional negation. Then, one needs to show how independent properties of contexts in which ExN is licensed give rise to the expletive result. Given the standard semantics of questions, it is possible to explain in this way cases of ExN in embedded polar questions (3). Additionally, ExN in *until*-clauses (4) may lead to a new understanding of the semantics and pragmatics of *until* (as for *before* in Krifka (2010)). However, it is not clear what property of FRs could be the culprit. It is tempting to relate FRs to questions due to their use of *wh*-words, but then one ends-up wrongly predicting that ExN should be licensed in matrix questions. Moreover, points (b)–(c) remain unaccounted for.

A related approach is advocated for by Eilam (2007), who takes ExN to be a counterpart of English *-ever* in FRs. However, as Rubinstein and Doron (2015) argue, the availability of a quantificational interpretation of FRs even without ExN raises doubts on ExN’s meaningfulness ((a) above).

A different approach would be to argue that ExN is in fact semantically inert, and explain its existence as a syntactic phenomenon. Since Hebrew is a Strict Negative Concord language, one can argue that *lo* merely agrees with an abstract negative operator (along the lines of Zeijlstra, 2004, 2008). If *lo* is just an agreement marker, what would it be agreeing with in cases of ExN?

Since cases of ExN are by definition non-negative, one would be forced to expand the set of operators *lo* can agree with to contain something other than negation. Observing the cases of embedded polar questions and FRs, one possibility that comes to mind is agreement with a question operator. A related proposal is made by Rubinstein and Doron (2015), who analyze ExN as an agreement marker to *wh*-words. However, an immediate objection arises: as before, this overgenerates to matrix questions, which do not license ExN.

To conclude, ExN is a genuinely puzzling phenomenon to which currently there does not seem to exist a viable analysis.

References

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