A Conspiracy Theory of Constituent Negation (with Data from Spanish Varieties)

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Negation (NEG) can have sentential scope, or negate a subclausal term, typically a Quantifier Phrase (QP), in so-called Constituent Negation (CN) (Klima, 64; Horn, 89; Collins and Postal, 2014). In those cases, NEG immediately precedes the QP, as in Spanish (1):

(1) [[No pocos] han venido a la fiesta]
    not few have come to the party

NEG can combine with a large set of QPs, as in (2), and the common view is that all those sequences involve CN, with NEG directly merging with the QP (Sanchez Lopez, 1999 for Spanish; Kim and Sag, 2002; Collins and Postal, 2014; Collins, 2016, 2017).

(2) [No todos/cualquiera/cada uno de ellos] ha venido tarde
    Not all (just) anyone/each one of them has arrived late

Etxepare and Uribe-Etxebarria (E-UE, 2018) argue that some of the sequences of NEG QP are not cases of CN (understood as direct merge of the NEG head and the QP), but derived instances of adjacency between a very high NEG and a focus-fronted QP. One type of evidence that they contribute in favour of this idea has to do with cases like (3), in which NEG is followed immediately not by a QP, but by a clausal adverb:

(3) No tal vez a todos les guste eso  “Not perhaps everyone likes that”

Note that the modal adverb licenses subjunctive mood, and NEG does not negate the adverb, but the QP. We know independently that sentential NEG cannot precede modal adverbs of the sort above (4a), it must necessarily follow them (4b):

(4) a. *No tal vez les guste eso  b. Tal vez no les guste eso
    Neg perhaps cl like that  Perhaps neg has.subj come

Examples such as (3) must be related to the existence of double NEG in Spanish, possible in the context of denials targeting a negative sentence. (5) (from corpus) is a reply to a newspaper heading saying that People do not wish to work in the land:

(5) No todos no quieren trabajar en el campo
    Neg all neg wish work.inf in the land
    “Not everyone does not wish to work in the land”

E-UE show that true CN is only available to weak QPs. For strong QPs, the structure underlying the sequence NEG QP is one where the QP is fronted into a position that precedes sentential NEG, and is dominated by an even higher NEG. This higher NEG has a denial function but can be embedded (unlike “etalinguistic negation à la Martins, 2014), and combined with sentential NEG (5). Note that in Spanish, only weak QPs can be preceded by NEG withing a case-marked phrase:

(6) a. *A no todo dios le gusta eso  b. A no mucha gente le gusta eso
    Prep neg all god cl likes that  prep neg many people cl likes that
    “Not everyone likes that”  “Not many people likes that”

The two strategies for CN can be represented as follows:

(7) a. [PolP NEG … [FocP QP Foc […(QP)…]]]  Association with focus
    b. [QP NEG … [QP … Q…]]  Direct Merge

(7a) accounts for why sequences of NEG QP involving strong quantifiers present clear right-left asymmetries, inexistent in the case of weak quantifiers. Compare (8-9):

(8) a. Hoy no todos van a venir
    today neg all go to come
    “Today not all will come”

(9) a. Hoy no pocos vendrán tarde
    today neg few will.come late
    “Today not few come late”
This is expected if the derivation of NEG QP sequences in the case of strong Qs involves fronting the QP to a preverbal position that is below a higher NEG. So-called CN in the case of strong Qs is thus a case of association with focus. The reanalysis of apparent cases of CN as instances of association with focus raises the issue of why referential DPs cannot be adjacent to NEG in Spanish (10a), except in “edge coordination” (Bianchi and Zamparelli, 2004) (10b):

(10) a. *No JUAN ha venido  b. No JUAN, sino que MARÍA, ha venido

“No is Juan but Mary, who has come”

Although sequences of NEG DP are impossible in most varieties of Spanish, they are possible for monolingual speakers of Yucatecan Spanish (11) (Gutierrez-Bravo, Sobrino and Uth 2019):

(11) No YO se lo conté. ALEXIS se lo contó “I didn’t tell him. ALEXIS did it”

Neg I cl cl told Alexis cl cl told

Cases like (11) are also possible in other languages (Russian, Dahl 2006; Hungarian, Wedgewood, 2006; Welsh, Borsley, 1999; or Arabic, Aoun, et al, 2010). We propose that the contrast between the possible (8a) and the impossible (11a) in Iberian Spanish has to do with interface economy as understood by Reinhart (2006) and Fox (2000). Fronting of a QP can have an effect on the semantic interface via scope taking; fronting of a DP in Spanish can only have an effect at the interface via contrastive focus (Cruschina, 2011). Contrastive foci and topics involve, following Tomioka, 2010, the projection of an assertive operator in the left periphery (see also Zubizarreta, 1998). Crucially, this operator is under the scope of NEG in the presence of the higher metalinguistic negation, an impossible configuration for semantic reasons (Krifka, 2001), as assertive force cannot be denied:

(12) *[PolP NEG [AssertP Assert [FocP QP Foc [IP…(QP)]]]]

One way of escaping this offending configuration is by creating an edge coordination, and inserting the assertion operator in the positive disjunct. Note that the two conjuncts are not symmetric: only the second one bears the complementizer que, related to reported assertion: (13) No (*que) JUAN, sino que MARÍA, compró eso

We follow Neeleman and Vermeulen (2012) in the idea that NEG in (12) negates the alternatives component of the focal construction, not the focus. The thing is how we can derive (11). We propose that configurations like (11) in Yucatecan Spanish are possible because NEG is an adjunct in those varieties (as a result of contact with the neighbouring mayan languages), a position defended by Gutierrez-Bravo, Sobrino and Uth, and can be directly pair-merged at the outer edge of the fronted constituent (also Zeljstra, 2013). In that position, it doesn’t take scope over the assertion operator.

(13) [AssertP Assert [FocP NEG [FocP QP Foc [IP…(QP)]]]]

Another possibility for configurations such as (11), particularly in languages that have free-word order by means of processes different from Spanish fronting (e.g. Russian), is that fronting in those languages does not necessarily invoke contrastive focus. In those languages no assertion operator is necessarily projected in LF, and therefore no scopal interaction arises with NEG. This means that the different crosslinguistic options for CN emerge as a conspiracy of different intervening factors: the status of the QP (scalar or non-scalar); c-selectional properties (pair-merge vs. set-merge) of NEG; relative position of NEG (Zanuttini, 1997; Holmberg, 2016), and the status of fronting, and its association (or lack thereof) with an assertive operator.