The markedness of the negative: Analysing negation in a spoken corpus

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This paper presents the outcome of a corpus-based study of negation in English. The most straightforward conception of negation typically involves an inversion of some (descriptive) state of affairs [as in (1)] yet in everyday language negation may target any aspect of the utterance (thus going beyond the propositional content); Horn (1989) deems this metalinguistic negation [as in (2)]:

(1) I don’t feel well  [- I feel terrible]
(2) I don’t feel ‘well’ - I feel great!

Theoretical discussion of negation is centuries old but we now confront the empirical plausibility of current theory: drawing from real, spoken data in the International Corpus of English (ICE-GB) we can access hundreds of utterances containing the negative particle [not]. Indeed, by appealing to real life examples we illustrate the difficulty in positing a clear allocation of – and distinction between – Horn’s original posited categories. Instead, the corpus data and analysis gives rise to a modified, finer grained classification; enabling the identification of certain ‘clearer’ cases of metalinguistic and descriptive negation whilst allowing for considerable overlap between the assignments. This assessment still permits a modest reconciliation with Horn’s dichotomy and furthermore presents a tentative association with the public, mental and abstract representations discussed by Wilson (2000).

The current study and theoretical ramifications therefore address the lack of hard evidence in demarcating between metalinguistic and descriptive negation in everyday language. This leads to the incorporation of a complex combination of factors (including backgrounding, focus effects and prosodic features) in seeking a full understanding of negation in everyday use.

References