

## 115. Negative Indefinite Pronouns and Predicate Negation

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### 1. Overview of the values

Negative indefinite pronouns like 'nobody', 'nothing', 'nowhere' may or may not co-occur with the ordinary marker of predicate negation. A language where they **always co-occur with predicate negation** is Russian. In (1a–b), omission of the predicate negator *ne* would render the sentences ungrammatical.

- (1) Russian
- |    |                  |           |                       |
|----|------------------|-----------|-----------------------|
| a. | <i>Nikto</i>     | <i>ne</i> | <i>prišel.</i>        |
|    | nobody           | NEG       | came.                 |
|    | 'Nobody came.'   |           |                       |
| b. | <i>Ja</i>        | <i>ne</i> | <i>videla ničego.</i> |
|    | I                | NEG       | saw nothing           |
|    | 'I saw nothing.' |           |                       |

A language where negative indefinites **never co-occur with predicate negation** is German. In (2a–b), use of the predicate negator *nicht* would render the sentences ungrammatical (*\*Niemand kam nicht; \*Ich habe nichts nicht gesehen*).

- (2) German
- |    |                |             |    |            |             |               |                 |
|----|----------------|-------------|----|------------|-------------|---------------|-----------------|
| a. | <i>Niemand</i> | <i>kam.</i> | b. | <i>Ich</i> | <i>habe</i> | <i>nichts</i> | <i>gesehen.</i> |
|    | nobody         | came        |    | I          | have        | nothing       | seen            |

Languages may also show **mixed behaviour**. For example, Spanish negative indefinites preclude predicate negation when they precede the verb (as in 3a), but predicate negation is required when they follow the verb (as in 3b).

- (3) Spanish
- |    |              |              |    |           |           |              |
|----|--------------|--------------|----|-----------|-----------|--------------|
| a. | <i>Nadie</i> | <i>vino.</i> | b. | <i>No</i> | <i>vi</i> | <i>nada.</i> |
|    | nobody       | came         |    | NEG       | I.saw     | nothing      |

Finally, some languages require a **negative existential construction** with a negative or negated existential verb as the main predicate, and the word translating the English indefinite pronoun as the subject. An example is Nêlêmwa (Oceanic; New Caledonia):

## (4) Nêlêmwa (Bril 1999: 84)

*Kia agu i uya.*  
 not.exist person 3SG arrive

'Nobody came.' (Lit. 'There isn't a person who came.')

One could say that these languages, too, show co-occurrence with predicate negation, but they are assigned to a separate category here because these languages do not allow their counterparts of negative indefinites to occur in the standard nominal or adverbial positions.

Thus, four values are distinguished on the map:

@ 1.	Negative indefinites co-occur with predicate negation	170
@ 2.	Negative indefinites preclude predicate negation	11
@ 3.	Negative indefinites show mixed behaviour	13
@ 4.	Negative existential construction	12
	total	206

## 2. What counts as a negative indefinite pronoun

Negative indefinite pronouns are defined as nominal or adverbial expressions that directly translate 'nobody', 'nothing', 'nowhere', 'never' (etc.) in sentences (1)–(3), independently of whether they co-occur with predicate negation. They fall into the same formal types as the indefinite pronouns that are discussed in chapter 46:

- (i) interrogative-based negative indefinites;
- (ii) generic-noun-based negative indefinites; and
- (iii) special negative indefinites.

Typically, languages with interrogative-based specific indefinites also have interrogative-based negative indefinites, e.g. Georgian *vin* 'who', *vi-γac* 'somebody', *ara-vin* 'nobody' (Hewitt 1995: 81–82), and languages with generic-noun-based specific indefinites also have generic-noun-based negative indefinites, e.g. Kana (Benue–Congo; Nigeria) *nū* 'thing; something; nothing' (Ikoro 1996: 345).

Note that the definition of *negative indefinite pronoun* that is used here does not make reference to any kind of "inherent" negative sense. Some linguists feel that English *nobody* is

"inherently negative", while *anybody*, which co-occurs with predicate negation (as in *I did not see anybody*), is not "inherently negative" (e.g. Bernini and Ramat 1996: 118ff.). Such a claim would seem to be even more plausible with items such as Kana *nũ*, which probably simply means 'thing' and does not even have a special sense in (5), where it occurs in the scope of negation.

- (5) Kana (Ikoro 1996: 345)  
       *m̃-sî*     *yāē*     *nũ*.  
       I-NEG    buy     thing  
       'I have not bought anything.'

However, in this chapter no such distinction between two types "inherently negative" and "not inherently negative" indefinites is made, because it is unclear which criteria should be used to identify them systematically. One criterion, the occurrence in elliptical negative answers (*Who did you see? Nobody/ \*Anybody*), is not practical for a large-scale cross-linguistic study because of insufficient data, and it does not always coincide with another possible criterion, the non-occurrence in non-negative contexts. For instance, Modern Greek *kanénas* 'anybody, nobody' can be used in elliptical negative answers (unlike English *anybody*), but it is widely used in non-negative contexts (like *anybody*).

Thus, for this chapter all nominal expressions that correspond to 'nobody' and 'nothing' are regarded as "negative indefinite pronouns", even though in many or most languages the negative sense is contributed exclusively by the predicate negation (see Haspelmath 1997: 193–200 for further discussion).

### 3. What counts as predicate negation

For a language to qualify as belonging to the first type (co-occurrence with predicate negation), the negator must be the same as in ordinary negative clauses lacking a negative indefinite pronoun. This is indeed by far the most common situation, illustrated in (6) from Abun (West Papuan; Papua, Indonesia). This language has bipartite predicate negation (*yo...nde*).

- (6) Abun (Berry and Berry 1999: 131, 143)  
     a.   *Isak yo ben suk mo nggwe nde*.  
           Isak NEG do thing LOC garden NEG

- 'Isak did not do anything at the garden.'
- b. *Ān yo ma mo nu nde.*  
 they NEG come LOC house NEG  
 'They did not come to the house.'

In most cases, there is no danger of mistaking the predicate negator for a part of the indefinite, because the negator has a fixed position in the clause, generally close to the verb (see Dryer 1988b). However, sometimes the position of the negator is independent of the position of the verb, as in Gooniyandi (Bunaban; Western Australia):

- (7) Gooniyandi (McGregor 1990: 479, 389)
- a. *Mangaddi ngoorndoo-ga-ngaddaya wardnginbidde.*  
 NEG who-ERG-INDEF they.took.me  
 'No one gave me a lift.'
- b. *Mangaddi yangbala-ngga goornboo doownga.*  
 NEG young.man-ERG woman he.got.her  
 'Young men didn't take wives.'

In (7a), one might conceivably interpret *mangaddi ngoorndoo-ga-ngaddaya* as a single negative indefinite that does not co-occur with predicate negation; but as (7b) illustrates, Gooniyandi's negator typically occurs initially and need not be adjacent to the verb. Thus, *mangaddi* in (7a) is just the ordinary predicate negation, and we have the same negative construction in (7a) and (7b).

The situation is different in Tzutujil (Mayan; Guatemala):

- (8) Tzutujil (Dayley 1985: 245, 321)
- a. *Majuun x-in-tz'at.*  
 nothing COMP-1SG.ERG-see  
 'I saw nothing.'
- b. *Ma x-b'e ta jar Aa Lu7.*  
 NEG COMP-go IRREAL the young Pedro  
 'Pedro did not go.'

In (8a) *ma-* in *ma-juun* [NEG-one] does not count as predicate negation, because (i) the predicate negator *ma* is generally immediately preverbal, as in (8b), (ii) it is a separate word rather than a prefix, and (iii) it is generally accompanied by the irrealis particle *ta* in the completive aspect. Thus, (8a) represents a different negative construction from (8b).

Besides clear cases like Gooniyandi and Tzutujil, there are also truly doubtful cases like Chalcatongo Mixtec (Oto-Manguan; Mexico). In this language, predicate negation is ordinarily expressed by the pre-predicate clitic *tu=*, as in (9a). However, this clitic may also precede a focused noun phrase, as in (9b), so that it is possible that we are dealing with the same construction in (9c). If this were the case, Chalcatongo Mixtec would be classified as type one.

(9) Chalcatongo Mixtec (Macaulay 1996: 120, 124)

- a. *Ndežu*      *tú=žaʔu*.  
      food        NEG=expensive  
      'The food is not expensive.'
- b. *Tú=šūʔū*      *ñabaʔa=rí*.  
      NEG=money    have=1  
      'I didn't have any money.'
- c. *Tú=ndéú*      *ní=kii*.  
      NEG=who      COMP=come  
      'Nobody came.'

However, I have classified it as type 2 (precluding predicate negation), because *ndéú* 'who' does not seem to be otherwise used in an indefinite sense, and in the corresponding *tú=kwiʔi* 'nothing', the element *kwiʔi* is unique. Thus, *tú=ndéú* and *tú=kwiʔi* seem to be non-compositional expressions, but ideally one would have to have more information to be able to confirm this analysis.

#### 4. Types of mixed behaviour

There are several different ways in which a language can show mixed behaviour. One type is the Spanish type, where the use of the predicate negator depends on the position of the indefinite with respect to the verb (see (3) above). Another type is represented by Swedish, which has two different sets of indefinites, one of which co-occurs with predicate negation, while the other precludes it (as the translations show, English is mixed in the same way):

(10) Swedish

- a. *Jag*      *vet*      *inte*      *något*.  
      I        know    NEG    something  
      'I do not know anything.'
- b. *Jag*      *vet*      *ingenting*.

I know nothing  
'I know nothing.'

Third, a language may have a bipartite negator, only one of whose parts is precluded by the negative indefinite. This is the case in Maltese, whose ordinary predicate negator consists of the preverbal particle *ma* and the postverbal suffix *-x*. When the clause contains a negative indefinite, only *ma* appears (French, with its bipartite negator *ne...pas*, behaves in the same way).

(11) Maltese (Haspelmath 1997: 200)

- a. *Patricia ma rat-x lit-tifel.*  
 Patricia NEG she.saw-NEG ACC.the-boy  
 'Patricia did not see the boy.'
- b. *Patricia ma rat(\*-x) xejn.*  
 Patricia NEG saw nothing  
 'Patricia did not see anything.'

## 5. The issue of "double negation"

In a number of Germanic languages whose normative varieties have indefinites precluding predicate negation, these indefinites do co-occur with negation in non-standard varieties. For example, in Bavarian German, structures like (12) are completely normal (see, e.g., Weiß 1999).

(12) Bavarian German

*Gesdan han e neamd ned gseng.*  
 yesterday have I nobody not seen  
 'Yesterday I saw nobody.'

Such sentences are often criticized from a normative point of view as being "illogical", because according to logic, two negations should cancel each other out. Two problems with this point of view are (i) that the negative indefinites in question cannot easily be characterized as "inherently negative" because this concept is difficult to define (see §2 above), and (ii) that the co-occurrence of negative indefinites with predicate negation, as in (12), is by far the most common type in the world's languages. One would not, after all, want to say that only a few Germanic languages are "logical". In fact, it seems that ultimately the normative criticism of "double negation" is not based on logic, but on the prestige of Latin, which served as the model for the standard varieties of several western European languages, and

which had negative indefinites precluding predicate negation (cf. Haspelmath 1997: §8.2).

Although it is not possible to say whether a negative indefinite is "inherently negative", we can ask whether it contains a morpheme that functions as a negator elsewhere in the language. And here an interesting generalization emerges: in the great majority of languages where negative indefinites preclude predicate negation, the indefinites themselves contain a negation marker. Some examples are given in (13).

(13) Ossetic	<i>ma-cy</i>	[NEG-what]	'nothing'
Chamorro	<i>ni hayi</i>	[NEG who]	'nobody'
Tzutujil	<i>ma-juun</i>	[NEG-one]	'nobody'
Chalcatongo Mixtec	<i>tú=ndéú</i>	[NEG=who]	'nobody'
Dutch	<i>n-iets</i>	[NEG-something]	'nothing'

Exceptions to this generalization are found exclusively in western European languages (e.g. German *kein* 'no', Swedish *ingen* 'no(body)', and several Romance expressions which preclude verbal negation only when occurring preverbally, such as Spanish *nada* 'nothing', Italian *mai* 'never'). The probable diachronic explanation for this is that the pattern where negative indefinites preclude predicate negation typically arises by "attraction" of the negator to the negative indefinite pronoun (see (9) above for a possible intermediate stage in this process).

## 6. Geographical distribution

Negative indefinites precluding predicate negation are concentrated in Western Europe and in Mesoamerica, and languages with existential constructions are found particularly among the Oceanic languages of the small Pacific islands. The great majority of the world's languages have negative indefinites co-occurring with predicate negation.