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Revisiting negindefinite pronouns
(and related comparative concepts)

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"We must take most of the old terms as they are,
and make the best use of them that we can,
supplementing them where it is necessary,
and limiting the meanings of all terms,
old and new, as precisely and unambiguously as possible.
But this is no easy task..."
(Jespersen 1924: 33)

1. Terminological confusion:
What is a "negative indefinite (pronoun)"?

Haspelmath (1997; 2005): a _negative indefinite pronoun_ is an indefinite that may occur in the scope of negation of the same minimal clause ("direct negation"):

(1) a. *I saw **nobody**.*
     b. *I didn't see **anybody**.*
     c. *I didn't see **nobody**.*   (nonstandard English)

Two main types (and a mixed type):

NV-NI   negative indefinite cooccurs with negation on the verb
V-NI   negative indefinite occurs on its own

But why should this be confusing?

Błaszczak (2005: 174)

> contrary, the vast majority of the world's languages behave seemingly "unlogically": they allow two or more negative expressions to co-occur within one clause without canceling each other (see Haspelmath (1993), Bernini and Ramat (1996), and the references cited there for discussion).

Penka (2011: 14)

> (2) **Negative concord:**
>   Multiple negative constituents (i.e. NIs or negative markers) in a clause contribute only one instance of negation to the interpretation.
>
> Italian is by no means the only language exhibiting NC. In fact, the great majority of the world's languages have NC (cf. Haspelmath, 2005). Further examples from a number of European languages are given in (3).

Apparently, Błaszczak and Penka started out from a different typology, and mapped it onto Haspelmath's typology:

DN (double negation)	*I did**n't** see **nothing**.*	(≈ **V-NI**)
NC (negative concord)	(Spanish) ***No** vi **nada**.*	(≈ **NV-NI**)

But Haspelmath took pains to explain why *negative concord* is not well-defined, and why he only distinguishes between **V-NI** and **NV-NI** (plus a mixed type) (1997: 194-1999; 214).

Why did the misunderstanding arise anyway?

Hypothesis:
Because linguists assume that familiar and transparent grammatical terms have a clear meaning and need not be explained.

Consequence:
Familiar and transparent grammatical terms need to have a clear meaning.

2. Negindefinite pronouns

proposed definition:

(2) **negindefinite (pronoun)**
A negindefinite is a pronoun (or determiner) which either (i) can express negation in isolation, and/or (ii) always occurs in the scope of a clausal negation meaning.

(i) ISOLABLE negindefinites (can occur in fragment answers and similar situations)

(3) Italian
A: *Chi è   venuto?* B: **Nessuno**.
   who has   come   nobody
'A: Wo came? B: Nobody.'

(ii) EXCLUSIVE negindefinites (can only occur in negative contexts)

(4) Icelandic (Haspelmath 1997: 197)
   a. *Ég   sá   ekki   **neinn**.*
      I   saw   not   anybody
      'I saw nobody.'

   b. A: *Hver er   er   við   dyrnar?* B: ***Neinn***.
          who   is   there at   door.the   anybody
      'A: Who is at the door? B: Nobody.'

This is a disjunctive definition, which is not ideal, but **it does not depend on the semantic analysis** – this is crucial, because there is massive disagreement about the best analysis.

Thus, there is **no claim** that negindefinites are "inherently negative".

Italian *nessuno* is probably not inherently negative, because it can occur in non-negative contexts:

> *Se **nessuno** viene...*
> 'If anyone comes...'

3. Negative concord constructions

(5) Polish
Nikt   *nie*   *przyszedł.*
nobody   NEG   came
'Nobody came.'

(1) c.   *I didn't see **nobody**.*   (nonstandard English)

proposed definition:

(11) **negative concord construction**
A negative concord construction is a construction in which a negindefinite cooccurs with another negative form in the same minimal clause resulting in a simplex negation meaning.

(6) Spanish
a. **Nadie**   *hizo*   **nada**.   (NEGATIVE SPREAD)
nobody did   nothing
'Nobody did anything.'

b. **Ni**   *el*   *padre* **ni**   *la*   *madre*   *han*   *visto*   **nada**.
neither the father nor   the mother have seen   nothing
'Neither father nor mother saw anything.'

not good definitions:

(7) a. de Swart & Sag (2002: 373)
"[Negative concord] is the general term for cases where multiple occurrences of phonologically negative constituents express a single negation."

b. Giannakidou (2020: §1)
"We talk about 'negative concord' when we have a single interpretation of negation in the face of multiple *apparent* negative exponents."

c. van der Auwera et al. (2021: 53)
"The idea behind the notion of 'negative concord' is simple: a single clausal negation is expressed both with a standard negator and one or more constituents."

BIPARTITE negation and CONNECTIVE NEGATOR PAIRS do not count as negative concord:

(8) Afrikaans
    *Jan sal **nie** kom **nie**.*
    Jan will NEG come NEG
    'Jan will not come.'   (often called "double negation", e.g. Croft 2022)

(9) German
    *Ich mag **weder** die Beatles **noch** die Stones.*
    I like neither the Beatles nor the Stones
    'I like neither the Beatles nor the stones.'

According to van der Auwera et al. (2021), constructions with a connective negator pair plus clausal negation exhibt negative concord, e.g.

(10) Russian
    *Ona **ne** ljubit **ni** knig, **ni** fil'mov.*
    she NEG likes CONEG books CONEG films
    'She likes neither books nor films.' (van der Auwera et al. 2021: 48)

But if one wants to include such connective-negator cases and exclude bipartite negation, then the definition of *negative concord* must be impossibly complex.

Another good definition:

(11) van der Auwera & Van Alsenoy (2016: 473-474)
    "The basic idea behind the notion of 'negative concord' is simple: a semantically single negation is expressed both by a clause level negator and by a negative adverb, pronoun, or determiner."

This definition does not comprise negative spread constructions (Spanish **Nadie** *hizo* **nada** 'Nobody did anything'), and if it is amended to include them, the definition is more or less the same as proposed here.

4. Concord negindefinites

Following Horn & Kato's (2000: 6) "concordial negatives", I propose the following term for negindefinites in NC constructions:

(12) **concord negindefinite (pronoun)**
    A concord negindefinite is a pronoun (or determiner) which can occur in a negative concord construction in the scope of the negation meaning.

This is much better than "n-word", whose meaning has often been unclear.

Laka (1990: 107-108):

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The phenomenon I want to consider now is illustrated in

(23):

   (23) a. no  vino nadie        c. *vino nadie
           not came anybody         came anybody

           'Nobody came'            ('nobody came')

        b. nadie  vino           d. nadie  no vino
           nobody came              nobody not came

           'Nobody came'            'nobody didn't come'

There is a whole set of elements that behave in this

fashion: nadie 'anybody', nada, 'anything', 'at all', ningún

'any', nunca 'ever', ni 'either'... Given that most of them

begin with 'n-', I will refer to this set of elements as n-

words².
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Giannakidou (1998: 56):
"n-words are DPs and adverbs which appear under negation and may participate in negative concord structures"

But later in the book, she also talks about **n-words in German and English**, two languages that do not exhibt negative concord (Giannakidou 1998: 179-180; see also Giannakidou 2000: 478).

Richter & Sailer (2006: 309):
> "n-words in German"

A better new term: ***negative concord item (NCI)*** (Giannakidou 2020)

Larrivée (2021: 1):
> "N-word" standardly refers to items other than the clausal negatives that can communicate a negative value in a fragment answer. The new term "Negative Concord Item" has been coined by some to avoid confusion with the homonymous racist expression. However, [it] applies to the French and Italian items, and not to the English ones, which in the standard variety do not enter concord relations."

5. Negative polarity items

In contrast to negindefinites, negative polarity items have hardly been discussed in a typological context, and in English, there is normally no question which items are NPIs. But what is an NPI in general?

Proposed definition:

(13) **negative polarity item**
A negative polarity item (NPI) is a form which may occur in the scope of a clausal negation meaning (of the same clause or of a superordinate clause) that is expressed by some other negative form and which may not occur in affirmative declarative independent clauses.

van der Auwera & Van Alsenoy (2018: 113):

TABLE 4.2	*Negative indefiniteness in this study*
clausal negator & neutral indefinite	49.7%
clausal negator & negatively polar indefinite	47.5%
no clausal negator & negative indefinite	**11.7%**
clausal negator & negative indefinite	19%
other	13.8%

What exactly are negatively polar indefinites?

(14) a. Negative polarity items are expressions (either words or idiomatic phrases) with a limited distribution, part of which always includes negative sentences. (Hoeksema 2000: 115)

b. Negative Polarity Items (NPIs) are words or expressions that can only occur in contexts that are in some sense negative. (Penka & Zeijlstra 2010: 772)

c. NPIs are typologically very common .... Their hallmark property is exclusion from positive assertions with simple past (i.e., episodic sentences that make reference to a single positive event). (Giannakidou 2011: 1661)

Giannakidou's definition is too broad: It includes non-specific indefinite pronouns like Russian *kto-nibud'* 'someone' which cannot be used in "positive assertions that make reference to a single event":
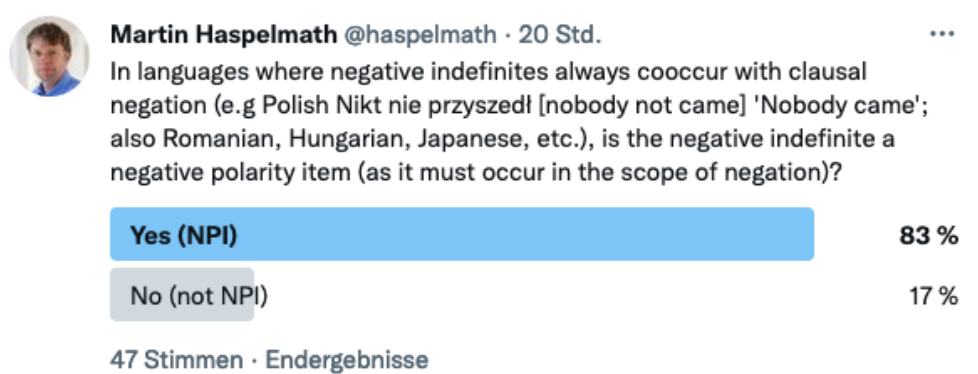
(15) a. ***Kto-nibud'** postučal   v dver'.*
     who-INDEF   knocked   at door
     'Someone knocked at the door.'

b. ***Kto-to**   postučal   v dver'.*
     who-INDEF   knocked   at door
     'Someone knocked at the door.'

NPIs must be possible in the scope of negation, but not necessarily in the scope of negation of the minimal clause. Cf. German *jemals*:

(16) a. *Ich glaube nicht, dass sie **jemals** in China war.*
I think not that she ever in China was
'I do not think that she was ever in China.'

b. **Sie war **jemals** in China.*
she was ever in China
('She was in China at some point.')

Are concord negindefinites included in the catgory of NPIs?

Most Twitter users seem to think so:

Martin Haspelmath @haspelmath · 20 Std.
In languages where negative indefinites always cooccur with clausal negation (e.g Polish Nikt nie przyszedł [nobody not came] 'Nobody came'; also Romanian, Hungarian, Japanese, etc.), is the negative indefinite a negative polarity item (as it must occur in the scope of negation)?

Yes (NPI)	83 %
No (not NPI)	17 %

47 Stimmen · Endergebnisse

So what could be the definition of "negatively polar" indefinites if negindefinites are not included? Not clear to me...

6. Duplex negation

Now let is look at a purely semantic term:

(17) **duplex negation**
A duplex negation reading is a reading of a clause in which two negative forms within the same minimal clause cancel each other out.

In (18a-c), there are two negative forms, and the resulting meaning is not negative.

The rule that two negative forms yield a non-negative reading has been known and discussed since antiquity (*duplex negatio affirmat*, Horn 1989: 297).

(18) a. English
***Nobody** likes **no** type of ice cream.*
= 'Everybody likes some type of ice cream.'

b. French
***Personne** ne commet **aucun** péché.*
nobody NEG commits no sin
'Nobody commits no sin.' (= 'Everybody commits some sins.')

This is best called *duplex negation* (contrasting with simplex negation), because "**double negation"** has been used also for negative concord and for bipartite negation.
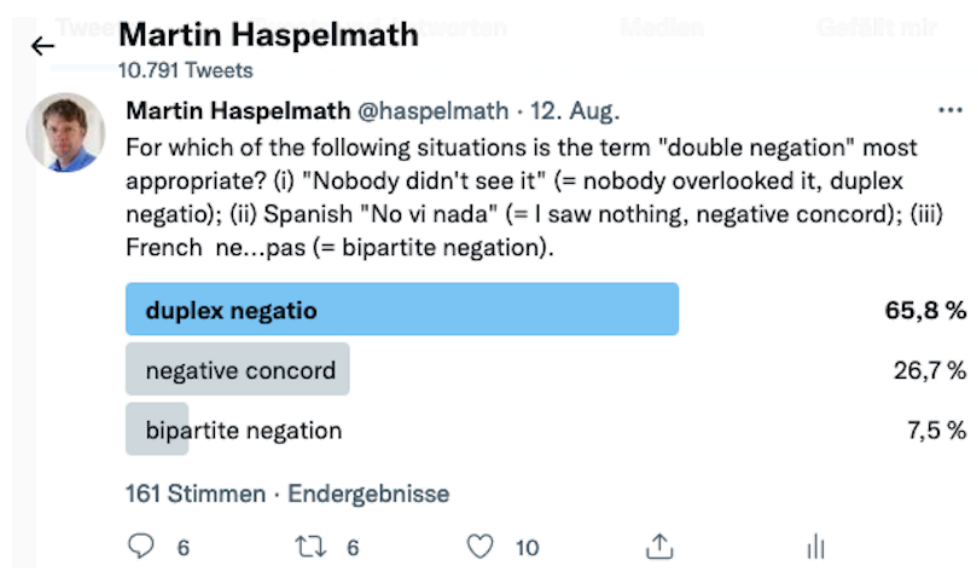
7. Negative amalgamation constructions

Negindefinites occur in two basic types of situations for which we want to have special terms. Consider the examples in (30a-c).

(19) Spanish
      a. ***Nada***   *aconteció.*   NEGATIVE AMALGAMATION
           nothing   happened
           'Nothing happened.'

      b. ***No*** *vi*   ***nada****.*   NEGATIVE CONCORD
           NEG I.saw   nothing
           'I did not see anything.'

Negindefinites like English *nobody* are called AMALGAM NEGINDEFINITES.

Jespersen (1917: 64) describes the construction as "**amalgamating** a negative element to some word capable of receiving a negative prefix".

(Another term used in the literature is *negative quantifier*, van der Auwera & Van Alsenoy 2018; but this term is more often used in a semantic sense, e.g. Zeijlstra 2020.)

(20) **negative amalgamation construction**
       A negative amalgamation construction is a construction with a clausal negation meaning that does not contain a clausal negator but only one or more negindefinites.

Of course, it is possible that an indefinite pronoun is BOTH a concord indefinite and an amalgam indefinite, e.g. Spanish *nada*, and systematically in Ossetic:

(21) Digor Ossetic (Erschler & Volk 2011: 138; 140; 141)
    a. *Mɐdinɐ   Soslan-i   **nɐ**   warz-uj.*
       Madina   Soslan-OBL   NEG   love-PRS.3SG
       'Madina doesn't love Soslan.'

    b. ***Neči**   (*nɐ)   zon-un.*   *(AMALGAMATION)*
       nothing   NEG   know-PRS.1SG
       'I don't know anything.'

    c. ***Neke**   **neči**   ʁigɐ   dar-uj.*   *(CONCORD)*
       nobody   nothing   disturbance   keep-PRS.3SG
       'Nothing disturbs anybody.'

Do we always know whether the negindefinite is a single form?

In Homeric Greek, particles can intervene between the negative element and the indefinite, so maybe this is not a single negindefinite (yet):

(22) Homeric Greek (cf. Gianollo 2021: 12)
    a. Ζεῦ πάτερ, οὔ τις σεῖο θεῶν ὀλοώτερος ἄλλος (Iliad 3.365)
       *Zeũ   páter,   **oú**   **tis**   seĩo   theõn   oloṓteros   állos.*
       Zeus   father   NEG   anyone   you.GEN   gods.GEN   destructiver   other
       'Father Zeus, there is no other god more destructive than you!'

    b. οὐ γάρ τίς μ' ὑπὲρ αἶσαν ἀνὴρ Ἄϊδι προϊάψει (Iliad 3.365)
       ***ou**   gár   **tís**   m'   hupèr   aĩsan   anèr   Áid-i   proïápsei*
       NEG   PCL   any   me   beyond   fate   man   Hades-DAT   will.send
       'No man beyond my fate shall send me forth to Hades.'

8. Types of analyses of negative concord constructions

negative indefinite analysis:
the negation takes scope above an indefinite (corresponding to an existential quantifier)

(23) *Nobody came*:
    NOT (¬) EXISTS (∃) *x, x* a PERSON, *x came.*
    ('There is no person who came.')

negative quantifier analysis:
there is a universal quantifier taking scope above the negation.

(24) *Nobody came*:
    for ALL (∀) *x, x* a PERSON, *x* NOT (¬) *came.*
    ('All persons did not come.')

ambiguous analysis:
negindefinites are sometimes negative indefinites and sometimes universal negative quantifiers

The debate about the proper analysis of these forms "has been raging since the 1970s" (Larrivée 2021: 1) – will it ever be resolved?

The terminology proposed here is independent of the semantic analysis.

The situation is similar to cross-indexing constructions (Haspelmath 2013):

(25) Latin
  a. *Marc-us   veni-t.*
     Marcus-NOM   come.PRS-3SG
     'Marcus is coming.'

  b. *Veni-t.*
     come.PRS-3SG
     'He is coming.'

Three types of analyses in the literature:

– the **"virtual-agreement"** view for (25b), according to which the verb agrees with a non-overt subject nominal   (also called **"pro-drop"**)

– the **"bound-argument"** view, according to which the suffix *-t* in (25a-b) is the true argument, while the conominal *Marcus* in (25a) is merely an "appositive" expression
                              (also called **"pronominal-argument"**)

– the **"dual-nature"** view, according to which Latin *-t* is an agreement marker in (25a), but a pronoun in (25b)   (also called **"ambiguous agreement"**)

9. Conclusion

– terminology surrounding negindefinites and negative concord is often confusing

– linguists have often thought that the terminology must depend on the analysis

– as there does not seem to be a way of settling on a unique analysis,
  the solution to the problem of confusing terminology is
  analysis-independent terminology

– I have proposed several (retro-)definitions of well-known terms,
  and suggested a few transparent new terms, which are largely in line
  with traditional usage but improve on them

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