

NEGATION IN ENGLISH AND MALTESE: Common Rules and Typological Differences¹

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The purpose of this paper is to compare the major means of expressing negation in standard English and Maltese. The syntactic patterns involved are: a. verbal negation (Jackendoff 1969), which correlates with negation of the predicate in the semantic formula Arg_1 . $Pred$. Arg_2 (Leech 1974); b. subject and/or object negation (with or without co-occurring verbal negation), which correlates with complete negation (Stoyanova 1985). The goal being to work out the rules connecting the syntactic and semantic structures under study, these will be handled in terms of semantico-syntactic correspondences rather than in morphological terms.

The first important methodological distinction to be made is between the content and form of negation, i.e. between the semantic operator *NEG* and its exponent *neg*. The application of *NEG* signifies absence by means of presence (Rotman 1987). It indicates that the semantic information conveyed by any entity *A* in its scope is zero, or *NEG* predicates zero of *A* (Grozdanova in press). The fact that *NEG* is assumed to be language universal, to retain its meaning across languages, makes various language-specific patterns comparable. Its meaning is expected to be conveyed systematically and consistently by *neg(s)* in contrast to the affirmative counterpart. Which suggests that in spite of their morphological differences languages can be given a kind of unified account. As pointed out in Miller (1985, p. 212), "when the same facts obtain in different languages or where the same syntactic situation is brought about in different languages" these facts "are not to be regarded as accidental but as systematic and indicative of semantic structure".

Before discussing the affirmative-negative opposition in English and Maltese, we have to make another crucial distinction between two classes of sentences with more than one *neg*-form: a. sentences with more than one application of *NEG* (1(a) and 1(b) below); b. those with one application of *NEG*, which is expressed by more than one negative form (2(b) below). The latter case does not exist in Standard English (2(a)) but is the rule in Maltese (2(b)). English employs one negative form only (e.g. *nobody*).

1. (a) I *can't* ever *not* answer the telephone.
(b) *Lanqas* biss *nista' ma* *nwiegibx* it-telefon.
2. (a) Peter did *not* see anybody.
Peter saw *nobody*.
(b) Pietru *ma* *ra'l hadd*. (Peter not saw obj-marker nobody.)

It is sufficient to remove one of the negative exponents from the two groups of sentences above and compare the results to see the crucial difference between them:

3. (a) I *can't* ever answer the telephone.
(b) *Lanqas* biss *nista' nwiegeb* it-telefon.

Paradoxical as this may sound, these morphologically different structures express the same underlying relationships. To show this let us first consider some examples of verbal negation:

9. (a) Peter did *not* see John.
 (b) Pietru *ma* *rax* 'l Ġanni.

There are obvious formal differences between the exponents of *NEG* in (9(a)) and (9(b)) above. English negative forms require obligatory *Aux*-support. Maltese employs a negative circumfix (Comrie 1982). In spite of this morphological diversity, when compared with the respective affirmative patterns, they seem to follow a common rule: *NEG* is expressed by a *neg*-form of the verb, and the subject and object, being outside its scope, remain unaffected.

Now let us see what happens if the subject or object are themselves negative:

10. (a) *Nobody* saw Peter.
 (b) *Hadd ma* *ra* 'l Pietru.
11. (a) Peter saw *nobody*.
 Peter did *not* see anybody.
 (b) Pietru *ma* *ra* 'l *hadd*. (Peter not he-saw obj-marker no-body.)

As is well known, Standard English does not allow for *no*-words to co-occur with negative verb forms within the same simple sentence. In Maltese, on the other hand, this is the obligatory rule, which applies in the case of complete negation. Complete negation can be accounted for in terms of interdependence of the constituents of such basic semantic complexes as [agent+action], [action+patient], etc. If the categories of [agent] and [patient] in them are assigned zero value, hence have no referents, the related category of [action] will also fail to refer. In other words, [zero-agent] necessarily combines with [zero-action], as do [zero-object] and [zero-action], which makes the complex completely negative. Completely negative constructions have two types of expression patterns – mononegative in English (11(a)) and polynegative in Maltese (11(b)). In addition, the *neg*-reduction rule in English is followed by a *neg*-incorporation rule (Klima 1964), which is obligatory in subject position (10(a)) and optional in object position (11(a)).

Now we are in a position to compare the basic negative patterns in English and Maltese in opposition to their affirmative counterparts:

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| 12. (a) Peter saw John. | Peter did <i>not</i> see John. |
| (b) Pietru <i>ra</i> 'l Ġanni. | Pietru <i>ma</i> <i>rax</i> 'l Ġanni. |
| 13. (a) Peter saw someone. | Peter did <i>not</i> see anyone. |
| (b) Pietru <i>ra</i> <i>lil xi hadd</i> . | Pietru <i>ma</i> <i>ra</i> 'il <i>hadd</i> . |
| (c) Someone saw John. | <i>No</i> one saw John. |
| (d) <i>Xi hadd</i> <i>ra</i> 'l Ġanni. | <i>Hadd ma</i> <i>ra</i> 'l Ġanni. |
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On the basis of the data above we can outline the following basic syntactic patterns:

14. Subject + *neg*-Verb² + object – English, Maltese;
15. (a) Subject + *neg*-Verb + *any*-object – English, ϕ ;
(b) Subject + Verb + *neg*-object – English, ϕ ;
(c) Subject + *neg*-Verb + *neg*-object – ϕ , Maltese;
(d) *Neg*-subject + *neg*-Verb + object – ϕ , Maltese;
(e) *Neg*-subject + Verb + object – English, ϕ .

Naturally, more complex cases as those related to ditransitive verbs, locative or temporal modifiers, etc. will need further elaboration. What we hope to have shown above is the fact that the systematic expression of negation in English and Maltese, and by logical extension in other languages, depends on two kinds of negation – predicate and complete. Verbal negation as an expression of the former can reasonably be expected to follow the same common rule, with a negative verb form (14) in a systematic opposition to a positive counterpart. Complete negation, on the other hand, is expressed by different types of rules. One such rule combines negative prowords (or zero-words) with negative verb forms, as in Maltese (15(c) and 15(d)). Another rule reduces the negative forms to one (15(a), (b) and (e)). It can be either a negative verb in correlation with a special word like *any* (15(a)) or a positive verb related to a negative object (15(b)) or subject (15(e)). Subject negation follows an obligatory *neg*-incorporation rule.

To summarize, in expressing predicate negation English and Maltese employ a common rule of inserting a negative exponent into the verb phrase. In the case of complete negation, however, they diverge significantly. The number of exponents in Maltese corresponds to the number of applications of *NEG*. In Standard English that number is reduced to one. So, in case of predicate/verbal negation there is symmetry between the corresponding semantic and syntactic constructions, whereas complete negation correlates with two types of syntactic patterns – a symmetric polynegative one and a highly grammaticalized, reduced mononegative one. This accounts for the points of similarity and difference between English and Maltese in the field of negation and allows one to evaluate the extent of convergence and divergence between them.

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2 The actual form and place of *neg* within the phrase is beyond the scope of this paper.