Negation, Suspended Assertion and Duality

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Negation is one of the most fundamental cognitive operations at the disposal of a human being. “Negated situations” are not visually perceptible: as was shown by Anna Wierzbicka, the verb видеть ‘see’ in in виду жон ‘I see John’ and in виду жон здесь нет ‘As I see, John is not here’ has different meanings (Wierzbicka 1969). In this paper I deal with the puzzle demonstrated by example (1) (influenced partially by Огусл вский 2002), with its synonymy of antonymous particles еще ‘still’ and уже ‘already’:

(1) a. зве мосты еще не сняли? ‘can-it-be-that the bridges are still not removed?’
    b. зве мосты уже не сняли? ‘can-it-be-that the bridges are not already removed?’

I shall argue that this synonymy is a consequence of two phenomena, each of general character and, presumably, broad theoretical implications. The first may be called SUSPENDED ASSERTION, the second is DUALITY.

Suspension of assertion was discussed at length in Weinreich 1963 (cf. the term non-veridicality in Giannakidou 2002 with approximately the same purport). Weinreich assumes the indicative, i.e. assertive, mood to be the initial one and enumerates linguistic assertion-suspending devices, such as nominalization, infinitive, future tense, imperative and other indirect moods. Suspended assertion is created also by modal verbs (meaning ‘can’, ‘ought’, ‘necessary’, ‘want’), negation (in particular, word internal negation, as in verbs meaning ‘refuse’, ‘prohibit’, ‘deny’), question, disjunction, double negation, conjunctions of condition and purpose, markers of uncertainty, supposition, unreality.

Suspension of assertion was considered in дучев 1985: 94, 215-220, дучев 2005 in connection with non-specific indefinite pronouns in Russian, such as к кой-нибудь: they are practically excluded in indicative contexts (* и взял что-нибудь ‘he took что-нибудь’), being felicitous only in the context of suspended assertion:

(2) озьми что-нибудь ‘take something’; и могу взять что-нибудь ‘he could take something’; возьму что-нибудь ‘I shall take something’; сли он взял что-нибудь ‘if he took something’; и должен был взять что-нибудь ‘he should have taken anything’; взять что-нибудь? ‘shall I take anything?’.

Suspension assertion plays an important role in the semantics of negation. In fact, this context licenses GLOBAL NEGATION of a verb-adverbial complex, almost excluded in Russian in assertive contexts:

(3) если мы немедленно не уйдем отсюд … ‘if we do not go away from here immediately’;
    только бы он вдруг не проп. а ‘if only he won’t suddenly get lost’;
    ин не бы ты к р но не приш ‘otherwise you won’t come so early’;
    чтобы я сломя голову не мч ась ‘in order not to run like a mad’.

For example, мы немедленно не уйдем, lit. ‘we immediately won’t leave’, has no sense (with normal prosody) outside some such context. In the context of example (3) the scope of negation broadens: the negative particle sticks to the assertion-suspending operator, with its wide sentential scope, and acquires its scope (cf. English unless = ‘if +not’); as a result, мы немедленно не уйдем is understood as

‘не (мы немедленно уйдем)’ = ‘not (we immediately leave)’.

As many adverbials admit verbal negation in their scope, global and pre-verbal negation may be opposed in the context of one and the same verb:

(4) a. к бы он не и дел второпях мою шляпу ‘if only he won’t put on my hat in a hurry [global negation];
    b. и второпях не и дел шляпу ‘in his haste, he didn’t put on his hat’ [verbal negation in the scope of the adverbial].
As for duality, it can be treated as a kind of antonymy. In fact, duals have opposite presuppositions. Examples of dual adverbials in Russian: уже ‘already’ and еще ‘still’; снова ‘again’ and этот p z ‘this time’; еще p з ‘once again’ and больше ‘never more’; тоже ‘also’ and в отличие от ‘as opposed to’; хоть ‘although’ and д же ‘even’. Duals generate quasi-synonymy relationship in the context of scope changing transformations, e.g., when “predicative” negation is transformed into a negative particle, example (5), or in the course of Neg-raising, example (6):

(5) a. (мосты уже сняли) ‘NOT THAT (the bridges are already removed)’
   = остые еще не сняли ‘the bridges are not yet removed’;
   b. (он снова выигр л) ‘NOT THAT (he won again)’
   = этот p з он не выигр л ‘this time he did not win’;
   c. (этот опыт повторили еще p э) ‘NOT THAT (this experiment was repeated once again)’ = тот опыт больше не повторили ‘this experiment was not repeated any more’;
   d. (ني тоже понял) ‘NOT THAT (Vanja also understood)’
   = ни в отличие от других, не понял ‘Vanja, as opposed to others, didn’t understand’;
   e. (ни хотя бы улыбнулся) ‘NOT THAT (Vanja at least smiled)’
   = ни д же не улыбнулся ‘Vanja didn’t even smile’.

(6) a. е дум ю, чтобы мосты уже сняли ‘I don’t think that the bridges are already removed’
   = ум ю, что мосты еще не сняли ‘I think that the bridges are not yet removed’;
   b. е дум ю, что он снова ее увидел ‘I don’t think that he saw her again’
   = дум ю, что и этот p з он не ее увидел ‘I think that this time he didn’t see her’.

It turns out that duality yields quasi-synonymy if pre-verbal negation is transformed into global negation in the context of suspended assertion. Sentence (7), with its preferably pre-verbal interpretation of negation, is not synonymous to (8), with its global negation. But if we substitute the adverbial снова ‘again’ for its dual и этот p з ‘this time’ we get (8’), with pre-verbal interpretation of negation, which is synonymous to globally interpreted (8):

(7) хорошо бы он снова и не ошибся = ‘[last time he didn’t fail;] if only he wouldn’t fail again’;
(8) хорошо бы он не ошибся снова снова = ‘[last time he failed;] if only he wouldn’t fail this time’;
(8’) хорошо бы он и этот p з не ошибся = ‘[last time he failed;] if only he wouldn’t fail this time’.

This explanation applies to example (1) as well – ‘still’ and ‘already’ have opposite presuppositions, but the change in the scope of negation makes the presupposition identical: не (уже P) = еще (не P); not (already P) = still (not P).

The paper discusses further theoretical questions related to suspended assertion: what presuppositions are coming with assertion and disappearing with suspension of assertion and why? Which adverbials afford choices in the scope of negation and which do not? How linguistics can help in exploring cognitive foundations of negation?

References