

Negation, Suspended Assertion and Duality

Elena Paducheva

avenul@atom.ru

Russian Academy of Sciences

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 ‘see’ in ‘I see John’ and in ‘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 2002), with its synonymy of antonymous particles ‘still’ and ‘already’:

- (1) a. ? ‘can-it-be-that the bridges are *still* not removed?’
b. ? ‘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.

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

- (2) - ‘take something’; - ‘he *could* take something’;
- ‘I *shall* take something’; - ‘if he took something’;
- ‘he *should* have taken anything’; - ? ‘*shall* I take anything?’.

Suspended 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) _____ ... ‘if we do not go away from here *immediately*’;
_____ ‘if only he won’t suddenly get lost’;
_____ ‘otherwise you won’t come so early’;
_____ ‘in order not to run like a mad’.

For example, _____, 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, _____ is understood as

‘ (_____)’ = ‘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) . _____ ‘if only he won’t put on my hat in a hurry
[global negation];
b. _____ ‘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: ‘already’ and ‘still’; ‘again’ and ‘this time’; ‘once again’ and ‘never more’; ‘also’ and ‘as opposed to’; ‘although’ and ‘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. _____, (_____) ‘NOT THAT (the bridges are already removed)’
 = _____ ‘the bridges are not yet removed’;
 b. _____, (_____) ‘NOT THAT (he won again)’
 = _____ ‘this time he did not win’;
 c. _____, (_____) ‘NOT THAT (this experiment was repeated once again)’ = _____ ‘this experiment was not repeated any more’;
 d. _____, (_____) ‘NOT THAT (Vanja also understood)’
 = _____, _____, ‘Vanja, as opposed to others, didn’t understand’;
 e. _____, (_____) ‘NOT THAT (Vanja at least smiled)’
 = _____ ‘Vanja didn’t even smile’.
- (6) a. _____, _____ ‘I don’t think that the bridges are already removed’
 ≈ _____, _____ ‘I think that the bridges are not yet removed’;
 b. _____, _____ ‘I don’t think that he saw her again’
 ≈ _____, _____ ‘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 ‘again’ for its dual ‘this time’ we get (8’), with pre-verbal interpretation of negation, which is synonymous to globally interpreted (8):

- (7) _____ \ _____ = ‘[last time he didn’t fail;] if only he wouldn’t fail again’;
 (8) _____ = ‘[last time he failed;] if only he wouldn’t fail this time’;
 (8’) _____ = ‘[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:

$$(\text{ P}) = (\text{ P}); \text{ not (already P) = still (not P)}.$$

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

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