A TWOFOLD CLASSIFICATION OF EXPLETIVE NEGATION

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Introduction: Expletive negation (EN) is commonly considered to be a unitary phenomenon cross-linguistically codified (cfr. Horn 1989; Van Der Wouden 1994; Makri 2013). I will provide empirical arguments to show that in fact EN consists of distinct subtypes and propose a twofold partition between weak and strong EN. Moreover, I will highlight a previously unnoticed instance of Italian EN clauses I dubbed “Surprise Negative Sentences” (Snegs). Snegs are distinct from any other EN clauses because of their grammatical proprieties, which can be caught by a specific syntactic representation.

Relevant data: From a semantic point of view, EN truly realizes a unique phenomenon in which the negative operator fails to reverse the polarity of the sentence and rejects strong-NPIs (Zeijlstra 2004) and not-also conjunctions (Delfitto & Fiorin 2014) as it is shown by two Italian expletive negative structures: “finché” (“until”) clauses (1a-2a) (Renzi & Salvi 1991) and negative exclamatives (1b-2b) (Zanutini & Portner 2003; Delfitto & Fiorin 2014).

(1) a. *Rimarrai qui finché non avrai affatto capito quello che ti ho detto (stay.2rdFut here until neg have.2rdFut at all understood what that Cl.to you have said)
   b. *Che cosa non ha affatto capito Gianni!
      (what neg has at all understood John)

(2) a. *Rimarrai qui finché non avrai finito gli esercizi e neanche il grafico
      (stay.2rdFut here until neg have.2rdFut ended the exercises and not-also the chart)
   b. *Che cosa non ha fatto Gianni e neanche Luca!
      (what neg has done John and not-also Luke)

However, until-clauses license weak-NPIs like “alzare un dito” (“lift a finger”) (3a) and n-words like “nessuno” (“nobody”) (4a), whereas negative exclamatives do not (3b-4b), rejecting in the latter case the so-called negative-concord phenomenon:

(3) a. Rimarrai qui finché non avrai alzato un dito per aiutarmi
      (stay.2rd sing.Fut here until neg have.2rd sing.Fut left a finger for to help-cl.me)
      ‘You will stay here until you lift a finger to help me’
   b. *Chi non ha alzato un dito per aiutarmi!  (Grammatical if Interrogative)
      (who neg has left a finger for to help-cl.me)

(4) a. Rimarrai qui finché non arriverà nessuno ad aiutarmi
      (stay.2rd sing.Fut here until neg come.3rd sing.Fut nobody to to help-cl.me)
      ‘You stay here until someone comes to help me’
   b. *Che cosa non ha fatto nessuno!
      (what neg has done nobody)

Similarly, polarity-sensitive elements (weak-NPIs, strong-NPIs, not-also conjunction, and N-words) as tested in other kinds of Italian EN clauses (Renzi & Salvi 1991), yield the following interesting pattern:

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Table A: This matrix combines 4 syntactic constructions with 8 types of EN clauses.
All EN clauses reject strong-NPIs and not-also conjunction. However, with regards to weak-NPIs and N-words, two groups can be discriminated: one in which they are legitimate (light grey area) and one in which they are not (dark grey area). I will label the first class weak EN and the second one strong EN, since the former maintains some features of standard negation (i.e. they allow weak-NPIs and N-words) whereas the latter does not. Crucially, strong EN instantiates a natural class within the EN one, in which all members have a “—“ value.

Among the strong EN class, a previously unnoticed case must be added: call them Surprise Negative Sentences (Snegs). Snegs are limited to a specific context in which a speaker is struck by an unexpected fact showing a marked intonation blending acoustic features of questions and exclamatives (hence the ?! diacritics):

(5) E non mi è scesa dal treno Maria?!
   (and neg Cl.to me is got off-the train Maria)
   ‘Maria got off the train!’

Their distribution sets them apart from any other case of EN clauses. For example, consider the relation with the discourse-orientated elements moved in the left periphery of the sentence (Rizzi 1997). Snegs cannot co-occur with a contrastive focalized element (6a), whereas other EN structures, like the until-clauses seen above, usually can (6b):

(6) a. *E LA PENNA non mi ha dato Gianni a Luca (non il libro) ?!
   (and the pen neg Cl.to me has given Gianni to Luca not the book)
   b. Gianni rimarrà qui finché LA PENNA non avrà dato a Luca (non il libro)
   (Gianni stay.2dFut here until the pen neg have.2dFut given to Luke (not the book))
   ‘Gianni will stay here until the pen, he will give it Luke’

To account for the pattern in (6), I propose a syntactic representation of Snegs that combines some assumptions of the cartographic project (Cinque&Rizzi 2010). More specifically, I propose that (i) the Italian negative marker non, generally assumed to be merged in the TP area (Belletti 1990; Zanuttini 1997; Poletto 2008), can also be externally merged in the CP-domain (à la Laka 1990); (ii) when the head non is merged, the v*-P-phase has already been closed; (iii) the entire TP is raised to Spec-Foc° making another focalization impossible (as 6a shows). Putting together (i-iii), a syntactic representation like the one in (7) emerges:

(7) [CP ... [X'-non ] ... [TP Foc° [... tP ... ]]]

The head non licenses Foc°, which I expect to be morphologically expressed in some languages as arguably is by Latin clitic ne combined with non, i.e. “nonne” (Ernout & Thomas 1953).

The structure in (7) also has further consequences like, for example, the fact that Snegs cannot occur in WH-structures since both Snegs and WH-elements compete for the same Spec-FocP position:

(8) a. *Da quale treno non ti è scesa Maria?!
   (From which train not you.ED is, got off-the Maria