Negative Conflicts
An Optimality Theoretic Approach
to the Variation of Negative Concord, Negative Spread and Double Negation

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Many (Indo-)European languages have n-words and n-phrases (terminology cf. Laka 1990) like English *nobody, nothing* or *no idea*, but there is also vast variation of the corresponding distribution – ranging from strict Double Negation languages (DN) with true negative quantifiers (NQ) (e. g. Standard English, Standard German) to Negative Spread languages (West Flemish, Romance languages) to strict Negative Concord languages (NC) (Slavic languages, Greek).

In this talk, I am proposing an Optimality theoretic analysis of n-words that accounts for the variation by still unifying the phenomenon. I am arguing for a Markedness approach in which it not the case that NC requires certain structural configurations in order to be licit (cf. e.g. Haegeman 1995, Giannakidou 2000), but on the contrary, that NQs are costly, and in particular costly in specific configurations. This cost can lead to their general deconstruction by multiple input-output-correspondence relations (= emergence of NC) or to context-dependent deconstruction (= emergence of Negative Spread). Only in the case where deconstruction itself is too costly, deconstruction is never possible (= emergence of DN).

The analysis captures n-word distribution in the Slavic languages, Standard English, English non-standard dialects, Spanish and Italian, Catalan, West Flemish and Bavarian German, Standard German and Danish.

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