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

Alex Zepter

Many (Indo-)European languages have n-words and n-phrases (terminology cf.
Lake 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. Hoekeman 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.

Address:
Alex Zepter
University of Cologne
Seminar für deutsche Sprache und ihre Didaktik
Gronewaldstr. 2
50931 Köln/Cologne
Germany

e-mail: ozepter@worthaus.com