

DOUBLE NEGATION IN ROMANIAN AND ENGLISH LANGUAGES

Stela ȚICUL

Catedra Limba Română, Lingvistică Generală și Romanică

Dubla negație apare atunci când două forme ale negației se folosesc în aceeași propoziție. În unele limbi, utilizarea dublei negații într-o propoziție rezultă într-un enunț cu sens negativ, în timp ce în alte limbi – într-un enunț cu sens pozitiv, atât din punct de vedere gramatical, cât și logic. Acestea sunt reguli gramaticale stricte, cu toate că dubla negație este folosită în unele limbi ca fiind un fenomen obișnuit și corect din punct de vedere gramatical, pe când în alte limbi utilizarea ei este considerată greșită.

The common construction of negative sentences is realized by doubling or even tripling the negation. This may be done by using *nu*, in order to negate the verb, and other means in order to double it:

e.g. *Nu mi-a spus niciodată ce s-a întâmplat.*

Still, sometimes the negated verb may be accompanied by a pronoun or positive pronominal adjectives. This is possible only in negative interrogative sentences:

e.g. *Nu ai vreă cunoștință la minister? (= nu cunoști pe nimeni la minister?)*

The replacing of negative pronouns by positive pronouns is not allowed in enunciations. Thus, we shall never say in Romanian:

e.g. *Nu cunosc vreun doctor* (correct: *Nu cunosc nici un doctor*).

All the sentences which include an unpredicative negation (or more) with general meaning, regarding the subject or predicate always have a negative predication (and not only one), namely the negation „nu” from the predicative core / nucleus. Double negation seems to appear in the late popular Latin, because it didn't exist in Classical Latin [1, p.23-26].

e.g. „Niciodată toamna nu fu mai frumoasă” (Arghezi T.)

Similarly, the negation of participles is realized by attaching „ne-” to the verb (e.g. „nefiind nimic de făcut”).

The negative predication „nu” (or the negation „ne-”) does not double in the case of complement / object or of the excluding complete (e.g. „fără nimic”, „fără să fie nimic”).

The double negation is usually used in Romanian, and often results in an affirmation (Duplex semper affirmat): „neinfinit” (finit), „nu nesigur” (sigur), „nu fără temei” (cu temei); „deloc lipsit de semnificație” (cu mult înțeles); „de netăgăduit” (cu valoare de adevăr indiscutabil); „nu zi ba” (zi da):

e.g. „Nu-l încontra!” (Nu-l contrazice!, Nu te împotrivi!) (Barbu E.)

When two negations have different objectives there is no double negation:

e.g. „Antipsihiatrie negativă” (Cortez P.)

or it may appear in ambiguous phrases / expressions:

e.g. „Ar fi cu putință să se combine două negative deodată? – ca după ce v-ați amăgit asupra mea, să fi suferit eu o identitate în sensul vostru?”

(Arghezi T.)

Stylistically, double negation emphasizes the affirmative meaning (the quotation):

e.g. „[...] drept să vă spun nu-mi era urită ...” (Creangă I.)

and sometimes has different objectives (for instance, the combatment of non-science, by using an apparent form of a drug's name):

e.g. „A luat chiar un antinuștiuce, cred că un antivralgic [...]” (Dumitriu M.)

Berceanu B. B. considers as a halving process the following ways of emphasizing „mai ... decât” (following the negation), „nimic altceva decât”, „nimeni altul” (or „nealtul”, „nemaialaltul”), „decât” etc. [2, p.61]:

e.g. „Nimic nu ține mai strâns pe oameni decât emulația în construcție” (Călinescu C.)

as well „numaidecât”.

The anyhow usage of double negation can lead to confusions, and thus it can be obtained the contrary of the desired effect.

In English, the use of two negatives in a sentence is much more common than is generally supposed. To assume that only those who are grossly ignorant of grammatical rules and constructions employ them is an

error. A negation in English admits only one negative word. The use of a single negative carries the meaning halfway around the circle. The meaning is therefore diametrically opposed to that which would be expressed without the negative. The use of a second negative would carry the meaning the remaining distance around the circle, thus bringing it to the starting point, and making it equivalent to the affirmative. The second negative destroys the effect of the first. The two negatives are equivalent to an affirmative. The double-negatives-make-a-positive rule was first introduced in English when Bishop Robert Lowth wrote "A Short Introduction to English Grammar with Critical Notes" in 1762 [3, p.65].

While two negatives in the same sentence destroy each other, a double negative has the effect of a more exact and guarded affirmative, as:

e.g. His story was not incredible.

A double negative occurs when two forms of negation are used in the same sentence. In some languages a double negative resolves to a negative, while in others it resolves to a positive. These are strictly grammatical rules and have nothing to do with mathematics. Double negatives are used in some languages and considered erroneous in others. Sometimes, triple and quadruple negation can also be seen, which leads to an alternative term for the same phenomenon called negative concord. In literature, denying a negation is known as the trope of litotes. Litotes is a rhetorical device which uses double negation to emphasize a statement. By denying its opposite, the double negation cancels itself out and resolves to a positive. The effect of this can differ depending on context [4, p.172].

Sometimes, sentences such as "I don't disagree" or "Mr. Jones was not incompetent" are thought to contain double negatives. The idea is that the *not* and the *dis/un* are both negative and therefore cancel each other out. This is an error. In the first place language is not mathematics and even the classic double negative is not an error because of any mathematical metaphor. The sentence "I don't disagree" uses a rhetorical device much like the intentional contradiction of a true oxymoron. The speaker who doesn't disagree means to say something like "There is no mistake in what you say, but there is more to it than that" if Mr. Jones is described as "not incompetent", it is unlikely that anyone would take him to be competent.

In today's Standard English, double negatives are not used; for example the Standard English equivalent of "I don't want nothing" is "I don't want anything". It should, however, be noted that in Standard English one cannot say "I don't want nothing" to express the meaning "I want something" unless there is very heavy stress on the *don't* or a specific "whiny" stress on the *nothing*.

Double negatives are standard in Romanian. Negation is generally expressed by adding the adverb *nu* to the verb and zero or more words elsewhere to indicate what part of the sentence is negated. For instance, "nu deranjez pe nimeni niciodată" literally means "I don't disturb nobody never" but is the same as saying in English "I never disturb anybody" [5, p.17].

In many languages, the use of double negatives occurs frequently and is quite acceptable. However, in English, double negatives are generally regarded as unacceptable because they are less direct and therefore require the reader to hesitate and think slowly to unravel the writer's intentions. Double negatives typically interrupt the flow of a reader's progress through a piece of text.

Problems with double negatives causing a lack of clarity typically arise when a negative word (*not*, *no*, *never*, *none* and so on) is used in the same sentence as a negative word form (*inconsiderable*, *uncontrollable*, *waterless* and so on).

e.g. 1. A *not inconsiderable* number of strength tests were carried out before the adhesive materials were selected.

e.g. 2. *None* of the *non-removable* parts of the machine were damaged by the fire.

In both of these examples the reader has to stop and think carefully about what the real situation is regarding: the number of tests conducted in Example 1, and which parts of the machine were damaged in the fire in Example 2.

Double negative errors, such as those we have discussed above, can be corrected by recasting the sentences using positive word forms and positive structures (sometimes called affirmative forms). For example: "The system is *never uneconomical* to operate" can be improved by rewriting it as: "The system is *economical* to operate". Here we have created a positive statement by removing *never* and replacing *uneconomical* with "economical".

Sometimes, however, it will be necessary to make changes to the structure of the sentence, as well as to selected words. For example: "There is *nothing improbable* about the predication that the first staffed flight

to Mars will occur in the first half of the twenty-first century” could be improved by rewriting it as: “The first staffed flight to Mars will probably occur in the first half of the twenty-first century”.

In addition to the sorts of double negatives errors described so far, there are several words that can be used in the negative sense without immediately being recognized as negatives, and these may be combined with other words to form what some texts describe as “subtle” double negatives. These words are as follows: *barely*, *nearly*, *hardly*, *merely*, *rarely*, *except*, *scarcely*, *just*, *seldom*, *only*. If we are using a sentence that contains one of these words do not use another negative word to support it [6, p.88].

e.g. Marisa completed the equation *without hardly* any help from the tutor.

In this example, the negative *hardly* has been used with another negative word, *without*.

The two negative words cancel each other to produce a positive meaning:

e.g. Marisa completed the equation without help.

However, the true intention behind the sentence is in doubt. Does it mean “Marisa completed the equation *without* any help from the tutor?” or “Marisa completed the equation *with hardly* any help from the tutor?” It is easy to cause confusion or doubt about your intended meaning if you use subtle double negative constructions.

In English, as in most other Germanic languages, the use of double negatives as grammatical intensifiers was formerly in frequent use: “We don’t have no walruses here”. Usage prescriptivists consider this use of double negatives to be a solecism, and condemn it. It makes the rhetorical figure of litotes ambiguous.

The force of double negative construction includes obviously negative words like *not*, *ain’t*, *no*, *none*, *never*, *nowhere*, but also adverbs with a negative slant like *barely*, *scarcely*, *hardly*.

Standard English accepts two types of double-negative construction: with and adjective that contains a negation (e.g. It is not unusual); and in sentences where the two negatives reinforce each other (e.g. He would never have done it, not even if his life depended on it). Sentences of the type “I wouldn’t be surprised if that wasn’t the messenger at the door now” are considered informal.

Romanian makes use of double (or multiple) negation. For example in English one would say: “Nor has anyone ever said anything to anyone”, but for example in Romanian it would be “Și nimeni niciodată nu a spus nimănui nimic”. So it seems that Romanian makes use of multiple negations while English only use single negation [7, p.21].

The common construction of negative sentences in Romanian is made by using double or even triple negation. This can be done by using *nu* in order to negate the verb and adding some other negative words in order to double it [8, p.69-76]:

e.g. *Nu vine nimeni în vizită astăzi?*

Nu mi-a spus niciodată ce s-a întâmplat.

Nimeni nu l-a văzut niciodată.

Yet, sometimes the negated verb can be accompanied by a positive pronoun or pronominal adjectives. This is possible only in negative interrogative sentences:

e.g. *Nu m-a căutat cineva?* (= *nu m-a căutat nimeni?*)

Nu ai vreo cunoștință la minister? (= *nu cunoști pe nimeni la minister?*)

The replacement of negative pronouns with positive pronouns is not allowed in positive statements. We will never say “Nu am ceva de citit” or “Nu cunosc vreun doctor” because it is incorrect. The correct form will be “Nu am nimic de citit” and “Nu cunosc nici un doctor”.

As we noted earlier, the double is a common construction in Romanian but it should be attentively distinguished from those constructions in which two negatives cancel each other, resulting in an affirmation.

e.g. *El nu era nevinovat* (= *el era vinovat*).

Nu putea să nu răspundă la scrisoare (= *a răspuns la scrisoare*).

Nu e lipsit de interes să iei legătura cu el (= *este interesant să iei legătura cu el*).

Thus the free usage of double negation in Romanian can lead to confusions and mistakes and we will obtain in this way the contrary effect of what we really wanted to say.

Contrary to what is generally argued, we show that double negation reading is available in Romania with or several negative words arguments of the same predicate:

e.g. *Nimeni nu iubește pe nimeni* (nobody neg loves nobody)

Nimeni nu poate spune nimic nimănui (nobody neg says nothing nobody)

Pragmatic or syntactic factors (like topicalization) may sometimes force the reading with double negation: e.g. Nimeni nu moare niodată (nobody neg dies never).

Nici o scrisoare Maria nu a scris nimănui (no letter Maria neg has written nobody).

The facts of Romanian thus give rise to the following paradox [9, p.152]:

1. a sentence with sentential negation and a negative word is always interpreted as containing only one semantic negation (it never has a double negation reading);
2. a sentence with two or more negative words arguments of the same predicate can have a double negation reading.

Grammarians may tell that English doesn't use double negatives because the two negatives contradict each other and make a positive. In other words, "I don't know nobody" is the same as saying "I know somebody". But negatives aren't viewed that way in Romanian. Although sometimes the second negative is used to make a stronger statement just as it is in substandard English, in most cases it is merely part of the grammatic structure of the sentence.

Usage of double negative is still regarded as illiteracy. Its use in English, as well in Romanian, intensifies the negation and rare is negation and rare is the native speaker who would not understand this. The idea that two negatives equal a positive is a confusion of the double negative and litotes, the latter of which indeed makes a positive out of an adverbial negative and a lexically based negative (e.g. She is not unhappy / Ea nu este nefericită = She is happy / Ea este fericită).

References:

1. Bădărău D. Dubla negație în vorbirea curentă // Cerc filoz. - 1958. - Nr.1. - P.5
2. Berceanu B.B. Negația. Sistemul negațiilor în limba română. - București: Crater, 1999.
3. Arkadjevskaya K.A. et al. English Grammar Through Practice, Morphology. - Moscow, 1975.
4. Blokh M.A. Course in Theoretical English Grammar. - Moscow, 1983.
5. De Swart H. and Sag F. Negation and Negative Concord in Romance // Linguistics and Philosophy. - 2002. - No.25.
6. Quirk R., Greenbaum S., Leech G., Svartvic Jan. A Grammar of Contemporary English. - Longams, 1973.
7. De Swat H., Sag F. Op. cit.
8. Chițoran D. Contrastive Study in the Syntax and Semantics of English and Romanian. - Bucharest University Press, 1974.
9. De Swat H., Sag F. Op. cit.

Prezentat la 27.09.2007