Negations? Who cares! An essay about negations in English and Danish

Introduction

This essay is about negations as used in English (EN) and Danish (DA). I think of them as a broad category of words used to express that something else isn't the case. There are various ways to express such, and the first part of the essay deals with direct ways of expressing them, and the second part with indirect ways. The third part deals with interpretations of negations.

Expressing negations

Direct

Simple negations with <not> and <ikke>

Due to space limitations, we will look only at very simple sentences.

Subject-predicate sentence structure

In EN, this is formed by adding the word <not> in between the finite verb (copula) and the predicate. Ex.:

> The Sun is yellow.

> The Sun is *not* yellow.

It is the same in DA:

> Solen er gul.

> Solen er *ikke* gul.

Subject-verb

In EN, most often one has to add an auxiliary verb, in this case <do>, to form the negation. Ex.:

> He jumps.

He does not jump. (or <doesn't>)

This phenomenon is called *do*-support.

In DA, this is not used:

Han hopper.

Han hopper ikke.

Other direct negations

There are many other words that one can use to negate that isn't the simple negation discussed before.

Without prefixes

There are a number of words that have an implicit negation in them that isn't due to some obvious prefix:

EN	DA
none, no	ingen
nothing	intet, ingenting
never	aldrig
no, nay	nej

Prefixes

One can also negate with negation prefixes.

EN	DA
un-: unremarkable	u- (uansvarlig)
non-: nonreligious	non- (nonfirmation)
//iC-//: indefinite, implausible, illogical, irresponsible, ignoramus	//iC-//: inaktiv, illegal, irrelevant, ignorere
dis-: disadvantage	dis-: diskvalificere,
dys-: dyslexia	dys-: dysleksi
a-: amoral	a-: amoralsk
mis-: misapply	mis-: misantropi
mal-: maladjusted	mal-: malplaceret

Many of these can be used to mean other things that a negation. <misapplied>, for instance, does not mean "not applied" it means "applied in a bad way".

Antonym pairs

There are many words that do not seem to have obvious prefixes, but are still usually taken as expressing the opposite of other, positive words. Some examples:

EN	DA
absent-present	fraværende-til stede
fail-succeed	fejle-lykkes
lack-have	mangle-have
forget-remember	glemme-huske

But as Jesp. 1917:43 remarks:

> But though we naturally look upon the former in each of these pairs as the negative (fail = not succeed), nothing hinders us from logically inverting the order (succeed = not fail). These words, therefore, cannot properly be classed with such formally negative words as unhappy, etc.

Indirect

Questions and negations

Questions can be used to make negative claims. For instance: EN "who cares?" = "no one cares" or "I don't care". Apparently no direct DA equiv. but perhaps "hvad rager det dig?"/"hvad kommer det dig ved?" = "det rager ikke dig"/"det kommer ikke dig ved".

EN "why should he?" = "there is no reason why he should" → "he should not", DA "hvorfor skulle han?" = "der er ingen grund til at han skulle" → "det skal han ikke"

Also works with a simple negation to get the opposite meaning: EN "why shouldn't he?" = "there is a reason he should" → "he should" DA "hvorfor skulle han ikke det?" = "der er en grund til at han skal" → "han skal".

Denying with conditionals

Conditions are sentences that have some kind of "if, ... then" structure. Often the "then" word is left

out. In logic, the first part, the one connected with <if> is called the antecedent, and the second part, the one connected with <then> is called the consequent. In natural language, it is common to find sentences where the two parts of a conditional are placed in opposite order. However, this doesn't change the underlying logical structure.

For our purposes there is one important inference that humans make with conditionals which is necessary to understand this linguistics phenomenon. It is the inference called "modus tollens" or "denying the consequent". Schematically, it works like this:

1. If P, then Q

2. Not-Q

3. Thus, not-P

In most logical systems, this is a valid inference, that is, whenever all the premises are true (1-2), so is the conclusion (3). This allows one to infer the conclusion from the premises without error.

Implausible or false consequents

EN "if you're a professor, then I'm a king!", inviting the listeners to make the inference with the implied information "I'm not a king", and hence "you're not a professor".

Works similarly in DA "hvis du er en professor, så er jeg en konge!", implying that since I'm not the king, you are not the professor either.

Unpleasant consequents

Jesp. mentions a variant of the idea, which instead of having a false or implausible consequent, has a nasty one. One of his examples "you may converse with them if you please, but the --- take me if ever I do". The missing word is <devil>, so the unpleasant consequent is "the devil [will] take me". The DA equivalent is "fanden [vil] tage mig".

In DA there is a similar odd variant where the consequent is "du må kalde mig Mads". Apparently, it is particularly bad to be called "Mads"! Cf. Jesp.:27.

Omitting the consequent

By further development, one can omit the consequent, giving sentences like "if it isn't a pity" meaning "it is a pity". The idea is the same as before, except one doesn't even state the conditional. DA doesn't seem to have an equivalent.

Omitting both antecedent and consequent

By further development, one can even avoid stating the entire conditional. EN "as if!" is used to deny something. Similarly in DA "som om!". Similarly in other languages (Jesp. 1917:28).

Advising people to tell it to someone more naive

Exists both in EN "tell that to the marines" and DA "den må du længere ud på landet med". Apparently, both marines and farmers were thought to be especially likely to believe incredible stories. So it is used to say that one doesn't believe what one is being told.

Negations and interpretation

Sometimes sentences with negations are ambiguous, and context is necessary to disambiguate them.

Verbs and negations

Jesp.(p. 51) gives the ex.:

> My purpose was not to haue seen you heere

Does this mean that 1) "my purpose was to not have you seen here" or 2) "I did not have the purpose to have you seen here"? The corresponding DA is: "Mit formål var ikke at få dig set her"

which means either 1) "Mit formål var at du ikke skulle blive set her", or 2) "Det var ikke mit formål at du skulle blive set her".

Another ex. is:

> Try not to look down! [when sitting in a ski lift]

which one may interpret at either 1) try to not look down, or 2) do not try to look down. However, in spoken language this hardly matters, and other expressions like "don't look down!" are probably more used. The DA equivalent is: "Prøv ikke at se ned!"

Beliefs, expectations, hopes etc.

In EN, DA and it seems, all other Germanic languages, there is a very frequent ambiguous sentence-construction, ex.:

> I don't think it is a good idea.

Which can be taken to mean either 1) "I think it is not a good idea"/"I think it is a bad idea", or 2)

"It is not the case that I think that it is a good idea.". It is rather troublesome to express the second meaning in a short, unambiguous sentence.

Similar sentences in other Germanic languages:

> DA/NO: Jeg tror ikke at det er en god ide.

> SE: Jag tror inte att det är en bra idé.

> DE: Ich glaube nicht, es ist eine gute Idee.

The trouble with this particular ambiguous sentence is that it often matters in discussions whether it is (1) or (2) that is meant. In the case of (1), the person is making a claim, and thus needs to be able to back it up with evidence/reasons. In the case of (2), the person isn't making any claim about anything outside his head at all.[I]

In a suitable extended logic, (1) and (2) can be formalized so as to reveal the distinction very clearly:

> (1)* $T(\neg G)$: S thinks that it is not the case that the idea is good.

> (2)* $\neg T(G)$: It is not the case that S thinks that the idea is good.

To avoid ambiguities philosophers often avoid the simple and ambiguous construction, and instead go for a longer construction like the ones used above, or use another word to get rid of the ambiguity. Quine et al (p. 8), for instance, wrote:

> It is important to distinguish between disbelief and nonbelief - between believing a sentence false and merely not believing it true. Disbelief is a case of belief; to believe a sentence false is to believe the negation of the sentence true. We disbelieve that there are ghosts; we believe that there are none. Nonbelief is the state of suspended judgment: neither believing the sentence true nor believing it false. Such is our attitude toward there being an even number of Paul Smiths in Boston. This is still nothing so contentious as believing the sentence to be neither true nor false; on the contrary, it is simply the absence of opinion. English usage is perverse on the point: we say, confusingly, the weaker "I don't believe so" to mean the stronger "I believe not.' But the fact is, taking is, alence at random, that belief and disbelief are less usual than non-belief. Are there an even number of Paul Smiths in


I   To clarify, the person is making a claim, but only a claim about his own mental states, namely, that he lacks a particular mental state, that is, the belief that the idea is a good. Usually, it is thought that people have some kind of special access to knowing about one's own mental state, and in that case, it is not necessary to supply any evidence in a discussion.

Boston? Will it rain in Pontiac next Labor Day? English being what it is, we answer "I don't know," because it would be misleading to say "I don't believe so." But our state is simple nonbelief.

Double negations

Simple negation + negative prefix

Sometimes a word with a negative prefix on it and a simple negation before it does not mean exactly the same as the word without the prefix, as one would expect if double negation simply resulted in a total lack of negations. Jesp. (p. 63) gives two examples in EN: 1) <not uncommon> vs. <common>, the first one is weaker. 2) <not unhandsome> vs. <handsome>, the first is weaker again. It seems to me that this is often or always the case with gradient antonyms, including those created by prefixes. A simplified illustration of (2) could be:
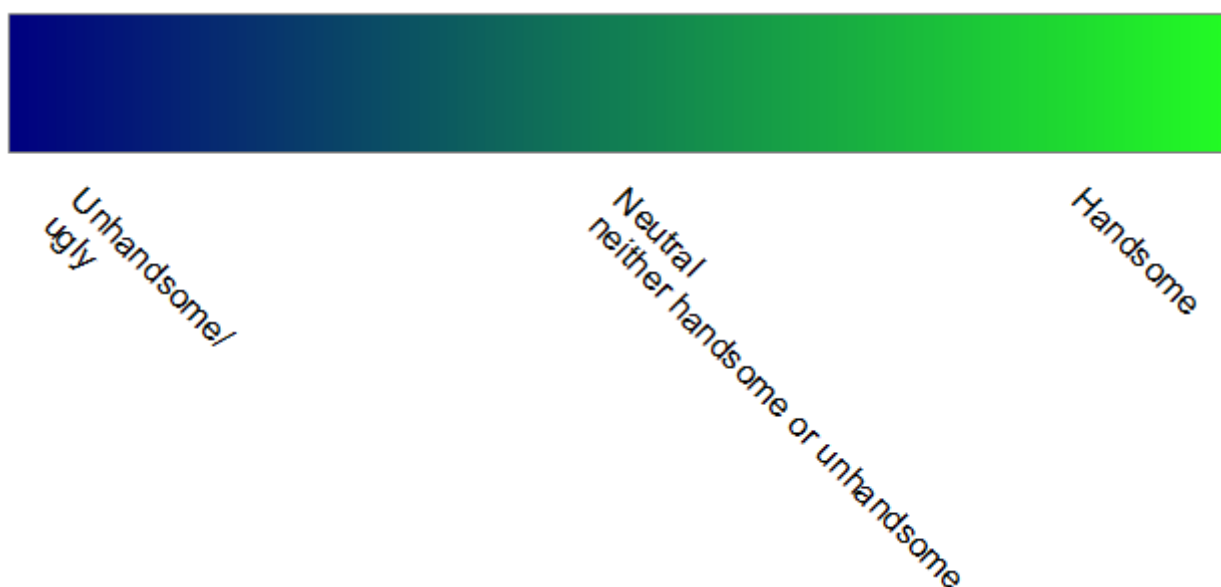
The same is the case in DA, cf. <ikke unormalt> vs. <normalt>, and <ikke uattraktiv> vs. <attraktiv>.

Two negation affixes

There is one curious ex. of this, and that is the word <irregardless>, which combines the negative prefix //iC-// with the negative suffix <-less>. While this should in theory lead to a word with the same meaning as <regard>, this isn't how the word is used. The word is commonly looked down upon as a "non-word" or as "incorrect". It is also commonly thought that it is a new phenomenon, but that isn't true. At least one ex. of this goes back to 1795. (City Gazette, Wikipedia

"irregardless")

Non-affixed double negation

These are often ascribed to modern people from the south in the US, especially blacks. However, the usage is old and not limited to the US. Consider these two ex.:

I don't know nothing about it.

No, I shall not do no such thing

both of which are from Yorkshire, England in the 18th century. It is better to understand such use of double negations as a form of negative agreement (similar to other forms of agreement, say gender agreement between noun and adjective) or as emphasis marking, rather than either lack of understanding of the language or a true double negation. Many other languages have double negations without trouble (Lerer:75, Jesp.:65, Wikipedia *"Double negative"*). Jesp. (p. 67-68) alone mentions French, Spanish, Slavonic languages, Greek, Hungarian, and Bantu languages. If double negatives exist in contemporary DA, they are very rare.[II] Even in older DA they were rare (Jesp.;68).

As for the reason for their existence, see Jesp. (p. 71-2) who offers his own pet theory, which I find plausible.

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"City Gazette & Daily Advertiser," [Charleston, South Carolina] Tuesday, June 23, 1795, p.3.

All references to Wikipedia are to English Wikipedia. All accessed at 20-12-2012.

II   Such as in the idiom quoted in Jesp. p. 74: "gu gør jeg ikke nikke nej" which can be seen as a triple negative.