A FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF NEGATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN WRITTEN TEXTS

Mădălina CERBAN*

Abstract: *Traditionally, the analysis of negative constructions has emphasized the morphologic and syntactic aspects without considering meaning or use in context.*

Within functional framework the analysis of negative constructions in written texts is realized from three perspectives, corresponding to the three functions identified by Halliday (interpersonal, textual and ideational). From an interpersonal perspective the analysis points out the role of negatives in the interaction between writer-reader and the reason these negatives appear. The textual perspective is concerned with the role of negatives at both micro- and macro-levels of structures, namely as they are related to clauses and text as a whole. The ideational perspective involves a comparison between overt negatives (with formal negative markers) and covert (with no formal negative markers).

In this article we are concerned only on the first perspective, the reason for which negative constructions appear in written texts.

Keywords: *negative constructions, written texts, interpersonal perspective.*

I. General considerations

Negation is more complex than affirmation due to the fact that any negative construction presupposes an affirmative counterpart. When a negative statement is uttered, the listener is familiar with the positive counterpart; as a result, the negative is more powerful than the affirmative (Givon, 1978). This theory is backed up in most languages as these languages mostly construct their negative structures overtly (with negative formal markers), and the appearance of certain grammatical categories are often restricted under negation.

Mentally, negative structures build a complex space as they set up a counterfactual space in which the corresponding affirmative is fulfilled. A statement like *There is no car in the parking lot* implies that in fact there were situations when there were cars in the parking lot. Affirmative structures build negative counterparts while negated structures do not due to the fact that assertions require a more complex cognitive process because negative structures are longer than their corresponding positive counterparts.

Negation and affirmative statements are traditionally presented as symmetrical in terms of propositional logic; at the same time, negated sentences are different from their affirmative counterparts in many different ways.

Tottie (1982) notes that negated constructions are more complex than an affirmative one as they deny something which might merely have been expected, or which can be contextually inferred but which has not been asserted by anyone.

For example, if someone is supposed to meet his wife at the airport in London, but this does not happen because he is not in London. This triggers another event, namely someone else is sent to the airport. Negation is more complex not only because it creates a new mental space, but also creates a network between individual and events.

* University of Craiova, mcerban15@gmail.com

BDD-A24541 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:49 UTC)

We can conclude that the focus of affirmative sentences is on the individual while the focus of negated sentences is on connections. Form and function of asymmetries between affirmative and negative constructions can thus be explained by looking at the discourse strategies that call for either the negative or the affirmative statement.

II. 1. Functional values of negative constructions

Before discussing the relations between individuals, we will firstly define the object of this article, namely the implicit *negatives* (also called *denials*). According to Tottie, they are used for two major purposes:

- to reject suggestions - rejections
- to deny assertions – denials

The main difference between these two categories is that the former category implies volition:

e.g. A: *Would you like to go to the theatre tonight?*
B: *No, I am busy tonight.*

The latter category does not express the idea of volition, they are concerned with facts. They only approve or not if a certain statement is true or false.

e.g. A: *I know you graduated from Oxford University.*
B: *No, it is not true. I started my college at Oxford, but I graduated at Cambridge.*

Nevertheless, this explanation does not fully explain the difference between the two uses of the negatives since it may be argued that volition, a quality associated only with rejection, may also underlie denials. This means that volition can express a denial.

The difference between rejections and denials may be better explained from a functional perspective, considering the function is predominant in each situation.

If we analyse rejections and denials functionally, we note that the language component is different in each case. In denials the ideational component is prominent because we are concerned with expressing our view on a particular fact:

e.g. A:*Carol had excellent time in Paris.*
B: *Are you sure? I don't agree. It rained all the time.*

Speaker's B denial of A's assumption (that Carol had an excellent time in Paris) has a strong ideational component due to the fact that the speaker B wants to correct speaker A's statement; the truth and the correctness of the statement is more important than the interpersonal element in the conversation.

In the following piece of text, although the ideational component is present, the interactional function is the one that predominates.

e.g. A: *The train leaves tomorrow at 6. Shall I come to bring you up or are you coming alone at the railway station?*
B: *No, thanks. My daughter will give me a lift.*

By using the *no* word, speaker B is assuming the role in the conversation, providing an answer, namely fulfilling the interpersonal function. But, at the same time, there is an ideational component (speaker A does not need to do anything). However, the interpersonal component is the one that predominates (the rejection). "Thus, taking into account the predominant language component in a particular instance of language use, rather than the notion of volition, we can posit in agreement with Tottie that

BDD-A24541 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:49 UTC)

rejections and denials constitute two different categories of negative use" (Pagano, 1994: 251).

Negation can be explicitly expressed

e.g. *Five years ago, students at the University of British Colombia were given $12 and asked to play a game. They could decide whether **or not** to donate $1 to a public pot of money over the course of 12 rounds.*

(The Times, June 3, 2015)

Or implicitly:

e.g. "The greatest leader is not necessarily the one who does the greatest things. He is the one that gets the people to do the greatest things." (Ronald Reagan)

In this example, the denial *not necessarily* refers to a proposition that has not explicitly asserted.

The terms *implicitly* and *explicitly* are sometimes misleading in that is explicit or not due to the fact that they are used when referring to the thing that is denied and not to the negative itself. In a dialogue like:

e.g. A: *Have you paid the bills?*
B: *You know I've just come back from abroad.*

B's answer is an implicit negative answer, namely "No, I have not". Nevertheless, in functional terms, this is not a negation because it does not have any formal negative word such as: *no, nothing* and so on. An implicit denial is a denial of a proposition which has been explicitly expressed in a text.

Implicit denials are denials that have their origin in the assumption made by the speaker or writer in relation to the other person's beliefs involved in the dialogue. They reveal the process taking place in the interlocutor's mind when communicating the message.

Negatives have many uses, but implicit denials represent one of the most interesting one due to the fact that they raise questions about why a speaker or a write utter a denial and why a particular message should be implicit in a particular situation and why a denial is used in a particular context.

As I have stated before, an important element is the interaction between the writer and the reader. The characteristics of this interaction depend on the type of text we are talking about. Regarding written texts there is no immediate reaction the text in the moment this text is produced. However, the receiver is replaced by a mental process of the reader. "The writer creates a picture of the reader, who thus becomes an 'ideal' reader, and attributes to the reader a certain experience, knowledge, opinions and beliefs on the basis of which the writer builds his/her message (Coulthard, 1994: 4).

In written texts the writer assumes the roles of both the addresser and the addressee. He thinks of the possible reactions that a reader might have, reactions that depend on his cultural background, personal opinions and so on. The writer anticipates these reactions and tries to cope with them accordingly. Whenever the writer feels the text may raise a doubt, he provides additional information to the reader, information that the reader is expecting. As a result, when certain information cannot be found in the text, the writer can report this information by using denials of what is expected:

e.g. *For personnel safety, the power terminals on models up to MCD5-0105B are protected by snap-off tabs. When using large cables, it may be necessary to break off these tabs. Models which are internally bypassed do **not** require an external bypass contactor.*

BDD-A24541 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:49 UTC)

In this piece of text the author describes the power terminals of a piece of equipment. The writer probably though that the reader needs some information about models which are not internally bypassed, and offered this information using a denial.

Sometimes the writer thinks that the message may contain information which is likely to be misinterpreted. The disambiguity can be avoided by using denials, pointing out the possible wrong interpretations:

e.g. *It's been shamefully long in coming, and I am **not** talking about today's reopening of the Whitworth, for all that the redevelopment of this landmark northern gallery ran over time by a matter of several months. I am talking about the show that it stages to celebrate the completion of its now greatly expanded and newly light-flooded spaces.*

(The Times, 11.06.2015)

According to Miller and Johnson-Laird (1976), not all ideas can be denied because the propositions denied have to be plausible or expected in the context of interaction. We believe that all propositions can be plausible or accepted in a particular context, in an existential paradigm which implies a set of linguistic items that are related in such way that they can be replaced with each other in a given context. Nevertheless, we have to make a distinction between the general paradigm and the existential one. If we have a dialogue as the following:

e.g. A: *What would you like to drink?*
B: *Apple juice, please.*

We notice that the response can be fulfilled with several linguistic choices, and these possibilities have to be regarded as possibilities available in a given situation (existential paradigm).

It is interesting to see that when a denial is expressed, "the producer is projecting a world in which what is denied is accepted, that is, in which there is an understanding that the producer and his/her readers accept the proposition being denied" (Pagano: 1994, 256). For instance, if somebody says at a funeral *The widow is **not** wearing black*, the speaker is projecting a world in which a widow normally wears black. But if somebody says: *The widow is **not** wearing blue jeans*, the reader is projecting a world in which, for a certain reason, the widow was expecting to wear blue jeans. In this case the writer/speaker presents the choices (the existential paradigm) from which he selected the option.

On some situations, the writer or the reader expresses a denial or an idea he wants to correct after a statement he considers to be the right choice:

e.g. *The Nobel prize for literature is related to creativity, **not** only the talent, of the writers.*

II.2 Uses of implicit denials in texts

Implicit denials refer to propositions which are not explicit in texts. This does not mean that they appear in the text without any connection to the topic in question. They occur because the writer or the reader feels the need to use a negative. There are four main situations when negatives are used:

(i) when contextual information is denied: when the writer assumes the idea that the reader has got a wrong idea from the text and from his previous information:

e.g. *Choosing a professional career is **not** for life. Everyone can start a career and then decide that he wants to do something else.*

BDD-A24541 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:49 UTC)

(ii) when text information is denied: they involve ideas or beliefs which the writer or the reader thinks the reader can wrongly interpret from the text. This implies the awareness of the writer/ speaker regarding the information that could be ambiguous for the reader. Due to the fact that the author is interested in being understood, he detects the misleading parts:

e.g. *When a beginning microscopist looks through a microscope at an organism, the first question asked is "what is the name of that thing?" It is in the nature of man to want to organize, classify and name anything that we study and a complicated system has been developed to try to match the extraordinary complexity of nature. We want to know how living things are related to each other and to things that once lived but are now extinct. However, any system we devise is manmade and will always in some sense be arbitrary. This is why* ***no*** *classification is universally accepted.*

In this example the author anticipates the reader's reaction about this classification.

(iii) when the expectations of the reader are not accomplished

e.g. *When people say, "I see your point" and then go onto disagree with you, are they actually capable of seeing your point? For example, in politics (the easiest example) liberals and conservatives both agree on one thing: freedom. But they disagree on precisely what freedom means and what it leads to. As a result, we can say* ***that it is not possible to fully understand somebody else's position without agreeing with it****.*

(iv) when expressing contrast the denials are used as implicit, pointing out the differences. In an example as:

e.g. *This tiny wooden beach hut has gone on the market for a staggering £200,000 despite having* ***no*** *running water, electricity or even a toilet. The 12ft by 18ft hut opens directly onto the beach at Mudeford near Christchurch, Dorset, and at least boasts stunning views over the The Solent towards the Isle of Wight.*
But with no mains sewerage, there is no toilet and the buyer will have to walk a nearby amenity block to spend a penny.

(www.dailymail.co.uk)

Conclusions

After analyzing the interpersonal perspective of denials, namely the interaction between the reader and the writer, we can conclude that the ideational perspective of negatives involves a comparison between overt negatives (with formal negative markers) and covert (with no formal negative markers) in a variety of constructions, having different functions.

References

Butler, C.S., *Systemic Linguistics: theory and applications*, London: Batsford, 1985.
Coulthard, M., "On Analysing and Evaluating Written Text" in *Advances in Written Text* Analysis (Coulthard eds.), London: Routledge, 1994.
Cumming, S, Ono, T., "Discourse and Grammar". In T.A. van Dijk [ed.] *Discourse as Structure and* Process, London: Sage, 112-137.
Givon, T., *Topic Continuity in Discourse,* Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1978.
Halliday, M.A.K., Matthiessen, C., *Introduction to Functional Linguistics*. London: Arnold, 2004.
Hoey, M., *On the surface of discourse*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1993.

BDD-A24541 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:49 UTC)

Martin, J.R. , Rose, D., *Working with Discourse. Meaning beyond the clause,* London & New York: Continuum Publishing House, 2003.
Miller, G, Johnson-Laird, P., *Language and Perception*, Cmabridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
Pagano, A, "A Pragmatic Study of Negatives" in *Advances in Written Text* Analysis (Coulthard eds.), London: Routledge, 1994.
Tottie, G, "Where do negative sentences come from?" in *Studia Lingvistica,* 36,1, pp. 88-105, 1982.
Wodak, R., *Disorder of Discourse,* London: Longman, 1996.

BDD-A24541 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:39:49 UTC)