Nicoleta Sava

Romanian Negation– Slavic or Romance?

Languages differ typologically according to whether they allow multiple occurrences on negative words in the same clause, a phenomenon labelled as Negative Concord. Romance languages and Slavic languages both allow NC, the former allowing exceptions in some cases and the latter being a strict NC language. The paper analyses Romanian negation comparing it to the two language families. It is shown that Romanian patterns with Slavic languages in finite contexts and with Romance languages in non-finite contexts. This asymmetry is argued to be due to a weakening of the negative force in non-finite contexts, as negation is assumed to be related to Tense.

Key words: *Negation, Romance, Slavic, negative marker, negative concord*

1. Introduction

Negation is a universal category, inherent to human reasoning. It is present in all the languages of the world under various realizations. It has been the object of extensive research from different perspectives, given its impact on several fields, among which logics, philosophy, mathematics, linguistics (syntax, semantics, pragmatics). In this paper we will be considering mainly the syntactic behaviour of negation.

From a syntactic point of view, it is necessary first of all to distinguish at the level of the scope of negation between: sentence negation (gives rise to a negative sentence and in many languages it results from negating the verb) and constituent negation (creates a negative word, while the overall polarity of the sentence is positive).

1) a) I *didn't see* Paul at the party last night.
   b) This aspect was considered *not relevant* for the matter at hand.

The distinction between the two types of negation is not always clear as in certain languages it is possible for a negative word other than the verb to result in negating the entire clause. One such language is English, where certain negative words (quantifiers) act as sentence negators.

2) *Nobody* phoned while you were away.

An important typological distinction from the point of view of the syntactic behaviour of negation is between languages which allow only one negative word in the negative clause (e.g. English) and languages which allow multiple negative words in the same negative

BDD-A3705 © 2007 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 11:57:04 UTC)

clause (e.g. Slavic languages). In the first type of languages, the presence of two negative words in the same clause leads to the phenomenon of *double negation* (the two negative words cancel each other), while the second type of languages not only allows for several negative words to occur in the same clause, but they require all polarity-sensitive words to be negative if the verb is negated, a phenomenon labelled *negative concord*. There are also "hybrid" languages, which allow for both double negation and negative concord depending on the context and the position of the negative words in the clause. In this paper we will examine the behaviour of Romanian with respect to these two phenomena, comparing it to two classes of languages to which it is diacronically related, Romance languages and Slavic languages

2. Negation in Romance languages[1]

2.1. Sentence negation

Most Romance languages negate the sentence by means of a negative morpheme (negative marker) in pre-verbal position:

3) a) Gianni non ha telefonato a sua madre. Italian
b) Juan ***no*** ha llamado a su madre. Spanish
c) Joao ***nao*** ligou para sua mae. Portuguese
John not has phoned PREP. his mother
'John didn't call his mother'

The exception within the Romance languages in French, which traditionally employs two morphemes, one in pre-verbal position (*ne*) and one in post-verbal position (*pas*).

The same negation strategy is used both for finite (see 3 above) and for non-finite verbs, illustrated in (4).

4) a) ***Non*** leggere articoli di sintassi e un vero peccato. Italian
b) ***No*** leer artixoles de sintaxis es un verdadero pecado. Spanish
not read.inf articles of syntax is a real pity
'It's a pity not to read syntax articles'

In all Romance languages the negative marker in pre-verbal position precedes other clitic elements such as the pronouns

5) a) ***No*** *lo* he visto a Juan. Spanish
b) Je ***ne*** *l'*ai ***pas*** vu a Jean. French
(I) not him.cl have (not) seen PREP. John
'I haven't seen John'

[1] Romanian is analysed separately in chapter 4.

BDD-A3705 © 2007 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 11:57:04 UTC)

Except for these elements, no other constituent can intervene between the negative marker and the verb. Otherwise, the negative marker no longer negates the verb leading to sentence negation, but the intervening constituent.

6) a) No Maria/ayer/ en tren vino. Spanish
b) ***Ne*** Marie/ hier/ en train a ***pas*** venu. French
not Mary /yesterday in train (not) come
'It wasn't Mary who came by train/ It wasn't yesterday that he came'

2.2. Negative Concord

Sentence negation imposes restrictions on other sentence constituents, in the sense that the negative verb requires that all polarity-sensitive items be realised as negative polarity items (NPIs). Hence Romance languages are characterized as Negative Concord (NC) languages.

7) No dijo *nunca nada* a *nadie*. Spanish
not said never nothing to nobody
'He never said anything to anybody'

Sentence (7) is negative despite the presence of four negative terms.

The requirement that the negative term dominate the verb explains the asymmetry between the syntactic effect of the pre-verbal and the post-verbal negative terms in Romance languages. That is, negative terms in pre-verbal position (subjects or other pre-posed negative constituents) can lead to sentence negation by themselves. The use of the negative marker in the same clause induces a double negation interpretation.

8) a) Nadie/ jamas dijo la verdad. Spanish
nobody/ never said the truth.
'Nobody said the truth/ He never said the truth'
b) Nadie no dijo la verdad. Spanish
nobody not said the truth
'Nobody didn't say the truth'.

3. Negation in Slavic languages[2]

Slavic languages use a negative morpheme in preverbal position to express sentence negation, as illustrated in the Russian example below.

9) **Ne** mu go e dal.
not 3Sg.M.Dat.Cl 3Sg.M.Acc.Cl is.Cl given.M.Sg.l-Part
'He hasn't given it to him.'

[2] In this paper we considered only Balkan Slavic languages, both for space limitations and for diachronic reasons.

BDD-A3705 © 2007 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 11:57:04 UTC)

Slavic languages are also part of the negative concord languages.

10) Milan_**ne** vidi nista. (Giannakidou 2000) Serbo-Croatian
Milan not seen nothing
'Milan didn't see anything'

Unlike Romance languages, Slavic languages are strict negative concord languages – negative constituents re licensed only in the presence of the negative marker indicating sentence negation, irrespective of their pre- or post-verbal position.

11) a) ***Nikoy*** *(**ne**) tragna. Bulgarian
nobody not left
'Nobody left'
b) Ja ***nikogo*** *(**ne**) znaju. (Giannakidou) Russian
I nothing not know
'I don't know anything'

As the examples above indicate, omitting the negative marker leads to ungrammaticality. Therefore, in Slavic languages, negative items in pre-verbal position don't have inherent negative force (syntactically) and cannot negate the sentence or license other negative words in post-verbal position.

Negative words can surface in the absence of the negative marker only in limited contexts (in metaphorical contexts (a) or in prepositional phrases (b)).

12) a) Vanja sćital Iru **nikem**. (Giannakidou) Russian
Vanja considered Ira nobody.
'Vanja considered Ira a nobody'
b) Ty javilas' iz **niotkuda**.
you came from nowhere

4. Negation in Romanian

4.1. Preliminary assumptions about the syntax of Romanian:

Romanian finite and non-finite verbs raise overtly outside the VP. Following Cornilescu (2000), we assume that finite verbs raise to the highest position in the functional domain, namely head MoodP, a position which also hosts the infinitive marker *a* and the subjunctive marker *să*.

BDD-A3705 © 2007 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 11:57:04 UTC)

In Romanian finite sentences, negation takes the form of a free morpheme[3] *nu* (‚not') which obligatorily precedes the finite verb. There is an adjacency requirement between *nu* and the verb. The only elements that intervene between the verb and the negative marker are clitic-like elements (auxiliaries, pronominal clitics and adverbial intensifiers such as *mai* 'more', *prea* 'too, very', etc.), which in Romanian obligatorily precede the verb, but follow negation. Negation projects its own phrasal category, labelled NegP, in finite sentences the negative marker *nu* being hosted in head Neg. This position is lower than MP, but higher than TP.

13) Să nu mă deranjeze nimeni!
să not me disturb-SUBJ nobody
'Nobody may disturb me'

The verb raises to M ^{0} along with the whole cluster of elements accompanying it (negation, clitics, adverbial intensifiers). Time and aspect adverbs target Spec positions of TP and AspP, resulting in the order: CP > MP > NegP > TP > AspP

As argued by Alboiu (2001), Romanian has two types of Focus: (i) one involving sentential-scope taking hosted in the pre-verbal segment (a Focus head in the left periphery of the clause); and (ii) a rhematic type associated with the VP (the in situ subject and any other elements that do not raise outside the VP in VOS sentences acquire maximal stress). In keeping with Isac and Jakab (2003) Focus placement is conditioned by T strength, being sensitive to verb-adjacency. Consequently, strong T will allow fronting to Focus.

Infinitive clauses do not host lexical constituents in the left periphery segment preceding the mood marker, even in the presence of complementizers such as *pentru* 'for'.

Am cumpărat cartea [pentru (*copiii) a o citi copiii.

have-1 SG bought the book for the childtren to it read the childtren

'I bought the book for the children to read it'

4.2. Negation-related properties of Romanian

In this paper, negative polarity items designate weak indefinites (*vre* compounds), crucially distinct from n-words, although the latter could also be included in the same class, given their sensitivity to positive/negative contexts. Also, we restrict the analysis to negative contexts marked by the free morpheme *nu* (or its clitic form *n-*) and the negation affix *ne-*.

---

[3] The negative marker *nu* may also be realized as enclitic on the auxiliary *a avea* 'have' in compound tenses.

i) N-am văzut niciodată un astfel de spectacol.
not-cl. have seen never a such prep. show.
'I have never seen such a show.'

BDD-A3705 © 2007 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 11:57:04 UTC)

Romanian is a strict negative-concord language in finite contexts, that is, if the negative marker is present in a finite context, it triggers sentential negation and allows for co-occurrence of n-words. Ionescu (2004) adds a further condition, namely that the negative marker must be in its normal semantic force in order to license n-words[4].

14) Maria nu a crezut niciodată adevărul.
Maria not has believed never the truth
'Maria never believed the truth'

In (15) the negative marker *nu* requires the use of *niciodată*. If *niciodată* is replaced by the indefinite *câteodată* the sentence becomes ungrammatical.

15) * Maria nu a crezut câteodată adevărul.
Maria not has believed sometimes the truth
'Maria didn't believe the truth sometimes'

Unlike other Romance languages, Romanian doesn't allow N-words in pre-verbal position to be followed by an affirmative form of the verb. In finite sentences, the presence of an n-word requires an obligatory overt licensor, the negative marker *nu*.

16) Nimeni nu a crezut în el.
Nobody not have believed in him.
'Nobody believed in him.'

We assume, following Giannakidou (2000), that, in NC contexts, n-words are existential quantifiers licensed by the negative marker *nu*.
Outside NC, n-words may express constituent negation and in certain contexts (where n-words precede participials, certain adjectives and supines) these acquire quantificational force, taking over the semantic function of the negative marker.

17) Cartea de nimeni citită zăcea pe noptieră.
The book by nobody read was lying on night table.
'The book that nobody read was lying on the night table.'

In these contexts, Romanian resembles Romance languages in that pre-verbal n-words perform the function of the negative marker, the verb following them being affirmative.

Constituent negation realized by the negative prefix ne- may, under certain conditions (primarily, the licensor must be the first n-word in the phrase), trigger negative-concord, that is license other n-words.

18) Bătrânii nevizitați niodată de nimeni devin singuratici.
the old people un-visited never by nobody become lonely
'Old people that nobody ever visits get lonely.'

---

[4] By this remark, the linguist distinguishes what he calls *negation proper* from *expletive negation* or *negation raising*, environments in which, although present, the negative marker doesn't license n-words.

BDD-A3705 © 2007 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 11:57:04 UTC)

4.3. NPIs and n-words in negative non-finite contexts

NPIs and n-words are licensed by negative non-finite verb forms (infinitives, gerunds, participles and supines), predicative negative adjectives and negative deverbal nouns. Infinitives behave similarly to finite verb forms as concerns negation and NC, in that they are negated by the NEGATIVE MARKER *nu*, licensing n-words. However, unlike finite verbs, the infinitive doesn't allow any material preceding the *a* marker in M position, and consequently no preverbal n-words.

19) Am venit azi pentru (*Maria) a nu se certa Maria cu prietena sa.
Have-1pl come today for Maria to not SE quarrel Maria with her friend.
'We came today so that Maria would not quarrel with her friend.'
20) Am venit azi pentru ca Maria să nu se certe (Maria) cu prietena sa.
have-1pl come today for that Maria să not SE quarrel Maria with her friend
'We came earlier so that Maria would not quarrel with her friend.'

When the infinitive marker is absent, the negative marker obligatorily raises to the matrix clause modifying the finite verb. It is not possible to negate the infinite.

21) Copilul nu ştie citi sau scrie.
child-the not know-3SG read-INF or write-INF.
'The child can't read or write.'

Gerunds are negated by the negative prefix *ne-*. They also trigger NC.

22) Necunoscând pe nimeni în oraş, vorbea rar cu cineva.
un-knowing pe nobody in town, spoke-3SG rarely with somebody.
'Not knowing anybody in town, he rarely spoke to someone.'

Gerunds disallow fronting of n-words to pre-verbal positions.

23) (*Nimeni) nevenind nimeni, am plecat mai devreme acasă.
nobody un-coming nobody, have-1PL left more early home.
'As nobody was coming, we have gone home earlier.'

But gerunds do allow a preverbal Subject expressed by a definite NP.

24) Părinții nefiind informați, şedința s-a amânat.
the parents un-being informed the meeting s-cl. have-3SG postponed
'As the parents were not informed, the meeting was postponed'

Participials are also negated by the negative prefix *ne-*. They license n-words in environments where they are not preceded by other n-words.

25) Femeia a donat toate hainele nepurtate niciodată.
the woman has donated all the clothes unworn never.
'The woman donated all the clothes she had never worn'

BDD-A3705 © 2007 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 11:57:04 UTC)

If preceded by a n-word, participials will obligatorily be affirmative and any other polarity sensitive items will be realized as indefinites or NPIs, not n-words.

26) Vorbea o limbă niciodată auzită de *nimeni/ cineva/ vreunul dintre noi.
spoke-3sg. a language never heard by nobody/ somebody/any among us.
'He spoke a language that none of us had ever heard.'

Supines behave similarly to participles, in that they are negated by *ne-* and license NC if occurring as the first n-word in the clause. When preceded by other n-words, NC is disallowed.

27) Aceasta este o problemă de nediscutat cu niciunul dintre copii.
This is a problem DE NE-discussed with none PREP children.
'This is a problem not to be discussed with any of the children.'
28) Doamna Smith e o persoană niciodată de găsit.
Miss Smith is a person never DE found
'Miss Smith is a person who can never be found.'

Predicative negative adjectives and negative deverbal nouns also license n-words in the phrases they head, subject to the same constraints applicable to participles and supines.

29) Neindicarea în nici un tabel a valorilor exacte a condus la erori.
NE-indication in no a table of the values precise has led to errors.
'Failure to indicate the precise values in any table has led to errors.'
30) Oferta neatractivă pentru nimeni/pentru nimeni atractivă a fost retrasă.
the offer unattractive for nobody/for nobody attractive has been withdrawn
'The offer that nobody found attractive has been withdrawn.'

In case the negated verb, adjective or noun is followed by more than one polarity-sensitive item, either both of these items must be realized as NPIs (or as indefinites), or the NPI must follow the n-word.

31) a) Notează tot pentru a nu uita niciodată vreun amănunt.
b) * Notează tot pentru a nu uita vreodată nici un amănunt.
write everything for to not forget never/ever no a detail
'Write everything so as never to forget a detail'

The same constraint holds for finite contexts as well, where strong readings of indefinites in rhematic focus position bar n-words following them, while allowing NPIs in the same position.

32) Ion n-a venit *o dată* la *nici un/vreun curs.
Ion not-cl. has come once to no/ any class.
'Ion has never come to any class.'

Unlike n-words, NPIs cannot occupy a pre-verbal focus position, since Focus involves stress and imposes a strong reading.

33) *Vreodată/Niciodată/O dată nimeni n-a ştiut răspunsul.

BDD-A3705 © 2007 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 11:57:04 UTC)

ever/ never/ once nobody not has known the answer.
'Nobody has ever known the truth.'

This constraint holds for declarative negative and affirmative finite or non-finite verbs.

4.4. Suggested analysis for finite/ non-finite asymmetry

Arguing against Ionescu (2004) we propose that a unified analysis for the behaviour of n-words and NPIs in non-finite contexts is possible. We argue that in non-finite contexts Negation is weak, in correlation with the weakening of the Tense feature. Following Zanuttini and Haegeman (1991) and Haegeman (1995), we assume that negation can take scope over the whole sentence only if it occurs at s(urface)-structure in a position from which it c-commands the Tense Phrase. Except for the infinitive, non-finite verbs do not raise to MP, but only as high as AspP, as indicated by the impossibility of raising tense adverbials to a pre-verbal position in no-finite clauses.

34) (*Ieri) venind ieri, nu s-a întâlnit cu Ana.
yesterday coming yesterday, not SE-cl. has met with Ana.
'Coming yesterday, she/he didn't meet Ana.

Aspectual adverbs are, however, allowed.

35) Abia sosit, omul nu aflase veştile.
just arrived, the man not heard the news.
'Having just arrived, the man hadn't heard the news.'

Having affix status *ne-* is adjoined to the highest position available. If that position hosts a verb or deverbal item (having [Tense] features), Neg will have operator status licensing n-words. Otherwise, it will only mark the constituent to which it attaches as negative.
Since the infinitive marker *a* is obligatorily hosted by MP, infinitival clauses will also have a position available for the negative marker (NegP) and therefore this will be realized as a free morpheme, similarly to finite contexts.

When the infinitive marker is not present, the verb will head a VP. Since there is no functional position available for the negative affix, this will climb to the matrix clause being realized as a negative marker for the main verb. Since that is a strong [Neg] position and there is no syntactic barrier, it will license n-words in the VP.

36) Nu pot vedea nimic.
not can-1SG see nothing
'I can't see anything.'

NPIs are licensed by weak [Neg]. Consequently they will appear in the right periphery of the clause or in clauses containing an n-word preceding participles, negative adjectives or deverbal nouns. For the same reasons they seem to be preferred in non-finite clauses.

37) Nu l-am cunoscut *vreodată/niciodată.

BDD-A3705 © 2007 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 11:57:04 UTC)

not cl.3masc.sg have-1sg met ever/never.
'I have never met him.'

38) Necunoscând vreodată/?niciodată persoana, n-o pot identifica.
NE-meeting ever /never the person, not-cl.3fem.sg. can identify.
'Never having met the person, I cannot identify him/her.'

NPIs also follow indefinites which acquire strong readings outscoping negation and marking the restrictor of the negative operator (Partee 1993).

39) Nespunându-mi o dată o/?vreo vorbă de încurajare, nu-mi era drag.
NE-telling cl.1.sg once a/any word of support, not cl.1.sg. was dear
'Never telling me a word of support, he was not dear to me.'

The use of NPIs after intervening quantifiers are marginal, in such cases the indefinite NPI being strengthened.

Conclusions

The analysis of negative sentences shows that Romanian behaves like Slavic languages in disallowing n-words in the absence of the negative marker in finite contexts, irrespective of the position of the n-words. In some non-finite contexts however, Romanian resembles Romance languages in allowing pre-verbal n-words to negated the sentence without an overt negative marker. This asymmetry is explained in terms of the weakening of negation in [-Tense] contexts. This weakening is also correlated with the distinction between N-words and NPIs, the former being preferred in finite contexts and in non-finite contexts when the negation affix attaches to a verb or a deverbal element. The presence of NPIs instead of n-words or on a par with them is taken to indicate a weaker negative context.

Ovidius University, Constanța

References:

Alboiu Gabriela, (2001): *The Features of Movement in Romanian,* Bucureşti*:* Editura Universității Bucureşti

Cornilescu, Alexandra (2000): The Double Subject Construction in Romanian in V. Motapanyane (Ed.), *Comparative Studies in Romanian Syntax*. Oxford: Elsevier: 83-134

Giannakidou, Anastasia (2000): Negative ...Concord? in*Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 18: 457-523

Haegeman, Liliane (1995): *The Syntax of Negation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Haegeman, Liliane and Raffaella Zanuttini (1991). 'Negative heads and the neg criterion'. *The Linguistic Review* 8:233-251

Ionescu, Emil (ed.) (2004): *Understanding Romanian Negation. Syntactic and Semantic Approaches in a Declarative Perspective*. Bucharest: Bucharest University Press

BDD-A3705 © 2007 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 11:57:04 UTC)

Isac, Daniela, and Jakab, Edit (2003): Mood and Force Features in the Languages of the Balkans' in O. M. Tomic (ed.), *Topics in Balkan Sprachbund Syntax and Semantics*. Amsterdam: Benjamins: 315-338

Partee, Barbara H. (1993): On the "Scope of Negation" and Polarity Sensitivity in E. Hajicova (ed.), *Functional Approaches to Language Description*. Prague: 179-196

BDD-A3705 © 2007 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 18.97.14.83 (2026-09-05 11:57:04 UTC)