DESCRIPTIVE AND INTERPRETIVE USE IN THE ANALYSIS OF NEGATION

ELENA ALBU
Universitatea din Bucureşti

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss the mental configuration of negation in natural language use. Our study is based on the premise that the descriptive use (DU) and the interpretive use (IU) lay the foundation of how information is mentally configured in verbal communication. The approach uses the tools and methods provided by Relevance Theory (RT) (Sperber, Wilson 1995).

In our approach we depart from the classical view on negation and concentrate on the action the negative operator „not" (Rom. „nu") has on the material found in its scope. We introduce the notion of negative structure (NS) in the attempt to delimit between the mental configuration and the discursive pattern of the structure generated by the negative operator. The mental configuration regards the manner in which the NS functions from a cognitive point of view, with an emphasis on what inferences are triggered and what cognitive effects are generated. We have created correspondent glossing formulas for each NS in order to point out the manner in which they are generated and the relationships among the existing components. On the other hand, the discursive pattern concerns the linguistic representation and the discursive organization of each NS. The data are represented by the TV political debate, „Sinteza zilei"[1], broadcast live on the 8th March 2010. This edition is rather special, divided in two parts. The host invites the leaders of two political parties, each part being dedicated to one of them. We have opted for a single political debate in the attempt to offer a clear image of how NSs are used by the participants in order to achieve their communicative goals in an on-going dialogue. Although the examples represent authentic Romanian data[2], it is our belief that the configuration of the two uses, DU and IU, is universal, generating structures that trigger the same interpretation in all contexts.

---

[1] We have collected the debates from the political parties' websites and politicians' personal websites:
http://www.psd.ro/transcripte.php;
http://www.crinantonescu.ro/Public/cat/14/Noutati.html.

[2] We have opted for a literal translation. We have kept the word order of the original material and we have opted for the expression of some linguistic elements and for the omission of others in accordance with the Romanian grammatical rules and patterns.

BDD-V933 © 2012 Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:49:41 UTC)

In order to achieve our goals, we shall proceed as follows: in section 2 we shall briefly describe the RT framework and introduce the dichotomy between DU and IU in terms of "an interpretation of a description" and "an interpretation of an interpretation", respectively. In the next section, we shall suggest two working hypotheses regarding the action the negative operator on the material found in its scope, according to which descriptive negation (DN) is the actualization of DU and metarepresentational negation (MetNeg) is the actualization of IU. In section 4 we shall briefly introduce the metarepresentational negation (MetNeg) [not (X) but (X')], discuss its main features and indicate its discursive pattern. Section 5 is dedicated to the contextual analysis of DN and MetNeg [not (X) but (X')]. The accent is equally put on the prototypical instances of the negative structures and on the complex and problematic cases that may pose some identification problems. Conclusions will be drawn in section 6.

2. Prefatory Theoretical Remarks

D. Sperber and D. Wilson (Sperber, Wilson 1995) postulate an *ostensive inferential approach* to communication according to which the speaker provides evidence of his intention to convey a certain meaning which is inferred by the audience on the basis of the evidence provided. The theory is centred on the concept of *relevance*, interpreted as the property of the stimuli, which creates some expectations that are precise enough and predictable enough to guide the hearer towards the speaker's meaning. An input is considered relevant to an individual when its processing in a context of available assumptions yields a *positive cognitive effect*, i.e. a worthwhile difference to the individual's representation of the world (Wilson, Sperber 2002: 251).

Sperber and Wilson consider that any representation can be used either *descriptively*, representing some state of affairs in virtue of its propositional form being true of that state of affairs, or *interpretively*, representing some other representation which also has a propositional form (Sperber, Wilson 1995: 232), according to the following scheme:

the propositional form of an utterance
is
an interpretation (1)
of
a mental representation of the speaker
which can be entertained
as
an interpretation **a description**
of of
actual or desirable representation actual or desirable state of affairs

Figure 1

The above mentioned scheme highlights the components involved in the communicative activity, the relationships among them and the outcomes of these relationships. The components involved are: the propositional form of the utterance, the mental representation, i.e. the speaker's thought, and, depending on the situation, a state of affairs (SOA) or a representation which belongs to a different discursive entity.

These components take action on different levels and are characterized by different relationships. Sperber and Wilson consider that „every utterance is an interpretive expression

BDD-V933 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:49:41 UTC)

of a thought of the speaker's" (Sperber, Wilson 1995: 231). This indicates the fact that, at a fundamental level, there is always a relationship of interpretive resemblance in logical or propositional form between the propositional form of an utterance and the speaker's mental representation. We shall refer to it as "interpretation (1)" and to the outcome of this relationship as „representation (1)". This interpretive dimension is found in all mental and public representations.

2.1. *Descriptive use*

A representation is said to be descriptively used when the thought it interprets is itself entertained as a description of a SOA. Description is used as a technical notion, standing for the relationship between the SOA and the propositional form of the speaker's thought. It is truth based and world oriented at the same time, indicating the fact that the speaker is presenting the SOA based on his real, direct perception of reality. We have thought of the following scheme in order to illustrate the relationships between the various components involved in the configuration of DU:

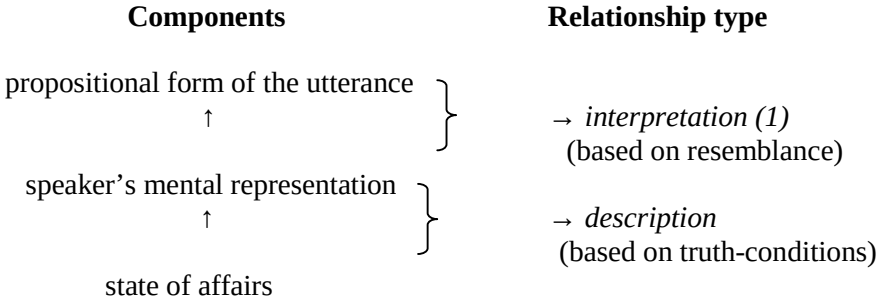


Figure 2

Utterances and thoughts are said to have content, i.e. they are used to represent (actual or imaginary) SOAs. Let's take a look at the following example:

(1) *It is raining.*

and assume that the person who looks out on the window and sees that outside it is raining and therefore he says „It is raining". According to the scheme, the SOA is represented by the action of raining, which is the content of the thought he forms {It is raining}. This thought is created according to his belief which is based on his perception of the reality. Therefore, the relationship of truthfulness characterizes the speaker's mental representation of the given SOA.

The DU always involves a first order interpretation (FOI) where the speaker's thought is used to represent a state of affairs. The conceptual representation generated is self-attributive, belonging to the actual speaker.

2.2. *Interpretive use*

A representation can also be used to represent another representation, such as a different utterance, a thought or an abstract linguistic entity. Unlike DU, IU involves a second order interpretation (SOI). As a consequence, there are more representations that belong to different discursive levels, uttered or thought by distinct discursive entities. We have drawn up the following scheme in order to emphasize the configuration of this use:

BDD-V933 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:49:41 UTC)

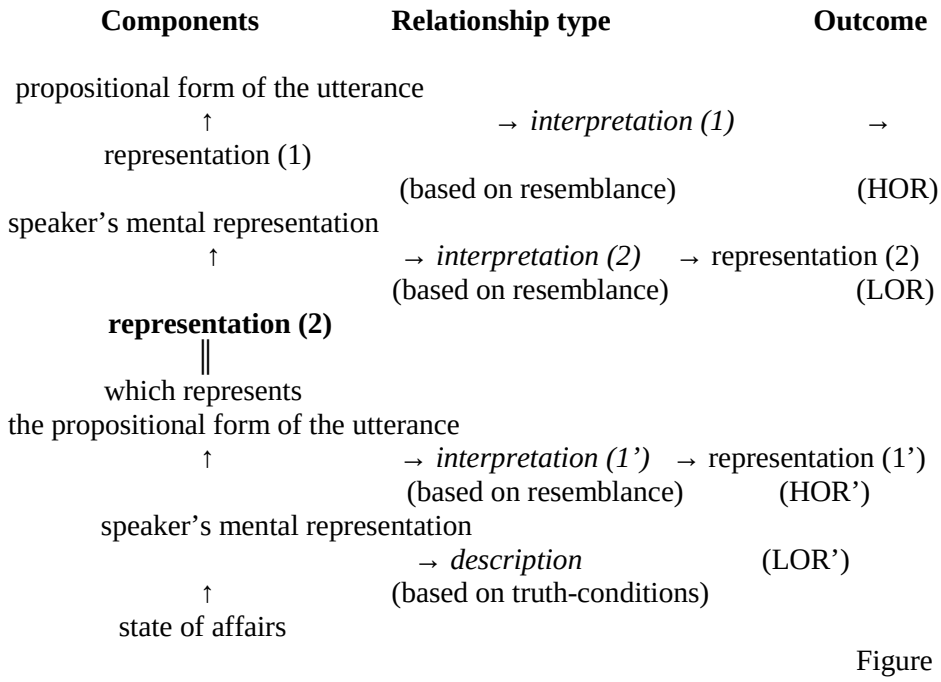


Figure 3

The scheme suggested consists in two parts: the first part points out the configuration of the IU and the second part emphasizes the display of the representation that is being metarepresented.

Looking at the top of the scheme, it can be noticed that interpretation (1) points out the relationship of interpretive resemblance between the propositional form of the utterance and the speaker's mental representation, similar to the situation previously presented in the case of the DU. The outcome of interpretation (1) is illustrated by representation (1). There is a second interpretive relationship by resemblance between representation (1) and the representation that is metarepresented, i.e. representation (2). This representation is complex, displaying its own particular components and relationships, as shown in the second part of the scheme. If it is a case of SOI, the configuration of representation (2) is the actualization of a description. Although it is the most common form IU, SOI does not represent the only possibility of configuration. A third or even a fourth order interpretation, depending on how many speakers are involved and how many representations are used to convey a certain message, have been identified in our corpus of data.

In the literature, IU is interpreted as a second order metarepresentation, defined as a "higher order representation (HOR) with a lower order representation (LOR) embedded in it" (Wilson 2000: 411). To avoid any confusion, we shall refer to the IU as metarepresentational use (MU), to representation (1) as HOR and to representation (2) as LOR. Accordingly, representation (2) is the outcome of the interaction between an initial HOR' and LOR' with the primary SOA pointed out. To sum up, SOI represents the HOR with a LOR embedded in it, and LOR also consists in a HOR' (i.e. interpretation (1')) with a LOR' (i.e. description) embedded in it.

BDD-V933 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:49:41 UTC)

We have tried to highlight the MU, i.e. the interpretation of an interpretation[1], in the first part of the scheme and the configuration of a structure as the actualization of this use, with an emphasis on the elements of the representation that is metarepresented, in the second part. While the representation pointed out in the first part of the scheme (i.e. HOR) belongs to the actual speaker, in the second part the fact that the representation (i.e. LOR) belongs to a different discursive entity and to a different level is illustrated. We will refer to the elements of the lower order interpretation as the original speaker (OS) (i.e. the source) and the original representation (OR), respectively.

3. A Relevance Theoretic Approach to Negation

3.1. *Descriptive Negation*

The *descriptive use* is actualized if the linguistic material describes a state of affairs (SOA). In order to avoid any terminological misunderstandings, we suggest the following hypothesis: ***a descriptive negation (DN) is the actualization of DU*.**

Regarding the action of the negative operator, it is our belief that DN represents the description of a negative content. Starting from the example we mentioned in the previous section, we shall try to indicate how a DN is generated. We believe "It is raining" represents a positive description. Briefly, the speaker perceives that the action of raining (i.e. the SOA) is taking place at that particular time, in that particular space. Therefore, he forms the thought [it is raining (now, here)] based on his direct perception of the given reality. If he wants to communicate his thought to a different person, he embeds it in a propositional form: "I say [X]", where [X] represents the thought [it is raining]:

The propositional form → I say [it is raining]
↑
The speaker's thought → [it is raining]
↑
SOA → [to rain]

Figure 4

We believe a similar situation happens in the case of a negative description, such as "It is not raining". The negator takes action at the level of the speaker's mental representation, indicating a negative content, as follows:

The propositional form → I say [it is not raining]
↑
The speaker's thought → [it is not raining]
↑
SOA → [to rain]

Figure 5

[1] The MU has two subtypes: „interpretive use" (involving a SOI where the speaker's thought is itself used to metarepresent another thought or utterance which it resembles in content) and „metalinguistic use" (involving a SOI where the speaker's thought is itself used to metarepresent another thought or utterance which it resembles in linguistic form (Noh 2000: 74-5)).

BDD-V933 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:49:41 UTC)

The difference between the negative description and the positive description is represented by the action of the negator, which indicates the speaker's perception on the given SOA, either [X] or [not X]. We have thought of the following schemes to illustrate the configuration of a negative description and the configuration of a positive description, respectively, as actualizations of DU:

propositional form of the utterance – I say [not X]
↑ → *interpretation (1)* (based on resemblance)
speaker's mental representation – [not X]
↑ → *description* (based on truth-conditions)
state of affairs - [X]

Figure 6

propositional form of the utterance – I say [X]
↑ → *interpretation (1)* (based on resemblance)
speaker's mental representation – [X]
↑ → *description* (based on truth-conditions)
state of affairs - [X]

Figure 7

The schemes point out the relation between an utterance and the SOA it describes. Both negative and positive descriptions can be reduced to the speaker's perception on a given SOA. The function of the speaker's utterance in this situation is informative.

Some people may disagree that „it is not raining" is the description of a negative content, pointing out that it is uncommon to utter this utterance out of the sudden. The general tendency is to interpret negation in terms of „denial" according to which one does not normally deny something unless one thinks that someone might believe it. In other words, an expectation represented by the counterpart („it is raining") is rejected (i.e. somebody assumed that it should have rained and it has not).

If there is an expectation regarding the presence of the counterpart, we believe this situation is available for both a positive and a negative content. The NC „it is not raining" is always in a contradictory logical relation with its positive counterpart „it is raining". What we need to specify form the beginning is the fact that, even if we admit and mention the existence of a counterpart, we believe it plays no role when a description is generated. Therefore the hypothesis we postulate is the following: when a description is generated, it is based on the speaker's perception of reality. No counterpart is involved, the description is not made based on the contribution of the counterpart. Starting from the set of examples we used, we can affirm that in the case of „it is raining" the negative counterpart „it is not raining" is not implied. This is also true for the ND „it is not raining": no positive counterpart „it is raining" is available when it is generated.

We consider the communicative context and the discursive pattern crucial in the delimitation of the negative content in comparison with the action of rejection (MetNeg). It is impossible to determine the exact action of the negative operator if the structure is not embedded in a communicative context to indicate the speaker's intentions.

DN is a type of negative structure, denoting a broad category, made up of different types of descriptions. The states of affairs can have an actual, potential, past, desirable or

BDD-V933 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:49:41 UTC)

hypothetical character. The negative operator takes action on the semantic content of the representation, having an influence on the meaning of the entire utterance. Therefore, DN displays a negative content expressed through a negative form. The representation [not X] is not attributed to a previous speaker, actual or potential, but it is self-attributed.

3.2. *Metarepresentational Negation*

It is a case of *metarepresentational use* when the representation interprets another representation. We suggest, similarly, the following hypothesis: ***b. Metarepresentational negation (MetNeg) is the actualization of MU.***

We start from the premise that MetNeg is the actualization of metarepresentation and postulate the hypothesis that the action the negator takes on the material found in its scope is an action of *rejection***.** We interpret rejection as a mental activity generated in accordance with the cognitive effect represented by „contradicting and eliminating an existing set of assumptions". Therefore, MetNeg is the outcome of an input processed in a context in which a „contradicting and eliminating" inference is applied, i.e. some existing assumptions are rejected and a new set of assumptions is suggested.

Depending on the context and background knowledge, rejection can target different aspects and may be applied to different elements. It can be used alone or it can combine with other mental operations. Thus, there are structures built on [simple rejection] and on [rejection + substitution]. In the first situation there is no indication whether an alternative to the rejected material exists. The accent is put only on the material that is being objected to on different reasons, while the alternative to rejection is apparently abandoned and left to the hearer either to infer it or to form new hypotheses of interpretation based on the communicated material available.

In the case of [rejection + substitution], rejection combines with a different type of activity, generating different subtypes of „contradicting and eliminating an existing set of assumptions" cognitive effect. The accent is equally put on rejection (i.e. objecting to something, contradiction of some assumptions) and substitution (i.e. the elimination of the rejected set of assumption and its replacement). Substitution is also the generic name for the action of elimination and can be achieved differently as well. The most frequent type of substitution found in our corpus is substitution by correction.

It has to be mentioned that we use MetNeg as a generic name, representing the broad and varied category in which several types of structures are included, such as: metarepresentational negation[1] [not (X) but (X')], MetNeg [not only (X) but (X')], MetNeg [(X') not just (X)], SR [not (X)], to name just a few.

Let's look at an example from our corpus of data and try to identify the action performed by the negative operator on the material found in its scope:

(2) *Mihai Gâdea: Tonight we meet with the leader of PNL, Mr. Crin Antonescu, and the leader of PSD, Mr. Victor Ponta, and tomorrow evening we meet with the leader of the Conservative Party and with the president of the Senate, the one who may find out that* ***he is not the president anymore****. Good evening, Mr. President, welcome!*

[1] Regarding the dichotomy metalinguistic negation (MN) vs. MetNeg we consider MN to be a subtype of the latter, i.e. MetNeg [not (X) but (X')], always involving a SOI and the mental operations of [rejection + correction].

BDD-V933 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:49:41 UTC)

The NS is represented by "he is not the president anymore". The distinction between the descriptive and interpretive use, is not always clear. We have stated that the negative operator can be used to describe a negative content or to reject a representation.

Starting from the negative structure „he is not the president", we believe that there are three possibilities of configuration, leading to the generation of three different structures used in distinct contexts, as follows:

a. [he is not the president]
b. not [he is the president]
c. not [he is not the president]

When the operator is placed outside the material, it is a case of rejection, as the examples that fall under b. and c. show. The speaker uses these forms in order to reject a certain representation, that may have been uttered or implied in a previous reply by a different discursive entity or it may be a representation anticipatorily rejected because the speaker assumed it to be or to become part of the hearer's cognitive environment. In b. the speaker chooses to reject a positive content [he is the president], while in c. a negative content is being rejected [he is not the president]. It has to be mentioned that, although there are two negative operators used in c., it is not the case of the double negation from logic, where the resulted meaning is affirmative. This example shows that the two operators take action on different levels, on different linguistic materials. On the other hand, the situation presented under a. constitutes the description of a negative content. The content is made negative as a result of the action the negative operator has on it.

3.3. *Formal affirmative correspondent (FAC) vs. semantic affirmative correspondent (SAC)*

In order to distinguish between the activities of describing a negative content and rejecting a representation, respectively, we have thought of a test. Starting from the example Os. Ducrot (1972) gave regarding descriptive negation: „Il n'y a aucun nuage au ciel" we have tried to identify the affirmative correspondent and to see what the relationship between them is. It seems that there are two possibilities: „Il y a un nuage au ciel" and „Le ciel est pur".

Comparing the initial utterance "Il n'y a aucun nuage au ciel" with "Le ciel est pur", it can be noticed that the two utterances are semantically similar. This highlights the fact that the same SOA can be expressed either through a negative or a positive form, denoting the same content. Therefore, the positive utterance, in this situation, represents the semantic affirmative correspondent (SAC). On the other hand, when a formal affirmative correspondent (FAC) is available, such as „Il y a un nuage au ciel", an action of rejection is applied. We could find the same situation in Romanian and English, „Nu e niciun nor pe cer" vs. „ (Cerul) Este senin" and „There is no cloud in the sky" vs. „The sky is clear", respectively. Both examples imply that the correspondent FACs, "este un nor pe cer" and "there is a cloud in the sky" respectively, are not available. In consequence, we can postulate the following hypotheses:

a. if a FAC is available, it is a situation of rejection
b. if a SAC is available, it is a case of description.

To sum up, the action the negative operator „not" takes on the material found in its scope is the rejection of an existing set of assumptions on different reasons, in the case of MetNeg, and the description of a negative content in the case of DN. Whether a metarepresentational or descriptive interpretation is intended, it is a matter of context and

BDD-V933 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:49:41 UTC)

pragmatic inference. When communicating people usually choose the form that suits best their communicative intention and fulfil their search for relevance.

4. Metarepresentational Negation [not (X) but (X')]

MetNeg [not (X) but (X')] is a structure built on the actions of [rejection + correction]. The propositional form of MetNeg [not (X) but (X')] is an interpretation of a speaker's thought entertained as an *interpretation of a representation*, actual or desirable, resulted from the rejection of a representation and (substituted by) its corresponding correction. The configuration of MetNeg [not (X) but (X')] is highlighted in the following scheme:

The propositional form of the MetNeg [not (X) but (X')]
is
an interpretation (1)
of
a mental representation of the speaker
which can be entertained
as
an interpretation (2)
of
a representation
built on
/ \
rejection → correction

Figure 8

According to the scheme we have suggested**,** it appears that the operations of rejection and correction take action at the level of the output of interpretation (2), i.e. representation (2). While interpretation (1) is situated on a more psychological level, regarding the way in which the information is inserted in an utterance as part of a thought, interpretation (2) represents the content of the thought that generates the utterance. Representation (2) is a complex representation, consisting in two segments that correspond to the outcomes of the rejection and correction operations applied to it.

The components of MetNeg [not (X) but (X')] are represented by the discursive segments (X) and (X') and the correlative pair [not …but]. (X) and (X') represent the discursive segments, the linguistic representations, that correspond to the [rejection - correction] inference. (X) is the representation that is rejected, belongs to a different speaker and is situated on a different discursive level. It can be actual or potential and of mental (i.e. thoughts), public (i.e. utterances) or abstract (i.e. linguistic properties) nature. (X') replaces by correction the negated assumption/contradicted assumption. It is implied that it is the only possibility, the alternative to the negated segment. The correction representation belongs to the actual discursive level. It is self-attributed, belonging to the actual speaker. The two representations, (X) and (X'), are closely related in terms of the content they display and the structure they have. (X) and (X') can be expressed affirmatively or negatively. This means that the action of rejection is different from the action determined by the negative operator when it reverses the polarity of a representation: [not (not-X) but (not-X')].

BDD-V933 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:49:41 UTC)

In the literature, „not" and „but"[1] have been analysed separately, as having individual contributions within discourse. We postulate the idea that [not…but] is a correlative pair which functions unitarily, always triggering the same type of inference, i.e. [rejection + correction]. Regarding the linguistic expression of the elements, it has to be mentioned that while „not" is always expressed, „but" can be sometimes left unexpressed, but it is always recovered inferentially. Its omission may be syntactically explained.

We interpret this pair as conveying procedural information (Blakemore 2002; Wilson, Sperber 1993), guiding the hearer in finding the correct interpretation. The [not … but] pair does not contribute to the truth-conditional content, but its role is to reduce the hearer's processing effort by limiting the range of interpretive hypotheses he has to consider. It contributes thus to increasing the efficiency of communication.

5. Contextual analysis

This section is dedicated to the contextual analysis of DN and MetNeg [not (X) but (X')]. We have selected the prototypical instances of these NSs in order to point out their mental configuration, their main features and to indicate their contribution within discourse. We also discuss some complex cases where the two uses interfere one with the other, generating a multitude of NSs in the same discursive sequence and some problematic situations in which the delimitation between the DU and MU is more difficult.

5.1. *Descriptive Negation*

The interpretation of DN is derived inferentially as a result of the interaction of the semantics of the group found in the scope of negation, the speaker's intention, considerations of relevance and the participants' background knowledge.

We consider the following example a prototypical example of DN. The thought describing the SOA is a current thought of the speaker, the semantics of the verbal group in the scope of the negator designating his mental state:

> (3) *Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to «Sinteza zilei»! It is a special edition tonight. We meet with two of the leaders of the oppositions. Tonight and tomorrow night we seek to discuss to those who represent the opposition in Romania in order to ask some basic questions, like for example if we, **those who do not admire the current regime Traian Băsescu – Emil Boc ,** stand a chance anymore.*

Even if it is embedded in a reported question, the assertive character of the negative structure is evident. The speaker commits to the truth of the propositional form of her utterance and conveys the correspondent presuppositions at the same time.

The DN is a FOI, denoting the speaker's perception on the given SOA [to admire the regime]. The resulted representation is self-attributed. The DN „those who do not admire the current regime Traian Băsescu – Emil Boc" has a semantic counterpart represented by „those who do admire". The relationship between the ND and the PD is one of contradictoriness.

[1] Romanian has developed different linguistic expressions to mark the values encoded by the English „but": Rom. „ci" standing for the corrective Engl. „but" (which is used in this situation) , Rom. „dar" standing for the Engl. „but" expressing the denial of expectations and Rom. „iar" marking the thematic contrast (Zafiu 2005).

BDD-V933 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:49:41 UTC)

The pragmatic reconstruction „those who [not X]" reveals the fact that the action the negative operator „not" is taking on the material is not one of rejection but of description of a negative content. There is no FAC available or an expectation of it implied. Also, no follow up is required, a correction segment being redundant. „Not" is part of the content, making it negative by creating the idea of polarity: there are people who admire and there are people who do not admire the actual regime Traian Băsescu – Emil Boc.

Although it is a factual perception of the speaker, its character is abstract, unable to be physically perceived. The speaker intends to delimit between two categories of people in order to draw the attention on the consequences this aspect may have. There are some implicated premises and some implicated conclusions derived, based on the speaker and audience's shared knowledge. Regarding the type of SOA, it can be said that although the verb is used in the present indicative, the meaning is hypothetical, given by the use of „he may find out that" which scopes over the DN.

The example we have previously analysed, example (2), also exhibits the idea of polarity, but from a different perspective. Unlike example (3), where the presupposition indicating the existence of two groups of people with distinct positions was activated, in example (2) the existential presupposition is activated and rejected. If the assertion „he is the president" conveys and preserves the existential presupposition, the negative structure reverses the effect and cancels this type of information.

In the next example the situation is different. Although it may seem to be a case of DN, at a closer look it can be noticed that the representations are used to reject a previous representation, actual or potential:

> (4) *At the same time I am letting people know that [**we will not change the decisions we take many times to be in a governing position]** and take advantage of it, that [**we will not make any compromise with those that are governing now]** and that [**the solutions we propose will not be adopted only for pensioners]**, because you mentioned pensioners and the budget salaries.*

Contrary to expectations, in this situation there are FACs available. Therefore, the negative utterance „we will not change the decisions" has the FAC: „the decisions have been changed" available, the negative utterance „we will not make any compromise with those that are governing now" has the FAC: „compromises have been made" and „the solutions we propose will not be adopted only for pensioners" has the FAC: „the solutions proposed have been adopted only for pensioners" available, respectively.

The rejected representation belongs to a different entity, to a distinct speaker. It appears that the actual speaker attributes indirectly the content of these representations to his political opponents in the attempt to incriminate them. In this situation, „not" takes action over the following representations: [they have changed the decisions they have taken several times], [they have made many compromises].

This example is a case of rejection and not a case of description of a negative content, as it may seem at first sight. The rejections are based on the dichotomy between past *vs.* future actions. The representations have an anticipatory character, describing future situations and actions. Moreover, they have the value of promises, commitments the speaker makes in order to persuade his audience.

To sum up, DN is pointed out as the description of a negative content in terms of mental states, states, events, situations.

BDD-V933 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:49:41 UTC)

5.2. ***MetNeg [not (X) but (X')]***

We suggest a pattern of interpretation for the analysis of MetNeg [not (X) but (X')], the accent being put on the configuration of the structure, its constitutive elements and the discursive pattern. In the first part, we shall discuss some prototypical examples and in the second part some complex cases, where the two uses interfere generating novel situation.

The configuration of the first example corresponds to the general glossing formula: [NOT (X) {BUT} (X')][1]. It can be noticed that the second part of the correlative pair, the „but" particle, is not explicitly mentioned but its action can be easily recovered:

(5) *Victor Ponta: (…) If I had not believed (it) I would not have run.* ***I did not wish by all means to be the president of PSD to put my photo there after Mr. Adrian Năstase and Mircea Geoană. I have really believed, as a man of my generation and of your generation that, after 20 years, a system is close to collapse and that one has to come up with a fundamental change.***

The action of the correlative pair on the material found in its scope is pointed out in the following glossing formula: NOT [I wanted necessarily to be the leader of PSD…] {BUT} [I really believed…]. The rejection action performed by the negative operator is emphasized by the availability of the FAC: [I wanted to be the leader of PSD]. This representation belongs to a different discursive entity and to a different discursive level. Regarding the source or the type of the rejected material, it can be said that it may be a mental representation, denoting potential thoughts the audience may have. A public representation is not excluded but it is unlikely. The original representation is not attributed to a particular discursive entity, being a case of general implicit attribution.

We could identify more reasons for which the speaker rejected this representation. The speaker may have assumed that the thoughts and opinions he is rejecting can be found in the audience's cognitive environment. There is also the possibility that he wants to make sure that no one will believe something like that and therefore the rejection has an anticipatory function. The scenario the speaker has created points out that he rejects something the members of his audience may have thought at some point or may think in the future. In conclusion, the OR is rejected on the basis of an assumed possibility.

The [rejection + correction] operations target the content. The accent is not put on the entities to whom the representation belonged initially or the reasons for which it was uttered in the first place. The accent is put on the message conveyed, on the idea transmitted by the rejected material.

Regarding the linguistic representation of the segments, it should be mentioned that the dichotomy between the paradigm of desire *vs.* the paradigm of epistemic state is outlined. The relationship between (X) and (X') is one of exclusion, of total substitution. The correction part strongly reinforces the politician's self-image by stressing the genuine belief he has held about the adequate political agenda and about the functioning of the existing political discourse.

[1] In the ongoing PhD dissertation "The Pragmatics of Negative Structures in Political Discourse. A Relevance Theoretic Approach", we have identified three discursive patterns for the [rejection + correction] class of MetNeg. The first one is represented by the [not (X) but (X')] pattern in which both elements of the correlative pair are explicitly expressed. The second pattern, and the richest in our corpus, is represented by [not (X) {but} (X')] where the "but" particle is omitted due to syntactic constraints. The third pattern is configured differently, the order of the segments being reversed: [(X') not (X)].

BDD-V933 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:49:41 UTC)

The following example is very interesting as there is a myriad of discursive entities belonging to different discursive levels and different contributions of the negative operator:

(6) *You know it or not, I am going to ask you what would happen if you were faced with this situation. In a way this thing is not unfamiliar to Traian Băsescu's way of thinking. Do you remember, Mr. Emil Hurezeanu, the story that at the American Embassy Traian Băsescu was talking to the USA ambassador and he was saying (that) if PSD won the general elections, **I will not appoint a prime minister from their group**, then it was Mircea Geoană, **but I will appoint Sorin Oprescu**, Oprescu having left the PSD then and being the general mayor of Bucharest.*

The speaker is the host of the TV political debate, as the first person singular used at the beginning of the intervention shows: „whether you know it or not, I ask you (…)". The interlocutor is also directly mentioned by the speaker: „Do you remember, Mr Emil Hurezeanu,(…)". There is also a third discursive entity mentioned to whom the NS is attributed, explicitly marked by the use of the proper name and the verb „to say": „Traian Băsescu", „ (he) was saying". These aspects prove that it is a case of reported speech and the MetNeg is part of this kind of discourse. In fact, MetNeg is a sample of direct speech, the actual speaker quoting the words of another discursive entity. The switch between the third person singular „he was saying when he was talking to the USA ambassador" to the first person singular „I will appoint" can be easily identified.

Looking now only at the MetNeg [not (X) but (X')], it can be noticed that the discursive pattern is represented by „I will appoint NOT [Mircea Geoană] BUT [Sorin Oprescu]", the focus being on the person designated to be prime minister. The fact that the verb „to appoint" is reiterated is intriguing as it is not customary to repeat the verb that scopes over the NS. In this case, due to the insertion of other segments, it may represent the host's emphasis.

The host in this situation, at the level of MetNeg, can be considered an intermediary speaker, an involved intermediary speaker as opposed to an outside intermediary speaker because he has an active contribution to the discourse, inserting personal comments. The discursive pattern of the fragment is: [Not (X)] – [explanation] – [BUT (X')] – [explanation].

MetNeg consists in [rejection + correction] operations. A FAC is available, but regarding the type and source of the representation found in the scope of the negator, it is not clear whether there is a mental or a public representation. The original representation may consist in some previous statements or in thoughts generally attributed to the electorate and politicians. Also, there is no clear indication if the rejection is anticipatory or retrospective. The speaker rejects a representation that he thinks it belongs or may belong to a person at some point.

To sum up, it is a situation of a MetNeg [not (X) but (X')], which belongs to a speaker that is not part of the ongoing dialogue, inserted in a sequence of direct speech by an intermediary entity who is, in fact, the actual speaker of the entire discursive sequence.

If we have analysed examples where we could identify the actualization of DU or IU, the next example brings forward a novel situation where the two uses are mixed:

(7) *I am telling you as a viewer as much as I have the opportunity and I am telling you as a result of what I usually discuss with people who are afraid now, not [only of the weakening of the political opposition] which is inevitably weak but [also of the fact that it could disappear from the media which talks about these realities, **from the media which does not find that the evil is still in the political opposition]**.*

BDD-V933 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:49:41 UTC)

The MetNeg is marked by the correlative pair [not…but]. It represents the actualization of the metarepresentative use, „not" taking action on the incomplete denotation displayed by the (X) segment. At the level of this structure, a cumulative inference is generated, guiding the hearer towards the correct interpretation. A FAC is available, made explicit by the speaker himself: „which is inevitably weak". The representation is generally attributed and the idea that it is a common opinion shared by the population is implied.

The configuration of (X') segment is very interesting. A negative content can be identified as part of it, together with an affirmative clause. Thus, the correction segment (X') is made up of a clause with a positive content and of a clause with a negative content: a description of a negative content and a description of a positive content, together creating the idea of polarity. This example illustrates the manner in which the DU and MU interact within discourse, generating different structures based on both FOI and SOI.

In the next example, there are six occurrences of the negative operator, each of them indicating different actions performed on the material found in its scope. As a result many negative structures are generated. We could identify an instance of simple rejection, the reiteration of the simple rejection, followed by the MetNeg [not (X) but (X')], a simple rejection and a litotic structure:

(8) *Victor Ponta: Johannis should have been… prime minister; I have heard many voices doubting that PSD would keep its word. [I do not doubt] and [I do not doubt]* ***not [because I would not know that words are usually broken in politics]*** *and almost all political parties have broken their word* ***but [because a rational party, as PSD still is, would not afford not to respect [it] that moment, in the wave that would have led to the replacement of Traian Băsescu]****.*

The configuration of these NS and the relationships among them is extremely intriguing. The first simple rejection is represented by „I do not doubt" and the speaker reiterates the structure in order to explain it: „and I do not doubt because". Moreover, the simple rejection targets the evaluation of a SOA: „I doubt that [p]" *vs.* „I do not doubt that [p]". They are instances of rejection as a FAC is available, pointing out that there is an assumption considered inappropriate or false.

What is more interesting is the fact that the MetNeg is found in the scope of the second simple rejection: „NOT [because I would not know that words are usually broken in politics] BUT [because a party like PSD would not afford not to respect it]". Looking at the configuration of MetNeg it can be noticed that both (X) and (X') have a negative form. (X) is built on a simple rejection. There is a FAC available „I know that p", indicating that the speaker's mental attitude is questioned in this situation. In this example, there are more discursive levels on which simple rejection is generated. They are entailed, creating the impression of one being embedded in the other.

This example, similar to example (3), points out the different actions of the negative operator on different discursive levels. The negative operator which is part of the correlative pair [not…but] does not influence the action of the negative operator found in the (X) segment. There are two actions of rejection that function differently, on distinct materials. The representation is rejected anticipatorily in order to create the impression of being aware of the existing situation. The (X) segment is followed by an additional commentary which represents the lexicalization of the presuppositions activated by the content „p". The (X') segment is built on a structure with a litotic interpretation, the meaning having a SAC available: „they had to

BDD-V933 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:49:41 UTC)

respect it". In the case of litotic structures, there is a different type of rejection, i.e. linguistic rejection.

The example is characterized by complexity in terms of mental configuration and discursive pattern. The discursive configuration of MetNeg [not (X) but (X')] is riveting and it is characterized by a mixture of FOI and SOI, of descriptions of negative contents and rejections.

6. Conclusions

This paper aimed at analysing the mental configuration of the negative structures in the contemporary Romanian political discourse from a relevance theoretic point of view. Our research was based on the premise that NSs represent the actualizations of DU and MU. We have defined the two uses, indicated the manner in which they are mentally configured and suggested a test in order to distinguish between them at the discursive level.

Depending on the speaker's intention and on considerations of relevance different structures with different mental configurations are generated. In this paper we looked at the DN and MetNeg [not (X) but (X')]. The analysis revealed the complexity of negation both at the cognitive and at the discursive levels.

In order to mark the difference between DN and MetNeg, we delimited between *rejection* and *description*, as mental processes actualized through the corresponding linguistic operation. In the case of DN, the negative utterance is world-oriented, the speaker intends *to describe a negative content*, while in the case of metarepresentation the speaker intends *to reject a representation*.

We opted to discuss the configuration of various NSs in TV political debates for two reasons. The first one is represented by the fact that it represents a sample of authentic language use and it indicates the manner in which native speakers configure and use negation when expressing themselves. The second reason regards the functions of NSs in political communication, i.e. performed by politicians on political subjects. The NSs are strategically used. DN is usually used informatively while the MetNeg conveys more argumentative force to the discourse as a result of the complex inferential processes involved in its interpretation.

REFERENCES

Blakemore, Diane, 2002, *Relevance and Linguistic Meaning. The Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse Markers*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Carston, Robyn, 2002, *Thoughts and Utterances: The Pragmatics of Explicit Communication*, Oxford, Blackwell.

Ducrot, Oswald, 1972, *Dire et ne pas dire. Principes de sémantique linguistique*, Paris, Hermann.

Noh, Eun-Ju, 2000, *Metarepresentation. A Relevance-Theory Approach*, Amsterdam, Philadelphia, John Benjamins.

Sperber, Dan (ed.), 2000, *Metarepresentations: A multidisciplinary perspective*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Sperber, Dan, Wilson, Deirdre, 2004, "Relevance Theory", in Laurence Horn, , Gregory, Ward (ed.), 2004, The Handbook of Pragmatics, Oxford, Blackwell, p. 607-632.

Sperber, Dan, Deirdre Wilson, 1995, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell.

Wilson, Deidre, 2000, "Metarepresentation in Linguistic Communication", in Dan Sperber (ed.), *Metarepresentations: A multidisciplinary perspective*, p. 411–448.

Wilson, Deidre and Dan Sperber, 1993, "Linguistic form and relevance" *Lingua*, nr. 90, p. 1-25.

BDD-V933 © 2012 Editura Universității din București
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:49:41 UTC)

Wilson, Deirdre and Dan Sperber, (2002): "Relevance Theory", *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics*, 14, p. 249–287

Zafiu, Rodica, 2005, "Conjuncţiile adversative în limba română: tipologie şi niveluri de incidenţă", in Gabriela Pană Dindelegan (coord.), *Limba română – structură şi funcţionare*, Bucureşti, Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, p. 243-258.

DESCRIPTIVE AND INTERPRETIVE USE IN THE ANALYSIS OF NEGATION

(*Abstract*)

The aim of this article is to discuss the configuration and the discursive functioning of negation in the contemporary Romanian political discourse. Our study is based on the premise that the different types of negation are actualizations of the descriptive or the interpretive use (Sperber, Wilson 1995: 232). We discuss negation in terms of the mental actions the negative operator has on the material found in its scope: description of a negative content and rejection of a representation, respectively. We delimit between descriptive negation and metarepresentational negation as broad categories in which several structures are included. The analysis reveals the complexity of negation both at a cognitive and at a discursive level.

BDD-V933 © 2012 Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 04:49:41 UTC)