

Register effects in the usage of NC vs. NPI in English

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Abstract

Negation and polarity phenomena have been investigated in both theoretical linguistics and sociolinguistics. This talk focuses on NC (negative concord) vs. NPI (negative polarity item) in English from a REGISTER point of view (Rotter and Liu, in preparation). It is known that NC is present in some varieties of English but considered ungrammatical in Standard English. Thus, multiple negations in English can be ambiguous between a NC vs. DN (double negative) interpretation. In contrast, NPIs are semantically unambiguous and functional equivalents of NC in Standard English. We define REGISTER as aspects of intra-individual variation influenced by situational-functional settings (Lüdeling et al., 2022). Our study addresses whether and to what extent the usage and interpretation of NC and NPI constructions are register-sensitive. We conducted two rating experiments with American and British English speakers and used social relations of interlocutors as formality manipulation. Results show that across both samples, NC was rated less appropriate than NPI, with a register effect in the American English data in that NC was rated more appropriate in formal than informal contexts. In terms of interpretations, we did not find any register effect, but a difference in negativity between NC vs. NPI in both data sets. Our study shows, among the first, the register effects in the usage of NC vs. NPI in American English.