Preposing Polarity Particles

Marcel den Dikken

Department of English Linguistics • SEAS • Eötvös Loránd University
Research Institute for Linguistics • Hungarian Academy of Sciences

Particles which indicate the polarity of a proposition (positive or negative) come in various forms. Dutch, which is known for its large inventory of discourse particles, has a sizable family of polarity particles, including the simple affirmation and negation particles *wel* 'AFF' and *niet* 'NEG' but also *noch* 'neither/nor', *toch* 'yet/still', *evenmin* 'neither' en *(des(al))niettemin* 'nonetheless'. Like *wel*, *toch* and *niettemin* are affirmation particles; like *niet*, *noch* and *evenmin* are negation particles. All these particles have the entire proposition in their scope. Yet except for *noch* they typically occupy a clause-medial position: their placement in sentence-initial position is restricted in ways that have not been studied in any detail. Consider the paradigm in (1):

(1) a. *wel* zou hij haar gekust hebben
AFF would he her kissed have

b. *toch* zou hij haar gekust hebben
yet would he her kissed have

c. *niettemin* zou hij haar gekust hebben
nonetheless would he her kissed have

d. *niet zou hij haar gekust hebben
NEG would he her kissed have

e. *noch* zou hij haar gekust hebben
nor would he her kissed have

f. *evenmin* zou hij haar gekust hebben
neither would he her kissed have

For the affirmative examples in the left-hand column, what is striking is that, unlike (1b) and (1c), the sentence in (1a) forces a contrastive reading, with contrastive focus on *hij* 'he', *haar* 'her' or *gekust* 'kissed'. Consequently, (1a) cannot be recruited as a simple denial of a statement with the opposite polarity (**jawel, wél heeft hij haar gekust!*). For the right-hand column in (1), the picture is more complex. (1e) and (1f) share with (1a) the requirement of contrastive focus, differing in this regard from (1b,c). But even on a contrastive reading, (1d) is unacceptable.

It is not strictly impossible, however, to place the negation particle *niet* in sentence-initial position by itself: sentences such as those in (2a,b) are well-formed (in elevated registers such as legal documents). For sentences such as these, we find a contrastive effect similar to that discovered for (1a): sentences with preposed *niet* cannot be used as simple denials of statements with opposite polarity (**nee, niét is gesproken over het vluchtelingenprobleem!*). But though (1a) and (1d) share their contrastiveness requirement, preposing of *niet* is subject to more stringent constraints: the contrastive focus can only be a phrasal constituent in clause-final position; and sentences with initial *niet* are usually (though not exclusively) impersonal constructions.

(2) a. *niet* is gesproken over het vluchtelingenprobleem
not is spoken about the refugee.problem
'there has been no discussion of the refugee crisis'

b. *niet* is de rechtbank gebleken dat een strafbaar feit is gepleegd
not is the court.of.justice appeared that a criminal offence is committed
'to the court, there are no indications that a criminal offence has been committed'

From a comparative perspective, (2) is quite unusual. Like Dutch *noch*, English *neither/ nor* can occupy the sentence-initial position, immediately followed by the finite verb; but under no circumstances can English front the simple negative polarity particle *not* all by itself. The insular Scandinavian languages (Icelandic, Faroese) can place the negation particle in clause-initial position; but the process that gives rise to this word order (so-called stylistic inversion) has properties that are diametrically opposed to the conditions under which Dutch (2) is grammatical: Scandinavian stylistic inversion is characterised precisely by the fact that it does *not* have a contrastive or focus effect (Holmberg 2000).

Barbiers (2002) and Zeijlstra (2013) address some of the properties of Dutch sentences of the type in (2). Their proposals only touch upon the preposing of *niet*, and do not place this in the broader context of the paradigm in (1); they also leave the exceptional position of Dutch within Germanic unaddressed. In this paper, I will examine the properties of (2) as part of the general problem of polarity and association to focus. I will review previous scholarship and synthesise the desirable components of the Barbiers and Zeijlstra proposals into a new analysis, based on a range of new data, that makes precise predictions which will be shown to be corroborated. The analysis of *niet*-preposing is placed in a typology of negation constructions, revealing that syntactically, the pattern under in (2) has things in common both with sentential negation and with constituent negation — though it does not directly reduce to either.

References

Barbiers, Sjef. 2003. Microvariation in negation in varieties of Dutch. In Sjef Barbiers, Leonie Cornips & Susanne van der Kleij (eds), *Syntactic microvariation*. Meertens Institute Electronic Publications in Linguistics. 13–40.

Holmberg, Anders. 2000. Scandinavian stylistic fronting: How any category can become an expletive. *Linguistic Inquiry* 31. 445–83.

Zeijlstra, Hedde. 2013. *Not* in the first place. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 31. 865–900.

Research Institute for Linguistics
Hungarian Academy of Sciences
Benczúr u. 33
H-1068 Budapest
Hungary
marcel.den.dikken@nytud.mta.hu

Department of English Linguistics
Eötvös Loránd University
Rákóczi út 5
H-1088 Budapest
Hungary