

Double and Multiple Negation in English and Romanian. A Contrastive Approach

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Abstract: *The status of double and multiple negation in English has long been debated on the argument that it is simply incorrect to have more than one negative element in a Standard English sentence. In non-standard English sentences such as 'I don't have no money', double negation is frequently used. It has a long history in the spoken language. Crystal (1988) and Pinker (1994) point out that it was common in Middle English and had the effect of making negation more emphatic. Our paper aims at presenting double and multiple negation in contemporary Standard English and Romanian.*

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Negation is one of the most basic conceptual devices of language. It is so fundamental that it is difficult to imagine either a natural or an artificial language that could exist without it. The uses of negation are numerous; the most obvious are in denials. Very often we know only enough about an event to be able to say what it is not; for instance, we say *Mary isn't at school* because we cannot say for certain where Mary is – we only know where she is not.

Double and multiple negation presupposes, alongside with predicate negation, supplementary negations, either of some other part of the sentence, as in the case of double negation:

Nu a venit nimeni.

or of several parts of the sentence, as in the case of multiple negation:

Nici una dintre fete nu a făcut nicio ispravă.

If we analyze the examples above, we can say that the well-known assertion that two negatives equal an affirmative is not erroneous as far as Romanian is concerned. It is worth mentioning that double and multiple negation is very frequent in Romanian and a rarity in modern English and when it appears, it characterises uneducated speech. The existence of multiple negation may be explained by the speaker's desire to stress the negative character of the statement, by using negation not only with the predicate but also with any other word capable of receiving it. Thus, instead of limiting negation to a single position, the speaker gives a negative colouring to the whole sentence. For instance:

El n-a făcut niciodată nimic rău nimănui.

This sentence can be translated into English in different ways:

He didn't ever do any harm to anybody.

He never did any harm to anybody.

He did no harm to anybody ever.

To nobody did he ever do any harm.

The examples above illustrate the fact that it is not allowed to use more than one negation in an English sentence, whereas in the Romanian sentences it is accepted the impressive number of four negative elements. There are a lot of negative non-negative [1] pairs in English that correspond to the Romanian negation, such as: *nimeni* (*nobody* – *not anybody*, *no one* – *not anyone*), *nimic* (*nothing* – *not anything*), *niciodată* (*never* – *not ever*) and so on.

Another structural observation that derives from the analysis of the English examples mentioned above is the tendency to attach the negative element to the first word. This is especially valid when the subject is negated. Therefore, we can say:

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Nobody ever helped her.

or

Never did anybody help her.

but never:

Anybody never helped her.

or:

Ever did nobody help her.

One negative element in an English sentence automatically imposes the use of non-negative doublets wherever Romanian places supplementary reinforcing negative elements:

*N-am răspuns nimănui nimic.
I didn't answer anybody anything.*

*Nici lui nu i-a plăcut deloc.
He didn't like it at all, either.*

It is worth mentioning that if the English sentence contains the words *nobody* in the nominative and *never*, formally and obligatorily the statement becomes partially negative because the predicate remains positive, despite the fact that the meaning of the statement is wholly negative:

*Nimeni nu l-a văzut venind acasă.
Nobody saw him come home.*

*Nu am fost niciodată în străinătate.
I have never been abroad.*

When dealing with double and multiple negation, it is important to mention an interesting case in modern English, namely the so-called resumptive negation. It is a sort of negative supplement with an obvious emphatic role, functioning as reinforcement to a negative statement.

*I didn't like to, not after what happened.
I'll never do such a thing, not I!*

As we cannot draw a rigid boundary between sentences, this supplementary negation could be considered as belonging to the main statement which would thus contain two negations.

Double negation may appear in English in the case of an enumeration of things which culminates in the word *nothing* (Rom. *nimic*):

.....no paper, no pen, no ink, no nothing.

This obviously emphatic construction is colloquial. The enumeration would normally end with the words *not nothing*. Double negation may also appear in English when using the words *hardly* and *scarcely*. These are words with a negative meaning usually not associated with the negator *not*, even by well-known writers such as Shaw, Kipling etc.:

*You can't hardly tell who anyone is. (Shaw)
He wasn't changed at all hardly. (Kipling)*

There are also cases in which *hardly* and *scarcely* are associated with indirect negations, of the *without* type, although they are considered ungrammatical:

Without scarcely hearing a word. (Thackeray)

In contrast with English, in Romanian the use of the correspondents of *hardly* (Rom. *abia, cu greu*) and *scarcely* (Rom. *abia dacǎ*) is not associated with a negative element. For instance:

Nu era deloc schimbat.
Abia dacǎ era schimbat.

Nu țin deloc sǎ rǎmân.
Cu greu s-ar spune cǎ aș vrea sǎ rǎmân.

In conclusion, the most important traits that distinguish negation in Romanian from the negation in English are the following:

❖ If in Romanian the existence of a negation within a statement does not exclude the use of other negations within the same statement, in English the use of any other negation within the same statement is excluded;

❖ In contrast with Romanian, the negative signal *not* (*n't*) at the English predicate must obligatorily be preceded by the auxiliary *do* in the absence of other auxiliaries or modals;

❖ The existence of a negation in the English sentence automatically requires the use of the non-negative doublets wherever Romanian uses supplementary reinforcing negations;

❖ To the Romanian adverb *nu* correspond two forms in the English language, *no* and *not*, with different syntactic behaviour, the former being able to form non-analysable simple negative sentences functioning as an answer to a previously formulated question, or being able to accompany a noun within a partial negation, the latter being able to form only non-analysable subordinate negative direct object clauses or being able to accompany the predicate within an integral negation, or other parts of speech within a partial negation.

Note:

[1] By “non-negative” we mean only the formal aspect of the word, as we perceive its content as negative. Non-negative terms appear either in the presence of a negated predicate or in the presence of some negative terms.

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