A Metarepresentation-Based Approach to Negation

There is a tendency to understand negation broadly, although there are a variety of negative utterances that have specific ways of configuration and contribute differently to the process of meaning derivation. One illustration of the multiple interpretations negation can have is the dichotomy between descriptive negation vs. metalinguistic negation (Carston 1996, 1999, Ducrot 1972, 1984, Horn 1985, 2001, Moeschler 1993, 1997, 2010, to name but a few). Starting from the relevance-theoretic account (Sperber and Wilson 1995, Carston 2002), we distinguish between metarepresentational negation (MetNeg) and descriptive negation, based on the premise that they represent two different ways in which information is configured at the mental level. We hypothesize that MetNeg is actualization of the metarepresentative use, i.e. an instance of second order interpretation, based on a resemblance relationship. Therefore, MetNeg is built around the ‘rejection’ of a formal affirmative correspondent, always the output of the cognitive effect represented by the contradiction and elimination of an existing assumption, as indicated by the glossing formula \([\text{NOT} (X)]\) (Albu 2012a, b). There can be two types of negative structures: built on [simple rejection], such as simple rejection [not (X)], and built on [rejection + correction], such as MetNeg [not (X) but (X')], MetNeg [not only (X) but (X')], MetNeg [(X') not just (X)].

The aim of this paper is to discuss the cases where the rejected assumption, i.e. (X), is presented as part of the shared common ground when there is no explicit evidence provided for this type of interpretation. We argue that the contextual information speakers and hearers share as part of their mutually accepted common ground plays an essential role in the interpretation of these negative structures. The formal affirmative correspondent may be explicitly expressed (situation corresponding to cases of reported speech and thought where the rejected assumption is presented as mutually manifest) or may be left implicit, situation when the hearer has to infer the source, nature and status of rejected representation. In the latter case, the rejected representation can be presented as being part of the hearer’s cognitive environment in different ways: for instance, some thoughts and beliefs the hearer or the audience might have are anticipatorily rejected by the speaker or the speaker dismisses potential thoughts he attributes implicitly to the hearer. In this paper, we are particularly interested in the analysis of the examples falling into this category and in the mechanisms involved in the generation of such interpretations.

The corpus of data on which this study relies is represented by authentic Romanian and English political discourses. The presentation is a linguistic contribution situated in the subfield of cognitive pragmatics and the approach uses mainly the tools and methods provided by Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995).

key words: contextual information, common ground, mutual manifestness, metarepresentational negation

References


