Negative Concord in Levantine Arabic

I show that negative concord occurs in the Levantine varieties of Arabic (Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria), where negative concord is defined as the failure of an n-word (a word that can be used to express sentential negation) to express negation in syntagm with another negative expression (a morpheme that can be used to express sentential negation) (c.f. Giannikadou 2002, Watanabe 2004). I provide an analysis of Levantine negative concord involving both syntactic and semantic elements. I treat negative concord in Levantine Arabic as a purely semantic process, and therefore one involving interpretable features. However, the distribution of negative concord configurations is constrained by syntactic and prosodic properties of the language. The analysis correctly predicts both the Tovena-Herburger generalization (Tovena 1996, Herburger 2001), as well as the fact that n-words express negation in fragment answers. The analysis therefore supports approaches to negative concord that treat n-words as introducing negation, but improves upon existing approaches by removing the need for additional formal devices such as quantifier absorption or factorization (e.g. Haegeman & Zanuttini 1996, de Swart & Sag 2002). Furthermore, a semantic analysis has advantages over syntactic alternatives (e.g. Haegeman & Zanuttini 1996, Watanabe 2004, Zeijlstra 2004, Hoyt 2006) because it captures without stipulation variation in the morpho-syntactic environments in which negative concord can occur as well as subtleties involving scope interpretation.

Levantine Arabic has three categories of words that appear to be n-words: the “still-words” lissa- and baʿīd- “still, yet”; the “never-words” ʿabādān and bilmarra “never, not at all”; and “wala-phrases,” phrases prefixed by the particle wala “not even, not a single.” These differ from each other in several respects. First, the still-words are ambiguous between negative (1) and positive interpretations (2) in both sentence fragments and in full clauses, while the never-words and wala-phrases are never ambiguous. Never-words and wala-phrase, in turn, differ in terms of the positions in full clauses in which they can express negation, and in which they must be “roofed” (after Ladusaw 1992) by another negative expression. Never-words must be roofed in all positions in both the pre- and post-verbal fields (3), while wala-phrases always express negation in the pre-verbal field (4), and in the post-verbal field follow a generalization noted by (Tovena 1996, 230-241) and (Herburger 2001, 301-05), according to which n-words must be roofed if they are interpreted in thematically entailed positions, where thematically entailed means that the meaning of a predicate entails the existence of an object satisfying the thematic role assigned to the position in question (5). Elsewhere, wala-phrases express negation freely (6-8).

I show that wala-phrases presuppose alternatives ranging over cardinalities of noun phrase denotations, negating the minimum cardinality (9), in contrast to noun phrases prefixed with the NPI determiner ʿayīn “any,” which introduce alternatives ranging over objects witnessing noun phrase denotations of varying cardinalities (10: c.f. Lahiri 1998). Likewise, wala-phrases answer constituent questions, sets of alternatives ranging over argument positions. I then show that the Tovena-Herburger generalization follows directly from a theory of logical form in which thematical roles are treated as modal operators modelling accessibility relations between eventualities and their participants (c.f. Kruijff 2001). The satisfaction conditions for modal operators involve existential quantification over objects in a model, allowing wala-phrases to be interpreted as introducing variables rather than quantifiers (c.f. Progovac 2000, Ladusaw 1992, Przepiórkowski & Kupść 1999, Blaszczak 1998, a.o.), removing the need to stipulate scoping operations in the interpretation of wala-phrases (c.f. Herburger 2001). The interpretation of a wala-phrase in a thematically-entailed position negates the existence of an object satisfying the thematic role in question, creating a contradiction with the entailments of the predicate. Negation of the predicate removes the contradiction, correctly predicting that wala-phrases need to be roofed only in thematically entailed positions, and that the positions in which wala-phrases must be roofed and those in which in they need not be are in complementary distribution.

The difference between wala-phrases and never-words in terms of whether they must be roofed in the pre-verbal field is treated as a difference in the syntactic properties of the two kinds of expressions. Pre-verbal wala-phrase, even those binding thematically-entailed positions, are interpreted as topics, with the remainder of the clause predicated of the topic (c.f. Doron & Heycock 1999). The negation introduced by the wala-phrase then scopes over what can be seen as a tri-partite structure, with the the common noun restriction interpreted as the topic restriction, and the scope as the comment predicated of it. Pre-verbal never-words, in contrast, are interpreted as focused phrases, and therefore interpreted in a reconstructed position, in which they require roofing. Contrasts between the Levantine dialects and and the Maghrebin dialects (Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco) are argued likewise to follow from syntactic differences: in the Maghrebin dialects, n-words must be roofed in all positions, including in the pre-verbal field. I argue that this follows from a syntactic difference: in Levantine, pre-verbal nominal expressions are interpreted as topics and therefore subject to a well-known specificity condition, understood as discourse topichood, while in Maghrebi, pre-verbal noun phrases are not subject to such a condition. Independent evidence for this conclusion is presented.
(1) Q: ?inta mitzawwaį? A: ( la ) baʕd-nîlîssa
you.ms married no still-me\textit{still}
"Are you married?" “(No) still [not], [not] yet.”

(2) Q: ?anta ʕazab? A: ( qa ) baʕd-nîlîssa.
you.ms bachelor yes still-me\textit{still}
"Are you single?" “(Yes) I still [am].”

(3) (*?abdan|bîlmarra) *( ma- ) baʕrif ɦada | *( ma- ) baʕrif ɦada (*?abdan|bîlmarra)
ever in-the\textit{once} not- ind.1s\textit{know} one not- ind.1s\textit{know} one never in-the\textit{once}
“I never know anyone, I don’t know anyone at all.”

(4) wala yo:m ɣaɣab-nî l-rkil | wala yo:m ma-ɣaɣab-nî l-rkil.
not.even day pleased-me the-food not.even day not-pleased-me the-food
“Not one day did the food please me,” “Not one day did the food please me.”

(5) *( ma- ) ɦakket wala maɣ ɦada minhum.
not spoke.1s not.even with one from-them
“I didn’t speak with even one of them.”

Elisa conceived/fs upon not.even thing
“Elisa is conceived for nothing at all.”

who want.2ms 2.marry either Hanin or not.even one/fs
“Who do you want to marry?” “Either Hanin, or nobody at all.”

(8) ?inta wala ?ilisi!
you.ms not.even thing
“You are nothing at all!”

(9) fiʕsa wala ( sabb | *sabab | *sabben ).
exist.neg not.even boy boys boy\textit{dual}
“There isn’t a single boy.”

(10) fiʕsa ?aɣi ( sabb | sabaːb | sabben ).
exist.neg any boy / boys / boy\textit{dual}
“There isn’t any boy,” “There aren’t any boys,” “There aren’t any two boys.”

Khalid said-to-you thing no no not.even thing
“Khalid, did he say anything to you?” “No, no, not a thing.”

References


