

An intertextual perspective of negatives in written text

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1. Introduction

Recent work within discourse analysis has paid attention to the intertextual relations that texts hold with other texts and has revealed that the analysis of intertextuality is necessary for the process of discourse production and interpretation (Fairclough, 1989, 1992; Hatim and Mason, 1990; Lemke, 1985). The concepts of intertextuality and interaction provide useful tools for an appropriate account of negative sentences in written discourse.

Most studies on negation have focused on form and grammar and have described the notion of negation at the morphosyntactical level (e.g. Payne, 1985; Quirk *et al.*, 1985). Negation has very rarely been considered from a pragmatic perspective. Only a few studies on negatives are concerned with the rationale for their use in context (e.g. Bublitz, 1992; Heinemann, 1983; Montgomery, 1983; Pagano, 1994; Tottie, 1981, 1987). Bublitz (1992) makes a distinction between the grammatical notion *negation*, which refers to particles and verbal items which lexicalize concepts such as falsity (e.g. no, not, none, nothing) and the pragmatic notion *negating*, which performs speech acts such as *rejecting* (proposals), *refusing* (offers), *denying* (the hearers' assumed beliefs) or *contradicting*. Following Bublitz (1992), in this paper I use the term "negative" to refer to linguistic expressions which include a negation. Tottie (1987) distinguishes two categories of negatives in terms of the pragmatic function: *rejections*, used for rejecting suggestions; and *denials*, used for denying assertions. She further distinguishes between *implicit* and *explicit denials*. *Explicit denials* are those that deny an explicit proposition, that is, a proposition that appears in the text. An *implicit denial*, by contrast, denies a proposition which has not been made explicit in the text. For instance, the first sentence in the following example, which corresponds to the beginning of an advert in TIME, includes an implicit denial, because there is no previous clause stating that skyscrapers can make a business successful.

"Skiscrapers can't make a business successful. It is what lies behind the company facade that counts".

Pagano (1994), focusing on implicit negatives, studies them from an interpersonal point of view, analysing their role in the interaction between writer and reader. She considers that implicit denials are a result of the producer's

assumptions regarding his interlocutor's beliefs. This explanation of denials is similar to that given by Leech, who claims that "s in uttering *neg X* believes that prior to the uttering of *neg X*, s or h has had the disposition to believe that X" (1983: 165). These pieces of research have led us to study negatives in relation to intertextuality.

2. Intertextuality

In any text there are elements which evoke prior texts which are part of the user's experience (Kristeva, 1986; Hatim and Mason, 1990; Fairclough, 1992). The interpretation of a text by a reader will depend on her textual experience. Intertextuality is the property texts have of including parts or discourse conventions of other texts. Beaugrande and Dressler (1981: 10) describe it as "the factors which make the utilization of one text dependent upon knowledge of one or more previously encountered text". Any text is part of a "chain of speech communication" (Bakhtin, 1986: 96): it always includes prior texts to which it responds.

The concept of intertextuality implies that a text is made up of heterogeneous elements (Fairclough, 1992). The various prior texts which go into the composition of a text may be more or less integrated: they may be clearly marked in the surface of the text, with features like quotation marks, or they may simply be presupposed in the text. Fairclough (1992) draws an interesting distinction between *manifest intertextuality*, where other texts are explicitly present and cued within a text, and *interdiscursivity* or *constitutive intertextuality*, where a text is constructed out of conventions of other texts.

Negative sentences presuppose a proposition in the text or in a prior text. I will focus on those cases where negative sentences presuppose a proposition in a prior text (or in the intertextual context),¹ which is in this way incorporated in the new text. By means of these negatives the text producer not only presupposes elements of the intertextual context, but also contests or challenges them (Fairclough, 1989: 154), as we can see in the following example:

"We who live in Waco know far more of the history of the Davidian cult and the events of the past weeks than many of the so-called experts. Most of us strongly support the federal officers. The basic fact is, the Davidians had no right to resist the serving of a legal warrant. No one but David Koresh is responsible for the burning of the building. I doubt that anything could have averted this tragedy" (*TIME*).

The underlined sentences presuppose the proposition, occurring in one or more previous texts, that the federal officers were to blame for the tragedy in Waco. This proposition is repeated in the text and incorporated here in order to reject it.

¹ The concept of *intertextual context* has been used in studies on intertextuality to refer to "the previous (series of) discourses the current one is connected to" (Fairclough, 1989: 145). Participants' assumptions about this context determine what can be presupposed, alluded to, contested, and so on, in the current text.

I will call the negatives which presuppose propositions in previous texts "intertextual negatives". We could consider this type of negatives as instances of *echoic use*, as defined by Sperber and Wilson (1986). For them a representation is used echoically when the writer's reporting of what somebody else has said or thought involves an evaluation or the expression of his attitude. Here are two typical examples used by Sperber and Wilson (1986):

- (1) a. Peter: it is a lovely day for a picnic.
(They go for a picnic and the sun shines)
- b. Mary (happily): it is a lovely day for a picnic, indeed.
- (2) a. Peter: it is a lovely day for a picnic.
(They go for a picnic and it rains)
- b. Mary (sarcastically): it is a lovely day for a picnic, indeed.

Whereas in (1) Mary expresses a positive attitude to the opinion echoed, in (2) the attitude expressed is negative.

The use of intertextual negatives reflects the writer's awareness of the intertextual context within which the reader will interpret them and is a useful tool for text construction and for ideological struggle. As Pagano (1994: 256) states: "When a denial is expressed, the producer is projecting a world in which what is denied is accepted, that is, in which there is an understanding that the producer and his/her reader accept the proposition being denied". The denial challenges this proposition and allows the producer to reject the view of the world presented in the previous text. The function of the intertext can only be determined by analyzing its contribution to the meaning of the discourse where it is included and its contextualization in this discourse. I will study the presuppositions behind intertextual negatives, the purpose of the intertext, and the transformations that this intertext undergoes. Before going on I should clarify two terms used in this paper: *represented discourse* and *representing discourse*. Representing discourse is that which includes a previous text. Represented discourse is that which is drawn on or included in another text.

In order to study intertextual negatives I have chosen a corpus of letters to the Editor published in the journal TIME. The reason for this choice is that the articles (or prior texts) on which they draw are very easily available, which permits us to see how the intertext is transformed to build a text. Additionally, the selection of this genre allows us to know a high number of aspects of the social identity of the addresser, such as his/her gender, age, nationality or ethnicity. These aspects are highly significant when accounting for the writer's reaction to what is said, presupposed or assumed in a previous text. In the examples used in this paper these aspects will be noted down if they have an explanatory role.

I have classified negatives in terms of the type of proposition they deny. The resulting categories are the following:

- (i) Denials of explicit statements in the prior text.
- (ii) Denials of assumptions and implications in the prior text.
- (iii) Denials of antecedent texts within the reader's experience.
- (iv) Denials of common knowledge expectations.

In the remaining of the paper I will analyse these four categories.

3. *Denials of explicit statements in the prior text*

In this case the negative echoes a stretch of text which occurs explicitly in the prior text. The negatives can deny either an assertion made in the previous text or a proposition presupposed in that text.

3.1. *Denial of an assertion*

When an assertion of the prior text is denied there are several ways to represent this assertion. It may be quoted, that is, the negation may involve a direct representation of the prior text. All the values conveyed by the assertion are in this way denied.

Example 1

Text A²: “Germany is *by no means running out of road* (...) By slimming down and becoming leaner, Germany will be better prepared for the next upswing”. (Germany)

Text B: “Germany Mercedes-mighty economy is beginning to splutter like a tired Trabant. As America emerges from recession and Asia surges ahead, Germany *is running out of the road*. Last year the economy stalled; this year it will go into reverse as industrial output in the western part of the country falls 7%, driven by a 17% slowdown in the key automobile sector”.

The writer of text B uses the metaphor of “driving along the road” to represent economic prosperity. The ideological attachments of this metaphorical representation are very clear. Since German economy relies highly on the automobile sector a slowdown in this sector goes hand in hand with a slowdown in economy in general. By denying the assertion “Germany is running out of the road” the writer of text A rejects German recession in economy, and especially in the automobile sector.

Quotations are very frequently used to correct statements that in the producer’s view are false. The following example illustrates this point:

Example 2

Text A: “*Estonia did not pass a law denying citizenship to anyone* (July 19). It did pass a law regulating permanent resident status. As in the U.S., Canada and anywhere in Western Europe one can remain as a permanent resident alien in Estonia as long as one likes. *The law has absolutely nothing to do with citizenship, and employment in Estonia is in no way contingent upon citizenship*. The Estonian citizenship law, now a year and a half old allows anyone who meets its requirements

² The label *text A* is used throughout the paper to refer to a stretch of the letter to the editor where the negative occurs. The label *text B* is used to designate the text to which the negative in text A makes reference.

to become a citizen. The law stipulates residency, a language test and a loyalty oath. Residency is simple: two years and you can apply, followed by a waiting period of a year. *The language test is not 'very complicated'*. The law described in your article *does not provide for the deportation of anyone*" (Toomas Hendrik Ilves, Ambassador of Estonia, Washington).

Text B: "Worried about becoming a minority in their own homeland, *Estonians* in the State Assembly *passed a package of laws that would deny citizenship- and hence employment-* to anyone who have moved to Estonia after 1940 and who failed to pass a *very complicated language test*. Last month another law was passed requiring noncitizens to apply for either Estonian or Russian citizenship or to register as aliens and *face possible deportation*".

Negations are used here as a device for ideological and political struggle. The assertions in text B support the claim that Estonians have passed laws whose purpose is to deny citizenship to "aliens". In this way Estonia is grouped together with the countries which have an unacceptable political behaviour towards immigration. The negations in text A build up another argument: the law regulates permanent resident status, so it is similar to laws in other countries, such as the U.S. or countries in Western Europe, whose attitude towards immigration is not described in text B as incorrect. Aligning Estonia with these politically powerful countries makes Estonian politics correct.

The proposition that is quoted may be manipulated for specific purposes. An example of the manipulative effect of negation occurs in the following text:

Example 3

Text A: "The West has not gone *into decline*, as Behrens states. Europe, and the U.S., the so-called West stick to their ideals, which are liberalism and secularism"

Text B: "The West's victories abroad go hand in hand *with domestic decline*. Its civic bonds have weakened. Its founding principles are being forgotten. Political leadership is conspicuous by its absence. The consensus on collective security has gone, and military spending is declining dramatically".

"Decline" is a word with a negative expressive value. Thus, associating this word with the present state of the West implies a negative evaluation of the way the West develops. The negative "the West has not gone into decline" denies this negative evaluation. The negative is concerned here with the interpretation of the notions used by the writer to conceptualize and represent his thought. Negation is a way of opposing the claim proposed in the previous text. For this purpose the author rejects the definition of the notion on which the argument in the previous text is based: "decline". The word "decline" is redefined to mean something radically different from the meaning in text B. The political ideology represented in text B is challenged by the negative.

Another way to represent an assertion is by transforming it in such a way that different words are used but the meaning remains, as can be seen in example 4:

Example 4

Text A: "The Germans *have not become lazy*, but their industry is stifled by the pervasive environmental Green movement" (Germany).

Text B: "Amplifying the angst is the nagging suspicion on the part of many Germans that they may not be up to the challenges confronting their country, that *they have grown too soft, or too old, or too confused, that they have forgotten the hard lessons of post-war recovery*".

The underlined part in text A is a reiteration of the underlined part in text B. In the view of the writer of the letter (text A) all the meanings in "they have grown too soft, or too old, or too confused, that they have forgotten the hard lessons of post-war recovery" are subsumed within the words "become lazy". By changing the lexical item an increment of expressivity is attached to the reiteration (McCarthy, 1988: 190). That is, the denial is effected by means of a word that the writer considers synonym but with stronger effect. The writer of the letter feels that the Germans are being accused of being "lazy" and this is the reason of the economic situation. Denying this assertion (i.e. that the Germans are lazy) implies that another reason must be looked for to account for this crisis: the Green Movement.

3.2. *Denial of a presupposition*

Negatives can also cancel presuppositions in the prior text. Propositions are presupposed when they are known information for the participants in the communicative act. Givón (1979: 50), defining presuppositions in pragmatic terms, states that they are "assumptions the speaker makes about what the hearer is likely to accept without challenge". In most cases the presupposition which is cancelled is not sincere, but manipulative. Through these presuppositions writers manipulate audiences by attributing to their experience things which they want them to accept. In the examples 5 and 6 text A denies the presupposition in text B.

Example 5

Text A: "The president *has not shrunk* (June 7). He has shown himself to be a fallible human being like the rest of us, *not the superhuman messiah* some had expected he would be".

Text B: "The incredibly shrinking president" (cover of the journal).

The attributive adjective "shrinking" in text B, modified by "incredibly", cues the presupposition that the president has shrunk and he is still shrinking. The word "shrink" is used metaphorically to signify a process of becoming less powerful. "The incredibly shrinking president" has two readings: the first is that the president has lost supporters, the second that the president has revealed himself as managing worst in politics than he was expected to. It is this second meaning that is denied by

the negative. The writer of text B presents this as a fact: with the presupposition he implies that everybody is aware of this shrinking. In text A the attributive adjective is denied and with it the proposition is presupposes.

Example 6

Text A: "Contrary to your report Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who was ousted as President of the Republic of Georgia, *was never a member of the Communist Party*. He won office in a multicandidate election in May 1991, and, after a violent coup, was replaced by Edward Shevardnadze, who had been KGB chief, then Communist Party Head, of Georgia. I was an election observer when Shevardnadze, the sole candidate of the ballot, had himself "democratically elected" in October 1992. A U.S. Embassy official made it clear that the observers were in Georgia to endorse Shevardnadze's election".

Text B: "Georgia was certainly the jaws of peril (...) Eduard Shevardnadze's government is threatened not only by a war in the breakaway region of Abkhazia but also by violence from supporters of ousted *communist* President Aviad Gamshakhurdia".

The nominal phrase with modifiers in text B "ousted communist president Aviad Gamshakhurdia" presupposes that Gamshakhurdia was communist. Although apparently what is denied in text A is the fact that Gamshakhurdia was a member of the communist party, the denial of the word "communist" has further implications, which are evident if we examine the meaning system in which this word is used. The concept of meaning system is clearly explained by Fairclough (1989: 94):

Words and other linguistic expressions enter into many sorts of relationships—relationships of similarity, contrast, overlap and inclusion. And the meaning of a single word depends very much on the relationship of that word to others. So instead of the vocabulary of a language consisting of an unordered list of isolated words each with its own meaning, it consists of clusters of words within meaning systems.

The meaning of a word should therefore be considered in terms of the meaning systems drawn on in a text and this meaning system depends on the ideology underlying the text. Fairclough (1989) comments that in the post-war America "communism" is a subordinate of "totalitarianism", which is reflected in these texts. Both in text A and in text B "communist" is equated with "violent" and opposed to "democratically elected". In text A it is denied that Gamshakhurdia has ever been communist and in this way all the connotations and associations that come with this word are rejected. In fact, it is the other candidate who is described as communist: "Edward Shevardnadze, who had been KGB chief, then Communist Party Head, of Georgia".

4. *Denial of assumptions and implications in the previous text*

Writers build their texts by relying on a series of assumptions that are not made explicit. Given that the production of any text involves an interpretation of the world, these assumptions are subjective, depend on the writer's interpretation. Implicit assumptions may be powerful ideological instruments when they are presented as "common sense" to the reader and in this way they contribute to achieving the continuity of a particular view of the world. Some negatives deny these implicit assumptions. We will see some examples:

Example 7

Text A: "The U.S.A. has *no right to* tell the world who should and should not develop and possess nuclear weapons", (South Australia)

Text B: "The Clinton Administration says it is determined to strengthen international controls (...) However firm the stance, the U.S. and its allies *cannot entirely eliminate* the ambitions and fears that prod nations to acquire weapons of mass destruction".

Text B provides a clear example of "ideological common sense" or "common sense in the service of sustaining unequal relations of power" (Fairclough, 1989: 84). The implicit assumption behind "...the U.S. and its allies *cannot entirely eliminate* the ambitions and fears that prod nations to acquire weapons of mass destruction" is that the U.S. has the right to do it. This view of the world, with the U.S. as an arbiter is common sense for some people and will probably be accepted by a wide readership of TIME. The negation challenges this assumption, becoming a form of ideological struggle. While text B perpetuates the view of the U.S. having the role of controlling the world politics, the negation rejects this role.

In some cases the writer of the representing text phrases the implications of the represented text in order to deny them. The negative reveals that the writer of the representing text is aware of the manipulative power of these implications and denies the implications themselves in order to express his own attitude towards the topic.

Example 8

Text A: "Your statement that 'in the five wars between Arabs and Israelis, neither side *could* obliterate the other' (Sept. 20) *implies* a non-existent symmetry. Physical *obliteration of the other side has never been* an objective of Israeli policy (...). The basic asymmetry was between the physical obliteration threat felt by the Israelis and the conceptual obliteration threat felt by the Palestinians" (Jack Arbib, Tel Aviv).

The implication of the represented text is that Arabs tried to obliterate Israelis and Israelis tried to obliterate Arabs. In text A only one part of this implication is negated. The writer of the letter uses negation to deny that Israelis wanted to obliterate Arabs, but not to deny that Arabs wanted to obliterate Israelis. Negation is used for ideological purposes: to present a group as the victims in the wars and the other group as the aggressors.

In the following example the writer of text A denies his own interpretation of how the writer of the represented text interprets reality:

Example 9

Text A: "It is interesting that you picture Clinton's health plan (Sept. 20) with Stars and Stripes, possibly **signifying** American's patriotic duty to support it. In fact the health situation as it stands is wholly un-american. *It cannot be American to exclude* single mothers and children from a plan because they cannot afford the premiums. *It cannot be American* that faithful citizens do not take their kids to the doctor because of the cost".

The main purpose of the negative is to introduce the writer's opinion in an argument. The negative has a strong ideological meaning. It defines the concept of "American" in negative terms, opposing in this way the writer's view about what is to be American to the view held by the people in power, revealing in this way that the government implements "un-american" policies. With the denial the producer appeals to the prototype of American in the addressees' minds. The prototypical image of this concept for Americans has a series of features and properties (such as "democrat", "equalitarian") that the government's policy is denied to have.

5. *Denials of antecedent texts within the reader's experience*

In some cases the intertext is not to be found in a specific single text but in a series of antecedent texts (oral or written) which the writer assumes to be part of the reader's textual experience.

The example below makes reference to a topic which has been widely covered by American journals and in television: the Simpson's trial. When the American black star O.J. Simpson was accused of committing a crime, his lawyers presented the trial as a trial where what was being judged was the black race. Simpson was presented as the representative of the black race, and this is how a great deal of the black population saw him, as the following fragments show:

Example 10

a. "I am a 44-year-old black man, and did not look forward to hearing the O.J. Simpson verdict (Oct 16) because I was sure another black man would not receive justice".

b. "O.J. Simpson is simply a black American whose life and actions were put on public trial because of his background and social standing as a black man who made it in a white dominated society".

Making Simpson a representative of the African-American people was necessary in order to gain the support of part of the public opinion and part of the jury, and in order to present the case as a trial against the black race. The following example challenges the assumption on which this argument is based:

Example 11

Text A: "The lawyers representing him (O.J. Simpson) were able to switch the focus of the trial away from the deaths of the two victims and somehow turn it toward the disparity between whites and blacks in the U.S. But *O.J. Simpson is not by any stretch of the imagination a representative of the African-American people*".

Similarly, in the following example what is denied is that the trial was about race, a belief often spoken out during the trial and reflected in the examples 10a and 10b above:

Example 17

Text A: "The O.J. Simpson trial *was not about race and racial division* in the U.S. (Oct 9). It was deeper than that: it was about poverty vs. wealth. The struggle of classes is the foundation of all religions, economic and political systems, and the Simpson trial only reflects the superficiality of the times".

6. *Denials of common knowledge expectations*

The reader has a conception of the world which derives from previous experiences. The different aspects of this conception are stored in memory as *schemata* (see Cook, 1994), configurations of background knowledge which organize the information in the mind. When reading a text the reader interprets it in terms of the aspects of her conception of the world which are related to the topic of the text. That is, the schemata which help her make sense of the discourse are activated. A schema is a typical instance of an object, event or situation. Therefore, it has a set of defining elements which the reader expects to find when the schema of that object, event or situation is activated. Some of these defining elements are common sense assumptions which favour the groups which are in power. The denial of these assumptions is another case of ideological struggle. Let us see it in the following example:

Example 12

Text A: "After nine months of the O.J. saga one thing seems perfectly clear: *juries do not decide whether the accused is innocent or guilty*. They vote on which side has better lawyers".

The text has been prompted by Simpson's acquittal. The negative denies a shared belief about the role of justice: that it is equal for everybody. The jury's impartiality is a defining element of the *trial schema*. Thus, the denial becomes an accusation against the travesty of justice.

7. Concluding remarks

The purpose of this study has been to contribute to a better understanding of the pragmatics of negation in written text. The study has revealed the applicability of the notions of intertextuality and interaction to the analysis of the discursive function of negatives. Intertextual negatives, which presuppose propositions in a prior text, are used by the writer to perform pragmatic acts such as denying or challenging those propositions. The intertextual context of the reader is, thus, used as a tool for the social construction of reality and for ideological struggle. Given that intertextual negatives are instruments of the social-discursive process which involve the evaluation, manipulation or transformation of explicit information, presuppositions or assumptions occurring in a prior text, they help the writer to engage in an argument with prior texts where a specific ideology is reflected. In conclusion, these negatives have an important role in the conveyance and constitution of ideology in discourse.

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