Neg-raising, NPIs, and the semantics-pragmatics interface: What’s at issue?
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While Quine (1960) dismissed “the familiar quirk of English whereby \( x \) does not believe that \( p \)” is equated to \( x \) believes that not \( p \)” rather than to “it is not the case that \( x \) believes that \( p \)” as an “idiosyncratic complication”, this correspondence is systematic and widely attested cross-linguistically. Following Fillmore (1963), some linguists have posited a syntactic rule of neg-raising (NR) to derive \([\text{NEG} \ (a \ V_{\text{NR}} \ \text{that} \ p)]\) from \([a \ V_{\text{NR}} \ \text{that} \ \text{NEG-}p]\), while others (Bartsch 1973, Horn 1989, Gajewski 2007) have favored a pragmatic account assimilating NR to the general tendency for contradictory negation to be contextually strengthened to contrariety. The key step here is the assumption of an excluded-middle disjunction, allowing the NR effect to be derived as an instance of disjunctive syllogism (\( p \lor q, \neg p \therefore q \)):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(1)} & \quad (i) \ F (a, p) \lor F (a, \neg p) & \text{(assumed disjunction)} \\
\text{\quad (ii)} & \quad \neg F (a, p) & \text{(proposition asserted)} \\
\text{\quad (iii)} & \quad F (a, \neg p) & \text{(proposition conveyed)}
\end{align*}
\]

Unfortunately, this approach cannot account for the attested variation across and within languages as to just which predicates allow the pragmatic strengthening in (1).

Collins & Postal (2014) defend the grammatical status of NR by citing, inter alia, the distribution of strong negative polarity items (NPIs) as in (2) and the possibility of “Horn clauses” with embedded subject-aux inversion under higher negation in as in (3), properties they argue are restricted to NR governors.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(2)} & \quad \text{I don’t \{believe/*claim\} he’s been here in years.} \\
& \quad \text{Lucinda doesn’t \{think/*know/*realize\} that Arnold is all that intelligent.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(3)} & \quad \text{I don’t \{believe/*regret\} that ever before has something like this happened.} \\
& \quad \text{I don’t \{think/*claim\} that ever again will this happen.}
\end{align*}
\]

But the same licensing behavior is found with non-NR predicates like non-factive know and related constructions, e.g. cannot say, as seen in the attested examples in (4) and (5):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(4)} & \quad \text{I can’t say I’ve cooked myself a full meal in weeks.} \\
& \quad \text{Hell, I don’t know that it was all that easy even back then.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(5)} & \quad \text{I don’t know that ever before or since in my life have I felt such exhaustion.} \\
& \quad \text{I can’t say that at any time did I have a problem with the customer service team.}
\end{align*}
\]

While uttering \( I \text{ don’t know that } p \) does not commit me to \( I \text{ know that } \neg p \), in stating the former I crucially present \( \neg p \) as AT ISSUE (cf. Tonhauser et al. 2013) and highlight the probability that \( \neg p \) holds. Additional evidence will be presented for the role of at-issueness in the licensing of NPIs in the scope of only XP and barely and in (some) sarcastic contexts and in the non-licensing of NPIs by clefts and definites.
References