

NEGATION

This document discusses negation in English.

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When we talk about negation we can talk about its syntactic scope and its semantic scope.

Syntactic scope

The syntactic scope of negation can be clausal or subclausal. At the clausal level, negation can be in the verb phrase or through one of several other devices.

- 1) She is happy
- 2) She was unhappy
- 3) She wasn't happy

3) is clausal negation while 2) is subclausal; at the lexical level. We can also have subclausal at the phrasal level:

Jim may not be here

Syntactically, clausal negation is realized by the use of analytic 'not' or the clitic 'n't' on the auxiliary verb. If no auxiliary exist, do-support is required. Clausal negation can also be achieved through the use of words such as:

(A) nothing, none, no, few, never etc

acting as heads of noun phrases and adjectival phrases, determiners or modifiers:

She said nothing
She never gave me anything
She talked to no man

At the subclausal level, lexical negation is fairly straightforward with the attachment of affixes such as un-, mis-, dis etc. The interesting part is when the lexical items in (A) above combine with verbs to give phrasal negation (subclausal):

She is a not too happy woman
She did it in no time at all

Subclausal and clausal negation interact in the infamous double negative:

She ain't done nothing.

Logically, the two negatives make a positive but the first negation is clausal and the second subclausal. The sentence is therefore usually taken to be negative.

Semantic Scope

Semantically, negation can have scope over the clause, phrase or word.

Adjuncts such as 'intentionally' are inside the scope of negation if they come after the verb but outside if they precede the verb.

- 1) She didn't hit him intentionally
- 2) She intentionally didn't hit him

1) normally entails 'She hit him' whereas 2) entails 'she didn't hit him'

Adjuncts of reason are normally outside but can be brought inside through prosodic means:

She didn't hit him because she was angry

Normally this would entail 'she didn't hit him' but if the stress falls on 'angry' then it entails 'she hit him'. (In fact, stress and intonation can act to shift the point of negation to most parts of the sentence.)

Adjuncts of manner are normally inside the scope:

She doesn't play well

Modal constructions can show either clausal negation or subclausal. 'May' is normally outside the scope of negation in its epistemic sense yielding subclausal negation but inside in its deontic sense:

- He may not be home (Epistemic, subclausal)
He may not come in (Deontic, clausal)

'Must' is outside the scope in both senses:

- He must not be home (Epistemic, subclausal)
He must not see me (Deontic, subclausal)
He needn't do that (Deontic, clausal)

Embedded clauses that are negated don't normally allow the negation to pass into the main clause:

- She said not to come
It is a fact that we didn't do it

The scope of negation can often be determined by the use of tags. Thus clausal negation will often require a positive tag whereas subclausal will require a negative tag in line with the unmarked sentence:

- She was happy, wasn't she
She was unhappy, wasn't she
She wasn't happy, was she

Also 'fronting' can sometimes reveal the level of the negation:

- 1) She had faith in no man
In no man, did she have faith

2) She did it in no time

In no time she did it

The auxiliary in 1) is brought in front of the subject which reveal the clausal scope of the negation.

SOURCES

Huddleston, R. (1984) *Introduction to the grammar of English language*. CUP