Expletive Negation and Polarity Focus in Tseltal (Mayan)
Kirill Shklovsky, MIT
`kirills@mit.edu`

Petalcingo Tseltal (Mayan, Southern Mexico) features a construction used to expresse speaker uncertainty. While this construction includes obligatory (sentential) negation, this negation is semantically vacuous, since it does not contribute negativity to the denotation. In this presentation we propose a modal-type analysis of this construction and compare it to other instances of expletive negation in other world's languages.

The construction in question (henceforth, *the unnegative*) is used to express speaker uncertainty and shares it's prosodic features with intonational polar questions. Such questions in Tseltal receive a low final boundary tone (L%), in contrast to declaratives which feature flat or rising utterance-final intonation (H% boundary tone). The unnegative construction, exemplified in (1), is indeed ambiguous between a polar question and a declarative interpretation.

> **(1)** a. ma yakal ja'al [L%]?
> NEG PROG rain?
> 'Is it raining?' or 'It might be raining'

The first puzzle with respect to unnegatives concerns the issue of why they share intonational contour with polar questions. Two types of evidential-based approaches have been developed for question/declarative isomorphy, however, besides the fact that there is no obvious evidential in Tseltal unnegatives, these proposals make predictions that are not borne out in this language. Fasola (2007) develops a declarative-type account of Imbabura Quechua marker *-chu*, which appears in polar questions and negative assertions. In Fasola's analysis the relevant utterance with *-chu* is semantically and syntactically declarative while the interrogative force comes about as a result of Gricean reasoning. Such an approach seems to predict that assertions disclaiming knowledge should function as questions, contrary to Tseltal facts. Alternatively, Littell, Matthewson, & Peterson (2010) propose an interrogative account of "conjectural questions" in three Amerindian languages based on the idea that syntactic interrogatives combined with conjectural/inferential evidentials signal the fact that the speaker believes the interlocutor not to be in a position to answer the question. As a result, conjectural questions are questions semantically and syntactically, but act as assertions pragmatically (cf. Caponigro & Sprouse 2007 on rhetorical questions). If this approach was correct for Tseltal unnegatives, we would expect that the context would admit unnegatives only in cases where the speaker believed the hearer not to be in a position to resolve the question. This turns out not to be the case: unnegatives are licit in situations where the speaker has no such belief.

Another puzzle in the unnegative construction relates to the presence of negation. Given the fact that the negation in unnegatives does not contribute negative meaning, it looks to be an instance of expletive negation (cf. Horn 1989, Espinal 1992, Van der Wouden & Zwarts 1993, Abels 2002, Espinal 2000, Yoon 2011, among others). The vacuous negation analysis is supported by the fact that negation in Tseltal unnegatives does not license NPIs. Unlike many reported instances of expletive negation, however, negation in Tseltal unnegatives is obligatory (though see Zanuttini & Portner (2003), Yoon (2011), and references in the latter work for instances of expletive negation that is required). Yoon (2011) proposes a unified analysis of expletive negation (EN) where the main semantic contribution of EN is along the evaluative dimension (Potts 2005; 2007). In Yoon's proposal "evaluative negation" (the term she uses) takes some contextually-given scale, and contributes meaning in the evaluative dimension signifying that the speaker believes that the expressed proposition ranks low on the given scale. The scales Yoon proposes are buletic and epistemic, reflecting the desires of the speaker or likelihood of occurrence respectively, though other scales are imaginable as well. The problem with this approach for Tseltal unnegatives is the fact that speakers do not consider the proposition expressed in unnegatives to be particularly unlikely: rather they assign it something close to a 50/50 probability. Also, unnegatives (as well as other instances of expletive negation in other languages) do not seem to have evaluative content,

according to the Potts criteria. Finally, unlike many instances of expletive negation (excepting expletive negation in exclamatives in Zanuttini & Portner 2003), the negation in Tseltal unnegatives appears in root clauses only.

Our proposal for Tseltal unnegatives builds on the fact that they appear to have a modalized meaning. Besides the fact the denotation of unnegatives necessarily refers to possible worlds, we observe that Tseltal unnegatives can be used to convey approximate amounts much like English modalized expressions of uncertainty: *How much did that disc cost? I don't know, it might have been fifteen dollars.* (see Sauerland & Stateva (2011) for one account of approximators). We propose the part of the meaning of unnegatives is derived via an abstract modal/propositional attitude verb, which contributes quantification over possible worlds, and embeds the expressed proposition. With respect to the intonational isomorphy between polar questions and unnegatives we observe that similar facts obtain in Korean and Japanese (Yoon 2011): the question marker in these languages is homophonous with the non-factive complementizer. While at present we are unable to account for why the non-factive complementizer is required in unnegatives, but not in other non-veridical root clauses (such as statements with dubitative markers and negated assertions), we can nonetheless understand the intonational facts of unnegatives on analogy with Korean and Japanese.

References

Abels, Klaus. 2002. Expletive negation. In *Proceedings of FASL*, vol. 10, 1–20.

Caponigro, Ivano & Jon Sprouse. 2007. Rhetorical questions as questions. In *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung*, vol. 11, 121–133.

Espinal, Maria Teresa. 1992. Expletive Negation and Logical Absorption. *The Linguistic Review* 9. 333-358.

Espinal, Maria Teresa. 2000. Expletive negation, negative concord and feature checking. *Catalan working papers in linguistics* 8. 47–69.

Fasola, Carlos A. 2007. A Unified Semantics for the Quechua Question and Negation Marker-Chu. *UMass occasional papers in linguistics: Proceedings of the 4th conference on the Semantics of Under-Represented Languages in the Americas* (SULA). 81–97.

Holmberg, Anders. 2001. The syntax of yes and no in Finnish. *Studia Linguistica* 55(2). 141-175.

Holmberg, Anders. 2007. Null subjects and polarity focus. *Studia Linguistica* 61(3). 212-236.

Holmberg, Anders. 2011. On the syntax of yes and no in English. Ms.

Horn, Laurence R. 1989. *A Natural History of Negation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Littell, Patrick, Lisa Matthewson & Tyler Peterson. 2010. On the Semantics of Conjectural Questions. In Tyler Peterson & Uli Sauerland (eds.), *Evidence from Evidentials*, vol. 28, 89-104. University of British Columbia Working Papers in Linguistics. Vancouver, Canada.

Potts, Christopher. 2005. *The logic of conventional implicatures*. Oxford University Press.

Potts, Christopher. 2007. The expressive dimension. *Theoretical Linguistics* 33. 165-198.

Sauerland, Uli & Penka Stateva. 2011. Scalar vs. epistemic vagueness: Evidence from approximators. In *Proceedings of SALT*, vol. 17, 228–245.

Van der Wouden, T. & F. Zwarts. 1993. A semantic analysis of negative concord. In *Proceedings of SALT*, vol. 3, 202–219.

Yoon, Suwon. 2011. "Not" in the mood: The syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of evaluative negation. Ph.D dissertation, University of Chicago.

Zanuttini, Raffaella & Paul Portner. 2003. Exclamative clauses at the syntax semantics interface. *Language* 79(1). 3981.