

Pas de problème

1. Two main characteristics of French negation are (i) that the language is a so-called Negative Concord (NC) language; and (ii) that French exhibits so-called embracing negation. NC refers to the phenomenon where negative expressions yield only one negation. This is illustrated for French in (1). Although both *personne* ('n-body') and *rien* ('n-thing') may induce a semantic negation of their own, co-occurrence of the two in a single clause yield an NC reading. 2. Embracing negation means that the language exhibits two negative markers that embrace the finite verb. This is illustrated in (2a) where both *ne* and *pas* together express sentential negation. Currently French *ne* may be left out in informal registers. Note that *ne* may not appear without being licensed by another negative term (see (2b)), except for a few idiomatic expressions that are remainders of a previous stage of the language. 3. At first sight the two phenomena seem to behave on a par. Both in combination with French negative indefinites (n-words henceforward, following Laka's (1990) terminology) and with French *pas*, *ne* may co-occur. But co-occurrence of *pas* with an n-word always yields a Double Negation (DN), i.e. a non-NC, reading, as shown in (3). This fact forms a problem for theories of NC: why is it that in French both n-words and *ne* may establish an NC relation (see (1)), as well as *ne* and *pas* (see (2)), but not *pas* with n-words (see (3))? 4. Penka (2007) argues that this is a problem for all current theories of NC and in order to solve this problem she modifies Zeijlstra's (2004) theory of NC who takes NC to be an instance of syntactic agreement between a possibly abstract negative operator that carries an interpretable (i.e. semantically negative) formal feature [iNEG] and one or more elements that carry an uninterpretable (i.e. semantically vacuous) feature [uNEG], which needs to be checked by a feature [iNEG]. Under Zeijlstra's proposal, French n-words would carry [uNEG] and *pas* would carry [iNEG], but this would raise the expectation that the sentences in (3) would be fine with an NC reading, contrary to fact. 5. Instead Penka proposes that although French *pas* still carries a feature [iNEG], French n-words carry a feature [uNEGØ] (an uninterpretable covert negative feature) that requires that checking by a covert negative element only (carrying [iNEGØ]), in casu the abstract negative operator Op_{-} . French *ne*, finally carries a feature [uNEG], which allows it both to be checked by *pas* and by Op_{-} . This accounts for the patterns in (1) and (2a). In (1) the n-words and *ne* are checked by Op_{-} ; in (2) *ne* is checked by *pas*. Also the DN readings in (3) follow immediately: the n-words are licensed by Op_{-} , and *pas* contains a negation as well. Hence the sentence must yield two semantic negations. But the analysis suffers from two problems. First the introduction of the feature pair [u/iNEGØ] is stipulative, as its only motivation is to account for the French facts. Second, Penka's analysis predicts that (2b) is ruled in. If French *ne*, may be licensed by Op_{-} , why could Op_{-} not be included in (2b), just as is the case in (1)? 6. In this paper I argue that French n-words carry the same feature as n-words in other languages (following Zeijlstra (2004)): [uNEG]. However, I argue that French *ne* does not carry any formal feature and is a plain Negative Polarity Item (NPI). This is motivated by the fact that *ne* may occur in all kinds of constructions that are known to license, such as conditionals (4a) and complements of fear-clauses (4b) (examples taken from Rooryck (2008)). The distribution of *ne* is much more liberal in this sense than the distribution of n-words, even though *ne* may not occur in all downward entailing contexts, such as the first argument of a universal quantifier. However, it is a well known fact that many NPI's are not at ease in all licensing contexts (cf. van der Wouden (1994)). 7. Due to the NPI status of *ne* it follows that *ne* cannot invoke the presence of an abstract negative operator as that is restricted to n-words only (by virtue of their [uNEG] feature). Moreover, it also follows why *pas* cannot establish an NC relation with n-word. Since cases of *ne ... pas* can no longer be seen as cases of syntactic agreement, these constructions cannot act as a cue for language learners to assign a formal negative feature to *pas*. There is simply no evidence in the in the language input on which basis language learners should assign a *formal* negative feature to *pas*. It is only lexically and therefore semantically negative. Having the lexical semantics of a negation does by no means guarantee getting assigned a formal negative feature as well. 8. This analysis now explains the data in (1)-(4): *Ne* can be licensed by Op_{-} , if the presence of Op_{-} is guaranteed by the presence of an n-word (as in (1) and (3)), as Zeijlstra (2004) already proposed; *ne* can be licensed by *pas*, as it is an anti-additive operator (in (2a) and (3)); and *ne* can be licensed in other downward entailing contexts (as in (4)). Since *ne* cannot self-license Op_{-} and therefore (2b) is ruled out. Finally, since French *pas* lacks a feature [iNEG], it cannot check any [uNEG] either, thus ruling out NC readings of the sentences in (3).

- (1) a. *Personne (ne) mange*
N-body (NEG) eats
'Nobody eats'
- b. *Jean (ne) mange rien*
Jean (NEG) eats n-thing
'Jean eats nothing'
- c. *Personne (ne) mange rien*
N-body (NEG) eats n-thing
'Nobody eats anything'
- (2) a. *Jean (ne) mange pas*
Jean (NEG) eats NEG
'Jean doesn't eat'
- b. **Jean ne mange*
Jean (NEG) eats
- (3) a. *Personne (ne) mange pas*
N-body NEG eats NEG
'Nobody doesn't eat'
- b. *Jean (ne) mange pas rien*
Jean NEG eats NEG n-thing
'Jean doesn't eat nothing'
- (4) a. *Je viendrai à moins que Jean (ne) soit là*
I will come PREP unless that Jean (NEG) is.SUBJ there
'I will come unless Jean is there'
- b. *Marie a peur que Susanne (ne) revienne*
Marie has fear that Susanne (NEG) returns.SUBJ
'Marie is afraid that Susanne returns'

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