

English Negative Concord and Double Negation: The Division of Labor Between Syntax and Pragmatics

Frances Blanchette (Penn State, fkb1@psu.edu), Marianna Nadeu (mariannanadeu@gmail.com),
Viviane Déprez (Rutgers, viviane.deprez1@gmail.com), Jeremy Yeaton (École Normale Supérieure, jdyeaton27@gmail.com)

Introduction

Negative Concord (NC): 2 (or more) syntactic negations, 1 semantic negation

Double Negation (DN): 2 syntactic negations, 2 semantic negations

Maria didn't eat nothing.

NC: It is not the case that Maria ate.

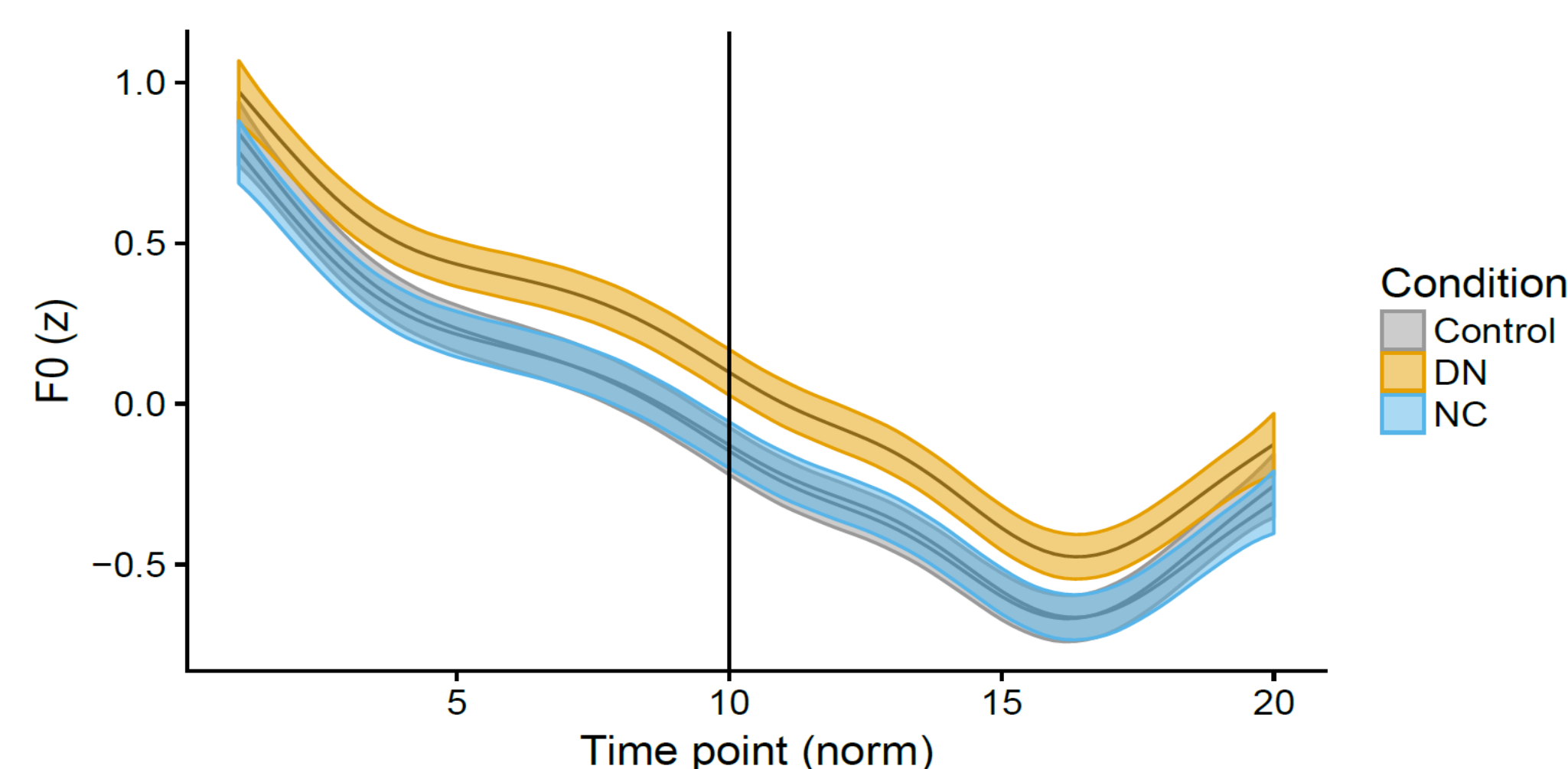
DN: It is not the case that Maria did not eat.

DN in "NC languages"

NC languages like Spanish, Catalan, and French generate DN in specific pragmatic conditions, and with a marked prosodic contour [3,4,5,6,8].

NC in a "DN language"

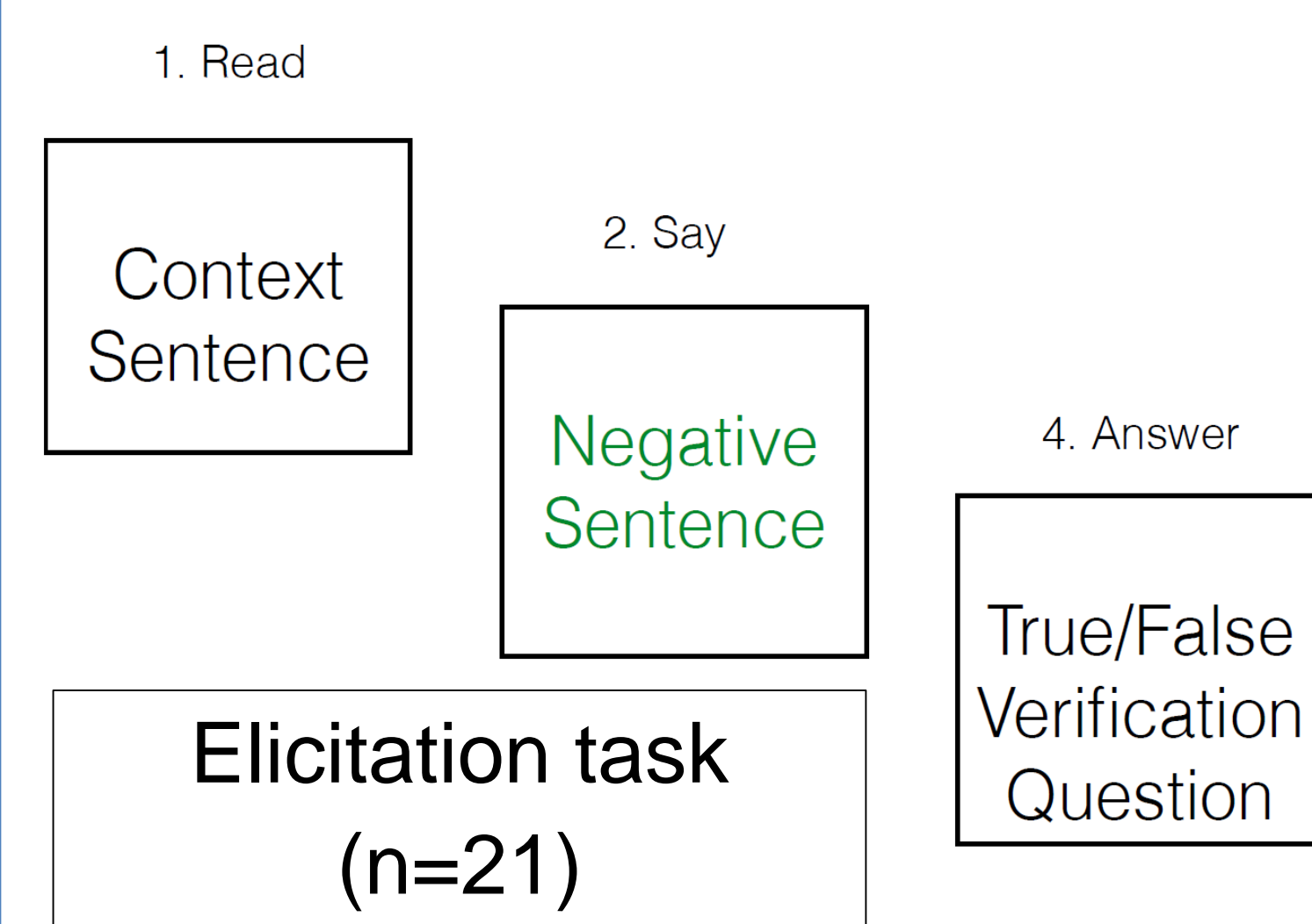
"Standard English" is thought to be DN [9], but speakers have intuitions about NC [1]. Recent prosody work shows that NC is the unmarked form in English, and that DN is marked [2]:



Research Questions

- Do "Standard English" speakers access both NC and DN interpretations of sentences with two negatives?
- Do English speakers use pragmatic (prosodic) cues to distinguish between NC and DN interpretations?
- How do syntax and pragmatics (speaker intent) interact in shaping the interpretation of sentences with two negatives in English?

Methods



Listen:



What did the speaker mean?*

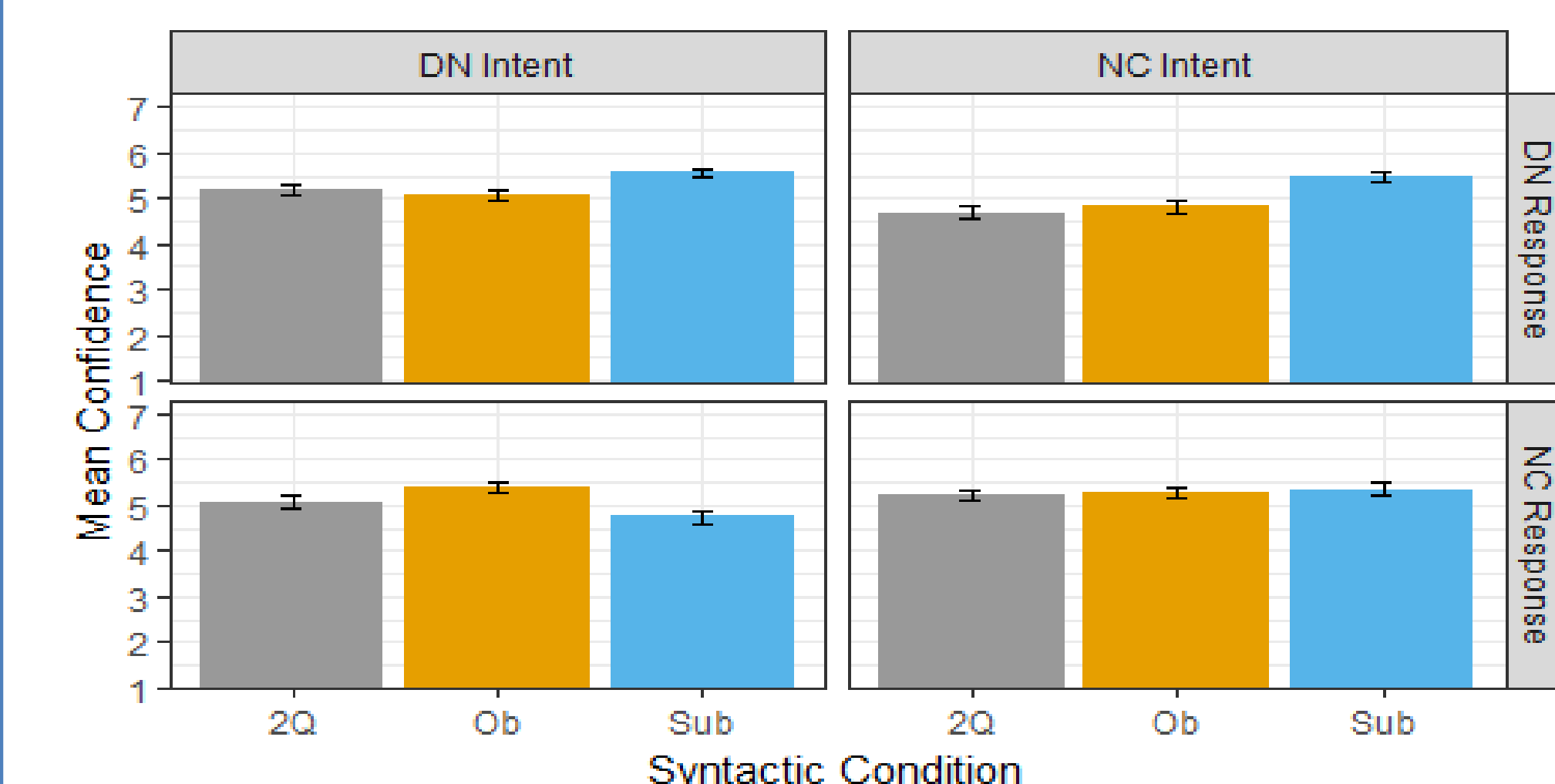
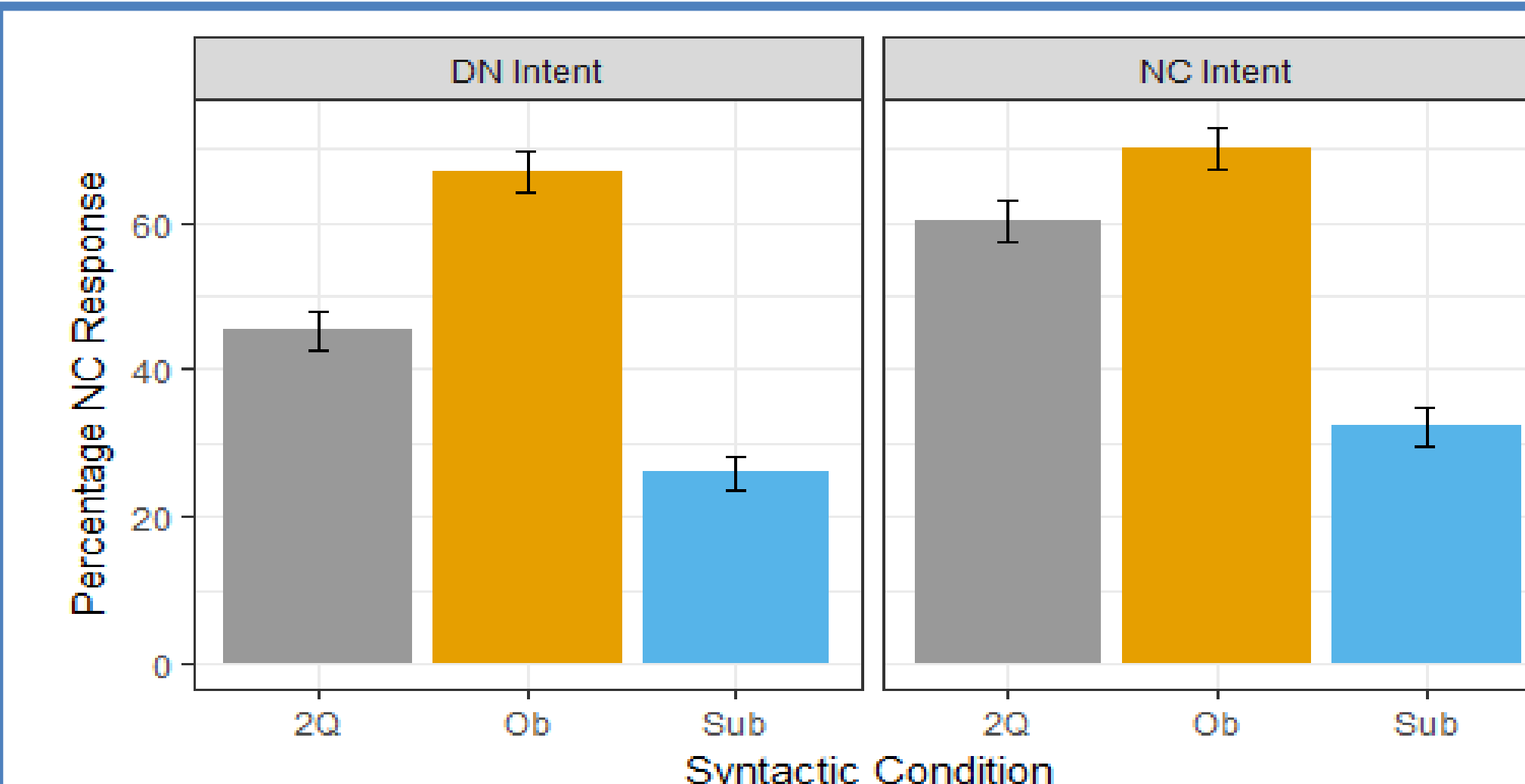
- People will load things on the truck.
- People will refuse to load things on the truck.

How confident are you in your response?

(1 = not confident at all, 7 = completely confident)*

Syntactic Condition	Example Item	NC Meaning	DN Meaning
Two negative quantifiers (2Q)	No one will love nothing when it gets cold.	People will be miserable in the cold weather.	People will find ways to enjoy the cold weather.
Didn't + negative object (Ob)	Lina won't load nothing on the truck.	Lina will refuse to help load the truck.	Lina will help load the truck.
Negative subject + didn't (Sub)	No one won't owe payment to the college.	All students will have paid their tuition.	All students will owe tuition money.

Results



NC Responses	NC Intent	DN Intent
Overall	NC > DN	DN > NC
2Q condition	NC > DN	DN > NC
Ob condition	NC > DN	NC > DN
Sub condition	DN > NC	DN > NC

Listeners were more confident when their responses...

aligned with speaker intent (main effect);

were NC, but only in the Object condition.

Conclusions

- "Standard English" speakers can generate both NC and DN interpretations of sentences with two negatives.
- Speaker Intent (pragmatics) shapes the interpretation of sentences with two negatives: NC Intent reliably yields an NC Response.
- Prosody provides cues to Speaker Intent (i.e. pragmatic context), in the absence of preceding discourse, in the interpretation of sentences with two negatives.
- However, syntax overrides pragmatics in determining interpretation, with a preference for Object NC and Subject DN.
- In sum, the data suggest that "Standard English" is both an NC and a DN language, similar to prototypical non-strict NC languages [7], which also generate DN.

References

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