# Russian ne-bez adjectives: a case of <Neg, Neg>?

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## Introduction

There is a long-standing question (Horn 1989), (Jespersen 2013) of why English negative adjectives cannot combine with the prefix *-un* (e.g. *unsad, *unrude, but also *un-dis-honest, *un-use-less). One answer to this question is a constraint called <Neg, Neg>:

*'The functional sequence must not contain two structurally adjacent Neg-features'* (De Clercq, Vanden Wyngaerd 2017).

## Data

There are at least several 'double negative' adjectives in Russian, which seem like a counterexample to this generalization. These adjectives consist of a negative prefix *ne-* and a caritive prefix *bez-*, and they are adjacent to each other. Here are several examples:
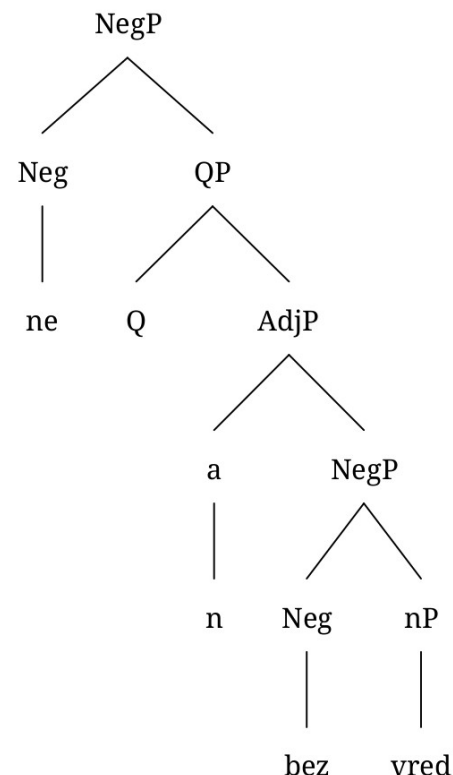
*Ne-bez-interesnyj* (NEG-NEG-interesting, 'now without interest'), *ne-bez-nad'ozhnyj* (NEG-NEG-reliable, 'now without hope'), *ne-bez-vrednyj* (NEG-NEG-harmful, 'not without harm') and so on.

Although these double negative adjectives constitute a small closed lexical class, they still require an explanation. I would argue for these data to be consistent with the <Neg, Neg> constraint.

## No structural adjacency

Despite the visible linear adjacency, there is no structural adjacency between the two negative markers, as they are separated by the attributive affix -*n*. This has been noted in (Zaliznyak 2002: 421)[1], who provides a derivation for the word *bez-loshad-nyj* ('horseless'): first *bez-* merges with *loshad* and then this constituent merges with -*n*.

Therefore, when the negation marker -*ne* is merged with the bez-adjective, it is not adjacent to the negative marker -*bez*, but it is rather adjacent to the attributive affix. This point can be illustrated with a following syntactic tree for the word *ne-bez-vrednyj* (NEG-NEG-harmful, 'not without harm'):

That makes these Russian examples similar to English un-dis-put-ed (Siegel 1978), where un and dis are separated by the morpheme -ed.[2]

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                    NegP
                   /    \
                 Neg     QP
                  |     /  \
                 ne    Q    AdjP
                          /      \
                         a       NegP
                         |      /    \
                         n    Neg     nP
                               |       |
                              bez     vred
```

## Contradictory readings

One of diagnostics for determining the scope of negation is whether it contributes a contradictory or a contrary reading. 'Lower' negative markers such as *un-* are known to have contrary readings (De Clercq 2020), meanwhile 'higher' negative markers such as *non-* have contradictory readings.

An example is a word *ne-bez-izvesntyj* (NEG-NEG-famous). This word is derived from bez-isvastnyj (NEG-famous), 'unknown'. If the *ne-* marker had contrary semantics, the resulting form would mean 'famous'. That is not the case as it rather means 'known in certain circles', 'one who has some degree of fame'. This contradictory reading is an argument for *ne-* being a 'high' negation marker like English *non-* in these contexts[3].

## Gradable adjectives

As noted in (Fedotov 2019), *ne-* can only merge with gradable adjectives[4] containing bez-.

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1 Andrey Zaliznyak proposes this bracketing on accentological grounds
2 A potential counterexample is *ne-bez-rukij* ('not without hands') or *ne-bez-golovyj* ('not dumb', 'not without a head'), where there is no overt adjectival marker. However, there is still an adjectival projection, which is spelled out either by a null morpheme or by the l-tree for *bez*.
3 This semantic distinction consistenty reflects the syntactic difference.
4 It is not a general restriction of *ne-* in Russian, as it can apply to non-gradable adjectives as well: *ne-lingvisticheskij* (non-linguistic). However, *ne-lingvisticheskij* has *more* structure than gradable adjectives (QP and DegP) meanwhile the adjectives in question have *less* structure than gradable adjectives, lacking a QP at all.

For example, there is a word *ne-bez-rukij,* which is formed from *bez-rukij* (literally 'handless'). The latter form is ambiguous: it either means 'one who has no hands' (being an ungradable adjective) or 'one who cannot make a good use of their hands' (being a gradable adjective). If a negative marker *ne-* is added, only one interpretation is available: 'one who can use their hands'.

A solution to this question may be that the negative marker ne- requires a QP projection responsible for gradable adjectives (Bresnan 1973). Therefore, in *bez-rukij* ('one who has no hands') the structure is just AdjP, but in *bez-rukij* ('one who cannot use their hands properly') the structure consists of both AdjP and QP.

**Conclusion**

I have shown that Russian *ne-bez* adjectives cannot be considered a counterexample to the <Neg, Neg> constraint. The arguments for this point of view are structural non-adjacency and contradictory readings. Furthermore, I have explored the ban on non-gradable adjectives in this construction.

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