ON FRENCH NEGATION

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1.   Introduction

French is a language that exhibits two particular characteristics with respect to the expression of (sentential) negation. First it is a so-called Negative Concord (NC) language: a clause-internal combination of elements that can independently induce a semantic negation, together only yield one semantic negation, as illustrated in (1) below.[1]

(1)   a.   Personne (ne) mange
            N-body neg eats
            'Nobody eats'
        b.   Jean (ne) mange rien
            Jean neg eats n-thing
            'Jean doesn't eat anything'
        c.   Personne (ne) mange rien
            Nobody neg eats n-thing
            'Nobody doesn't eat anything'

Apart from that, French also displays Embracing Negation (EN), i.e. the phenomenon that Standard French has not one, but two negative markers (preverbal *ne* and postverbal *pas*) that normally 'embrace' the finite verb (see (2)). *Ne* is mostly a feature of formal French; in colloquial registers it is almost always dropped.

(2)   Marie (ne) mange pas
        Marie neg eats neg
        'Marie doesn't eat'

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[1] Under special intonation multiple negative constructions also allow Double Negation (DN) readings. (1c) can thus also have the reading 'nobody eats nothing' (cf. Corblin et al. (2004)). However, crucial for the analysis in this paper is that (1c) allows for an NC interpretation.

Interestingly, French *ne* and *pas* differ quite drastically from each other in the sense that whereas *ne* may participate in any NC construction and may be combined with *pas*, while yielding a single semantic negation, no combination of *pas* and an *n-word* (i.e. a negative indefinite such as *personne* or *rien*) gives rise to an NC reading. Inclusion of *pas* in a sentence containing one or more n-words always yields an additional semantic negation:

(3)   Personne (ne) mange pas (rien)
        N-body neg eats neg n-thing
        'Nobody doesn't eat (anything)'

This leads to the following question: what are the properties of n-words, *ne* and *pas*, such that *ne* can combine with both n-words and *pas*, while still yielding a single semantic negation, whereas *pas* and n-words may not be combined in such a way?

This paper is set up as follows: first I discuss two previous analyses that have dealt with this problem; after that I argue that *ne* should not be analyzed as a concordal element or as a negative marker, but rather as a plain Negative Polarity Item (NPI); finally I argue that once *ne* is taken to be an NPI, it follows straightforwardly that *pas* and n-words cannot establish an NC relation: adopting Zeijlstra's (2004, 2008) approach that takes NC to be an instance of syntactic agreement, every element that can participate in an NC relation should carry a formal negative feature; however, there is no evidence for language learners of French that *pas* must carry such a formal negative feature as well.

2   Previous analyses
2.1   De Swart & Sag (2002)
In order to evaluate De Swart & Sag's (2002) account for the incompatibility of French *pas* to participate in NC relations, first their treatment of NC should be clarified. According to De Swart & Sag, NC readings result from quantifier resumption, i.e. the process where *n* unary quantifiers merge into 1 *n*-ary quantifier. A sentence like (1c) then receives an additional reading saying 'there is no pair x, y such that x, y stand in an eating relation'. Every sentence containing two n-words is strictly speaking ambiguous between an iterative DN reading and a NC reading that is the result of quantifier resumption (disambiguation being either the result of principles of language usage (De Swart & Sag (2002)) or of additional language specific filters (De Swart (2006))). The question then immediately rises as to how to deal with negative markers (such as *ne* and *pas*) in this framework, as these markers are not quantifiers over individuals. De Swart & Sag argue that negative markers should be thought of as so-called zero-quantifiers, quantifiers that bind no variable. Being quantificational and negative in nature, negative markers can then participate in NC relations (as is the case in most languages). However, since negative markers in NC construction do not bring in any new semantic contribution (as they do not bind variables) languages may also

choose to leave negative markers out of NC. French would then be an example of a language that forbids one of its negative markers, namely *pas*, to participate in NC relations.

This analysis of French *pas* faces a number of problems. Apart from the general problems that it inherits from De Swart and Sag's treatment of NC in terms of quantifier resumption (see Giannakidou 2006, Zeijlstra 2004, 2008, De Swart 2009 for an overview and evaluation of different approaches to NC), the analysis seems to be too general, as it suggests that a salient subset of NC languages allow negative markers to be banned from NC constructions. However, to the best of my knowledge, only French exhibits this particular behavior. No other NC languages, even languages close to French, share this property. The examples below show that in other Romance languages the negative marker is always obligatorily present in NC constructions (Romanian) or at least in the case of n-words appearing in postverbal position only (Italian). Also languages that exhibit EN (Tamazight Berber, West Flemish) allow or require their negative markers to participate in NC constructions, and moreover, older or current varieties of French (such as Quebecois) allow *pas* to enter NC relation as well.

(4)   a.   Nimeni *(nu) suna   Romanian
                N-body neg calls
                'Nobody calls'
      b.   Gianni *(non) ha ditto niente   Italian
                Gianni neg has said n-thing
                'Gianni didn't say anything'
      c.   Sha-ur 3lix wali   Tam. Berber
                Neg-neg see.perf.1sg n-thing
                'I didn't see anything'
      d.   Valère (en) was ketent van niemand (nie)   West Flemish
                Valère neg was pleased of n-body neg
                'Valère wasn't pleased by anybody'
      e.   On ne veut pas rien faire ici qui vous déplaise   17th cent. Fr.
                We neg want neg n-thing do that you displeases
                'We don't want to do anything that displeases you'
      f.   Je juge pas personne   Quebecois
                I judge neg n-body
                'I don't judge anybody'

So, it appears to be a property of contemporary French that *pas* cannot participate in NC constructions. But it is unclear under De Swart & Sag's proposal how this is motivated and more importantly how this property of French *pas* is lexically encoded. What property is it that French *pas* has that all other negative markers in NC languages lack?

2.2 Penka (2007)

Penka (2007) addresses these above-mentioned questions and argues that it is not so much a special property of French *pas* that it cannot establish NC relations with n-word, but rather a special property of French n-words themselves. Penka adopts Zeijlstra's (2004, 2008) analysis of NC that takes NC to be an instance of syntactic agreement. Zeijlstra proposes that n-words in all NC languages carry an uninterpretable negative feature [uNEG] that needs to be checked off by a c-commanding element carrying an interpretable negative feature [iNEG]. Negative markers can either carry [iNEG] or [uNEG]. For reasons that will not be discussed here, Zeijlstra proposes that in languages such as Italian (where only postverbal n-words can establish an NC relation with the negative marker) the negative marker carries [iNEG]. In languages where the negative marker may be combined with n-words, regardless of their clausal position, Zeijlstra takes it to carry [uNEG]. The [iNEG] feature, then, is brought in by an abstract negative operator Op$_\neg$. To illustrate this mechanism, the underlying representations are shown for sentences (4a-b).

(5)   a.   Op$_{\neg[iNEG]}$ Nimeni$_{[uNEG]}$ *(nu$_{[uNEG]}$) suna
       b.   Gianni *(non$_{[iNEG]}$) ha ditto niente$_{[uNEG]}$

Prima facie, such an analysis cannot extend to French, Penka argues, since regardless of the feature status of *pas* ([iNEG] or [uNEG]) *pas* should be able to participate in at least some NC relations, contrary to fact. In order to solve this problem, Penka proposes that n-words in French do not carry a feature [uNEG] but rather a feature [uNEGØ] that states that n-words can only be checked by an abstract negative operator (which in French she says carries the corresponding feature [iNEGØ]). French *ne*, in her system, carries a general feature [uNEG] that does not specify the phonological status of its checker. *Pas*, finally, is an overt negator, thus carrying [iNEG].

Now the patterns simply follow: n-words and *ne* can be checked by one single abstract operator, yielding an NC reading (6a); *ne* can have its [uNEG] feature checked against *pas*' [iNEG] feature (6b); and finally, a combination of (one or more) n-words with *pas* yields a DN reading, as *pas* cannot check the n-words' [uNEGØ] features (6c) and thus an additional abstract negative operator is required:

(6)   a.   Op$_{\neg[iNEGØ]}$ Personne$_{[uNEGØ]}$ (ne$_{[uNEG]}$) mange rien$_{[uNEGØ]}$
       b.   Marie ne$_{[uNEG]}$ mange pas$_{[iNEG]}$
       c.   Op$_{\neg[iNEGØ]}$ Personne$_{[uNEGØ]}$ (ne$_{[uNEG]}$) mange pas$_{[iNEG]}$ rien$_{[uNEGØ]}$

Although, Penka's proposal seems to be an improvement of Zeijlstra's (2004, 2008) system, as it can handle the French patterns illustrated above, it is problematic for two reasons. First, the analysis is ad hoc, as independent motivation is lacking for the existence of [iNEGØ] and [uNEGØ] features.

Especially, and this is the same problem as De Swart & Sag have been facing, since no other NC languages seems to exhibit such features. But more fatally, Penka's analysis also makes a wrong prediction, namely that if *ne* can be licensed by Op¬ it should be able to negate a sentence by itself, contrary to fact.[2]

(7)   *Marie ne mange

3.   On *ne*

The observation in (7) is important as it shows that *ne* only appears to be a concordal element. Since, NC is the phenomenon where elements that may induce a semantic negation by their own, together only yield one semantic negation, *ne* by definition cannot appear in NC constructions (see also Breitbarth (2009) for a similar observation). If NC is taken to be an instance of syntactic agreement, instantiated by an underlying feature system, it follows as well that *ne* cannot have any formal negative feature at its disposal.

The question then rises what properties does *ne* exactly exhibit? Two properties immediately come to mind: first *ne* is semantically non-negative, as it is unable to induce a semantic negation by itself; second, it may appear in negative sentences. Whereas the first property seems to be undisputed, some questions may be raised concerning the second property. Clearly, *ne* may occur in negative sentences, i.e. sentences marked for negation by either the presence of one or more n-words, or by the presence of *pas*. But, as Godard (2004) and Rooryck (2008) amongst many others have shown, these are not the only contexts in which the presence of *ne* is allowed. *Ne* may also appear in all kinds of other (Strawson-) Downward Entailing contexts, such as restrictive focus (8a), comparatives (8b), complement clauses of expressions of fear (8c), avoidance (8d) denial or doubt (8e), conditionals (8f) and temporal before clauses (8g), as shown below (all examples have been taken from Rooryck (2008: 3-4)).

(8)   a.   Jean (ne) voit que Marie
                Jean neg sees comp Marie
                'Jean only sees Marie'
        b.   Jean est plus malin que Pierre (ne) l'est
                Jean is smarter Pierre neg it is
                'Jean is smarter than Pierre is'
        c.   Il a barricadé la porte de peur/ crainte qu'on (n) entre chez lui
                He has blocked the door of fear that they neg enter with him
                'He blocked the door for fear that people might come in'

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[2] There are a few known cases where *ne* actually may negate a sentence by itself, such as *je ne sais* ('I don't know'), but these expressions form a closed class and are generally analyzed as idiosyncratic properties of French, presumably remainders of a previous stage of the language

    d.   Jean a évité que Lucienne (ne) tombe
              Jean has avoided that Lucienne neg fall.subj
              'Jean prevented Lucienne from falling'
    e.   Nie/ doute-t-il que je (ne) dise la vérité?
              Denies/ doubts he that I neg tell.subj the truth?
              Does he doubt/ deny that I am telling the truth?
    f.   Je viendrai à moins que Jean (ne) soit là
              I will-come to less that Jean neg is.subj there
              'I will come unless Jean is there'
    g.   Il est parti avant que nous (n') ayons mange
              He is left before that we neg have eaten
              'He left before we ate'

The contexts where *ne* may appear without being supported by an n-word or by *pas* and without giving rise to a semantic negation, are all contexts that are known to license NPIs. Thus, the most natural question at this point is to ask whether *ne* is not a plain NPI (like English *any*-terms). At first sight, two arguments seem to counter such an analysis, as has been argued e.g. by Godard (2004): first *ne* may appear in contexts where it is not c-commanded by its licenser; second, *ne* is not allowed to appear in all NPI-licensing contexts. Closer inspection on the behavior of NPIs, however, reveals that these arguments are illicit.

    Concerning the first argument, *ne* clearly violates the constraint, initially proposed by Ladusaw (1992), that NPIs have to be licensed under c-command by a proper licenser both at the level of surface structure and at the level of LF. The second conjunct of this constraint prevents sentences like (9) being ruled in:

(9)   *Anybody has not been hit
        Intended: 'nobody has been hit'

Ne on the other hand may appear to the left of its licenser:

(10)   a.   Jean ne mange pas
             Jean neg eats neg
             'Jean doesn't eat'
        b.   Jean ne mange rien
             Jean neg eats n-thing
             'Jean doesn't eat anything'

However, as Van der Wouden (1994, 1996 1997) and Hoeksema (1993, 2000), have observed, Ladusaw's surface constraint is much weaker than Ladusaw's LF roofing constraint (i.e. the constraint that NPIs must be commanded by a proper licenser at the level of LF). The latter turns out to be valid in all cases, the former is not valid for all instances of NPI licensing. Dutch universal modal NPI *hoeven*

(as well as its German and English counterparts *brauchen* and *need* (without *to*))
can appear in a higher position than negation, as can English *as of yet*:

(11)   a.   Hij hoeft *(niet) te eten
               He needs neg to eat
               'He doesn't have to eat'
       b.   As of yet, they *(don't) have to go

The argument that French *ne* cannot be an NPI due to its relative surface position
with respect to its licenser is therefore not valid. The same holds for the second
argument, namely that French *ne* cannot occur in all contexts that license NPIs.

     If *ne* is an NPI, it must be a weak one, since it can occur in all kinds of weak
NPI contexts; if it were a strong NPI it could not occur in the examples in (8)
(perhaps with the exception of temporal *before* clauses, which in general allow
licensing of strong NPIs). But weak NPIs, such as English *any*-terms, are allowed
to occur in all Downward Entailing contexts. This is however not the case for
French *ne*, which, for instance, may not occur in the first argument of a universal
quantifier:

(12)   a.   Everybody who owns a car, likes it
       b.   Tous le mone qui (*n') aime Marie, aime Paul aussi
               All the world that neg loves Marie, loves Pierre too
               Intended: 'Everybody who loves Marie, loves Pierre as well'

Again, this argument is invalid, as it is a general property of NPIs that they may
not occur in all contexts that are Downward Entailing. The reader is referred to
Van der Wouden (1994, 1997) and Hoeksema (2000) for a series of examples, but
I will provide two examples from Dutch as well.

(13)   a.   *Iedereen die een auto hoeft te hebben, wil er een
               Everybody who needs a car to have, wants prt one
               Intended: 'Everybody who needs to have a car, wants one'
       b.   *Hij heeft nauwelijks ooit hard gewerkt
               He has hardly ever.npi hard worked
               Intended: 'He has hardly ever worked hard'

It is especially striking that modal auxiliaries, such as Dutch *hoeven*, and particles
like French *ne*, share a number of interesting properties in terms of their NPI
behavior, calling for future research. For now, it suffices to say that there are no
theoretical or empirical objections to claiming that French *ne* is an NPI. In fact, it
immediately solves the problem that French *ne*, contrary to n-words or *pas*,
cannot induce semantic negation by itself: no NPI can do that, not even in
fragmentary questions:

(14) a.   Who did you see? *Anybody
              Intended answer: 'Nobody'
      b.   Qu'est-ce-que tu fais? Ne manger
              What you do? Neg eat
              Intended answer: 'Not eating'

But taking French *ne* to be an NPI does not directly solve the initial problem: why is it that French *ne* and n-words and *ne* and *pas* may be combined but n-words and *pas* not (whilst yielding a single negation). The first problem is solved now: whatever is responsible for the single negation that n-words invoke, this negation can also license *ne*. And *pas*, which always brings in a negation of its own, can license *ne* as well.

In the next section I argue, though, that as a side-effect of *ne*'s NPI status it actually does follow that *pas* cannot participate in NC constructions at all.

4.   On *pas*
4.1   Diachronic observations

In order to understand the syntactic and semantic behavior of French *ne… pas*, and the exact role that *pas* plays given that *ne* must be considered an NPI, it first needs to be discussed how French negative marker *pas* came into being. As is widely known, French *pas* developed from a noun meaning 'step' via a minimalizer ('a bit') into a full negative marker (cf. Deprez (1997), Rowlett (1998), Roberts & Roussou (2003)), a development not uncommon to other languages and generally referred to as Jespersen's Cycle (Jespersen (1917), Dahl (1979)). Whereas Old French only had negative marker *ne* at its disposal, during the period of Middle French *ne* got combined more and more often by the additional minimalizer *pas*, until EN *ne … pas* became the standard way of expressing sentential negation. Schematically:

(15) a.   Je ne di   Old French
      b.   Je ne dis (pas)   Middle French
      c.   Je ne dis pas   Standard French
      d.   Je dis pas   Colloquial French
              'I don't say'

For reasons that will not be fully discussed here (but see Roberts & Roussou (2003) and Condoravdi & Kiparsky (2005) for an overview and analyses), at some point in the history of Middle French, *ne* was no longer felt to be able to express sentential negation by itself. Therefore initially an indefinite minimalizer was always added to reinforce *ne*.[3] However, in cases where there was already an

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[3] Initially *pas* was not the only candidate for this reinforcement. Other minimalizers, such as *point* ('point'), *grain* ('grain'), *goutte* ('drop') and *mie* ('crumb') have also been attested.

indefinite reinforcer present, there was no need for *pas* to strengthen *ne*. And this was exactly the case with n-words. Thus combinations with *ne* and n-words did not need an additional reinforcer *pas* and therefore combinations of *ne* with an n-word and combinations of *ne* with *pas*, have both been frequently attested.

Note that this does not entail that it must have been forbidden by then to reinforce combinations of an n-word and *ne* by an additional minimalizer *pas*. Such combinations have indeed be attested, such as the famous follow-up of example (4e) suggests, both repeated in (16) below:

(16) a. On ne veut pas rien faire ici qui vous déplaise … 17th cent. Fr.
           We neg want neg n-thing do that you displeases …
           'We don't want to do anything that displeases you …'
      b. … de *pas* mis avec *rien* tu fais la récidive,
               et c'est, comme on t'a dit, trop d'une negative
           … with pas put with rien you do the repeat,
               and it.is as one you.has said too.many of.one negative
           '… with *pas* put together with *rien*, you commit a repeat offense?,
               and it is as one says a negation too many'

From the 17th century onwards, French exhibited only combinations of *ne* and n-words, or *ne* and *pas*; the need to reinforce *ne* was absent in cases where *ne* already had been reinforced by an additional indefinite, and could only lead to extremely strong emphasis.

4.2   Synchronic observations

Since, combinations of n-words, *ne* and *pas* hardly occurred, after the reanalysis of *pas* as a plain negative marker, such occurrences could never be robust enough to form a cue for language learners that such constructions were possible as well (Lightfoot (1999)). Consequently, language learners could only base themselves on either constructions that contained *ne* and n-words, or *ne* and *pas*. Also, since constructions where *ne* could negate a sentence on its own (except for a handful of idiosyncratic expressions) were lacking, there was no evidence for language learners that *ne* could be a concordal element, so the only way that language learners could then analyze *ne* was in terms of *ne* being an NPI. Note that this implies that constructions containing *ne* and *pas* only formed proper evidence that *pas* was a semantic negation. Since *pas*, for its part, only occurs in sentences where it combines with *ne* (or occurring in sentences by itself), the conclusion that French *pas* must be a semantic negation is not falsified by any other type of construction.

The case of French n-words is rather complicated, as n-words can independently induce a semantic negation, but together they may yield only one semantic negation. Adopting Zeijlstra's (2004, 2008) mechanism, this means that n-words are equipped with an uninterpretable formal negative feature that may be licensed by an abstract negation. Since n-words can appear on their own, this

licenser may be abstract; application of this mechanism to French n-words is illustrated for the sentences in (1), repeated as (17). Note that *ne* is not equipped with such a feature as it is an NPI, not a concordal element.

(17) a. $Op_{\neg[iNEG]}$ $Personne_{[uNEG]}$ (ne) mange
             N-body neg eats
             'Nobody eats'

     b. $Op_{\neg[iNEG]}$ Jean (ne) mange $rien_{[uNEG]}$
             Jean neg eats n-thing
             'Jean doesn't eat anything'

     c. $Op_{\neg[iNEG]}$ $Personne_{[uNEG]}$ (ne) mange $rien_{[uNEG]}$
             Nobody neg eats n-thing
             'Nobody doesn't eat anything'

But now the question rises again why, instead of the abstract operator, $Op_\neg$, *pas* cannot be the checker of an n-words [uNEG] feature. Why is, for instance, (18) impossible with an NC reading ?

(18)   *Jean (ne) mange $pas_{[iNEG]}$ $rien_{[uNEG]}$
        Jean neg eats neg n-thing
         'Jean doesn't eat anything'

    Before, I argued that the fact that *pas* would have only occurred in the language input in combination with *ne*, and that *ne* was not a concordal element (but a plain NPI instead) formed evidence that *pas* was a semantic negation: its lexical semantic representation contains a negation. But *pas*' lexical semantic status does not entail that *pas* must carry a formal negative feature as well (regardless of whether such a formal feature would be semantically interpretable or not). Acquisition of formal features can only take place if there is evidence for a language learner to assign a formal feature to a particular lexical item. However, there is no construction available in current French that would provide such evidence. Hence *pas* cannot be said to carry an interpretable formal feature [iNEG] and for that reason it is unable to check off any [uNEG] feature of an n-word. *Pas* is semantically, but not formally negative.

    Instead, whenever an n-word and *pas* co-occur in one and the same clause, it must be the abstract negative operator $Op_\neg$ that checks off the n-word's [uNEG] feature and the sentence thus contains two semantic negations: once introduced by $Op_\neg$ and one by *pas*. In fact, even stronger, when one n-word precedes and one n-word follows *pas*, there is still one abstract negative operator that checks off both n-words' [uNEG] features, whereas *pas* introduces a semantic negation of its own. The fact that *pas* does not act as an intervener in the agreement relation between $Op_\neg$ and the two n-words follows straightforwardly: since *pas* is morphosyntactically not marked for negation, any morphosyntactic process must

be blind to *pas'* semantic negation. Examples of both constructions are given below:

(19)   a. $Op_{\neg[iNEG]}$ Jean (ne) mange pas $rien_{[uNEG]}$
               Jean neg eats neg n-thing
               'Jean doesn't eat nothing'
     b. $Op_{\neg[iNEG]}$ $Personne_{[uNEG]}$ (ne) mange pas $rien_{[uNEG]}$
               N-body neg eats neg n-thing
               'Nobody doesn't eat anything'

5.   Conclusions

In the beginning of this paper I raised the following question: what are the properties of n-words, *ne* and *pas*, such that *ne* can combine with both n-words and *pas*, while still yielding a single semantic negation, whereas *pas* and n-words may not be combined in such a way?

In the previous sections I argued French *pas* is semantically negative, but not equipped formally with any negative feature, i.e., morpho-synatcically, *pas* is not negative. N-words, on the other hand, form in a way the mirror image of *pas*: they are semantically non-negative, but only equipped formally with a negative feature: they carry an uninterpretable formal negative feature, which needs to be checked off by an element that carries an interpretable formal feature.

This also explains why *pas* and n-words cannot yield any NC reading: Since *pas* is formally non-negative, it can never check any n-word's [uNEG] feature. These features can thus only be checked off by an abstract negative operator, carrying an interpretable negative feature [iNEG], which has to be assumed to be present in the sentence as well. Consequently, combinations of n-words and *pas* always induce two negations.

I have demonstrated that French *ne* is a plain NPI in the sense that it must always be licensed by a proper Downward Entailing licenser (though not every Downward Entailing operator proves to be a valid licenser). In negative sentences *ne* can thus be licensed by the purely semantic negation *pas* or by the abstract negative operator $Op_\neg$ that carries an interpretable formal feature [iNEG].

Finally, I have argued that these assumptions concerning the nature of *ne*, *pas* and n-words are not postulated in order to make the system work, but rather follow straightforwardly from the development of French negation (along the lines of Jespersen's Cycle) and from independent principles of language acquisition.

This study has a few theoretical consequences. First, it provides more evidence for theories of NC in terms of syntactic agreement, such as Zeijlstra's (2004, 2008) approach. The French facts follow immediately once formal properties (like the feature system underlying NC) are thought to be distinct from semantic properties (such as NPI licensing). Second, it also shows that there is no 1:1 correspondence between formal and semantic properties. Some Lexical Items, such as *pas*, can have a particular semantic property, which is not reflected in

their formal representation, and vice versa, some Lexical Items, such as n-words in most languages, have formal properties that are not manifested in their lexical semantics.

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