CHAPTER 2

On the Grammar of Negation

2.1 Functional Perspectives on Negation

Negation can be described from several different points of view, and various descriptions may reach diverging conclusions as to whether a proposition is negative or not. A question without a negated predicate, for example, may be interpreted as negative from a pragmatic point of view (rhetorical question), while a clause with constituent negation, e.g. *The soul is non-mortal*, is an affirmative predication from an orthodox Aristotelian point of view.1 However, common to most if not all descriptions is that negation is generally approached from the viewpoint of affirmation.2

With regard to the formal expression, “the negative always receives overt expression while positive usually has zero expression” (Greenberg 1966: 50). Furthermore, the negative morpheme tends to come as close to the finite element of the clause as possible (Dahl 1979: 92). The reason seems to be that negation is intimately connected with finiteness. This relationship will be further explored in section 2.2. To be sure, negation of the predicate, or verb phrase negation, is the most common type of negation in natural language (Givón 2001, 1: 382).

Generally, verb phrase negation only negates the asserted and not the presupposed part of the corresponding affirmation. Typically then, the subject of the predication is excluded from negation. This type of negation, in its unmarked form, has wide scope over the predicate, such that the scope of negation in a clause *John didn’t kill the goat* may be paraphrased as ‘he did not kill the goat.’ However, while in propositional logic, negation is an operation that simply reverses the logical value of a proposition, negative clauses in natural language rarely reverse the logical value only. On the contrary, the effect of negation in natural language is much more complex (Givón 2001, 1: 378). Oftentimes, verb phrase negation involves contrastive focus. A clause *John didn’t kill the goat* with contrastive stress on the subject results in a narrower scope than

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1 For clauses that are not negated but may be understood as negative from a pragmatic point of view, cf. section 2.4.1 below. For a discussion of negative propositions, see further Horn (2001: 30–35).

2 See Horn (2001: 45–46, 154–161) for the markedness of negation and its presuppositional relation to affirmation (pp. 63–73).
neutral verb phrase negation and may be paraphrased as ‘John didn’t kill the goat’ (Givón 2001, 1: 381). As a matter of fact, adjuncts tend to attract the focus of negation in a negative clause, even when the negator negates the verb phrase. The pragmatic inference of a clause John didn’t kill the goat with a gun is narrow scope of negation over the prepositional phrase with a gun. In other words, the killing actually took place, but not with the instrument referred to.

Givón (1973; 1978) pointed out that negated propositions are (discourse) presuppositionally more marked than their affirmative counterparts. Generally, when a negative clause is asserted, its corresponding affirmative counterpart is somehow present in the discourse. For example, the response My wife is not pregnant to a question What is new? entails the assumption that the “hearer either has heard about, believes in, is likely to take for granted, or is at least familiar with the corresponding affirmative” (Givón 2001, 1: 370).

Therefore, when a non-event is uttered, it may be understood as a play on the norm. If the norm is stasis (non-event) and the event is change, negation is used when the event, rather than the stasis, is established as ground (Givón 2001, 1: 372). The reversal may be envisaged from a Gestalt theory point of view, such that the figure (event) becomes backgrounded and the ground (non-event) becomes foregrounded. Thus, Stockwell, Schachter, and Partee (1973: 250–251) point out that “there are certain cases where the negation of an event may, loosely speaking, itself be an event, e.g. not paying taxes, not getting up early, not going to church […] (semantically, the ‘event’ seems to be the breaking of a habitual or expected pattern of activity).”3,4 For example, if a speaker asserts He did not get up early and he did not pay his taxes in a story about an average citizen, the addressee may possibly jump at the unexpected norm-breaking (non-)events. Considering that negation tends to be felicitous when affirmation is presupposed, “the statement ‘x did not happen’ carries an entailment ‘but it could have,’ and this unrealized alternative scenario serves to evaluate what did happen” (Fleischman 1990: 158). As such, negative situations can be considered foregrounded.5

The distinctive properties of negated propositions, viz. the nature of presupposing an affirmative counterpart and the status as stasis, are

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3 Original emphasis changed from underlined into boldface.
4 Similarly, Van Dijk (1975: 280) notes that ‘not-doings’ are events where ‘doings’ are expected or required. To be sure, failure to act is criminalized and results in a guilty act (actus reus) in certain legal systems.
5 Cf. also Fleischman (1990: 183): “If we conceive of foregrounding in the basic Gestalt sense of a figure against a ground rather than in the sense of ‘sequential events on a time line,’ then foregrounding and evaluation can be seen as two sides of the same coin.”