NEGATION IN LINGUISTICS PAPERS

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There has been a re-awakening of interest in negation, particularly as in recent work on appraisal theory several authors have included negation among the features of engagement which realise the rhetorical potential of text to express author’s stance and negotiate convergence/divergence with other views, beyond modality and hedging. In order to investigate this further, a sample of linguistics articles from reputed journals was collected and occurrences of negation were located and analysed to consider how they are used and for what purposes. The hypothesis was that, as experience is typically coded in positive terms (Hidalgo 2002), there must be a “good reason” for choosing the negative. Therefore, it was postulated that in academic articles authors might use the negative to express dissatisfaction with notions put forward by other scholars or to delimit their position.

The first article in each number of Applied Linguistics and Text published in 2000 was searched for all instances of not-, no- and nor- negatives, excluding affixal negation and broad negatives such as hardly, scarcely. Negatives occurring in cited examples were also excluded. It was found that three of the articles in the data were on relations between linguistic theory and practice, whereas one was on language learning motivation and four on text linguistics, of which one theoretical and three presenting original research.

Most of the negatives were used to express: a) unfulfilled expectations (cf Pagano 1994), including presumed assumptions entertained by the reader or by both reader and writer, b) comparison and distinction, c) dissatisfaction and disagreement/agreement with other studies, d) limitations, for example in the recommendations applied linguistics can offer practising teachers, e) author’s detachment, including modality, hedging and litotes. It was found that negation was used in different ways by the authors of the 8 articles under study. For example, in Widdowson’s paper (Applied Linguistics 21/1), which contains the highest number of negatives per page in the sample, it is used as an effective rhetorical device, but also to rectify positions which he considers mistaken or to criticise commonly held or misguided assumptions attributed to other scholars. This is done frequently by establishing expectations in the reader which are subsequently negated or corrected. In Fetzer’s article (Text 20/2) one third of the negatives were represented by the emphatic discontinuous phrase not only…but also, because she aims to extend previous research (on political interviews) rather than reject it. She expresses dissatisfaction rather than outright criticism and therefore tends to open the potential for dialogue. Spolsky (Applied Linguistics) also expresses dissatisfaction and uses negation to proclaim opinions, as in “we cannot be satisfied with a narrow view of applying linguistics”, or in aligning himself with “scholars not satisfied with using only questionnaires to gather data” and to provide validity for assessments, including formulations such as “a scholar whose mastery …cannot be questioned”.

There is twice as much negation in speech as in writing (Tottie 1991). Although written text is considered interactive in Hunston’s terms (Hunston 2000, Sinclair 1981), it is not usually reciprocal, and consequently, whereas in face-to-face dialogue negatives are generally found in response to stimuli such as questions, in the written texts studied here the proposition giving rise to the negative item is not present in the text but it is implicit. In some cases, (Sheen 2002 in response to Lightbrown and Stubbs 2001 in response to Widdowson) there are responses published subsequently in the literature, to which the author may publish a reply (Lightbrown 2002). Thus a dialogue is set up, although displaced in space and time, so the intertextual engagement of the text becomes explicit. Even where this does not happen, however, in academic research discourse there are echoes of other voices in the text with which the writer interacts to achieve alignment or opposition.

Negation often forms part of the evaluative features of text because through it authors construct a virtual reader position. They use it to create a research space, at times simply to describe how their data differ from that of previous research, where the comparison may be mainly informational, to
clarify what topics are being discussed, or it may serve to occupy a niche and thus be more contractually persuasive. Hence, authors use negation to distinguish their position from that of others, to forestall misunderstanding or possible criticism of their work and to clarify their stance on controversial issues. This sample is too small to allow any definite conclusions, but it does provide some food for thought, and it is hoped in future to include texts from other disciplines in the study, in order to investigate, for example, whether the quasi-negatives so prevalent in scientific academic papers are found also in linguistics.