A Tale of Two Negations in Picard: A Dilemma for the Formal Analysis of Negative Concord

This paper presents novel dialectal data that, we argue, raise a dilemma for current theories of the syntax and semantics of negative concord. Unlike Standard French and other Gallo-Romance dialects, Picard, an Oïl variety spoken in Northern France, has two productive sentential negations: point and mie. Both of these expressions developed from Old French minimizers (meaning 'dot' and 'crumb' respectively), and they can both appear with the scope-marker ne (Auger & Villeneuve (2008)). Furthermore, (unlike ne) they can both appear bare and negate an atomic statement, as shown in (1).

(1) a. *o n’a sauros mie où aller. (Gustave Devraine : Picartext)
   ‘And I would not know where to go’

b. j’aveus pont fait mes d’voirs.(André Accart: Picartext)
   ‘I had not made my homework’

Picard also has a class of negative indefinites that includes parsonne 'no one', rien 'nothing', jamois 'never', and pu 'no longer', which show the distribution and interpretative pattern characteristic of n-words (Laka, 1990): in a sentence fragment (2), they contribute a semantic negation to the expression; however, when they appear within the scope of another n-word, the resulting sentence has a single negation (a.k.a. negative concord) interpretation, cf. (3).

(2) Quoè qu’i foait ? Rien. I jue à cartes […] (Gaston Vasseur)
   ‘What does he do? Nothing. He plays cards’

(3) et pi parsonne èn’ dit rien ! (Gaston Vasseur: Picartext)
   ‘And nobody says anything!’

Despite their similarities, point and mie do not pattern alike in sentences with n-words: while mie can co-occur with the entire class of (preverbal or postverbal) n-words, and give rise to negative concord interpretations (4), point can only do so with rien, and parsonne (5), as a quantitative study in the Picartext corpus confirms.

(4) a. Pèrson-ne i n’voreu mie d’élle pour és mèrieu. (A. Depoilly)
   ‘Nobody will want to marry her’

b. o n’a mie jamois vu un calémichon invaleu un hérichon ! (VASSEUR)
   ‘one has never seen a slug swallow a hedgehog’

c. o n’ère jamois vu un calémichon inveu ! (VASSEUR)
   ‘one has never seen a slug swallow a hedgehog’

d. *o n’èd point jamois vu un calémichon invalou un hérichon !
   ‘one has never seen a slug swallow a hedgehog’

We argue that the differences in the distributions of mie and point raise challenges for most formal syntactic and semantic analyses of Romance negative concord. Following de Swart (2010), we distinguish between two main theoretical approaches in the literature: grammatical vs lexical analyses. Grammatical analyses propose that negative concord interpretations with sentential negation are the result of general grammatical processes such as agreement (Zeijlstra, 2004) or special semantic compositional rules (Corblin, 1996; de Swart & Sag, 2002, a.o.). Such analyses predict the uniform pattern displayed by mie, under the assumption that Picard has a negative concord agreement or compositional rule; however, within this approach it is unclear why this rule should be lexically restricted to only rien and parsonne when the sentential negation is realized as point. On the other hand, within lexical analyses, negative concord interpretations with sentential negation are determined by the quantificational and polarity properties of individual n-words (Herburger, 2001; Déprez, 2003, a.o.). Within this class of analyses, the pattern displayed by point is expected, under the assumption that the semantic denotations of rien and parsonne differ from those of jamais and pu in a way that makes concord with sentential negation impossible for the latter elements. What is puzzling for these approaches, then, is why jamais and pu can appear within the scope of mie with a concord interpretations. The paper concludes by outlining future investigations into the differences between point and mie that will be undertaken within the context of the French ANR funded project: SyMiLa (Syntactic Microvariation in the Romance languages of France) with the aim of resolving this dilemma.
