Expletive negation in Spanish

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In this paper, we present novel data and consider previous approaches to expletive negation (EN) in the light of the said recently discovered data. We will also show that some of the licensing environments for EN in Spanish are not the ones described in the existing literature. Expletive negation (EN) has been defined as a negative element that appears in a sentence but does not contribute to the polarity of the proposition. This has been attested in many languages and is quite common in Romance:

(1) J'ai peur qu'il (ne) pleuve demain
  I=have.1SG.PRS fear that=it NEG rain.3.SG.SBJV tomorrow

 'I fear that it will rain tomorrow.'   [French]

One of the main issues regarding EN is deciding what instances of negation are indeed EN. If we solely consider that it does not contribute to the polarity of the sentence we can find many instances of EN. However, it has also been characterised as being optional (Yoon, 2011) or included for emphatic or expressive reasons (R.A.E, 2009), which narrows down the number of possible contexts.

Generally speaking, EN is found in environments that typically trigger the subjunctive mood and are categorised as nonveridical. These environments include verbs that express fear, as seen in (1) or doubt. Even though we find EN in those same environments in Spanish in classical texts, the contemporary language shows a more reduced number of possible environments for EN:

- We can find EN in what has been labelled as 'negative' verbs such as *impedir* 'prevent, avoid', even though it is not very frequent and can be ambiguous between opposed meanings:

    (2) [...] intentando evitar que **(no)** se prolongue más de 90 minutos
       try.PRS.PTCP avoid.INF that NEG REFL extend.3SG.PRS.SBJV more of 90 minutes

     'trying to avoid that it lasts longer than 90 minutes.' [1991 from CREA]

- Comparatives license EN, especially if the second term of the comparison is sentential:

    (3) Más vale que sobre   que **(no)** que falte
      More be.worth.3SG.PRS that be.left.over.3SG.PRS.SBJV that NEG that lack.3SG.PRS.SBJV

     'It is better to have extra than to be lacking.'

- Negation that appears in the environment of the preposition *hasta* - 'until' can be interpreted expletively. It is usually optional and, according to R.A.E (2009), it is expletive when it modifies a telic verb and is introduced by a negative marker:

    (4) No nos iremos hasta que **(no)** nos digan la verdad
      NEG REFL.1PL go.1PL.FUT until that NEG 1PL.DAT tell.3PL.PRS.SBJV the truth

     'We won't leave until they tell us the truth.'

- EN is also found in exclamative sentences:

    (5) ¡Cuántas veces **(no)** nos habrá dicho mi padre que comamos
      How.many time.PL NEG 1PL.DAT have.3SG.FUT say.PST.PTCP my father that eat.1PL.PRS.SBJV
      verduras!
      vegetables

     'How often our father has told us to eat vegetables!'

- A negative element that does not contribute to the semantics can be found in *unless* clauses. However, this element is never optional and seems to differ in distribution from the elements in the other environments since it is not modifying the verb in the embedded clause. R.A.E (2009) claims this is still a case of EN. We argue against this since its behaviour is different from the cases above based on its ability to license strong NPIs, as opposed to the negative elements in the other groups. We believe that the combination 'a no ser que' is to be treated as a subordinating conjunction.

(6) Resulta   incomprensible, [a **no** ser   que] se   meta   en un contexto general.
    result.3SG.PRS incomprehensible PREP NEG be.INF that PASS put.3SG.PRS.SBJV in a   context   general
    'It is incomprehensible unless it is put in a general context.'

Crucially, EN differs from standard negation in its ability to license strong NPIs:

(7) a. **No** hacemos   nada/*algo
       NEG do.3PL.PRS nothing/something

       'We don't do anything.'

    b. No nos iremos   hasta que **(no)** nos   digan   algo/*nada
       NEG REFL go.1PL.FUT until that NEG   1PL.DAT tell.3PL.PRS.SBJV something/nothing

       'We won't leave until they tell us something.'

In cases of ambiguity where the negation could be interpreted expletively or not, it is not possible to disambiguate unless we have a very biased context that would make one of the two readings preferred over the other:

(8) a. Prefiero   verte   encarcelada   que **(no)** muerta
       prefer.1SG.PRS see.INF=2SG.ACC jail.PST.PTCP.F that NEG   dead

       'I'd rather see you in jail than dead.'   [expletive]

    b. Es   preferible tener   libertad que **no** tenerla
       be.3.SG.PRS preferable have.INF freedom that NEG have.INF=3SG.F.ACC

       'It is better to have freedom than to not have it.'   [non-expletive]

Espinal (2000), Makri (2013) or R.A.E (2009) claim that EN in *hasta* 'until'- clauses has to be licensed by a negative element which could suggest a possible treatment of EN as a sort of negative polarity item. In this paper we will show that this widely accepted claim is contradicted by the facts by providing new data of EN without any apparent negative licensing element:

(9) Todo el   mundo es   inocente hasta que **(no)** hay   condena
    All   the world be.3SG.PRS innocent until that NEG   be.3SG.PRS sentence

    'Everyone is innocent until there's a sentence.'

This is not an idiosyncratic fact of Spanish and is found in other Romance languages such as Asturian:

(10) [...] de mou qu'hasta   que **(nun)** s'acababa   de cebar   les vaques yera
         of way that=until that NEG   PASS=finish.3SG.PST.IMPFV of feed.INF the cow.PL be.3SG.PST.IMPFV
     tal l'estronconadoriu que se   tresmitía,   que resultaba   normemente molestu en
     such the=noise   that .PASS spread.3SG.PST.IMPFV, that result.3SG.PST.IMPFV immensely   annoying in
     tola   casa
     all=the house

     'In such a way that until the feeding of the cows was over, the noise was such that it was incredibly annoying in the whole house'.   [from ESLEMA]

There are some recent approaches to EN in the literature: Yoon (2011) argues that it shows semantic dependency on *nonveridicality* – parallel to polarity items– and that its semantic/pragmatic contribution is that it triggers an *evaluative sense*, similar to some uses of the subjunctive mood, which makes her label it EVALUATIVE NEGATION. Makri (2013) postulates that EN is an EPISTEMIC MODAL since it introduces a set of equally possible alternatives. Cépeda (2016) believes expletive negation is not expletive at all. She compares the aspect of the eventualities expressed in the clauses and concludes that the truth conditions –although very similar– are not the same in sentences with and without EN. In this paper, we will assess these claims and consider whether they can be appropriately adapted to account for the new data that has been recently discovered for Spanish.

References

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