

How to be Doubly Negative but still Quite Happy

Workshop
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Why are there Double Negatives?

Weakened meanings:

- Jespersen (1924): The two negatives [...] do not exactly cancel one another, so that the result [*not uncommon, not infrequent*] is not identical with the simple *common, frequent*; the longer expression is always weaker: "this is not unknown to me" or "I am not ignorant of this" means: 'I am to some extent aware of it', etc.
- Fowler (1927): [Double negatives are] congenial to the English temperament [...] it is pleasant to believe that it owes its success with us to a stubborn national dislike of putting things too strongly.

Pomposity:

- George Orwell (1946): Banal statements are given an appearance of profundity by means of the *not un-* formation.

Strengthened meanings:

- Erasmus (1517, *Colloquia*): You shouldn't be left uninformed [!] that we use this sort of diction in two ways: for the sake of modesty, especially if we're talking of ourselves, and the sake of amplifying. For we say correctly and gracefully "not ungrateful" for "very grateful", "not vulgarly" for "singularly".

They shouldn't be there!

- Frege (1919): Wrapping up a thought in double negation does not alter its truth value.

Double Negatives

Antonyms and their negations:

<i>happy</i>	<i>not happy</i>	<i>unhappy</i>	<i>not unhappy</i>
<i>likely</i>	<i>not unlikely</i>	<i>unlikely</i>	<i>not unlikely</i>
<i>intelligent</i>	<i>not intelligent</i>	<i>unintelligent</i>	<i>not unintelligent</i>
<i>common</i>	<i>not common</i>	<i>uncommon</i>	<i>not uncommon</i>
<i>successful</i>	<i>not successful</i>	<i>unsuccessful</i>	<i>not unsuccessful</i>
<i>frequent</i>	<i>not frequent</i>	<i>infrequent</i>	<i>not infrequent</i>
<i>many</i>	<i>not many</i>	<i>few</i>	<i>not few</i>

The central source of data, and inspiration on Double Negatives:
Horn 1978, 1989, 1991, 1993,
2002: "The logic of double negation",
in Y. Kato, *Proceedings of the Sohia Symposium on Negation*, Tokyo.

Double Negatives

Example for the weakened reading (somewhat outdated, due to R. Blutner)

Parteitag der Bündnisgrünen in Münster wählt in großer Harmonie mit Renate Künast und Fritz Kuhn ein neues Führungsgremium und beschließt die Unterstützung des Atomkonsenses der Regierung



Grüne Harmonie: Glücklich (ganz links): Fraktionschefin Kerstin Müller. Glücklich (darunter): Fraktionschef Rezzo Schlauch. Glücklich (rechts daneben): Gesundheitsministerin Andrea Fischer. Glücklich (darüber): Schleswig-Holsteins Umweltminister Klaus Müller. Glücklich (verdeckt): Umweltminister Jürgen Trittin. Nicht unglücklich (vor Trittin): Außenminister Joschka Fischer. Überglücklich: die neue Parteichefin Renate Künast. (TAZ 26.6.2000)

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Further examples for weakened readings

Examples found on the internet:

For the first time in a long time I woke up feeling rested this morning. I felt rested and content and was not unhappy to find that my kids were already awake.

For the most part he is well informed and not unintelligent.

It is not unlikely that these early therapsids may have had the beginning of metabolic development towards the mammalian condition.

Homeowers Dept: "45% of Income not Uncommon"

The underlined expressions can be replaced by

quite happy, quite intelligent, quite likely, quite common
without significant change of meaning;

exchange with *happy, intelligent, likely, common*

seems leads to a more drastic meaning difference.

Explanation by Horn (1991, 1993) (a reconstruction):

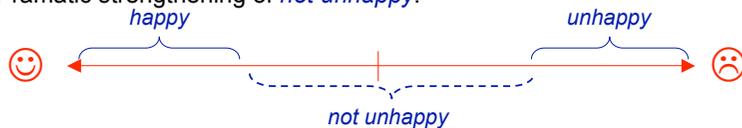
1. A and $un-A$ are contraries, i.e. $[[A]] \cup [[un-A]] = \text{whole domain}$
2. Negation by *not* forms complements.
3. Semantic blocking:
When the literal meaning of A, B is such that $[[A]] \subset [[B]]$,
then the meaning of B is pragmatically strengthened to $[[B]] \setminus [[A]]$



The literal meaning of the negations of *not unhappy*:



Pramatic strengthening of *not unhappy*:



How does weakening come about?

A first guess.

By psychological exhaustion? Jespersen, *ibid.*:

“The psychological reason for this is that the *détour* through the two mutually destructive negatives [*not uncommon, not unknown*]

weakens the mental energy of the listener and implies a hesitation which is absent from the blunt, outspoken *common* or *known*.”

Problem: *not unhappy* ≠ *indifferent*, “plateaued”

Judith M. Bardwick Ph.D., *The Plateauing Trap* (1986):

When we are plateaued, we are not so much actively unhappy as we are just not happy. We could continue to live as we are, because it's not awful. But it is also not joyous.

A more natural expression is *indifferent*, but this does not capture the meaning of *not unhappy*.

For the first time in a long time I woke up feeling rested this morning. I felt rested and content and was not unhappy to find that my kids were already awake.

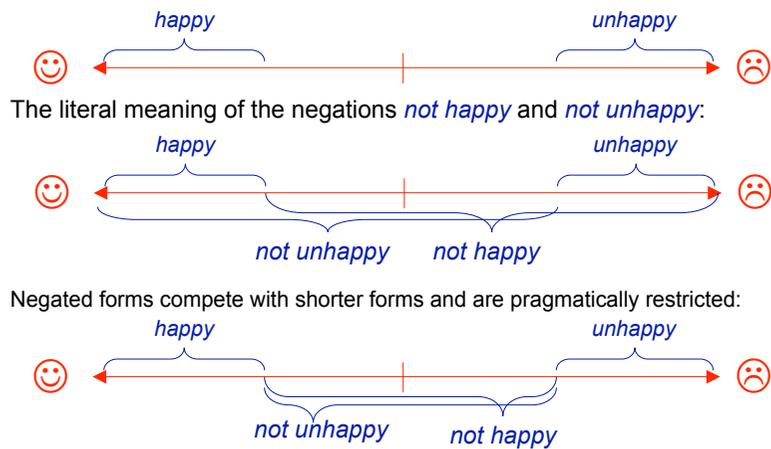
=

For the first time in a long time I woke up feeling rested this morning. I felt rested and content and was quite happy to find that my kids were already awake.

≠

For the first time in a long time I woke up feeling rested this morning. I felt rested and content and was indifferent to find that my kids were already awake.

Figuring in *not happy*: Blutner 2001



Problem:

- Unclear how different interpretation of *not happy* and *not unhappy* come about,
- prediction: *not unhappy* gets blocked because it is more complex than *not happy*!

A first step towards a solution: Form preferences, meaning preferences and their interaction in Bidirectional Optimality Theory

Standard example (McCawley 1978):

- Black Bart killed the sheriff.* (stereotypical killing)
- Black Bart caused the sheriff to die.* (non-stereotypical killing)

A less violent example:

- She smiled.* (normal smiling)
- She raised the corners of her mouth.* (artificial smiling)

M-implicature (Levinson 2000): Marked expressions have marked meanings.

Explanation by two principles (Blutner 2000, Jäger 2002):

- Short expressions are preferred over long ones (Zipf, Martinet ...); speaker economy, Q-Implicature (Horn, Levinson):
She smiled. > *She raised the corners of her mouth.*
- Stereotypical interpretations are preferred over non-stereotypical ones; hearer economy, R/I-Implicature (Horn, Levinson):
'*She smiled in a normal way*' > '*She smiled in an artificial way.*'
- The two preference orderings interact, yielding optimal form-interpretation pairs.

On being *not happy* vs. *not unhappy*

The two expressions are certainly not used equivalently:

I was very unhappy. I am not happy now. Everything is so sad.
[George Elliott, *Middlemarch*]

≠

(?) *I was very unhappy. I am not unhappy now. Everything is so sad.*

Rather, *not happy* denotes a mild state of unhappiness:

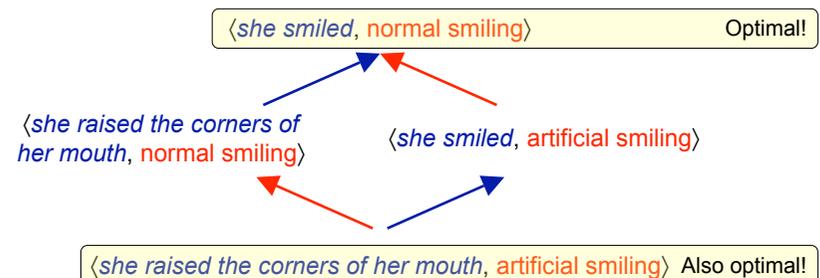
- *I'm not happy about it, in fact I am unhappy.*
- **I'm unhappy about it, in fact I am not happy.*
- *It's an absolutely horrible feeling to be unhappy, and I don't even think I was unhappy, just not happy, if you know what I mean.*

Interaction of Preferences in Bidirectional OT:

A form-meaning pair $\langle F, M \rangle$ is optimal iff:

- there is no optimal pair $\langle F^*, M \rangle$ such that $F^* > F$
- there is no optimal pair $\langle F, M^* \rangle$ such that $M^* > M$

Derivation of optimal form-meaning pairs in our example:

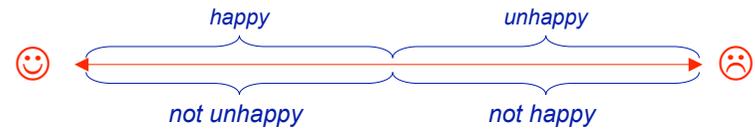


Application to the case at hand

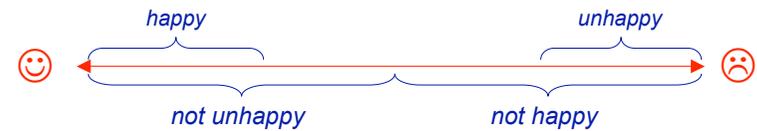
- Antonyms like *happy*, *unhappy* are contradictories, not contraries; they are exhaustive, i.e. there is no gap between their extensions,
- But they are preferably interpreted to refer to more extreme states of happiness and unhappiness, respectively.
- Consequently, the competing more complex expressions *not unhappy* and *not happy* are restricted to the remaining domain.

A Competition Theory for Happiness and Unhappiness

Initial situation: Antonym pairs and their negations.



Restriction of simpler expressions to clear cases.



Restriction of complex expressions to less clear cases.



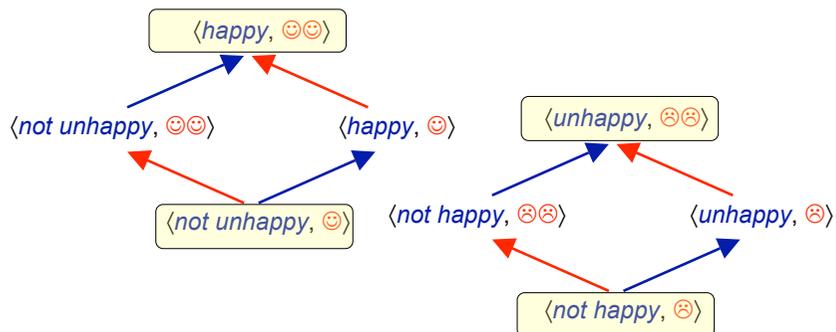
Weak Bidirectional-OT on Being not Unhappy

Preference for stereotypical interpretations:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{😊😊} &> \text{😊} \\ \text{😞😞} &> \text{😞} \end{aligned}$$

Preference for simple expressions:

$$\text{happy} > \text{unhappy} > \text{not happy} > \text{not unhappy}$$



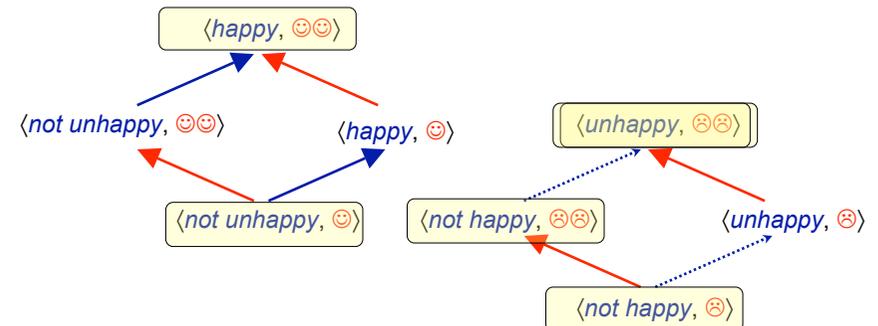
Differences between the two optimizations

Observation:

- The competition between *happy* and *not unhappy* leads to a clear result: *Not unhappy* refers clearly to mild states of happiness.
- The competition between *unhappy* and *not happy* does not lead to an equally clear result.

Possible reason:

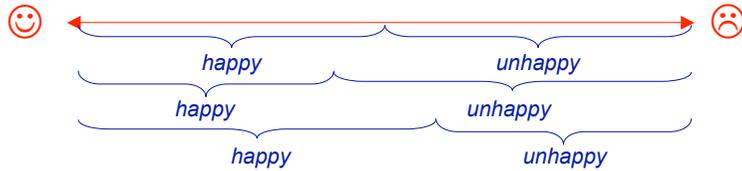
Complexity differences are small for *unhappy* vs. *not happy*, in contrast to *happy* vs. *not unhappy*.



Why extreme interpretations are preferred

With exhaustive interpretation of antonyms:

It is unclear where to draw the border,
cf. epistemic theory of vagueness of Timothy Williams (1994).



Saying that someone is happy or unhappy may not very informative if the person's state is close to the borderline; this is a motivation for restricting the use of *happy/unhappy* to the clear cases, the ones on which speaker and hearer definitely should agree upon:



Further interpretations of double negatives: Being Critical; Strengthening

Litotes (understatement):

This is not bad for 'This is good',

I'm not unhappy about it for 'I'm happy about it'

Avoidance of positive values from the range of expressions.

Reason: showing off critical attitude that nothing can be really positive.



Evidence for exhaustive meanings of antonyms

No strengthening in downward-entailing contexts that maximize informativity:

*Whether you lead a happy life or an unhappy life,
you will find this book very valuable.*

'Everyone will find this book very valuable.'

*Whenever a person, rich or poor, knocked at his door,
he was invited in.*

'Everyone was invited in.'

A problem ?

I am neither happy nor unhappy.

Not a contradiction; meaning: 'I am plateaued';

This shows that meaning strengthening by I-implicature cannot be global;

happy and *unhappy* enter the disjunction

in their pragmatically strengthened interpretations:

'I neither can be called "happy" nor "unhappy" '.

Further interpretations of double negatives: Being Polite.

Avoidance of face-threatening evaluations by mitigation:

This is not good for 'This is bad'

I'm not happy about it for 'I am unhappy about it'

Avoidance of negative values from the range of expressions

Reason: Politeness, attempts to save face.



Politeness may also apply to double negatives:

It is not uncommon that you come too late to work.

**Further interpretations of double negatives:
Being Pompous.**

Double negatives

- are more complex than simple positives
- reveal a more differentiated use of expressions

Hence they can be used to signal greater distinction
in the use of language
(cf. Handicap principle, Zahavi & Zahavi 1998).