Emphatic negation and discourse disalignment

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1 Introduction

This paper investigates the pragmatic space covered by emphatic negative expressions in colloquial German and Italian.[1] We focus on Expressive Negators (1a), supplemented by evidence coming from two Italian-specific structures, which respectively involve the combination of the unmarked negator *non* with the adverb *mica* (etymologically a minimizer related to the noun 'crumb') (1b) and with the response particle *NO* (1c) (Poletto 2008, Poletto & Zanuttini 2013).[2]

(1) a. ***Einen SCHEIß*** *schläft der!* (de) */* ***Col CAZZO*** *che sta dormendo!*
a shit sleep.3SG he / with.the dick that stay.3SG sleep.PROG

b. ***Non*** *sta* ***mica*** *dormendo!*
NEG stay.3SG crumb sleep.PROG

c. ***NO che*** *non sta dormendo! / Non sta dormendo* ***NO!***
no that NEG stay.3SG sleep.PROG / NEG stay.3SG sleep.PROG NO
≈ "He's not sleeping."

We analyze the distribution of this range of expressions and unearth systematic variation with respect to two parameters of variation. First, "emphatic" negative structures can be used to encode one of two distinct functions, namely a) the Rejection of a proposition (Rejection of p) and b) the Confirmation of a negative proposition (Confirmation of $\neg p$). While the literature typically focusses on "emphatic" negation as a means to reject, our dataset includes "emphatic" markers that specialize for function a) or function b), or are compatible with both.

Second, all structures in (1a)–(1c) impose requirements on the discourse status of their trigger p, i.e. the proposition that each "emphatic" negative assertion addresses. Specifically, we test contexts that vary in the degree of certainty the Interlocutor expresses with respect to the target p, ranging from being presupposed to being the object of an unbiased question. We observe that while no structure is felicitous in all contexts, each of them is only felicitous in contexts that cover contingeous degrees of certainty.

We analyze the use of these structures in terms of a disalignment between an Initiator (the person who starts the relevant step of the conversation) and a Reactor, the discourse participant who replies by using one of the above emphatic structures. By disalignment, we mean an incompatibility between the set of beliefs of the discourse participants. In order for the conversation to proceed, the set of beliefs shared by the two participants must coincide with respect to all the propositions that stand in a logical relation with the content of the current stage of the conversation. When the utterance of the Initiator implies a mismatch (e.g. it presupposes a belief that is not shared), the Reactor can use one of the structures above to signal the disalignment. We will use the term *tigger* for the utterance of the Initiator which makes the Reactor realize a disalignment. We will use the term *target* to refer to the proposition

[1] Unless marked as German (de), the examples in the text are Italian.

[2] As a cautionary note, all the structures we analyze are colloquial, and they might differ with respect to their regional distribution. The arguments in this paper are based on introspective judgments of the first two authors, so that no generalization about regional differences is possible. Specifically, we add the caveat that the acceptability of examples with the response particle *no* might vary among speakers from different regions of Italy.

with respect to which the two participants are not aligned. Informally, this is the proposition that is targeted by the emphatic reaction.

The set of observations we present sheds new light on the analysis of "emphatic" markers showing that inherent properties of each marker/structure define both its pragmatic function – what it does – and the status of the information it operates on – what it does it to. We argue that these two parameters can be captured in terms of the relation between the content of the target proposition and what each participant believes to be the case about the discourse situation. Rejecting and Confirming emphatic negative structures are employed to manage cases in which the participant's perspectives with respect to p do not align.

2 Discourse function

The literature on markers involved in "emphatic" negation has typically focussed on its use as Rejection. However, contexts that require Confirmation shed light on systematic contrasts between the structures in (1a) and (1b), on one hand, and Italian structures involving NO, (1c), on the other: the former resist Confirmation, while the latter are perfectly felicitous in such contexts.

The contrast emerges by comparing cases where an emphatic structure is used to reply to a positive assertion (2) or a negative one (3). In (2), the *Initiator* asserts the proposition p "Paul is sleeping". As shown in (2a), the participant responding to this assertion (the *Reactor*) might use Expressive Negators to reject the Initiator's assertion and assert $\neg p$, reversing the polarity of the antecedent. The same can be encoded by the Italian *NO che …* in (2b), while sentence-final *NO* is infelicitous, (2c):

(2) INITIATOR: "Paul is sleeping." (= *Trigger*)[3]
Target: Paul is sleeping.
REACTOR:

a. ***Einen Scheiß*** *schläft der!* (de) / ***Col cazzo che*** *sta dormendo!*
a shit sleep.3SG he / **with.the dick that** be.3SG sleep.PROG
'He's not sleeping'

b. ***NO*** *che* ***non*** *sta dormendo!*
no that **NEG** be.3SG sleep.PROG
'He's not sleeping'

c. *#**Non** sta dormendo **NO!***
NEG be.TSG sleep.PROG no
'He's not sleeping'

A different pattern emerges in responses to negative assertions (3). Both *NO che* and sentence-final *NO* can be used to confirm the Initiator's assertion. The other structures in our dataset, on the other hand, are infelicitous replies, as shown here for Expressive Negators:

[3]In this and the following case, the trigger and the target are the same. The disalignment amounts to the assertability of the target p: the Initiator considers it new information, while the Reactor considered p to already be shared. Note that the trigger and the target need not coincide, as we will see in Section 3.

(3) INITIATOR: "Paul is not hungry."
Target: Paul is not hungry.
REACTOR:

a. *#**Einen Scheiß** hat der Hunger!* (de)/ *#**Col cazzo che** ha fame!*
a shit have.3SG he hunger/ **with.the dick that** have.3SG hunger
'He's not hungry'

b. ***NO** che **non** ha fame! / **Non** ha fame **NO!***
no that **NEG** have.3SG hunger / **NEG** have.TSG hunger no
'He's not hungry'

Generalizing over a range of discourse scenarios, in our structures, in which the Reactor asserts $\neg p$, Rejection is a reaction to a target proposition p, and Confirmation is a reply to an utterance that commits the Initiator to $\neg p$.

3 Discourse-status continuum

It is generally acknowledged that emphatic expressions as discussed here cannot be uttered out of the blue, but operate on propositions that are discourse old (Horn 1985, Martins 2014, Schwenter 2005). In this paper, we present diagnostics that deepen this generalization: all structures in (1a)–(1c) impose requirements on the discourse-status of their trigger $(\neg)p$, but the specific requirements they impose are not the same across the board. Specifically, we test contexts that vary in the degree of certainty the Initiator expresses with respect to the trigger p. The highest degree of commitment is found when the Initiator assumes the target to be already settled between the interlocutors and left implicit, see (4). It can also be considered settled, but still mentioned explicitly, as in an adverbial clause in (5). The next weaker degree of commitment would be for the Initiator to explicitly assert the target, expressing their commitment to it but not assuming it to be already settled, (6). In the type of biased question that we consider here, the Initiator suggests the truth of the target, but presents it as something inferrable but does not fully commit to it, see (7). Finally, in an unbiased question, the Initiator has no prior commitment to the truth of the target, (8).

Based on this set of tests, we observe that the distribution of all structures in our pool is sensitive to this parameter in a systematic way: while no structure is felicitous in all contexts, each of them is only felicitous in contexts that are contiguous along the continuum.

For instance *einen Scheiß* (de) may felicitously surface when the target is explicit non-at-issue (5), asserted (6), in biased and unbiased question contexts – (7), (8) – yet not in non-at-issue implicit contexts, (4):

(4) INITIATOR: "Well, I wouldn't want to wake Paul up."
Target [Non-at-issue implicit]: Paul is asleep.
REACTOR: *#Einen Scheiß schläft der!* (de)
a shit sleep.3SG he
'He's not sleeping.'

(5) INITIATOR: "Since Paul is sleeping, we shouldn't play any music."
Target [Non-at-issue explicit]: Paul is asleep.
REACTOR: *Einen Scheiß schläft der!* (de)
a shit sleep.3SG he
'He's not sleeping.'

(6) INITIATOR: "Paul is sleeping."
Target [Asserted]: Paul is asleep.
REACTOR: *Einen Scheiß schläft der!* (de)
a shit sleep.3SG he
'He's not sleeping.'

(7) INITIATOR: "Oh, is Paul sleeping, then?"
Target [Suggested]: Paul is asleep.
REACTOR: *Einen Scheiß schläft der!* (de)
a shit sleep.3SG he
'He's not sleeping.'

(8) INITIATOR: "Is Paul sleeping?"
Target [Neutral question under discussion]: Paul is asleep.
REACTOR: *Einen Scheiß schläft der!* (de)
a shit sleep.3SG he
'He's not sleeping.'

Italian negative sentences featuring the marker *mica* pick a different part of the continuum, which still remains continuous: it can only occur with non-at-issue triggers. *No che* and sentence-final NO are fine only with assertions and confirmation-seeking biased polar questions. The overall distribution of the emphatic constructions considered in this paper is given in Table 1[1].

Structure	**non-at-issue implicit**	**non-at-issue explicit**	**Assertions**	**Biased Q**	**Unbiased Q**
(Neg +) *mica*	Rej. ✓	Rej. ✓	#	#	#
col cazzo	#	Rej. ✓/?	Rej. ✓	Rej. ✓	Rej. ✓
einen Scheiß (de)	#	Rej. ✓	Rej. ✓	Rej. ✓	Rej. ✓
NO che	#	#	Rej. ✓ Conf. of ¬p ✓	Rej. ✓ Conf. of ¬p ✓	#
S-final *NO*	#	#	Conf. of ¬p ✓	Conf. of ¬p ✓	#

Table 1: Distribution of emphatic negative constructions

It is generally recognized that sensitivity to discourse is a central property of 'emphatic markers' like those analyzed here. The gapless distribution of the felicitous uses of markers along the continuum given here supports a finer-grained approach to discourse sensitivity.

Our hypothesis is that the relevant parameter of variation concerns the different degrees of certainty about p that can be attributed to the Initiator. On a range of such degrees between believing that p is settled and presupposing it to asking an unbiased question about whether p, the distribution of markers of Rejection and Confirmation shows different 'cutting points'. On the other hand, negative sentences that contain any of these markers all convey that the Reactor commits to $\neg p$.

In most approaches in the literature on "emphatic" negative expressions, the distribution summarized in Table 1 is unexpected, as it primarily focuses on the Speaker's (i.e. the Reactor's in our terminology) perspective on the target.

[1]While we observe minor differences in judgements in between speakers, we note that all inter-individual variation still obeys continuity in the sense described above (cf. Poletto 2025.)

Following Horn (1985, 1989), research that treats these structures as instance of "Metalinguistic Negation" has taken them to be "device[s] for objecting to a previous utterance on any grounds whatever" (Horn 1989: p. 363). More recently, Italian *mica* (Frana & Rawlins 2019) and English *at all* (Mayer 2021) have been analyzed as Common Ground management operators signaling that the rejected target is incompatible with the Speaker's perspective on the Common Ground. This does not provide the means to draw distinctions among structures used to Reject that vary with respect to the discourse status of the propositions they can target. The continuum in Table 1 is rather primarily defined in terms of what can be concluded about the Initiator's perspective, and how settled a given proposition is.

4 Modelling types of commitment and rejection

If, in all cases above, we have a high commitment of the Reactor to $\neg p$, then the difference between the various types of emphatic negations must be in the kind of commitment of the Initiator to p (for Rejection) or $\neg p$ (for Confirmation). In this paper, we will mainly borrow mechanisms from Farkas & Bruce (2010) and AnderBois, Brasoveanu & Henderson (2015).[4]

We will model types of commitments in terms of an interlocutor's *Background* and *Common Ground* commitments. The Background corresponds to what Farkas & Bruce 2010 call *Discourse Commitments*, i.e., the propositons that an interlocutor believes to be true. The Common Ground contains the propositions that an interlocutor has accepted explicitly in the course of a conversation. We model both the Background and the Common Ground as *sets of propositions*.

We saw earier that emphatic negators are a discourse phenomenon that indicates a disalighment (or mismatch) in assumptions between an Initiator and a Reactor. For this reason, we need to allow for conflicts between what Initiator and Reactor take for granted. We write $\mathbf{BG}_R$ for the Reactor's Background. We write $\mathbf{BG}_I$ for the set of propositions for which the Reactor thinks that they are in the Background of the Initiator. In the same way, we distinguish between the Reactor's Common Ground, $\mathbf{CG}_R$, and the set of propositions that the Reactor thinks are in the Initiator's Common Ground, $\mathbf{CG}_I$. We will use the distinction between Background and Common Ground to model types of commitment: explicitly uttered material will always have a Common Ground component. Purely implicit material concerns the interlocutors' Background assumptions.

We are often interested in the set of worlds that are in all propositions of a set of propositions, i.e. in a "propositionalized" form of the set. We write this as $\bigcap\{p|p \in A\}$ (short $\bigcap A$). Two sets of propositions A and B are *compatible* iff their propositionalized forms overlap, i.e., iff $\bigcap A \cap \bigcap B \neq \emptyset$. With these definitions, we can assume that any participant x must have a compatible Background and Common Ground, i.e. $\bigcap \mathbf{BG}_x \cap \bigcap \mathbf{CG}_x \neq \emptyset$. A Reactor may assume that what the Initiator says is compatible with their Background, i.e. with $\mathbf{BG}_I$.

In an ordinary conversation, uttering a proposition p, i.e., asserting p, has the effect that the speaker wants p to become part of the Common Ground. A successful update means that p becomes an element of both $\mathbf{CG}_R$ and $\mathbf{CG}_I$. We write, generally, for each proposition p and each set of propositions A, **up4update**(p, A) iff p should become a member of A in the following discourse. Non-at-issue material acts differently: it is like a filter, i.e., all propositions in a set of proposition need to be compatible with it. Formally, for a set of propositions A, a non-at-issue

[4]We will use this framework here as it appears to us to come with the least amount of special assumptions. However, as a reviewer has pointed out, an analysis in terms of a theory of commitment, such as Geurts (2019) or Krifka (2021) might be closer to the way in which we characterize the data. Another alternative line of modelling may include a system that distinguishes positive from negative propositions by specific types, as proposed in Luecking & Ginzburg (2021). Adopting this distinction could lead to a more uniform treatment of the cases in which the emphatic negation can be used to reject a positive and to confirm a negative proposition.

update with p means that $\bigcap A \subseteq p$ (AnderBois, Brasoveanu & Henderson 2015).

Non-at-issue content must be part of the Common Ground already, i.e., if a proposition p is not at-issue, the propositionalized Common Grounds $\bigcap \mathbf{CG}_R$ and $\bigcap \mathbf{CG}_I$ are already subsets of p. We saw the relevance of the difference between implicit and explicit non-at-issue content in the contrast in (4) and (5). Implicit non-at-issue content is a filter on the Initiator's Background. This means that it should be part of the Initiator's Background, i.e. $\bigcap \mathbf{BG}_I \subseteq p$). Explicit non-at-issue material is a filter on the Common Ground sets, as well, but, in addition, it should be added to the new Background of the addressee in the following discourse, i.e., **up4update**$(p, \mathbf{BG}_R)$).

Consequently, an ordinary continuation of an assertion changes the conversational setting in the following ways: (i) non-at-issue content gets checked, (ii) explicit non-at-issue content is updated to the Reactor's Background, (iii) the at-issue content is updated to the Common Ground. sets. We assume that the relevant filtering and update instructions are part of the semantic and pragmatic representation of an utterance.

An emphatic negation does not show this ordinary integration but, instead, represents a special kind of integration. This is its response character. In addition, it may add something, i.e., assert itself a proposition q. In all cases of emphatic negators, the Reactor's utterance compositionally expresses a proposition $\neg p$ and triggers the alternative proposition p.

Based on this inventory, we can characterize the effect of different types of content, which are relevant to the type of emphatic negative reaction. We look at them from the perspective of the Reactor. In each case we need to specify the conditions under which the emphatic negator can be used, and its effect for the further discourse.

mica Let's assume that the propositional content of a *mica*-clause is $\neg p$. It responds to an Initiator's utterance that requires the Reactor's propositionalized Common Ground to be a subset of p, i.e., $\bigcap \mathbf{CG}_I \subseteq p$. To capture the ban of *mica* in all cases in which p is at issue, we need to add the condition that p must not be up for update into the Common Ground, i.e., **up4update**$(p, \mathbf{CG}_R)$ is not part of the Common Ground effect of the Initiator's utterance.

einen Scheiß (de)***/col cazzo*** These expressions require exactly what is excluded for *mica*: the propostion p must be the first argument of some **up4update**(p, X), where X can be $\mathbf{BG}_R$ for explicit non-at-issues material or $\mathbf{CG}_R$ for at issue content and explicit material for assertions and the type of questions under investigation here.

NO che The expression *NO che* is interesting because it can both reject a positive proposition p and confirm a negative proposition $\neg p$. In either case, it compositionally expresses the proposition $\neg p$, and the Reactor wants $\neg p$ to be up for update in the subsequent discourse. At the same time, the expression requires that the Initiator's utterance contains an explict bias towards either p or $\neg p$, i.e., the Initiator's utterance contains **up4update**$((\neg)p, \mathbf{CG}_R)$.

Sentence-final *NO* This structure is just like *NO che*, and can only appear with assertions and confirmation-seeking biased questions. However, it can only be used for confirming a negative utterance. I.e., the construction can be used if the previous utterance contributes **up4update**$(\neg p, \mathbf{CG}_R)$.

There is an additional effect of the two structures with *NO*: By using them, the Reactor signals that $\neg p$ is already in their Background, i.e., $\bigcap \mathbf{BG}_R \subseteq \neg p$. This additional restriction captures the disalignment effect of these structures even in their Confirmation use: The Initiator uses the trigger in order for the Reactor to update their Common Ground with $\neg p$. The Initiator would only do this if they assume that $\neg p$ is not yet settled completely. The Reactor's use of a *NO* structure signals to the Initiator that this proposition has already been in the Reactor's Background and that, consequently, the update proposed in the trigger does not lead to any gain of (propositional) information. This shows that even in a confirmation function, the emphatic negative structure is used to identify a disalignment in discourse.

Our system uses descrete building blocks to model what we have called a continuum. It can

be shown, that we can only, in fact, formulate distributional restrictions with it that span over contiguous columns in Table 1. Let's assume, for example, a hypothetical emphatic negator that is compatible with non-at-issue implicit propositions (the first context in the table) and assertions (the third context), but not non-at-issue explicit propositions (the second context). In that case, the non-at-issue component would require that this hypothetical structure is a reaction to a statement that filters for p. However, it should not put p up for update into $\mathbf{BG}_R$ (to exclude explicitly mentioned non-at-issue stimuli). An assertion, however, requires p to be up for update in the Reactor's Common Ground.

The only way in which such a distribution could be captured is through disjoined discourse requirements. We exclude this by a postulating a general principle on emphatic expressions that they must be restricted to a natural class of discourse context:

(9) **Discourse Clarity:** An emphatic expression may not have a disjunctive condition on its stimulus.

5 Conclusion

We argue for a fine-grained approach to the pragmatic contribution of "emphatic negation" beyond lumping them together under the label of "emphasis." Instead, we propose that cases of emphatic negation can be unified as structures that express a negative proposition and that are specialized to situations of discourse disalignment. To classify these structues, we distinguish two discourse functions: Rejection and Confirmation of a target. The structures under discussion are specific with respect to the discourse status of the target, i.e., the degree to which a contextually provided antecedent proposition is assumed to be common knowledge of the discourse participants.

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