

Negindefinites and negative concord: Concepts, terms and analyses

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This paper discusses several prominent comparative concepts in the domain of negated indefinite pronouns constructions. I note that the terminology is sometimes unclear or confused, and I provide clear and simple definitions of six key terms: *negindefinite pronoun*, *negative concord construction*, *concord negindefinite*, *negative polarity item*, *duplex negation*, and *negative amalgamation*. I emphasize that there is widespread agreement on the need for these concepts, and that the definitions of these terms are independent of the semantic analysis.

1. Indefinite pronouns and negation: Technical terms and the joints of nature

This paper discusses the terminology used by linguists for constructions in which indefinite pronouns (and determiners) occur in the scope of negation, and it makes a number of specific proposals. We will consider the terms used for a range of constructions such as those in (1a-c).

- (1) negated indefinite pronoun constructions
- a. Standard English
Nobody came.
 - b. Spanish
No vi nada.
NEG I.saw nothing
'I saw nothing.'
 - c. Modern Greek
Δεν είδα κανένα γράμμα.
Den íða kanéna yráma.
NEG I.saw any letter
'I didn't see any letter.' (= 'I saw no letter.')

Which terms should be used for these constructions is not always clear. Willis et al. (2013: 28) noted that "a significant difficulty encountered in discussions of the development of indefinites in the scope of negation is the large amount of associated terminology, much of which is used ambiguously or inconsistently." For example, words such as English *nobody* (in 1a) or Greek *kanéna* (in 1c) have been called *negative indefinite pronouns*, or *negative quantifiers*, or *n-words*, or *negative concord items*, or *negative polarity items*, and constructions such as Spanish *no vi nada* 'I saw nothing' (in 1b) have been called *double negation* or *negative concord*. Few of these terms have been clearly defined in the literature, but in practice, linguists often assume that they have clear definitions.

This paper makes a number of specific proposals for defining general terms in this domain in such a way that they can be applied to all languages using the same criteria. Crucially, I will not make any claims about how clauses with indefinite pronouns in the scope of negation should be analyzed. One might hope that it will eventually be possible to compare languages by means of concepts and terms that correspond directly to the innate building blocks of human linguisticity, i.e. to the “joints of nature” (this is the naturalistic approach of generative grammar). But regardless of whether one is optimistic about this, linguists are clearly not there yet, so that for the time being we must (additionally) work with comparative concepts which may strike some linguists as artificial. I will say a few things about specific possible analyses of negated indefinite pronoun constructions in §9, but primarily this paper will focus on the general concepts and associated terms.

2. Expression strategies for negated indefinite pronouns: An overview

There is broad agreement that we minimally need to distinguish four major types of strategies for negated indefinite pronoun constructions, represented here by German, Polish, Kannada, and Swahili (e.g. Kahrel 1996: 34; Haspelmath 1997: §8.1.1; van der Auwera & Van Alsenoy 2018: 113). In German, there is no clausal negator, and the negation meaning is expressed (via AMALGAMATION) as part of the indefinite pronoun *nichts*.¹

- (2) German (NEGATIVE AMALGAMATION; §8)
Nichts geschah.
 nothing happened
 ‘Nothing happened.’ (See also Standard English in (1a))

In Polish, by contrast, the negation meaning is expressed by the clausal negator *nie* ‘not’, and the indefinite pronoun *nikt* is “negative” in some sense, too (so we can say that there is some kind of CONCORD).

- (3) Polish (NEGATIVE CONCORD; §4-5)
Nikt nie przyszedł.
 nobody NEG came
 ‘Nobody came.’ (See also Spanish in (1b))

The next two types also show a clausal negator (*-illa* in Kannada, *ha-* in Swahili), but the indefinite pronoun is not negative. Kannada *yaar-uu* ‘anybody/nobody’ and *elliy-uu* ‘anywhere/nowhere’ can also occur in free-choice contexts, like English *anybody*. Such indefinites have sometimes been called “special indefinites” (Kahrel 1996: §3.1.2), but this type has not been defined clearly (see Haspelmath 1997: §8.2 for extensive discussion).

- (4) Kannada (Haspelmath 1997: 306; Sridhar 1989: 256) (“special indefinite”)
 a. *Illige yaar-uu baral-illa.*
 here who-INDEF come-NEG
 ‘Nobody came here.’

¹ By *negator*, I mean a morph that only expresses negation, e.g. German *nicht* or English *not*. Expressions that also convey other meanings apart from negation (such as negindefinites, or forms meaning ‘not yet’) are not included.

- b. *Raamu elliy-uu hoodaanu.*
 Ramu where-INDEF may.go
 ‘Ramu may go anywhere.’

Finally, in the Swahili example (5), there are no special grammatical forms at all. *Mtu* simply means ‘person’ and *nenô* simply means ‘thing’, and when they occur in the scope of negation, they can correspond to ‘nobody’ and ‘nothing’.

- (5) Swahili (Haspelmath 1997: 303) (generic noun)
Wala ha-wa-kumw-ambia mtu nenô.
 and NEG-they-him-say man thing
 ‘And they did not say anything to anybody.’ (New Testament, Mark 16:8)
 (Lit. ‘And they did not say a thing to a person.’)

When we treat “negated indefinite pronoun construction” as a type of construction-function (as I do in this section), we may say that Swahili *mtu* and *nenô* are “indefinite pronouns” (as I also did in 1997). However, these words are not special forms but ordinary generic nouns, so they would not fall under a concept of “indefinite pronoun” defined as a kind of formal construction-strategy.²

Treating “negated indefinite pronoun” as a construction-function is particularly useful for situations where there is no pronoun at all, as in (6) from the Malayic language Salako (cited after van der Auwera et al. 2023a: §4; see also van der Auwera et al. 2023b). This sentence expresses the same function as the other negated indefinite pronoun constructions, but it contains no indefinite pronoun or noun.

- (6) Salako (Adelaar 2005: 40)
Anà? adà an=nanaj ià.
 NEG EX REL=see him
 ‘Nobody saw him.’ (Lit. ‘There isn’t who saw him.’)

Van der Auwera et al. (2023a) say that the existential strategy here expresses the function of “negative human indefiniteness”, which may be a better name for the construction-function than “negated indefinite pronoun (construction)”, but it is still a bit awkward.³

3. Negindefinites

Linguists typically have the intuition that most of the elements translated as ‘nobody’, ‘nothing’, ‘nowhere’, ‘never’ (and so on) in the above examples are “negative” in some sense and that they can be treated together. I therefore propose the new technical term NEGINDEFINITE, defined as in (7).

² Constructions as comparative concepts can be defined in terms of their function (e.g. existential construction, topicalization construction) or in terms of their formal properties (e.g. subject-verb inversion construction, suffixing construction); see Croft (2022) and Haspelmath (2024) for the distinction between *construction-functions* and (*construction-*)*strategies*. Most of the technical terms that I focus on in this paper are terms for strategies, though what the construction types in §2-5 and §8 share is that they express the “negated indefinite pronoun” function.

³ The problem is that “negative indefiniteness” is of course exhibited also by indefinite nominals such as ‘a tree’ when they occur in the scope of negation, as in ‘I did not see a tree’. A more precise (but unwieldy) term for the construction-function that the clauses in §2 express would be “negated indefinite ontological-category construction”, because the indefinite referent is characterized merely by its ontological category (‘person’, ‘thing’, ‘place’, ‘manner’, etc.).

(7) **negindefinite (pronoun)**

A negindefinite is a pronoun (or determiner) which either (i) can express negation in isolation, or (ii) always occurs in the scope of a clausal negation meaning.

The term *negindefinite* is evidently an abbreviation of “negative indefinite (pronoun)”, and it is preferred here because the short form makes it clear that this is a special technical term that cannot be simply understood as consisting of “negative” plus “indefinite (pronoun)”.⁴ It should be noted that “pronoun” is intended to include not only noun-like forms such as *nobody* and *nothing*, but also adverbial forms such as *nowhere* and *never*.⁵

The definition in (7) is disjunctive, which is not ideal, but any other definition would seem to be too narrow. Negindefinites of the first type (expressing negation in isolation) are well-known, e.g. from Italian, where we find dialogues such as (8), where *nessuno* occurs in a FRAGMENT ANSWER without any additional negation.

(8) Italian

A: *Chi è venuto?* B: *Nessuno.*
 who has come nobody
 ‘A: Who came? B: Nobody.’

It is often said that occurrence in isolation implies “inherent negative force” of such forms, so a number of authors have cited occurrence in isolation as a sufficient criterion for identifying negindefinites (e.g. Bernini & Ramat 1992: 115; Giannakidou 2006: 329; Penka 2011: 2).

But as discussed by Haspelmath (1997: 197-198) and van der Auwera & Van Alsenoy (2016), not all indefinites that always occur in the scope of negation can occur in fragment answers. For example, Icelandic *neinn* ‘nobody’ occurs always in the scope of clausal negation but cannot constitute a fragment answer, as seen in (9b).

(9) Icelandic (Haspelmath 1997: 197)

a. *Ég sá ekki neinn.*
 I saw not anybody
 ‘I saw nobody.’

b. A: *Hver er er við dyrnar?* B: **Neinn.*
 who is there at door.the anybody
 ‘A: Who is at the door? B: Nobody.’

The Yiddish situation is somewhat similar in that the negator tends to be used along with the indefinite in elliptical contexts, as observed by van der Auwera & Alsenoy (2016: 476) (e.g. *keynem nisht* [nobody not] ‘nobody’). However, Yiddish also allows the bare negindefinite, so it is not quite like Icelandic (Johan van der Auwera, p.c.).

According to the definition in (7), English *nobody* (as in 1a), Spanish *nada* (as in 1b), Italian *nessuno* (in 8), and Icelandic *neinn* (as in 9) all count as negindefinites, because they fulfill at least one of the conditions. English *nobody* fulfills both of them, Italian

⁴ Some authors have misunderstood “negative indefinite pronoun” in Haspelmath (1997; 2005) as meaning “inherently negative” (e.g. Błaszczak 2005: 174; Penka 2011: 14), whereas I had defined it simply as “occurring in the scope of (direct) negation”. It seems that in general, composite technical terms can be misleading when they do not have a simple compositional meaning.

⁵ See Haspelmath (1997: 10-11), as well as this blogpost: <https://dlc.hypotheses.org/2575>.

nessuno fulfills the first condition (but not the second),⁶ and Icelandic *neinn* fulfills the second condition (but not the first).⁷

The reason why the neologism NEGINDEFINITE is needed is that the term *negative indefinite (pronoun)* used by authors such as Haspelmath (1997), Penka (2011), and Zeijlstra (2011) is not sufficiently clear and has been misunderstood in the past (see n. 4). Moreover, the concept of a negindefinite pronoun will be crucial for the definition of ‘negative concord’ in the next section.

The definition in (7) avoids making reference to “inherent negative force”, which is necessary because some negindefinites do not seem to have such force. We saw in (8) that Italian *nessuno* is an isolable negindefinite, but it is not an exclusive negindefinite because it can occur in a question without expressing a negation meaning, as in (10b).

(10) Italian

- a. *Nessuno* viene.
anybody comes
‘Nobody comes.’
- b. *È venuto nessuno?*
has come anybody
‘Has anybody come?’

It seems clear that the negation meaning depends on the constructional context here and is not “inherent” in the form *nessuno*.

A reviewer expressed dissatisfaction with the terminology suggested here: “We want a terminology that distinguishes between items like *nobody* and items like *nessuno*.” The reviewer went on to suggest that while *nobody* is a negindefinite, *nessuno* should be called a negative concord item. However, as we will see in the next two sections, negative concord (items) must be defined on the basis of the notion of ‘negindefinite’. Thus, *nessuno* must be a negindefinite, because otherwise Italian would end up without a negative concord construction.⁸

4. Negative concord constructions

We already saw two typical negative concord constructions in (1b) above (Spanish *No vi nada* ‘I saw nothing’) and in (3) (Polish *Nikt nie przyszedł* ‘Nobody came’). The definition I propose is given in (11).⁹

⁶ Italian *nessuno* may occur in non-negative contexts such as questions and can mean ‘anyone’, as we will see in (10).

⁷ One may use the terms ISOLABLE NEGINDEFINITE for forms like Italian *nessuno* and EXCLUSIVE NEGINDEFINITE for forms like Icelandic *neinn*. English *nobody* is both isolable and exclusive, and *anybody* is neither (though *anybody* can occur in the scope of negation in a negated indefinite pronoun construction).

⁸ Alternatively, one might conceivably say that the form *nessuno* is ambiguous and can be a negindefinite as in (8) and (10a), but also a “negative-polarity indefinite” as in (10b) (Johan van der Auwera, p.c.). However, in that case one could also say that English *anybody* is ambiguous and can be either a negindefinite (as in *I didn’t see anybody*) or a negative-polarity indefinite (as in *If anybody comes...*). So in effect, one would end up with only one criterion for negindefinites, occurrence in isolation. (Then Icelandic would lack negindefinites, and thus negative concord; it seems that this is not what we want.)

⁹ This definition is close to the formulation chosen by van der Auwera & Van Alsenoy (2016: 473): “[Negative concord:] a semantically single negation is expressed both by a clause level negator and by a negative adverb, pronoun, or determiner.” (Note that I use *pronoun* in a broad sense, including adverbial forms; Haspelmath 1997: 10-11).

(11) **negative concord construction**

A negative concord construction is a construction in which a negindefinite cooccurs with another negative form in the same minimal clause resulting in a simplex negation meaning.

Most commonly, the other negative form is a clausal negator (as in Spanish *No vi nada*), but it may also be another negindefinite, as in (12a), or a negative connective, as in (12b).

(12) Spanish

- a. *Nadie hizo nada.* (NEGATIVE SPREAD)
 nobody did nothing
 ‘Nobody did anything.’
- b. *Ni el padre ni la madre han visto nada.*
 neither the father nor the mother have seen nothing
 ‘Neither father nor mother saw anything.’

The subtype of negative concord where the other negative form is a negindefinite and there is no clausal negator is also called NEGATIVE SPREAD (den Besten 1986; Giannakidou 2000: 460-461).¹⁰

The definition in (11) is more specific than the definitions that one generally finds in the literature. The formulations in (13) are characteristic for the earlier literature.

- (13) a. de Swart & Sag (2002: 373)
 “[Negative concord] is the general term for cases where multiple occurrences of phonologically negative constituents express a single negation.”
- b. Giannakidou (2020: §1)
 “We talk about ‘negative concord’ when we have a single interpretation of negation in the face of multiple *apparent* negative exponents.”

However, these two formulations are too general, because they also apply to BIPARTITE NEGATION, as in the Afrikaans example in (14). Such constructions with two clausal negators have never been called “negative concord”.

(14) Afrikaans

- Hy het nie gelag nie.*
 he has NEG laughed NEG
 ‘He did not laugh.’ (den Besten 1986: 202)

In addition, negative connective pairs like English *neither...nor*, or German *weder...noch* (in 15) are not regarded as instances of negative concord, but they would fall under the overly broad definitions in (13).

(15) German

- Ich mag weder die Beatles noch die Stones.*
 I like neither the Beatles nor the Stones
 ‘I like neither the Beatles nor the Stones.’

¹⁰ Van Alsenoy (2014: 77-78) notes that the term *negative spread*, too, has been used in different senses, but it seems that the sense given here is the most widely adopted sense.

Many authors distinguish between STRICT NEGATIVE CONCORD SYSTEMS, as in Polish, and NON-STRICT NEGATIVE CONCORD SYSTEMS, as in Spanish and Italian. Polish requires both a preverbal clausal negator and a negindefinite under all circumstances, as illustrated in (16a-b) (and also in (3) above).

(16) Polish

- a. *Wczoraj nie widzieliśmy nikogo.*
 yesterday NEG we.saw nobody.ACC
 ‘Yesterday we did not see anyone.’
- b. *Nigdzie niczego nie znalazłam.*
 nowhere nothing NEG I.found
 ‘I did not find anything anywhere.’

Spanish and Italian, by contrast, do not use a negative concord construction when the negindefinite is preverbal. The contrast between (17a), with postverbal negindefinite and concord, and (17b), with preverbal negindefinite and no clausal negator, illustrates the general pattern.

(17) Spanish

- a. *No aconteció nada.*
 NEG happened nothing
 ‘Nothing happened.’
- b. *Nada aconteció.*
 nothing happened
 ‘Nothing happened.’

The term *non-strict negative concord* (Giannakidou 1998; 2006: §3.1) thus necessarily applies to entire LANGUAGE SYSTEMS in which negative concord constructions are not used under all circumstances. It is less commonly applied to specific constructions where the use of the clausal negator may be optional. Van der Auwera & Van Alsenoy (2016: §4.3) provide an extensive discussion of diverse situations with variable use of a negator, but they also note that in the great majority of languages, negative concord seems to be thoroughgoing (i.e. strict), and that Spanish and Italian are atypical.¹¹

5. Concord negindefinites

On the basis of the definition of a negative concord construction in the last section, we can now define *concord negindefinites* (cf. Horn & Kato (2000: 6), who talk about “concordial negatives”).

¹¹ Van der Auwera et al. (2021) also include cases of “connective negators” cooccurring with other negative forms, as in (i). (The definition in (11) would have to be made more complicated to include them; I leave it open whether this is desirable.)

(i) Russian

- Она не любит ни книг, ни фильмов.
Ona ne ljubit ni knig, ni fil'mov.
 she NEG likes CONEG books CONEG films
 ‘She likes neither books nor films.’ (van der Auwera et al. 2021: 48)

(18) concord negindefinite (pronoun)

A concord negindefinite is a pronoun (or determiner) which can occur in a negative concord construction in the scope of the negation meaning.

Thus, (Standard) English *nobody* and German *nichts* are not concord indefinites, while Polish *nigdzie* (in 16b) and Spanish *nada* (in 17) are concord indefinites. Polish *nigdzie* MUST occur in a negative concord construction, and Spanish *nada* CAN occur in such a construction (in 17a, but not in 17b).

Concord negindefinites have often been called *n-words* (or *N-words*) (following Laka 1990: 108), but the precise meaning of *n-word* has been unclear since the beginning. Giannakidou (1998: 56) says that “n-words are DPs and adverbs which appear under negation and may participate in negative concord structures”, but later in the book, she also talks about n-words in German and English, two languages that do not exhibit negative concord (Giannakidou 1998: 179-180; see also Giannakidou 2000: 478).

More recently, this word has been replaced by *negative concord item* or *NCI* (Déprez 2017; Giannakidou 2020), or by *neg-word*. The new term *NCI* is much better than “n-word”, not only because of the unwanted associations of the latter in English, but also because of the direct link with negative concord constructions. The term *n-word* had sometimes been misunderstood as comprising all negindefinites,¹² but amalgam negindefinites like Standard English *nobody* have typically been excluded, and this is made very clear by the new terminology.

However, still better than *NCI* is the term *concord negindefinite* that I propose here, because it does not include the vague word “item”, which reminds one of negative polarity items (NPIs, see §6). But while NPIs are formally very diverse and may thus perhaps justify the vague “item”, concord negindefinites are a subtype of negindefinite, and this should ideally be reflected in the terminology.

Neg-word is another new term, used by authors such as Zeijlstra (2022) and Borise (2023), apparently in the same sense. But Zeijlstra (2022: 4) seems to equate *neg-words* not only with “n-words”, but also with “negative indefinites”, thus continuing the kind of imprecise terminology that this paper addresses.

6. Negative polarity items

The notion of *negative polarity items* (or more generally, polarity-sensitive items) has been widely discussed since the 1970s (e.g. Baker 1970; Hoeksema 2000; Penka 2016). In contrast to negindefinites, negative polarity items have hardly been discussed in a typological context, and in English, there is normally no question which items are NPIs. But what is an NPI in general, as a comparative concept? Here I propose the definition in (19).

(19) negative polarity item

A negative polarity item (NPI) is a form (i) which may not occur in affirmative declarative independent clauses, and (ii) which may occur in the scope of a clausal negation meaning in the same clause or in a superordinate clause that is expressed by some other negative form.

This definition entails that most negindefinites are negative polarity items, namely all those that are exclusive (see n. 7) concord negindefinites.¹³ Negindefinites which do not

¹² See Richter & Sailer (2006: 309), Larrivé (2021) for two examples of the misunderstanding.

¹³ Van der Auwera & Van Alsenoy (2018: 113) make use of a special category of “negatively polar indefinites” that is distinct from “negative indefinites”, but they do not say how they define “negatively

participate in negative concord (amalgam negindefinites like Standard English *nobody*; §8) are not NPIs, and neither are all isolable negindefinites (as seen in (23) below).

In the literature, we do not find many definitions of the term *negative polarity item*. The characterizations in (20a-b) below are clearly too vague. Only (20c) comes close to an actual definition, and it illustrates the difficulty of formulating necessary and sufficient conditions.

- (20) a. Negative polarity items are expressions (either words or idiomatic phrases) with a limited distribution, part of which always includes negative sentences. (Hoeksema 2000: 115)
- b. Negative Polarity Items (NPIs) are words or expressions that can only occur in contexts that are in some sense negative. (Penka & Zeijlstra 2010: 772)
- c. NPIs are typologically very common Their hallmark property is exclusion from positive assertions with simple past (i.e., episodic sentences that make reference to a single positive event). (Giannakidou 2011: 1661)

In Giannakidou's characterization in (20c), non-concord negindefinites like *nobody* are included, but we would not want to say that they are NPIs. The definition is also too wide in another respect: It includes non-specific indefinite pronouns like Russian *kto-nibud'* 'someone', which cannot be used in "positive assertions that make reference to a single event". (21a) is impossible, and instead one must use the indefinite *kto-to* in (21b).

- (21) a. *Кто-нибудь постучал в дверь.
**Kto-nibud' postučal v dver'*.
who-INDEF knocked at door
'Someone knocked at the door.'
- b. Кто-то постучал в дверь.
Kto-to postučal v dver'.
who-INDEF knocked at door
'Someone knocked at the door.'

However, these Russian indefinites are not negative polarity items as they have no particular association with negation (Haspelmath 1997: 272-275).

Thus, NPIs must be possible in the scope of negation, but not necessarily in the scope of negation of the minimal clause. For example, German has the expression *jemals*, which can occur in the scope of superordinate negation as in (22a), but not in affirmative declarative independent clauses as in (22b).

- (22) a. *Ich glaube nicht, dass sie jemals in China war.*
I think not that she ever in China was
'I do not think that she was ever in China.'
- b. **Sie war jemals in China.*
she was ever in China
'(She was in China at some point.)'

polar" (maybe indefinites that can occur in the scope of negation, but not in the same minimal clause, like German *jemals* (cf. 22a)?).

Unlike English *ever*, German *jemals* cannot occur in the scope of a clausal negator of the same clause: **Sie war nicht jemals in China* ('She wasn't ever in China.')

Many NPIs can occur also in polar questions and in conditional clauses, and in a range of other licencing contexts which may (or may not) have semantic properties in common. There is a rich discussion of various semantic licencing factors (such as downward-entailing contexts, antimorphic contexts, antiveridical contexts; see, e.g., van der Wouden 1997; Giannakidou 2011; Garzonio & Poletto 2023), and it is clear that NPIs are internally diverse.¹⁴ Thus, it is not an empirical question how NPI is defined, and the definition in (19) seems to correspond quite closely to the way the term is actually used in the literature.

Finally, it should be noted that some isolable negindefinites do not qualify as negative polarity items because they can occur in affirmative declarative independent clauses and thus do not fulfill the first condition of the definition in (19). An example is the Greek indefinite-pronoun series that includes the determiner *kanénas* 'no, any' (seen in 1c) and *típota* 'nothing, anything'. These forms are negindefinites because they can occur in isolation with a negative meaning (*tí íδες? típota* 'what did you see? nothing'). They may also occur in a range of typical negative polarity contexts, and additionally in habitual contexts, as in (23).

(23) Modern Greek

Μας στέλνει πού και πού κανένα γράμμα.

Mas stéln-i pu ke pu kanéna yráma.

us send-3SG where and where any letter

'He sends us a letter every now and then.' (Giannakidou 1995: 95)

It may be for this reason that Giannakidou is inclined to define negative polarity items in a very broad way (as in 20c), but as we saw, her definition is too broad. Modern Greek is simply very unusual in allowing its concord negindefinites to occur in non-negative habitual contexts.

7. Duplex negation

So far, we have considered various negative constructions which are interesting for morphosyntax researchers because languages show different kinds of construction strategies. The term to be treated in this section, by contrast, is a purely semantic term:

(24) **duplex negation**

A duplex negation reading is a reading of a clause in which two negative forms within the same minimal clause cancel each other out.

For example, in (25a-c), there are two (or more) negative forms, and the resulting meaning is not (or need not be) negative. The rule that two negative forms yield a non-negative reading has been known and discussed since antiquity (*duplex negatio affirmat*, Horn 1989: 297). In (25b) and (25c), both readings are possible, depending on stress.

(25) a. English (Standard)

Nobody likes no type of ice cream.

= 'Everybody likes some type of ice cream.'

¹⁴ Hoeksema (2010: 218) writes: "I believe that 'negative polarity item' may well be a grab bag, similar to, say, 'adverb', that does not directly play a role in the grammar, but serves as a convenient term to refer to a loosely knit group of expressions with overlapping distributional properties."

b. French

Personne ne commet aucun péché.

nobody NEG commits no sin

‘Nobody commits a sin.’

OR: ‘Nobody commits no sin.’ (= ‘Everybody commits some sins.’)

c. Hungarian (Puskás 2012: 613)

Senki nem vett semmi-t.

nobody NEG bought nothing-ACC

‘Nobody bought anything.’

OR: ‘Nobody bought nothing.’ (= ‘Everybody bought something.’)

I propose that such readings should be called *duplex negation* (echoing the great antiquity of this issue in philosophical logic), though in the literature, *double negation* is much more common (e.g. Puskás 2012; de Swart 2020).¹⁵

The reason for this terminological choice is that *double negation* is also used in two other senses: On the one hand, it is a common informal term for negative concord (where there are two negative forms, but a simplex negation reading results, §4). On the other hand, the typological literature commonly uses *double negation* for what should properly be called BIPARTITE NEGATION, as found, for example, in Hausa (e.g. Dryer 2005; Dryer 2013; van der Auwera & Krasnoukhova 2020: §7.2.1; Croft 2022).

(26) Hausa

Bà tà daawoo ba.

NEG 3SG.SBJ return NEG

‘She did not return.’ (See also den Besten (1986) on Afrikaans, ex. (14) above.)

Thus, it is best to avoid “double negation” entirely and to distinguish strictly between bipartite negation constructions (where there are two clausal negators), negative concord constructions (where there is a negindefinite and another negative form), and duplex negation readings.

8. Negative amalgam constructions

As we already saw, negindefinites occur in two basic types of situations for which we want to have special terms. Consider the examples in (27a-b).

(27) Spanish

a. *Nada* *aconteció.* NEGATIVE AMALGAMATION (see also (2) above)

nothing happened

‘Nothing happened.’

b. *No* *vi nada.* NEGATIVE CONCORD (see also (1b) and §4 above)

NEG I.saw nothing

‘I did not see anything.’

¹⁵ The counterpart of duplex negation is best called *simplex negation*, as in the definition of negative concord in §4 above. The earlier literature typically uses “single negation” (contrasting with “double negation”).

The situation in which a minimal clause contains a negindefinite and no clausal negator is called NEGATIVE AMALGAMATION here, because the negindefinite (e.g. Spanish *nada* and English *nothing*) AMALGAMATES the two meanings of negation and the indefinite pronoun together.¹⁶ There is no well-known traditional term for this situation, even though it would seem to deserve a special name as it is not a common situation worldwide (only about 12% of languages worldwide, see van der Auwera & Van Alsenoy 2016: 483). But negative amalgamation is of course the usual pattern in three highly influential European languages (Latin, German and English), so it was the negative concord pattern that first got a special name (negative concord is somewhat more common, about 19% in van der Auwera & Van Alsenoy’s sample).

Analogously to *concord negindefinites* (§5), we can call forms like *nobody* or *nada* AMALGAM NEGINDEFINITES. Van der Auwera & Van Alsenoy (2018: 109) refer to them as *negative quantifiers*, and they call the strategy *negative quantification* (NQ, analogously to negative concord or NC). It is true that amalgam negindefinites have sometimes been called “negative quantifiers” in the past, but the term (*negative*) *quantifier* is more associated with semantic analyses (e.g. Giannakidou 2006: 330). Negindefinites of various kinds have sometimes been analyzed as negative universal quantifiers, and sometimes as negative indefinite quantifiers (see Zeijlstra 2020; and §9 below).¹⁷ I therefore propose to give the strategy in (27a) a new name, *negative amalgamation*. The definition is given in (28).

(28) **negative amalgamation construction**

A negative amalgamation construction is a construction (i) which has a clausal negation meaning and (ii) which does not contain a clausal negator but only one or more negindefinites.

Negative amalgamation is in contrast with negative concord, but it can actually cooccur with it, as seen in the negative spread construction in (12a) from Spanish, repeated here.

- (12) a. *Nadie hizo nada*
 ‘Nobody did anything.’

This is both a negative concord construction (as it shows a negative cooccurring with another negative form, namely another negindefinite) and a negative amalgamation construction (as it does not contain a clausal negator).

There are even some languages which never have negative concord when there is a single negindefinite, but which must use negative spread when a minimal clause contains more than one. In Ossetic, for example, the clausal negator *nɐ* (seen in 29a) does not occur with negindefinites (as in 29b), but the amalgam negindefinites must occur in a negative spread construction as in (29c).

(29) Digor Ossetic (Erschler & Volk 2011: 138; 140; 141)

- a. *Mɛdine Soslan-i nɐ warz-uj.*
 Madina Soslan-OBL NEG love-PRS.3SG

¹⁶ The term is taken from Jespersen (1917: 64), who describes the construction as “amalgamating a negative element to some word capable of receiving a negative prefix”. Labov (1972) used the term “negative attraction”, which was conceived of as a transformation.

¹⁷ For example, Zeijlstra (2020: §1) says that under standard Montagovian semantics, negative indefinites like English *nobody* are taken to be negative quantifiers with the following denotation: $\lambda X. \neg \exists x. [\text{Person}(x) \ \& \ X(x)]$.

‘Madina doesn't love Soslan.’

- b. *Neči* (*nə) *zon-un*.
 nothing NEG know-PRS.1SG
 ‘I don't know anything.’
- c. *Neke neči vige dar-uj*.
 nobody nothing disturbance keep-PRS.3SG
 ‘Nothing disturbs anybody.’

It should also be noted that negative amalgamation is not the same as duplex negation. In some works, the three main types of negated indefinite pronoun construction have been called (i) “double negation” (as in English), (ii) “non-strict negative concord” (as in Italian), and (iii) “strict negative concord” (as in Romanian) (e.g. Gianollo 2021: 5). But there is no guarantee that negative amalgamation constructions must be associated with duplex negation readings, and duplex negation readings may sometimes arise with concord negindefinites, too (as seen in (25b-c)).

In the case of amalgam negindefinites, the question sometimes arises whether a supposed negindefinite is really a single form, or whether it should instead be treated as consisting of a clausal negator plus an indefinite. Consider the hypothetical situation schematized in (30).

- (30) *We saw* NEG ANYTHING. (a hypothetical language)
 ‘We saw nothing.’

If NEG-ANYTHING is a single form, then it would be a negindefinite in an amalgamation construction. But if the language allows a postverbal clausal negator (NEG), then (30) would not be an amalgamation construction. Consider the examples from Homeric Greek in (31a-b), where *ou-tis* is said to be an amalgam negindefinite (see Gianollo 2021: 12).

- (31) Homeric Greek
- a. Ζεῦ πάτερ, οὐ τις σεῖο θεῶν ὀλοότερος ἄλλος (Iliad 3.365)
Zeũ páter, ou̐ tis seĩo theõn oloõteros allos.
 Zeus father NEG anyone you.GEN gods.GEN destructiver other
 ‘Father Zeus, there is no other god more destructive than you!’
- b. οὐ γάρ τις μ' ὑπὲρ αἴσαν ἀνήρ Ἄϊδι προΐαπει (Iliad 6.487)
ou̐ gár tis m' hupèr aĩsan anèr Aid-i proĩapsei
 NEG PCL any me beyond fate man Hades-DAT will.send
 ‘No man beyond my fate shall send me forth to Hades.’

However, the position of the clausal negator *ou* is quite flexible in Homeric Greek, so it might be that it just happens to occur in front of *tis* in (31a), without forming an actual unit with it. Note also that second position particles may occur between *ou* and the indefinite, e.g. the particle *gár* in (31b). Thus, this construction does not yet fall under the definition given in (28), but it is of course plausible that amalgam negindefinites often arise by “absorbing” a clausal negator.

9. Types of analyses of negative concord constructions

While broadly typological studies such as Kahrel (1996), Haspelmath (1997; 2005), and van der Auwera & Van Alsenoy (2016; 2018) have received some attention, the bulk of the earlier literature has focused on semantic analyses of negated indefinite pronoun constructions. It is particularly the negative concord constructions that have proved challenging for compositional semantic analysis, because negation seems to be expressed twice in them. In this regard, negative concord constructions are reminiscent of “subject-verb agreement” constructions such as Latin *Marcus veni-t* ‘Marcus comes’, where it also seems that the subject referent is expressed twice, by the subject nominal and by the person marker *-t* on the verb (see Haspelmath 2013: §5). This kind of “double expression” view has often been treated as undesirable, and many analyses have been proposed that avoid it.

It has often been noted that there are three basic types of analyses of negative concord constructions (e.g. Błaszczak 2005; Déprez 2017; Larrivée 2021; among many others). Simplifying greatly, we can distinguish (i) a negative indefinite analysis, (ii) a negative quantifier analysis, and (iii) an ambiguous approach.

In the negative indefinite analysis, the negation takes scope above an indefinite (corresponding to an existential quantifier), as in the simplified formula in (32).

- (32) *Nobody came*:
 NOT (\neg) EXISTS (\exists) x , x a PERSON, x came.
 (‘There is no person who came.’)

In the negative quantifier analysis, there is a universal quantifier taking scope above the negation.

- (33) *Nobody came*:
 for ALL (\forall) x , x a PERSON, x NOT (\neg) came.
 (‘All persons did not come.’)

And in the ambiguous approach, negindefinites are ambiguous between two analyses, a negative indefinite analysis and a negative quantifier analysis (e.g. Herburger 2001).

Of course, it is non-strict negative concord situations such as those found in Spanish and Italian that have presented a particular challenge for semanticists, because indefinites like Spanish *nadie* ‘nobody’ and *nada* ‘nothing’ qualify both as concord negindefinites and as amalgam negindefinites, depending on the syntactic context, and it is not immediately clear how this situation can be captured if they have a uniform meaning. The debate about the proper analysis of these forms “has been raging since the 1970s” (Larrivée 2021: 1), and it is unlikely that it will be resolved anytime soon, because different authors assign different weights to different criteria.

Thus, if we want to have a terminological system that works for all linguists regardless of their preferred analyses, it is necessary to abstract away from such disagreements and to define one’s terms via concepts that are widely agreed upon. The definitions given in §3-8 above hopefully meet this criterion, and it seems to me that they capture most of the key distinctions that we need in order to discuss the phenomena in the functional domain of negated indefinite pronoun constructions.

It is interesting to compare the situation with the different analyses of cross-indexing constructions like (34a-b) which were briefly mentioned above.

- (34) Latin

- a. *Marc-us* *veni-t*.
 Marcus-NOM come.PRS-3SG
 ‘Marcus is coming.’
- b. *Veni-t*.
 come.PRS-3SG
 ‘He is coming.’

As discussed in Haspelmath (2013: §5), a similar debate has been raging in this domain, too: Some authors adopt a “virtual-agreement” view for (34b), according to which the verb agrees with a non-overt subject nominal (in this view this situation is often called “pro-drop”). Other authors adopt the “bound-argument” view, according to which the suffix *-t* in (34a-b) is the true argument, while the conominal *Marcus* in (34a) is merely an “appositive” expression that is somehow extrasyntactic (this view is also called the “pronominal-argument” view). A third set of authors adopt the “dual-nature” view, according to which Latin *-t* is an agreement marker in (34a), but a pronoun in (34b) (in this view, this situation is also called “ambiguous agreement”). The debate around these three views is not as lively anymore as it used to be two decades ago, but it has not been resolved, and it is unlikely that it will ever be resolved, because different authors assign different weights to different criteria. Thus, it is best to adopt a set of concepts that are independent of the analysis (Haspelmath 2013 proposes a set of clearly defined terms for such constructions).

10. Conclusion

Starting out from the observation that the terminology surrounding negated indefinite pronoun constructions is often unclear, this paper has proposed a set of terms and definitions that cover the main conceptual distinctions that linguists want to draw. Not everyone will be happy with all the proposals, but the main point of the paper is to draw attention to the need for clear terminology. We may never converge on the same semantic analyses of these constructions, but the terminology for the main distinctions is largely independent of this. It appears that linguists have often assumed that our terminological choices must reflect what we know about the “joints of nature”, but this is not true: We can have clearly defined terms that help us talk about the phenomena, but that do not embody any presuppositions about the reality that we want to understand. Comparative concepts and technical terms are methodological tools, not theoretical claims.

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