

Nature and Categorization of Metalinguistic Negation

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Abstract—Metalinguistic negation, as opposed to descriptive negation, has captured great attention from scholars in philosophy, semantics and pragmatics, etc. throughout the world after its initiation. Various aspects of it have been brought into heated discussions, including its nature, categorization, constraints, scope and focus of negation and pragmatic functions, and so on. However, as the basis of investigation, what is the nature of metalinguistic negation and how it should be categorized are still controversial and current solutions to these two questions seem to be biased. This paper attempts to provide an impartial and more plausible explanation for its nature from the perspective of “use” and “mention” and categorize it according to prototype theory. Based on the distinction between “use” and “mention” and prototype theory, it is proposed that metalinguistic negation is the negation of what is mentioned rather than used in a sentence, and that there is an interface between descriptive negation and metalinguistic negation; in other words, there is no clear-cut borderline between descriptive negation and metalinguistic negation and they are two poles of the same continuum.

Index Terms—metalinguistic negation, use, mention, prototype theory, continuum

I. INTRODUCTION

Commonsensibly, it seems that negation operators are utilized to produce negative sentences. However, there is a very interesting language phenomenon in which though negation operators such as “not” are employed in the utterance, the actual meaning of the utterance is not negation at all. For example:

(1) A: The food is delicious.

B: It is not delicious; on the contrary, it tastes bad.

C: It is not delicious; it is very delicious.

Compared with B’s answer, C’s answer is not actually negation of A’s meaning. Instead, it strengthens A’s proposition by adding his affirmative subjective attitude towards the taste of the food. Such a phenomenon is traditionally called metalinguistic negation by some scholars or pragmatic negation by others. We think pragmatic negation is a more inclusive term which also encompasses negation merely realized by contexts instead of negation operators and tend to prefer metalinguistic negation.

The concept of metalinguistic negation was first proposed by Ducrot (1972/1973) who distinguished within negation descriptive negation and metalinguistic negation. Horn (1985, 1989), who also held the idea that negation in natural language can be subdivided into descriptive negation and metalinguistic negation, is among the first to raise scholars’ interest in metalinguistic negation. His initial investigations on metalinguistic negation are quite heuristic, and cause a heated debate on the issue. Some scholars following his footsteps improved Horn’s idea from other perspectives and made his analysis on metalinguistic negation more plausible and systematic, while other scholars who argued against him tried to embark on a course which they think can remedy where Horn has failed.

Various investigations have been directed to different aspects of metalinguistic negation, including how it is distinct from descriptive negation, what is its nature, how it is categorized, what should be included in its discussion, constraints on metalinguistic negation, its scope and focus of negation, and its pragmatic function, and so on. Though great achievements have been gained in the studies of metalinguistic negation, and those investigations have definitely improved our conception of it, there are still not inconsiderable controversies.

Among those controversies, issues on the nature and categorization of metalinguistic negation seem to stand out and are quite urgent, because as the foundations for the exploration of metalinguistic negation, they will determine how a scholar constructs his or her overall framework for the explanation of it. At present, three major perspectives on the issue of the nature of metalinguistic negation can be concluded and all of them are truth-conditionally motivated. Firstly, in alignment with Horn, metalinguistic negation has been regarded as the negation of non-truth condition of a sentence. Contrary to the first point of view, the second one claims that metalinguistic negation is the negation of the truth condition of a sentence. The third one seems to deny that there is a correlation between metalinguistic negation and truth condition and argues that metalinguistic negation is essentially a kind of language skills. As for the categorization of metalinguistic negation, different views can also be found and generally fall into two dimensions, one from the content of negation and the other, the motivations for metalinguistic negation. Their arguments have been whether the negation of phonetic and grammatical incorrectness should be categorized within the domain of metalinguistic negation.

However, since different directions along the path of truth condition have already been chosen but no consensus concerning the nature and categorization of metalinguistic negation has been reached, we would like to propose another way of thinking. We maintain that the nature of metalinguistic negation will be illuminated by an analysis in terms of “use” and “mention”. Correspondingly, since a construction may be both “used” and “mentioned” in different contexts, metalinguistic negation can be categorized from the perspective of prototype theory.

This paper is generally divided into four parts. In the first part, a brief introduction of metalinguistic negation is given. The second part is devoted to the discussion of the nature of metalinguistic negation while the third part focuses on its categorization. Finally comes the conclusions.

II. NATURE OF METALINGUISTIC NEGATION

It is beyond any doubt that a better understanding of the nature or definition of metalinguistic negation will be conducive to any investigation of it, as is generally acknowledged that the nature or definition of a concept is the basis for the examination of all other aspects pertaining to it. However, it is far from explicit as to what is the nature of metalinguistic negation and no consensus on this question has been achieved among scholars yet. In this section, this paper will attempt to provide a more plausible, tenable and impartial illumination of the nature of metalinguistic negation. Before the explanation, previous views on it and the distinction between “use” and “mention” will be first presented.

A. *Traditional Conception of Metalinguistic Negation*

Traditional conception of metalinguistic negation can be generally categorized in terms of two perspectives. One perspective follows the guideline of truth condition initiated by Horn (1985, 1989) which, in turn, can be subdivided into two directions: metalinguistic negation as the negation of non-truth condition of a sentence and metalinguistic negation as the negation of the truth condition of a sentence. The other perspective tries to break away from the restraint of truth condition and proposes that metalinguistic negation is irrelevant to the truth condition of a sentence and is just a kind of language skill adopted by interlocutors.

Negation of Non-truth Condition

Traditionally, ambiguity caused by negation has been conceived as semantic ambiguity. However, Horn (1985, 1989) pointed out that this is not the case and instead it should be regarded as pragmatic ambiguity. He maintained that such an ambiguity resulted from two different ways of the use of negation operator, i.e. truth-functional use and non-truth-functional use.

By truth-functional use of negation operator, it is meant that the truth condition of a sentence or proposition is what is negated. In other words, it is the negation of what a sentence or proposition affirms. This is internal negation, which is the most common and unmarked way of the use of negation operator, and it will not cancel the presupposition of the sentence. Horn (1985, 1989) called this kind of negation descriptive negation. As for non-truth-functional use, he argued what is negated is not the truth condition of a proposition. It is used to “signal the speaker’s unwillingness to assert a given proposition in a given way; or, more generally, the speaker’s objection to the content or form (phonetic, morphological, syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic) associated with a given utterance” (Horn, 1985, p.122). This is what he called metalinguistic negation, which is an external, marked and presupposition-cancelling negation.

Such a dichotomy of negation into descriptive negation and metalinguistic negation is welcomed by scholars throughout the world and wins Horn many followers. In accordance with Horn’s definition, scholars in China including Shen (1993), Xu (1994), Zhang (1999), etc., generally agree that metalinguistic negation is the negation of felicity conditions of an utterance, though they use different terminologies, semantic negation and metalinguistic negation.

Negation of Truth Condition

In response to Horn’s distinction between truth-functional use and non-truth-functional use of negation operator, Carston (1996) expressed his disagreement. He claimed that negation operator per se is not ambiguous, but the content it governed is. He further conducted a careful examination on the content governed by negation operator and identified two different ways of use, a semantic representation of the world and a semantic representation of another semantic representation or what is called the echoic use of a construction. A representation is said to be used echoically when it attributes some aspect of its form or content to someone other than the speaker himself at that moment and expresses an attitude to that aspect and the attribution may be explicit or implicit, and the expression of attitude may be explicit or implicit.

According to him, the negation operator itself acquires no special pragmatic meaning and it is interpreted as standard truth-functional negation in all cases. What metalinguistic negation is distinguished from descriptive negation is that it negates an echoic use. In this sense, metalinguistic negation is actually the truth-functional negation of the semantic representation of another semantic representation or the echoic use of a construction.

Jing (2002) and Gao (2003) also hold that metalinguistic negation is actually a truth-functional negation but they differ from Carston. They explored metalinguistic negation from the perspective of cognitive linguistics and proposing that metalinguistic negation is also the negation of truth condition of utterance by other speakers, which is not in a narrow and objective traditional sense but instead refers to the truth condition in cognitive linguistic sense, related to interlocutors in particular context.

Metalinguistic negation as Language Skills

The above two perspectives on the nature of metalinguistic negation have been closely related to truth condition of a sentence. Is it possible that metalinguistic negation actually has nothing to do with truth condition at all? A positive answer is given by Kong (1995), Liang (2000), He (2002), etc.

They purport that metalinguistic negation is irrelevant to the truth condition of a proposition and consider it as a kind of language skill adopted by speakers or writers. As a consequence, metalinguistic negation is the negation of the inappropriateness of an utterance, instead of the non-truth of a proposition or incorrectness in pronunciation or grammar.

B. A New Perspective on the Nature of Metalinguistic Negation

As can be seen from the above discussions, metalinguistic negation has mainly been investigated in terms of whether it is related to truth condition of a sentence or proposition or not, and if it is truth-conditionally related, whether it is the negation of the truth condition of a sentence or not. These investigations have centered on truth condition, leading to three directions, that is, metalinguistic negation as the negation of non-truth condition of a sentence, metalinguistic negation as the negation of the truth condition of a sentence and metalinguistic negation as linguistic skills irrelevant to the truth condition of a sentence. Such a course of metalinguistic negation has led to not inconsiderable controversies. The root of these controversies, as far as we are concerned, lies in truth condition per se, which is the product of logical semantics. Here we are attempting to offer a new outlook on the nature of metalinguistic negation from the actual language use. Two modes of language use can be distinguished, that is, “use” and “mention”, which will be discussed in the following part. It is argued that the nature of metalinguistic negation is actually the negation of the “mentioning” of a construction in a sentence, while descriptive negation is considered to be the negation of the “use” of a construction.

Use vs. Mention

The use and mention distinction has been widely acknowledged among scholars in philosophy of language. Following our intuition, the vast major of language is produced for use rather than simply mention. In other words, the essential function of language is its use in human communication and the roles of mention are auxiliary, albeit indispensable, to language use.

In fact, words, expressions, even clauses are usually employed to describe things, actions or events and so on; that is, they are used as not only linguistic symbols but also something beyond themselves. This is the “use” of words, expressions or clauses. However, on the other hand, they can be used merely to refer to themselves. To put it in another way, the occurrence of a word, expression or clause is meant to evoke hearers’ or readers’ attention to the mere word, expression or clause rather than something beyond them. This is the “mention” of words, expressions or clauses.

Take example (1) as an illustration.

(1) A. The book is on the table.

B. It should not be many “book”, but many “books”.

In (1) A, the word “book” is used not mentioned because it refers to a particular thing in the real world and on hearing or reading it, hearers or readers will pay special attention to what it picks out instead of the word “book” itself. However, as for sentence B, hearers’ or readers’ attention is just directed at the mere word “book”, a string of four letters, rather than what it refers to in the real world. In such a case we shall say that the word is being mentioned, not used.

Paul Saka (1998, p.126) proposed that “use” and “mention” can be understood as follows:

“use”: Speaker S uses an expression X iff:

- (1) S exhibits a token of X;
- (2) S thereby ostends the multiple items associated with X (including X’s extension);
- (3) S intends to direct the thoughts of the audience to the extension of X.

“mention”: Speaker S mentions an expression X iff:

- (1) S exhibits a token of X;
- (2) S thereby ostends the multiple items associated with X;
- (3) S intends to direct the thoughts of the audience to some item associated with X other than its extension.

It should be noted that “mention” can be categorized into “ostensive mention” and “non-ostensive or implicit mention”. In ostensive mention, quotation marks or italics (especially for sentences) are usually employed in written texts to reinforce the word, expression or clause being mentioned, as is shown in (1) B, while in spoken language, nonverbal cues are often given to signal mentioned language, such as prosodic features (e.g., intonation, stress) or gestures. Non-ostensive or implicit mention is always unmarked with any cue. Therefore, they are often confusing and give rise to ambiguity. It is also non-ostensive or implicit mention that results in the debate on the nature of metalinguistic negation.

Negation of Mention

Based on the examination of the distinction between “use” and “mention”, we think that the confusion in the nature of metalinguistic negation is deeply rooted in the misinterpretation of “mention” with “use”, and propose that metalinguistic negation is in fact the negation of the mentioning of a construction while descriptive negation is essentially the negation of the “use” of a construction.

Compare (2) B and C.

- (2) A. This book is interesting.
 B. No, it is not interesting; it is boring.
 C. No, it is not interesting; it's very interesting.

In (2) A, the word “interesting” is “used” to predicate the subject “this book”, to express some quality of the subject. In other words, “interesting” contributes to the propositional meaning of the sentence and is indispensable from it. B, in which “interesting” is also “used”, negates what is affirmed by A and conveys a totally opposite proposition. Thus, B is the negation of proposition A, or rather, the use of the word “interesting”.

However, different from B, C only mentioned the word “interesting” in *No, it is not interesting*. It negates the mention of the word “interesting”, which, from the perspective of a hearer or reader, is not accurate enough, rather than the lexical meaning of it. As a matter of fact, it echoes to or confirms the proposition expressed by A. What distinguishes it from A is that it indicates a higher scalar of interesting.

If the nature of metalinguistic negation is the negation of the “mentioning” of a construction, how to identify “mention” of a construction in practice since it is implicit with any unified formal marking? We propose a principle of mention:

A construction is mentioned in a negative sentence (in the sense that a sentence contains a negation operator) when it is used to strengthen its phonological or orthographical pole rather than its semantic pole. But such a principle is susceptible to various contexts and different interpretations.

In conclusion, instead of being entangled with whether the nature of metalinguistic negation is connected with truth conditions of sentences or not, we embark, on the basis of the distinction between “use” and “mention”, a new dimension in which metalinguistic negation is conceived as the negation of the “mentioning” of a construction while descriptive negation as the negation of the “use” of a construction. We maintain that our explanation of the problem is more plausible, tenable and impartial, and we will show how it will be further conducive to the categorization of metalinguistic negation in natural language.

III. CATEGORIZATION OF METALINGUISTIC NEGATION

How should metalinguistic negation be categorized? Such a question seems as disputable as the nature of metalinguistic negation since the categorization of it depends, if not exclusively, mainly on its nature. Consequently, based on different perspectives on its nature, various categorizations are provided. However, most of them are restricted to dichotomy, in which language phenomena are sharply divided into two clear-cut categories, either descriptive negation or metalinguistic negation. However, is dichotomy still suitable for language use which is quite sophisticated and daedal? Can a clear-cut borderline be maintained between descriptive negation and metalinguistic negation? As for these questions, we will take a careful consideration with reference to our previous conception of the nature of metalinguistic negation.

A. Traditional Dichotomic Categorization of Metalinguistic Negation

Traditionally, metalinguistic negation is mainly categorized on the basis of its two aspects, the content of negation and the motivations for metalinguistic negation.

According to the content of negation, metalinguistic negation is said to include, according the analysis of Horn (1985) and Shen (1993), five subcategories:

- A. The negation of the implicature resulting from the maxim of quantity; for example, *Some men are not chauvinists; all men are chauvinists*.
 B. The negation of the implicature resulting from the maxim of “Be Orderly”; for example, *They did not had a baby and got married; they got married and had a baby*.
 C. The negation of the implicature resulting from language style, context and so on; for example, *I'm not colored; I'm black*.
 D. The negation of the presupposition of a sentence; for example, *John did not manage to solve the problem; he was given the answer*.
 E. The negation of the felicity conditions in phonetics and grammar. For example, *I did not trap two “mongeese”; i trapped two “mongooses”*.

However, within this framework, many other categorizations, which are more or less similar, have also been provided. Their divergences lie in the fact that some scholars (e.g., Kong, 1995) think that the negation of a phonetic and/or grammatical incorrectness should not be included in metalinguistic negation.

Based on the motivations for metalinguistic negation, it, according to Liang (2000), should include the following five subcategories:

- A. The negation of the preconditions of the sentence; for example, *John did not manage to solve some problems; he solved them easily*.
 B. The negation of conversational implicature; for example, *Some men are not egoists; all men are egoists*.
 C. The negation of the focus or topic of an utterance; for example, *John Smith is not a black Police Commissioner but a Police Commissioner who is black*.
 D. The negation of the social connotations; for example, *I beg your pardon: Mary is not an uppity nigger broad; she*

is a strong, vibrant black woman.

E. The negation of the way of expressing. For example, *I did not manage to raise two "sheeps"; I managed to raise two "sheep"*.

Although seemingly different from the categorization of Horn, Shen and some other scholars, Liang's categorization essentially chimes in with the previous one. But he protests that the negation of phonetic incorrectness should not be covered in metalinguistic negation.

He (2002) embraces a unique opinion on the categorization of metalinguistic negation. According to her, metalinguistic negation or pragmatic negation in her terminology can be subdivided into two kinds: explicit and implicit pragmatic negation. Explicit pragmatic negation can be inferred from the context, and the negative reading is usually expounded by the following clause while negative reading in implicit metalinguistic negation can only be reached by pragmatic inferences. She insists that pragmatic negation should not contain negation of phonetic and grammatical incorrectness either. In addition, she further takes other two kinds into the consideration of pragmatic negation, that is, the negation of illocutionary act and negation caused by violations of certain conversational maxim or maxims but apparently without any negation operator.

B. Categorization of Metalinguistic Negation in Prototype Theory

The above categorizations have acquiesced that there is a clear-cut distinction between metalinguistic negation and descriptive negation. Under this prerequisite, a negation is either metalinguistic negation or descriptive negation. However, problems arise when it comes to negation of phonetic and grammatical incorrectness which some scholars think should be within the discussion of metalinguistic negation while other do not. These problems force us to reconsider whether traditional dichotomic categorizations are valid or not. Can it be the case that a negation in some linguistic context is metalinguistic negation while in another context, descriptive negation, or that there is no clear-cut distinction between metalinguistic negation and descriptive negation? Based on our previous assumption that metalinguistic negation is the negation of the "mentioning" of a construction and the fact that a construction can both be "used" and "mentioned" in different contexts, we think the answer is positive and we will provide our evidences based on prototype theory.

Prototype Theory

Following the tenets of prototype theory, there are best examples within a category, which are called the prototypes. A category is organized around the most prototypical members. That is to say, categories members do not enjoy the same status and they differ in their prototypicality, or degree of to which they are prototypical. There are good and bad members in category. In addition, categories have fuzzy boundaries. Certain things do not fall into clear-cut categories.

Continuum of Descriptive Negation and Metalinguistic negation

In 2.2, we have introduced the distinction between "use" and "mention". One more important point should be added that a particular word, expression or clause can occur with an interpretation of "use" in some context while as "mention" in others, and even both of "use" and "mention" within the same context. For example, in (3) A, the word "chocolate" is "used" to refer to a food which is made from roasted ground cacao beans. In B, the word "chocolate" is just "mentioned" because it is the form of it of it is just this string that is employed to designate certain kind of food. In C, "chocolate" is "mentioned" in the attributive clause and "used" in the main clause.

(3) A. Chocolate is delicious.

B. Chocolate is a kind of food.

C. Chocolate, which is a kind of food, is very delicious.

That a construction may be interpreted as "use" or "mention" or both in different contexts is heuristic when we take the categorization of metalinguistic negation into considerations. Is it possible that a negation may be metalinguistic negation in some context while descriptive negation in other contexts? We think so.

(4) We did not see hippopotamus; we saw hippopotami.

Traditionally, negation in (4) is considered to be the negation of incorrectness in grammar because "hippopotamus" is a countable noun and is not supposed to stand alone without any article. As have been noted above, different categorizations of such a negation have been proposed. Some scholars maintain that it is metalinguistic negation while others regard it as descriptive negation. However, we think that this negation is ambiguous.

On the one hand, it can be conceived as descriptive negation in some contexts. For example, in the zoo, there are many hippopotami right before your eyes and you uttered *we saw many hippopotamus* and one of your companions corrected *we did not see hippopotamus; we saw hippopotami*. In such a context, you are "using" the word "hippopotamus" in singular form to refer to a lot of animals, resulting in a wrong "use" of this word. In this sense, your companion's negation of your utterance is the negation of your misuse of "hippopotamus", so it is a descriptive negation.

On the other hand, it will be interpreted as metalinguistic negation in other context. For example, imagine a situation in which a child who is learning English, or perhaps is learning the plural forms of nouns, reported to his teacher his experience in the zoo yesterday and said *we saw many hippopotamus*, but the teacher corrected *We did not see hippopotamus; we saw hippopotami*. In this case, the teacher in fact cares nothing about what "hippopotamus" refers to or the animals themselves. Instead, he is just "mentioning" the word itself, that is, the student uses the wrong form of the word "hippopotamus". Therefore, his negation is just the "mention" of the word, and consequently is metalinguistic

negation.

There is no wonder that the categorization of the negation of grammatical incorrectness has been controversial. The reason lies in the fact that they can both be interpreted as descriptive negation and metalinguistic negation in different contexts. However, whether such an analysis will be suitable for other phenomenon of negation? We will provide another example in which the implicature brought about by the maxim of quantity is negated and which all scholars have thought of as metalinguistic negation.

(5) A: It is warm here.

B: It is not warm here, but hot.

According to the traditional categorization of metalinguistic negation, (5) B is the negation of the implicature brought about by the maxim of quantity and has been regarded as a prototypical example in metalinguistic negation by all scholars. However, from our perspective, it is far from that simple. This negation can also be interpreted differently in different contexts or according to different ways of conceptualization.

Previous categorization has included negation in (5) B in metalinguistic negation. The reason for such a categorization lies in the following assumptions. It is argued that hot and warm are on the same scale of temperature and that they are at the same pole of the scale. (5) A has not provided enough information as is required by B. Therefore, B expresses what he thinks is more accurate or detailed by first “negating” what A said, which is actually not semantic negation but an affirmation. In this sense, hot and warm are conceived in the same conceptual domain and B only negates what is mentioned by A. Therefore, it is a metalinguistic negation.

However, it should be noted that whether hot and warm can be conceptualized in the same domain or not lies in the interpreter. In this sense, they may be conceived as two different concepts in two different conceptual domains. When in different conceptual domains, “warm” is not “mentioned” by B but “used”. Consequently, B’s negation of A’s expression of warm is essential semantic negation, that is, B negates the proposition expressed by A. So, in this context, the negation in (5) B should be descriptive negation instead of metalinguistic negation.

Therefore, we propose that there is no clear-cut boundary between metalinguistic negation and descriptive negation and they actually form a continuum. As is similar to other categories, there are prototypical members and less prototypical ones in the category of metalinguistic negation. Meanwhile, typical uses and atypical uses can be distinguished within the same negative construction, such as the negation in (5) B which is prototypically used as metalinguistic negation but can also be regarded as descriptive negation in particular cognitive context.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, through a briefly review on previous discussions about the nature of metalinguistic negations and the categorization of it, this paper find there are still many controversies concerning them. It is observed that the root of these controversies lies in the misunderstanding of the nature of metalinguistic negation. Therefore, this paper proposes to reanalyze metalinguistic negation in terms of “use” and “mention” instead of truth condition initiated by Horn. We maintain that metalinguistic negation is essentially the negation of “mention” of a construction while descriptive negation is actually the negation of “use” of a construction. Since a construction can be both “use” and “mentioned”, there is no clear-cut boundary between metalinguistic negation and descriptive negation, that is, metalinguistic negation and descriptive negation form a continuum. In addition, a negative construction has its prototypical use, either as metalinguistic negation or descriptive negation, according to the particular context it occurs. In other words, whether a negative construction is metalinguistic negation or not is closely related to the contexts, both linguistic contexts and cognitive contexts.

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