The Routledge Handbook of Language in Conflict

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Projecting your “opponent’s” views

Publication details
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Published online on: 23 May 2019

How to cite :- Lisa Nahajec. 23 May 2019, Projecting your “opponent’s” views from: The Routledge Handbook of Language in Conflict Routledge
Accessed on: 27 Sep 2023

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Negation expresses an absence at the same time as evoking a possible presence, for example:

*Example 4.1*

This election is not a joke.

Example 4.1 calls to mind two opposing versions of a situation, one in which “this” is not a joke and one in which it is. The positive scenario in which it is a joke is not only textually accessible but assumed to be a belief or expectation on the part of the hearer that is being corrected by the speaker. This example is from a newspaper interview with the Labour party’s London mayoral candidate in 2008, Ken Livingstone. His main political opponent, Boris Johnson, was, at the time, represented as something of a buffoon and not sufficiently serious for the role of London mayor. He went on to win two terms as mayor. Here, Livingstone’s utterance encapsulates two viewpoints: the supposed viewpoint of the interviewer (and, by extension, readers of the newspaper) that the election is not to be taken seriously and his own viewpoint that it is. What is particularly significant here is that Livingstone is able to project the alternative positive onto the interviewer at the same time as rejecting this characterisation of the election. His viewpoint conflicts with the viewpoint that he has evoked and through negation he has attributed that viewpoint to the interviewer and readers. In addition, he contributed to the media discourse around the representation of Johnson as a clown-like figure.

Linguistic negation is the textual realisation of an underlying conceptualisation of a dichotomy between actual absence and possible presence. This textual/conceptual practice (Jeffries, 2010b) can be put to use in context along two broadly distinctive lines within Halliday’s (1985) metafunctions of language. On the one hand, there is the interpersonal dimension where negation can be used for refusal, denial and prohibition. On the other, there is the ideational dimension where negation can function to reflect or project conceptualisations of worlds. Both functions share textual properties, but they also share the potential for conflict.
The duality of negation has long been recognised by scholars and is at the core of understanding its use in discourse. However, despite millennia of interest in the linguistic, psychological and philosophical properties of negation, scholars have only relatively recently begun to examine how we make sense of negation in the context of discourse and to consider its effects (Dancygier, 2010; Hodge and Kress, 1979; Hidalgo-Downing, 2000; Jeffries, 2010b; Nahajec, 2009, 2014; Pagano, 1994; Werth, 1999; Riddle-Harding, 2007; Nørgaard, 2007; Sweetser, 2006). Apart from the contributions of Hodge and Kress (1979), Jeffries (2010b) and Nahajec (2012), who consider its ideological effects, examination of its role in discourse has largely been concerned with its effects in literary texts. Little work has been done on the ideological effects of manipulating viewpoints. The aim of this chapter is to broaden our understanding of negation as a viewpoint mechanism and in doing so, consider the interplay of negation and conflict.

Halliday’s influential approach to language posits the idea that language performs particular functions in the context of use: ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions. The interpersonal is concerned with managing relations between discourse participants, while the ideational is concerned with representing worlds. Conflict could be seen as most closely associated with the interpersonal function: conflict is, in some sense, the breakdown of relations between interlocutors, sometimes to the point of violence. However, the ideational and interpersonal show significant overlap. In the case of negation, while negated declaratives and imperatives frequently function as refusal, denial and prohibition, they do so on an ideational basis by representing the world in a particular way.

In using negation to manage the beliefs and intentions of others, speakers/writers choose to evoke potential but unrealised states that implicitly create a contrast between what is presented as expected and what is actually realised. Let us take another example from the 2008 London Mayoral election. During the election campaign, Ken Livingstone sent out a mail-shot comprising a postcard which urged readers:

**Example 4.2**

Don’t vote for a joke. Vote for London.

While Livingstone’s textual strategy would seem to operate on an interpersonal level, managing the relationship between writer and reader in directing a particular course of action, it simultaneously works on an ideational level, presenting an image of the world in which it is not only possible to vote for a joke, but also where one or more of Livingstone’s addressees intend to follow that particular course of action. This potential to attribute ideas, beliefs and intentions can contribute to the reproduction of existing beliefs, intentions and so on, but also create them in the act of negating. In their discussion of language as ideology, Hodge and Kress (1979, p.145) note the powerful effects of negation:

A negative is a convenient way of expressing forbidden meanings, evading a censor by the vehemence of the denial. It is also a way of planting ideas without having to take responsibility for them.

This chapter examines negation from the perspective of what and how it contributes to meaning in the context of language in use in order to understand its role in situations of conflict. It suggests that linguistic negation constitutes a significant mechanism for viewpoint projection and plays a role in both enacting conflict and presenting the ideas that form the bases for conflict. It has the potential to reproduce and contribute to the naturalisation of
ideas that shape our understanding of the world. The aim of this discussion is to highlight some of the ways in which analysing the use of negation can be useful in identifying how conflict is enacted or how it may arise from this presentation of ideas about others and the world they inhabit.

The following sections provide a brief explanation of what negation is and how it works in context before considering a range of illustrative examples of negation in situations of conflict. Negation is not conflictual per se; it is the context that gives rise to its conflict potential. These examples, therefore, focus on broadcast political interviews, a context that is characterised by conflicting conversational goals and ideas. The chapter concludes with a summary of this conflict potential and considers the relationship between understanding negation as a textual practice and the potential for conflict transformation.

4.1 Realising and processing negation

Negation, then, fundamentally operates at a conceptual level; it is a recognition and expression of an absence that is relevant to the current discourse. Absence is, however, contingent on presence; marking something as absent is to indicate that it could have been present. Section 4.3 returns to the question of how this basic property of negation impacts on discourse through presupposition and point of view effects. This section, however, briefly considers how absences are textually realised and how language users are likely to make sense of them.

4.1.1 Conceptualisations and textual realisations

As noted above, negation is the recognition and expression of a salient absence. Words such as “not”, “no”, “never” and “none” are textual vehicles for this conceptual practice (Jeffries, 2010b). This conceptual practice, however, is realised in a wider variety of textual forms than these readily recognisable ones. Linguistic negation ranges from its most basic expression in “not” to such things as grammaticalised metaphors (Yamanashi, 2000) such as “far from”. Givón (2001) and Tottie (1991) suggest a three-part classification of negators (lexical items that fulfil the negation function) around syntactic, morphological and semantic properties. However, while this classification makes a useful starting point, it presents only a partial picture of the range of textual forms that function as negators and it is worth supplementing this kind of classification with Jeffries’ notion that underlying conceptual practices are realised at the textual level through forms that range from prototypical expressions to the more peripheral.

In her discussion of textual–conceptual practices (e.g. opposing, hypothesising, assuming, etc), Jeffries (2010b) notes the tendency for underlying conceptualisations to be realised in a variety of surface forms. These forms range from the prototypical to the more peripheral in relation to their membership of a category of forms that can express that underlying concept. The textual realisations of negation range from the prototypical expressions “not” and “no” to more peripheral expressions including such forms as “diddly squat”. So, the sentences below all express an absence, but use a variety of textual forms to do this:

Example 4.3

a. Jen was not happy.
b. Jen was never happy.
c. Jen was unhappy.
d. Jen failed to be happy.
e. Jen was almost happy.
f. Jen was far from happy.
g. I wish that Jen was happy.
h. If Jen had been happy, she would have smiled.

In each sentence, Jen lacks the property of being happy. In 4.3a and 4.3b, the negator is syntactic, taking scope over “was happy”. While “not” in 4.3a has a single function as a negator, “never” in 4.3b combines the negator function with a reference to time in the combination of “not” and “ever”. The negator in 4.3c operates at a morphological level with the prefix “un” and takes scope only over the base word to which it attaches, “happy”. While the negators in 4.3a to 4.3c have a distinct linguistic identity, in 4.3d the negation function is inherent in the meaning of the word “fail”. Identifying negators in the semantic properties of a word is fraught with problems. However, Givón (2001) and Cruse (1986) and Karttunen and Peters (1978), among others, suggest that inherently semantic negators can be paraphrased with more prototypical negators. In the above examples, 4.3d is propositionally equivalent to 4.3a. Examples 4.3e to 4.3h constitute more peripheral forms of negator; 4.3e belongs to a small group of adverbs that straddle the divide between negation and affirmation: “almost”, “nearly”, “barely”, “scarcely” and “hardly” (see Tottie, 1977). These forms express a mitigated form of negation and affirmation. For example, while “almost” in 4.3e is propositionally equivalent to “not” in 4.3a, it carries a sense in which the absence is less forcefully expressed; 4.3f contains the grammaticalised metaphor (Yamashita, 2000), “far from”, which carries the same function as “not” but is context dependent and based on a metaphor of proximity. Like grammaticalised metaphors, 4.3g and 4.3h are also context dependent. “Wish” in 4.3g is a modal expression of a desire for something to be the case and only implies that it is not. The combination of past perfect tense and aspect with the conditional “if … then” structure in 4.3h sets up a hypothetical but unrealised scenario in which Jen was happy and smiled.

The variety of textual vehicles ranges from the explicit to the implicit, from the prototypical to the peripheral. They are conditioned by the linguistic context in which they occur, the scope of the negator (what utterance elements it has influence over) and the degree of emphasis or force expressed by a speaker (for more on variation, scope and pragmatic force, see Givón, 2001; Horn, 1989; Nahajec, 2012; Tottie, 1991).

4.1.2 Negation and indirect meaning

As negation expresses an absence, it does not, technically speaking, tell us something about what is the case; hearers/readers must infer what speakers/writers intend to mean. Leech (1983, p.101) considers the idea that using negation is uninformative, but posits that it will in fact be used when it is most meaningful:

In fact, the CP (Co-operative Principle) will predict that negative sentences tend to be used precisely in situations when they are not less informative for a given purpose than positive ones: and this will be when S (speaker) wants to deny some proposition which has been put forward or entertained by someone in the context (probably the addressee).

Understanding negation in context is a matter of inferring implied meaning. Elsewhere (Nahajec, 2012, 2014), I suggest that understanding negation relies on taking into account...
the textual form of the negator, its presuppositional value (see below) and the context in which it occurs to determine an implicature (implied meaning). Grice (1975) proposed that language users orient towards the notion of co-operation in understanding language in context. That is, hearers/readers will assume that speakers/writers are intending to mean something even where their utterances appear to lack relevance, clarity or truthfulness, or have too much or too little detail. To capture this idea, Grice (1975, pp.45–6) posited the Co-operative Principle with the attendant set of maxims (rather than rules) – quantity, quality, relation and manner. He suggests that, all things being equal, hearers will assume that speakers orient towards these maxims or norms for conversation and where they are overtly disregarded it will be for the reason of implying more than is literally said.

In the case of negation, speakers can be seen to flout (disregard) the maxims to imply meaning rather than directly affirm meaning. Depending on the context, negation can flout the above maxims in that it can appear to lack relevance to the current discourse or fail to give clear information. The process by which meaning can then be inferred is by considering what it would mean if the state, event or attribute that is negated were present and then reversing that meaning by the degree of emphatic force of the negator itself.

Looking again at Example 4.1, the utterance is indirect because it does not say anything about what the election is, only what it is not. However, taking into account the prototypical negator with a single negation function (“not”), the presuppositional value (someone thinks the election is a joke) and the context (mayoral election campaign where the main opponent is frequently constructed in the media as a fool), readers may well infer that Livingstone is implying that voters should cast their ballot for him rather than Boris Johnson, who is projected as a wider participant to the discourse as believing the election is a joke.

As noted here, negation is a complex form of communication that, in part, requires an understanding of its presuppositional nature. As Levinson (1983, p.107) asserts:

Whenever I avoid some simple expression in favour of some more complex paraphrase, it may be assumed that I do not do so wantonly, but because the details are somehow relevant to the enterprise.

The next section examines this presuppositional nature of negation and links it to point of view effects in communication.

4.2 Negation, presupposition and point of view

The basis of understanding negation in context is its duality in realising both an actual absence and possible presence. Negation, then, is not simply the opposite of affirmation. Affirmation does not automatically draw attention to its opposite, whereas negation does. Not only does negation draw attention to the negated positive, it treats the positive as if it were part of the common ground knowledge between speaker and hearer. More importantly, it treats the positive as if it is expected to be the case by the hearer and potentially other discourse participants. In using negation, speakers/writers are interacting with hearers’/readers’ conceptualisations of the world rather than the world itself. According to Verhagen (2005), negation is intersubjective, concerned not with representing the world, but with representing others’ conceptualisations of the world. In presenting those supposed images of others’ minds, speakers/writers reproduce or project conceptualisations and operate at the ideational level of language. Hodge and Kress (1979, p.145) note (in relation to an utterance
such as “There isn’t a tiger in that room”) that “The negative form does not guarantee the reality of the tiger, but it does guarantee the reality of the thought”.

4.2.1 Negation and presupposition

Negation has long been recognised as presuppositional in nature (e.g. Givón, 2001; Hidalgo-Downing, 2000; Jordan, 1998; Nørgaard, 2007; Pagano, 1994; Tottie, 1991; Werth, 1999), and it is this aspect of its use in context that is particularly significant in the consideration of its relationship to conflict. For example, according to Givón (2001, p. 336), negation not only treats the negated positive as if it were part of the shared common knowledge between speaker and hearer but treats hearers (and potentially wider discourse participants) as if they expect or believe the positive to be the case:

a negative assertion is made on the tacit assumption that the hearer has either heard about, believes in, is likely to take for granted, or is at least familiar with the corresponding affirmative proposition.

He goes on to note that this presupposition is pragmatic in nature, presupposing what hearers think rather than presupposing that a situation is true. For example, an assertion such as “My door is not blue” does not presuppose that it is true that my door is blue, but rather that someone thinks that it is.

It is worth briefly considering the sources for these presuppositions. While the textual construction of negation treats information as if it were part of the common ground between speakers and hearers, there can be a correlation between what is presented as expected and what could actually be expected. The expectations can be part of the co-text in that negation functions to deny some previous assertion available as part of the immediate discourse. They can be incorrectly inferred from the text or part of more general schematic knowledge of the world. They can also be created in the act of negating itself through a process of negative accommodation (Werth, 1999). The types of background knowledge evoked or projected by negation can be summarised as follows:

i. explicit expectations: expectations that are explicit in the co-text
ii. implicit expectations:
   a. based on knowledge about how the world works
   b. based on specific knowledge shared by discourse participants
   c. based on incorrect inferences from the text
   d. based on cultural shared knowledge
iii. projected expectation: expectations simultaneously instantiated and defeated through the use of negation

Negation, then, is a viewpoint mechanism, either reflecting a hearer’s existing point of view based on co-text or context, or creating that point of view in the act of negating. Pagano (1994, p.253) captures this idea when she points out that writers construct texts around an idealised version of the reader, a reader who holds the expectations that are projected by the text itself:

The writer creates a picture of the reader, who thus becomes an “ideal reader”, and attributes to this reader certain experience, knowledge, opinions and beliefs on the basis
of which a writer builds his/her message … As the writer somehow assumes what the reader’s questions and expectations are, s/he tries to provide information about these.

The presupposed expectations, beliefs and opinions of Pagano’s “ideal” reader present a partial picture of negation as a viewpoint mechanism. The next section examines the multiplicity of viewpoints encoded in negation.

4.2.2 Negation and viewpoint

According to Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2016), negation is one of many linguistic and discursive mechanisms that create local viewpoint multiplicity, encoding a mix of viewpoints in textual constructions. Negation encodes the point of view of the speaker (the absence of something) and the supposed viewpoint of the hearer/wider discourse participants (an expectation of the presence of something). Nørgaard (2007), developing work by Nolke (2006), captures this position from a polyphony-based approach, suggesting that negation encodes multiple voices and, consequently, multiple viewpoint effects in discourse. Nolke (2006) suggests that an utterance such as “this wall is not white” encodes two points of view:

POV 1: The wall is white
POV 2: POV 1 is wrong

Negation, then, holds within it both the speaker’s viewpoint that the embedded viewpoint of some other discourse participant is wrong, but also that embedded viewpoint itself.

In this environment of presupposition, the assertion of absence projects, at the textual level, the supposed viewpoints of hearer and potentially other discourse participants. However, it does so without needing to assert that the expectation of the positive is actually the viewpoint of the hearer. Negation presents the potential for speakers to construct an image of their interlocutors as not only holding beliefs or expectations about the world but also as holding incorrect beliefs or expectations. Therefore, from a conflict perspective, the use of negation involves two significant features:

1. it constructs a situation in which hearers (and other discourse participants) are presented as being wrong (in their beliefs/expectations)
2. it presents an image of the (incorrect) beliefs/expectations held by hearers (and other discourse participants)

In relation to the examples from political interviews discussed below, negation allows participants to project the supposed beliefs of their immediate interlocutors, the overhearing audience and wider discourse participants such as political opponents.

4.3 Negation and conflict situations

Having laid the foundations of the textual practice of negating – that is, how it is expressed and how it is understood – we can consider its conflict potential in situations of use. The examples address three broad areas in which negation and conflict intersect. The first is the role of negation in enacting conflict between speakers and hearers in the local management of talk. The second is concerned with how negation represents opponents, situations and
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ideas that contribute to an environment of, or bases for, conflict. The last looks at negation used in the context of conflict situations, particularly in relation to how it may heighten fears and tensions.

These types of effects are not exclusive to any particular discourse type. However, in order to illustrate this range of intersections between negation and conflict, the analyses below draw on a discourse type that is inevitably, and even necessarily, combative – political interviews. The examples focus on the role of negation in reflecting and projecting viewpoints through evoking, reframing and attributing unrealised expectations. They are selected from a wider project on textual practices in political interviews broadcast on public television in the UK but are framed by a period of time in 2017 that saw a heightened level of conflict in the UK.2 This period was particularly marked by political conflict over the aftermath of the UK-wide referendum on Brexit. The 52 percent to 48 percent vote in favour of leaving the European Union left a divided country and produced dissenting voices from across the political spectrum. As a result, the sitting prime minister, Theresa May, called an early General Election with the intention of strengthening the government’s hand in negotiations with the EU. The period was further marred by a series of terrorist acts in London and Manchester. Party political campaigning, ongoing Brexit issues and extremist violence dominated interviews with politicians at this time.

Political interviews are characterised by both the potential to realise conflict between interlocutors and for conflict to be the topic of discussion. Fundamentally, there is conflict at the level of the goals of each participant. On a simplified basis, interviewees’ goals are characterised by the nature of democratic political systems that are dependent on the approval of voters. In such contexts, interviewees (politicians) need to present themselves to the viewing audience as worthy of voting for. Politicians, then, must tread a fine line between being sufficiently informative and presenting the government and/or political party in the best possible light. The goal of the interviewer, on the other hand, is to reveal a fuller picture of the issue under discussion rather than a partial one that favours the particular politician, political party or government. In order to do this, the interviewer is likely to adopt, if only in the context of the interview itself,3 a contrary position to that of the interviewee. Within this framework, conflict is a necessary feature of the function of a political interview as interviewer and interviewee present competing conceptualisations of situations, events and entities. Bull (2008, p.336) suggests that political interviews are shaped by local “communicative conflict” as interviewees attempt to avoid answers that might damage the public perception of them and their party. Montgomery (2008) notes that political interviews are constructed around the notion of holding politicians to account for their policies and actions, which reflect particular ideologies. As a means of holding politicians to account, such interviews are concerned with representing broad issues within societies, the conceptualisations of which may provide the bases for conflicting understandings of the world. Political interviews are also frequently concerned with discussing conflicts, including conflicts of ideas with political opponents as well as broader social conflicts and conflicts that have deteriorated to the level of violence, such as terrorism and war.

In their exploration of the effects of linguistic negation in discourse, scholars in the field (e.g. Jeffries, 2010b; Nahajec, 2012; Nørgaard, 2007; Sweetser, 2006) have noted that the range of these effects is likely to be open-ended and highly context dependent. However, the role of negation in viewpoint manipulation is one of the core effects identified (e.g. Nahajec, 2012; Nørgaard, 2007; Sweetser, 2006). The examples analysed below build on and expand our understanding of the contextual effects of viewpoint manipulation by specifically examining the role of negation in realising and contributing to an environment of conflict.
4.3.1 Enacting conflict in interaction

While the broad focus of this discussion is the way in which negation can produce and reproduce ideas and project points of view, it is worth briefly considering perhaps the most obvious realisation of conflict through negation in interview situations. As noted above, negation can draw on expectations that are part of the co-text, asserted by a prior speaker; in doing so, it can deny the validity or truthfulness of that assertion. For example, the interview between the Prime Minister, Theresa May (PM), and Andrew Neil (AN) on the BBC in the run-up to the General Election contains several instances where May uses negation to deny Neil’s characterisation of a situation:

Example 4.4

*AN*: So Jeremy Corbyn is now rewriting your manifesto?

*PM*: No, not at all.

*AN*: Well, that’s what it sounds like. You’ve reacted to him.

*PM*: No, we haven’t. Andrew, we have not rewritten the manifesto.

May’s responses in this example negate expectations that are made explicit by Neil in the co-text (Corbyn rewriting the manifesto and Theresa May reacting) and function as a denial of Neil’s viewpoint. May is not projecting but echoing Neil’s asserted viewpoint in her use of negation. In doing so, she implies that he is wrong in his beliefs and that his viewpoint is not valid. These speakers, then, come into conflict over what constitutes an accurate representation of the world. This reflects the underlying conflict in goals where May wants, particularly during an election campaign, to present, in her words, a “strong and stable” government worthy of re-election.

While the negation in Example 4.4 draws on explicit expectations in the co-text in order to realise conflicting viewpoints, there are less obvious ways in which negation enacts conflict. In the following example, the Labour MP Andrew Gwynn uses negation to reframe the meaning of a question from Andrew Neil regarding Labour party plans for funding the National Health Service:

Example 4.5

I am not going to lay out the Labour Party manifesto for an election that hasn’t been called.

Gwynn’s use of negation re-frames Neil’s question on specific funding plans to a question of general funding plans. By negating an intention to lay out the Labour Party’s manifesto, Gwynn is either responding to what he views as Neil’s implied request to lay out the party manifesto or reframing Neil’s actual question as meaning something else in order to avoid answering it. Either way, the utterance presupposes that Neil’s viewpoint is such that Gwynn should put forward the Labour party manifesto. In fact, Neil goes on to say, “That wasn’t my question”, challenging the point of view that Gwynn is projecting. Here, the utterance attributes a point of view to Neil that is clearly at odds with what he intended to mean but constructs Neil and Gwynn as being opponents in this context. Further, like Example 4.4, it reflects the underlying goal conflict; while elaborating on Labour’s spending plans would fulfil the interviewer’s goals to inform the viewing audience, avoiding the question saves the interviewee from making spending commitments in front of an audience of potential voters that may cause problems in the future.
Where Gwynn appears to be using reframing to avoid answering a question, Home Secretary Amber Rudd (AR), in an interview with Andrew Marr (AM), reframes and projects the interviewer’s meaning to correct an inference that the audience may derive from the interviewer’s suggestions and question:

**Example 4.6**

*AM:* I suppose what I’m wondering is the question about whether Abedi was red flagged or not at some point in the last few years may simply be because there are so many plots, so many people that they have to look at. One thing you could decide to do after Manchester is a step change in the size of MI5. You could double it. You could spend money that’s being spent on Trident or something else and put it into this. Have you considered that?

*AR:* We won’t shy away from finding out what else we can do to keep people safe.

In Example 4.6, Marr makes suggestions for what the security services and Home Office could do to increase and improve security in relation to terrorist plots in the UK and poses a question regarding whether Rudd has considered these possibilities. Though Rudd goes on to address funding issues more directly, her initial negated response re-frames Marr’s suggestions and question as an expectation that “we” (the home office) will “shy away from finding out what else we can do to keep people safe”. Rudd’s negated utterance seems to present Marr and perhaps the audience as believing the Home Office is reluctant to consider ways in which security can be improved. By using negation, the utterance encodes both the supposed viewpoint of the hearer and Rudd’s viewpoint that the hearer is wrong, and in doing so, Rudd, like Gwynn, constructs her interlocutor as opponent.

It may seem odd that Rudd is constructing Marr as an opponent here when she might simply have said she was thinking about those options. However, in re-framing Marr’s meaning, she is perhaps forestalling an inference that the audience may derive from his suggestions/question; while interviews are on one level a conversation between the interviewer and interviewee, they engage in conversation for the purpose of informing the audience. It would seem that in re-framing Marr’s meaning through negating a supposed expectation, Rudd is making an implied criticism explicit in order to disagree with it.

It seems that in this situation, if Rudd directly engages with Marr’s suggestions, she opens up problems around the government’s commitments to funding and to the much bigger issue of the UK’s nuclear programme. However, by circumventing the question/suggestion, she raises the very possibility of shying away (albeit unrealised) and perhaps makes the Home Office and herself look weak in the process.

The final example in this section looks again at the interview between Andrew Neil and Theresa May. The use of negation here re-frames the interviewer’s meaning and also potentially draws on wider perceptions of the Conservative party as being target driven:

**Example 4.7**

*AN:* But let me come back to the NHS. Our hospitals have just endured their worst 12 months in ten years. A record number of urgent operations were cancelled, a string of targets, from emergency care to routine care, to cancer care, have been missed. What you’re promising is too little too late.

*PM:* No. And I accept that the NHS has missed some of its targets, but let’s look at—and targets aren’t the be all and end all. What matters actually is the quality of patient care.
May’s assertion that “targets aren’t the be all and end all” presupposes and reframes Neil’s comments on cancelled operations and missed targets as an expectation/belief that “targets are the be all and end all” of NHS care. Again, the two encoded viewpoints construct May and Neil as being in opposition, even though it is the negation itself that constructs Neil’s supposed viewpoint. However, as well as reframing Neil’s comments, May’s assertion also draws on, reproduces and challenges the wider conceptualisation of the NHS as being target driven, a viewpoint arguably constructed in the consistent reporting of NHS trusts’ performance in relation to targets set by the government. As such, May is not only constructing Neil’s viewpoint and implying that it is wrong but also drawing on the same viewpoint that is held more widely and implying that those who hold that viewpoint are wrong.

4.3.2 Contributing to the bases for conflict

In the above examples, the use of negation to echo or reframe the interviewers’ meanings provides the basis for disagreement and realises conflict in the local management of talk. This section moves on to look at the way in which negation can contribute to the ideas that might underpin conflict more widely. The potential to attribute expectations or beliefs to wider discourse participants is significant in the reproduction and naturalisation of ideologies. These ideologies in turn underpin wider social conflicts.

In the following example, Paul Nuttall, the then leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), was being interviewed by Andrew Marr during the General Election campaign. As UKIP’s policies primarily revolve around the desire for UK independence from Europe, the topic of the interview turned to the management of migration, a frequently contentious and emotive topic in UK (and world) politics:

**Example 4.8**

*AM:* Now, the Office of Budget Responsibility has calculated that if we cut immigration down to 185,000 – so vastly more than you’re suggesting – that would cost the Treasury £6 billion a year in lost revenue. How much will your policy cost the Treasury?

*PN:* [...] We need people to come into the country, they can come in and they can work. But you know, economics isn’t everything. It’s also about social cohesion, and at the moment we have communities which have been tipped upside down over recent years because too many people are coming to the country too quickly and not learning English and not integrating.

Nuttall’s response to Marr’s question on the financial cost of reducing migration reframes the question as a presupposed assertion that “economics is everything”. So, Nuttall both projects Marr’s supposed point of view and implies that this point of view is wrong. However, he goes on to qualify what it means for “economics is everything” to be absent from an understanding of the migration situation. Nuttall links migration to the lived experiences of communities that he implies are suffering from a lack of community cohesion through excessive numbers of migrants. What is of particular significance here, however, is Nuttall’s negated assertion that those coming are “not learning English and not integrating”. As with the other examples, this encodes two points of view:

*Viewpoint 1:* People are learning English and are integrating.

*Viewpoint 2:* Viewpoint 1 is wrong.
Projecting your “opponent’s” views

Viewpoint 2 is clearly held by Nuttall himself, while viewpoint 1 could be attributed to the interviewer, audience and wider discourse participants. Nuttall is correcting what he clearly sees as a misapprehension on their part. There is, then, a very basic level of conflicting viewpoints with regards to whether or not migrants are learning English and integrating. However, what is perhaps more significant is that Nuttall sets up an expectation of integrating and learning English without needing to assert it and possibly be challenged on it. It also sets the agenda for what constitutes social cohesion. O’Driscoll (2009) notes that negation can contribute to what he terms the “discursive deictic centre”, a situation in which speakers may hold differing viewpoints on a particular subject yet share a common viewing position. In discussing the construction of a discursive deictic centre in a BBC Question Time debate over the seemingly intractable Israeli/Palestinian conflict, O’Driscoll (2009) uses the following example to illustrate:

Example 4.9

Jenny Tonge: It [the attack by Israel] is not doing Israel any good.

While this utterance was made by a pro-Palestinian speaker and took an opposing view on the efficacy of Israeli actions to her pro-Israeli opponent, she shares a common viewing position with that opponent. By realising an absence of “doing Israel any good”, the speaker views those actions from the position, as her opponent does, of whether or not the actions are of benefit to Israel.

Similarly, the two viewpoints in Nuttall’s assertion that people (migrants) are not learning English and not integrating come from the same discursive deictic centre where there is an expectation of learning and integrating – an expectation that is attributed to wider discourse participants and which goes unchallenged by the interviewer.

A discursive deictic centre is similarly established in Andrew Neil’s interview with the leader of the Liberal Democrats at the time, Tim Farron. While their exchange is concerned with whether or not Farron is a Eurosceptic, what is interesting is Neil’s assertion that Farron is not being honest:

Example 4.10

AN: You are no Eurosceptic Mr Farron, are you? It’s not honest to say that to the British people.

In asserting Farron’s lack of honesty, Neil reproduces and reinforces the widely held expectation of honesty, though politicians’ lack of honesty is frequently a point of media speculation and public criticism. The two encoded viewpoints do not dispute whether or not honesty is required but only project Farron’s belief that he is compared with Neil’s assertion that he is not. Reproducing the expectation of honesty then establishes, albeit on a small scale, a discursive deictic centre where honesty is a baseline requirement of politicians. Rather than directly engaging with Neil’s characterisation of him as not being honest, Mr Farron, perhaps wisely, goes on to attack the basis of the claim; by delineating what he means by Eurosceptic, Farron attempts to demonstrate his honesty rather than deny Neil’s assertion of dishonesty.

In the same interview between Neil and Farron, Farron uses negation to introduce expectations into the discourse, again projecting others’ viewpoints. Here, the subject is the contentious issue of who has the final say on the Brexit deal negotiated between Britain and the European Union:
Example 4.11

TF: It should not be a deal stitched up by the politicians in Brussels and London. Instead it should be a deal that we agree with as a country, and that’s what we’re supporting.

In this example, parallel structures and negation are used to construct an opposition between those in power (“politicians in Brussels and London”) and those subject to that power (“we [...] as a country”) (see Davies, 2013 and Jeffries, 2010a on constructed opposition). However, the use of negation presupposes that the interviewer and potentially wider participants believe that it “should be a deal stitched up by the politicians in Brussels and London” and that a “stitched up” deal is possible or likely. The use of the phrase “stitched up” (meaning to intentionally or maliciously arrange a situation such that it disadvantages individuals or groups involved) negatively evaluates the inevitable prospect that it will be politicians who come to a final agreement. This evaluative phrase, however, makes it unlikely that someone who thinks that politicians should draw up the final agreement would see it as “stitched up”. The negated positive, then, is being introduced as an expectation rather than reproducing one. Farron is constructing his political opponents – in this case, the government – as intending to produce a stitched-up agreement against the interests of voters.

Negation can also be used to engage with individual political opponents, opposing parties and their policies. In an interview with Andrew Marr, shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott was challenged on her track record of not supporting anti-terrorist legislation and legislation around enhancing the powers of the security services. She was specifically challenged on whether or not the country could trust her given her support of the IRA in the 1980s. She responded with:

Example 4.12

No, no, no, but what I’m saying to you is this: it was 34 years ago, I had a rather splendid afro at the time – I don’t have the same hairstyle and I don’t have the same views, and it’s 34 years on. The hairstyle has gone and some of the views have gone.

On the same episode of The Andrew Marr Show, Amber Rudd (Home Secretary) was interviewed. When asked about Abbot’s defence of her beliefs in the past, Rudd said:

Example 4.13

What I would say to Diane Abbott is I’ve changed my hairstyle a few times in 34 years as well, but I have not changed my view about how we keep the British public safe.

Here, Rudd is constructing herself in opposition to Abbott for the viewing audience. If she had changed her views about how to keep the British public safe, as Abbott has, then she would be the same as her Labour party counterpart. By negating this and evoking Abbott’s assertion earlier in the TV programme, Rudd is placing herself in opposition to Abbott, although she does not assert any major policy difference on which they disagree. Rudd is implying that her approach to security is consistent and therefore better. However, there is nothing in being consistent that entails being particularly efficacious, or even good; for example, ineffective or discriminatory ideas on security do not, unlike wine, improve with age.
While Rudd engages directly with her Labour party counterpart and realises a conflict of ideas between them, she also, unsurprisingly, places the Labour Party as a whole in conflict with the Conservative party:

Example 4.14

AR: The Conservative Party is a party that is very frank about these things, unlike the Labour Party.

In example 14, the expectation is subtle and morphologically embedded in the use of “unlike”. The expectation of similarity between the Labour and Conservative parties is realised and rejected at word level. That expectation of similarity is presupposed, but probably also reflects wider beliefs that political parties in general are similar to one another. However, while the negator takes scope over only “like”, it influences the whole utterance, resulting in a meaning something like:

The Conservative party is X. The Labour party is not X.

As such, the Conservative Party is constructed in opposition to the Labour Party in terms of the presence and absence of frankness as the basis for being unlike. In embedding the negation in the second clause and in a morphological form, Rudd is able to assert something positive about the Conservatives and merely tack on the opposition to Labour without asserting the Labour Party’s lack of frankness in such a way as it could be easily challenged.

4.3.3 In the context of conflict

Where the examples above have considered the contribution of negation to enacting conflict or contributing to the bases of conflict, this final section looks at negation in the context of conflict, particularly in relation to heightening fears and tensions. The examples examined in this section focus on the use of negation in political interviews at a time when terrorist attacks and the ongoing conflicts that underpin them are a regular part of the news. Since 2001, there have been a series of terrorist incidents in the UK, with four taking place in the first half of 2017. Terrorism is not new to Britain and indeed is a problem worldwide. Recent terrorist attacks have seemingly been inspired by a perceived conflict between Western-style liberalism and religiously motivated extremism. This conflict is played out in various discourses on mass and social media platforms and through violent actions of nation states and extremist groups. Significant media space is devoted to the coverage of terrorist events.

This first example is taken from an interview between Andrew Marr (AM) and Labour shadow defence secretary Emily Thornberry (ET) on the day after the second terrorist attack during the official campaign period for the General Election. Part of the attack involved the killing and injuring of pedestrians with a van on London Bridge. Marr addresses the question of security, particularly in relation to London’s bridges:

Example 4.15

AM: This is the second attack on a London bridge and it just strikes me that perhaps London’s bridges are particularly soft targets. There aren’t bollards, there aren’t bits of street furniture to stop cars from getting onto the pavement, and of course people have nowhere to jump except into the river. Do you think we need to look again at the security of London bridges?
While Marr is ostensibly eliciting Thornberry’s views on security measures, he does so after establishing a high level of vulnerability in relation to pedestrians and bridges in London. He suggests that London’s bridges are “soft targets” but goes on to delineate the notion of “soft” as relating to a lack of bollards, street furniture and somewhere to jump. In negating the presence of these things, the utterance draws on common knowledge regarding what is possible for streets and raises that possibility to an expectation through presupposition. Thornberry and the audience are then constructed as expecting some kind of safety measures on London bridges, expectations that are defeated in the negated utterance. There are no doubt a great many streets and bridges across the UK that do not have barriers that would prevent a vehicle from mounting the pavement. By drawing attention to the possibility and thus projecting an unrealised expectation of preventative measures, such utterances have the potential to communicate to audiences the sense that they are at risk in everyday life. Of course, most activities involve some kind of risk and indeed a driver going out of control on any street and mounting the pavement is dangerous to pedestrians. However, in drawing attention to a lack of safety measures, Marr’s utterance has the potential to heighten the perception of danger, particularly from terrorism.

Thornberry picks up this “safety” meaning in her response:

Example 4.16

*ET*:  […] Obviously you can never make anywhere completely safe, but measures like that and like we’re now beginning to get around the House, around parliament, I think need to be looked at.

The negation of “make anywhere completely safe” in this example projects both Marr and the audience as holding the viewpoint that somewhere could be completely safe. While it is unlikely that either would genuinely hold this view given the nature of life in general, by projecting it as their expectation, the utterance sets it up as a possibility that is being defeated. Drawing attention to a lack of safety, like in the lack of bollards and so on, emphasises vulnerability and potentially heightens fears.

A related issue is the use of negation in relation to non-terrorist events in UK news bulletins. It has now become a frequent practice in news bulletins to note that acts of public violence or tragedy are not, or are not believed to be, acts of terrorism. Here, the description of an event as not being related to terrorism presents the listening audience as holding an expectation that needs to be corrected. But, of course, in saying that it is not an act of terrorism, the news producers raise this not only as a possibility but as a baseline expectation, repeated again and again to the point where audiences may expect terrorism at every turn despite its relative infrequency. Taken alongside a “them” and “us”-based media coverage of Islam and Muslims, such use of negation could in fact be inflammatory rather than providing the perhaps well-intentioned aim of reassurance.

The final example, from the same Thornberry/Marr interview, relates not to expectations or beliefs per se, but to intentions. Here, the use of negation in an imperative structure that functions as a prohibition presupposes that the interviewer and particularly the viewing audience intend to carry out an action that is negatively evaluated by the interviewee:

Example 4.17

*ET*:  Well, I don’t know if it’s a conscious— I don’t know if it’s done consciously or not, but clearly a side effect of it could be, and that absolutely we must not allow
to happen. And one of the responses, the response from London, should be to be brave, be calm, carry on. But also, do not let this derail our democracy. We go ahead with this election and we make sure people vote.

Marr raises the question of whether the timing of the latest terrorist attack during the general election campaign was aimed at disrupting the electoral process. What is particularly significant in relation to heightening tensions is Thornberry’s use of negation in an imperative structure that treats Marr and the audience as if they intend to “let this derail our democracy” and that it is in fact possible for democracy to be “derailed”. As with Example 4.2, the negative imperative encodes not only the point of view of the hearer in that they intend to carry out some action but also the point of view of the speaker that that action is negatively evaluated; after all, we are unlikely to prohibit something that is approved of. Here, the audience and Marr are being constructed as intending to allow “this” – the terrorist action – to impact on the process of democracy. The implication would seem to be that the impact of the attack has the potential to go beyond the isolated incident in London to undermine the very structure of society, adding to already heightened fears.

Areas of overlap between the types of effects created through negation in these examples are clear. For example, using negation to re-frame a hearer’s prior turns at talk can not only be a matter of local communicative conflict over meaning but can also contribute to the bases for conflict and contribute to an environment of heightened fear. However, the above characterisation of the types of viewpoint effects created through negation provides a general framework with reference points for examining how conflicting goals and ideas are realised in discourse.

4.4 Conclusions and transformative potential

It would seem that as social animals, human beings cannot avoid conflict of one kind or another, and as Tjosvold (2006) suggests, engaging with conflict situations is about managing conflict rather than simply resolving it. Political interviews would seem to be a situation in which conflict is managed and maintained, at least at the local level of the interviewer and interviewee, in order to achieve conflicting conversational goals in relation to the viewing or listening audience. Political interviews present an environment where conflict is a necessary part of the discourse type; if, as Montgomery (2008) notes, the aim of the political interview is to hold politicians to account for their policies, actions and ideological positions, then interviewer and interviewee are pursuing conflicting goals and presenting competing conceptualisations of situations, events and entities. One might argue that the realisation of this local communicative conflict attempts to shed light on potentially unpalatable policies, ideas and so on, and serves the very task of holding politicians to account. However, the mutually dependent relationship between interviewer and interviewee – one seeking votes, the other seeking “truth” – means that conflict is managed in order for the interview format to be mutually beneficial.

It is important to note, however, that this type of necessary conflict is not completely benign. The analyses carried out above demonstrate that negation not only contributes to local communicative conflict but also to the viewpoints that form the bases for wider conflicts of ideas. If understanding how language is used in discourse enhances our understanding of conflict – the notion explored in this volume – then understanding negation illustrates one aspect of the interplay between these two complex phenomena. The above discussion presents illustrations that demonstrate the contribution of negation to:
local conflict between speakers and hearers in managing the type of interaction and the turns at talk
• a more general level of conflict in the introduction or reproduction of ideas that form the bases of conflict
• potentially heightening fears and tensions in the environment of conflict

If indeed understanding language can illuminate our understanding of conflict, then there is a basis for considering in what way this understanding can contribute to transforming or managing conflict. In understanding the presuppositional qualities of negation, we (academics, professionals in the field of conflict management and transformation and everyday language users) can identify the kinds of ideas and conceptualisations that are being introduced into a discourse without, as Hodge and Kress (1979) note, participants needing to take responsibility for them. For example, in Paul Nuttall’s negative assertion that migrants are not integrating and not learning English, he contributes to the agenda of what constitutes community coherence without having to debate whether these things are actually fundamental. It is also possible to identify what kinds of elements potentially contribute to an environment of fear in conflict situations. For example, in Andrew Marr’s delineation of the notion of a “soft target” as being an absence of street furniture and bollards, the emphasis is placed on a lack of something that ought to be there, perhaps leading to a sense of privation and vulnerability even in the most mundane of actions – walking down the street. Heightening fears within the media in this way may impact on the possibility of a reasoned response in relation to a conflict situation.

We might also consider the very nature of negation as an indirect form of communication that can impact on conflict situations. As negation is ostensibly uninformative, it requires, like other mechanisms of indirectness, interlocutors to “work out” what speakers intend to mean. This leads to the potential for misunderstanding. While not an exclusive property of negation, it does add negation to a set of language practices where misunderstanding is a possible side effect in communication. However, as demonstrated in Example 4.18, although negation is itself indirect, it can be used to make implied meaning at least partially explicit and challenge ideas that are being indirectly introduced into a discourse:

Example 4.18

\[\text{AM:}\] I suppose what I’m wondering is the question about whether Abedi was red flagged or not at some point in the last few years may simply be because there are so many plots, so many people that they have to look at. One thing you could decide to do after Manchester is a step change in the size of MI5. You could double it. You could spend money that’s being spent on Trident or something else and put it into this. Have you considered that?

\[\text{AR:}\] We won’t shy away from finding out what else we can do to keep people safe.

Finally, we might ask how we can expand the circle of “we” that can engage with negation as a point of view mechanism and with its conflict potential. First is seeing the conflict potential of language practices in general and expanding our evidence-based understanding of the intersection of language and conflict. This evidenced-based, rigorous and detailed engagement with language in context should feed into an education system that not only introduces professional mediators to the centrality of language, but also to undergraduates. Encouraging and facilitating a critical engagement with language not only benefits individual students, but students also take their knowledge, understanding and skills
out into the wider community, become the wider community and are able to question the way that meaning is encoded and often obfuscated in the discourses we encounter on a daily basis.

Notes

1 Morphological negation, like negation as a whole, is varied and there are several affixes that carry the negation function: “un-” (“unfinished”, “unclear”, “unbuttoned”, “unequal”); “in-” and the variants “il-”, “im-”, “ir-” and “ig-” (e.g. “indispensable”, “illogical”, “impossible”, “irregular”, “ignorant”; “de-” (e.g. “detangle”, “decommissioned”); “dis-” (e.g. “discontinuous”, “dishonest”); “a/an-” (e.g. “atonal”, “anaerobic”); “-less” (e.g. “hopeless”, “homeless”); “-free” (e.g. “tax-free”, “sugar-free”); “ex-” (e.g. “ex-wife”, “ex-manager”).

2 The Andrew Marr Show – Andrew Marr and Emily Thornberry interview – 4 June 2017: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/04061702.pdf.


BBC election interviews – Andrew Neil and Tim Farron – 1 May 2017: https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2017/06/andrew-neil-interviews-tim-farron-full-transcript/


3 In political programmes such as The Andrew Marr Show (BBC) or Peston on Sunday (ITV), interviewers can be seen to switch positions as they interview politicians with opposing political stances on the same topic.

4 The position of shadow Home Secretary is held by a member of the shadow cabinet formed by the second largest political grouping in parliament – the official opposition to the government of the day. Shadow cabinet positions echo those in the government and function to hold the sitting government to account.

References


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