

A NOTE ON A STUDENT'S REPORT ON NOT-BECAUSE SENTENCES*

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Abstract

In this note, I would like to briefly discuss what an “unexpected” result of linguistic research might tell us about languages and linguistic study. The relevant research has to do with so called not-because sentences in English, which are known to be ambiguous between two interpretations, and the unexpected report was that there was yet another “third” interpretation for them. Although the report seems wrong and reflecting some problem in the research procedure, I would argue that the report offered me a chance to think about related linguistic phenomena from a broader perspective, and in this sense, contributed to my deeper understanding of not only English but also languages in general.

1. Prologue: A Student's Report on Not-Because Sentences

In one of the assignments of the Sociolinguistics class I taught in the 2005–2006 academic year at Bunkyo Gakuin University, I asked students to conduct some sort of fieldwork. The research target was so called not-because sentences in English such as (1).

- (1) Jennifer didn't go to the library because it was raining.
- a. Jennifer didn't go to the library for the reason stated, it was raining.
 - b. Jennifer went to the library for a reason as yet unstated, e.g. she had to return a book to the library.

The not-because sentence in (1) is ambiguous between verb negation (Not-V) as in (1a) and because negation (Not-Bec) as in (1b). Despite the alleged strong preference for the Not-V interpretation, the Not-Bec interpretation is still considered to be available (Frazier and Clifton (1996)).

The task assigned to the students of the class was to construct a not-because sentence by themselves, and then ask a native speaker of English how he/she interprets the sentence.¹ Below are some examples of the not-because sentences students made:

- (2) My friend did not go to the gym because she was tired.

- a. My friend did not go to the gym for the reason stated, she was tired. (Not-V)
 - b. My friend went to the gym for a reason as yet unstated. (Not-Bec)
- (3) Ai did not play the piano because it was broken.
- a. Ai didn't play the piano for the reason stated, it was broken. (Not-V)
 - b. Ai played the piano for a reason as yet unstated. (Not-Bec)
- (4) Tom did not go shopping because he caught a cold.
- a. Tom did not go shopping for the reason stated, he caught a cold. (Not-V)
 - b. Tom went shopping for a reason as yet stated. (Not-Bec)

Most of the students' reports on this task were consistent with what has been reported in the literature. That is to say, although Not-V is the default, preferred interpretation, compared to the corresponding Not-Bec interpretation, the Not-Bec interpretation is still available in certain context (cf. Koizumi (2006) and references therein). For example, in (4), we tend to get the Not-V interpretation in (4a), rather than the Not-Bec interpretation in (4b), because our common background knowledge tells us that people would rather stay home when they have a cold. For the Not-Bec interpretation in (4b) to go through, we need to imagine a special situation like the following:

- (5) Tom was supposed to go out and buy a birthday present for his girlfriend. However, he caught a cold and had a feeling that the cold would be getting worse.

When he went shopping, his family thought that he went shopping because he had just caught a cold and his cold was just at the beginning stage. In fact, however, he was already feeling too sick to go out, but went shopping anyway for another reason (Not-Bec): because he knew that the store he intended to go to would be closed for renovation for a few weeks from the next day, and wanted to finish his shopping before that.

At least impressionistically, a Not-Bec interpretation requires more search for a possible and appropriate situation for the interpretation than a Not-V interpretation does, and this was what most of the students found out through their fieldwork. Beside that, some students reported that for the Not-Bec interpretation, the native English speakers preferred to have the negation *not* immediately before the because clause and continue the sentence providing another reason. For example, the Not-Bec interpretation of (1) would be easily achieved if the sentence was like (6).

- (6) Jennifer went to the library not because it was raining (but because...).

One of the 53 students who submitted the assignment made a striking report that a native speaker she consulted volunteered a "third" interpretation for a not-because sentence.

The example in (2) was what she constructed, and the third interpretation she reported was something like (7).

(7) My friend did not go to the gym for a reason as yet unstated, e.g. it was raining hard outside.

In (7), negation takes scope over both the *V* and the because clause. I will refer to this interpretation as the Not-[*V*+*Bec*] interpretation, henceforth. To my knowledge, such an interpretation has never been reported for not-because sentences, and this student's report made me wonder if this "third" interpretation was truly available to native English speakers and has just been accidentally neglected in the literature, or, it was only reflecting some problem in her fieldwork procedure, i.e. problem with the way how the student approached the native speaker's knowledge of English regarding not-because sentences. I would like to take this note as an opportunity to make some informal reflection on this student's report.

2. Following Up the Student's Report

2.1. The "Third" Interpretation of Not-Because Sentences

The first thing I did was to talk to the student and ask her about the situation in which she elicited the Not-[*V*+*Bec*] interpretation from a native English speaker. According to her, when she was asking a native English speaker (A) about the possible interpretations of the not-because sentence in (2), the speaker A volunteered the third, Not-[*V*+*Bec*] interpretation in addition to the Not-*V* interpretation. The speaker A did not volunteer the second, Not-*Bec* interpretation, which is already known to be available (though disfavored). This made me suspect that the speaker A was mixed up the Not-*Bec* interpretation with the Not-[*V*+*Bec*] one and ended up mistakenly negating the verb.

The next step I took was to go to a native speaker of English (B) and asked B if the Not-[*V*+*Bec*] interpretation is possible at all for the not-because sentence in (1). The speaker B reflected on the availability of the Not-[*V*+*Bec*] interpretation for a while, probably around a few minutes (keeping reading the sentence aloud with different prosodic patterns, which looked as if B was searching for the appropriate prosody to go with the Not-[*V*+*Bec*] interpretation). Finally, the speaker B said, "I am sorry, I cannot get that interpretation however hard I try!" It seems as if the speaker B had failed to think of a context in which the Not-[*V*+*Bec*] interpretation might make sense.

Then, two other native speakers of English (C and D) came by, both of whom did not get the third interpretation, either. When I told them about the student's report that an English speaker volunteered the Not-[*V*+*Bec*] interpretation, the speaker C said, "oh, I

guess it was just that the person was drunk or something at that time,” which implies that such an interpretation came out as a slip of tongue. The other speakers (B and D) agreed with C on this. All these reactions of the native speakers (B, C and D) strongly suggest that they never get the Not-[V+Bec] interpretation for a not-because sentence, no matter how they try to think of an appropriate context for the interpretation.

Based on the result of this brief and informal follow-up to the student’s research, I would conclude that the third interpretation does not exist, and there was some kind of problem in how the student elicited the data. This tells us a lesson that we cannot be too careful in working with a language consultant, especially when we are dealing with intricate linguistic phenomena such as interpretational ambiguity. In the specific case of not-because sentences, not only situations or discourse context but also prosody, all of which supposedly interact with each other, affect the availability and preference of interpretations. For example, the Not-V interpretation is associated with the “default” prosodic pattern where the beginning of the because clause corresponds to an intonational break. On the other hand, the Not-Bec interpretation is associated with a marked prosodic pattern in which the whole sentence ends with a continuation rise (cf. Koizumi (2006)).

2.2. Going beyond Not-Because Sentences

The follow-up to the student’s report on not-because sentences revealed that not-because sentences do not have the Not-[V+Bec] interpretation. In other words, the negation *not* cannot take scope over the V and the because clause at the same time within a sentence. To come to think about it, this is a nontrivial fact because it seems that *not* may license two different negative polarity items (NPIs) in sentences like (8)–(10) below. Imagine that these sentences are uttered by a parent who is complaining about his/her kids’ diet.


- (8) I do not want anybody to eat anything before dinner.
- (9) I do not want anybody to eat sweets before any meal.
- (10) I do not want my kids to eat anything before any meal.

According to a native speaker of English I consulted, the sentence in (8) can mean that “I don’t want anybody to eat, and I don’t want them to eat anything.” Likewise, the sentence in (9) can mean that “I don’t want anybody to eat sweets, and I don’t want that to happen before any meal,” and (10) can mean that “I don’t want my kids to eat anything, and I don’t want my kids to eat before any meal.” This is schematized as follows:

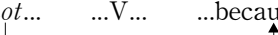
- (11) ... *not*... ...NPI₁... ...NPI₂...
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- (The arrow stands for licensing.)

This contrasts with not-because sentences where the negation *not* applies to one element only, the V or the because clause. They cannot be negated at the same time within a sentence, i.e. Not-[V+Bec] interpretation is not available.

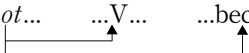
(12) a. Not-V interpretation

... *not*... ...V... ...because...


b. Not-Bec interpretation

... *not*... ...V... ...because...


c. *Not-[V+Bec] interpretation

... *not*... ...V... ...because...


One might argue that licensing of NPI and the interpretation of not in not-because sentences are different syntactic processes and hence are subject to different syntactic (structural) conditions. Even so, the remaining question is why doubling the licit NPI licensing in a sentence is allowed whereas doubling the licit Not-X association in a sentence is not in a not-because sentence. In other words, why (12a) plus (12b) do not imply (12c) remains unexplained.

At this point, I would like to argue that (12c) is ruled out for prosodic reasons. Recall that the Not-V interpretation and the Not-Bec interpretation are associated with different prosodic patterns: there occurs an intonational break at the beginning of the because clause in the former, whereas there is not such a break and the whole sentence ends with a continuation rise in the latter (cf. 2.1). Since it is not possible to have two different prosodic patterns for one sentence, we can only have the Not-V interpretation, or the Not-Bec interpretation.

3. Epilogue

To my surprise, one of my students reported that according to her data collection, a not-because sentence has yet unknown “third” interpretation. At first, I thought it could be a novel discovery that has been unfound in the previous studies, but a simple follow-up showed that things were not that easy. Although the student’s report was not backed up and turned out to be incorrect, it offered me a chance to go beyond the not-because sentences to think about the scope of negation in general. In future research, I would like to further expand the empirical domain and investigate the relationship between prosody and interpretation in general (e.g. along the lines with Koizumi (in prep.)).

References

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- Koizumi, Y. 2006. “If wide-scope negation isn’t hard because the parser gets stuck, what does explain the problem?” paper presented at *Human Sentence Processing and Production*, University of Tokyo, Komaba.
- Koizumi, Y. in prep. “On the interaction of negation and focus in English,” Doctoral thesis, City University of New York.

- * I thank Bruce Brinkman, Eleanor Kelly, and John Wendel for interesting discussion and comments on not-because sentences. I also thank Bruce and Ellie for acting as language informants, and an anonymous student for the permission of my talking about her report in this note. Any remaining inadequacies or misunderstanding of the data are solely my responsibility.
- 1 Students were also asked to report how the native speaker of English read aloud the sentence. This is irrelevant to the main part of this paper and will be ignored at the moment. (But see 2. 2.)