

Scope interactions between indefinites and negation in German

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In the German middle field, the clausal negation *nicht* 'not' can take inverse scope over a preceding existential indefinite. This is shown by the fact that *ein Boot nicht* 'a boat not' in the sentence *Leider stand uns ein Boot nicht zur Verfügung* 'Unfortunately, a boat was not available to us' can be replaced by *kein Boot* 'no boat' without a change in meaning. Following the assumption that semantically *kein* 'no' is composed of the meanings of the negation *nicht* 'not' and the existential quantifier *ein* 'a' (Jacobs 1990, Zeijlstra 2011), we argue that the negation can take inverse scope over the preceding existential quantifier in this sentence.

This exceptional scope configuration contradicts the widely held assumption that negation in German exhibits purely linear scope (Jacobs 1982). It therefore raises the question of which factors license or favor this inverse negative scope reading. Both the interpretation of scope and the interpretation of indefinites are known to depend on the interaction of several linguistic factors, such as word order, the expression of negation, information-structural properties, and genericity. The goal of this corpus study is to disentangle these factors and to identify patterns that determine the relative scope of indefinites and negation in written corpus data.

Using targeted annotation tests, we investigate (i) the range of scope relations in *ein N nicht* 'a N not' sentences, (ii) the role of genericity in shaping these scope interpretations, and (iii) the influence of the givenness of the indefinite on inverse negative scope. Our preliminary results show that inverse negative scope sentences occur frequently and are not necessarily generic, suggesting that the common assumption of a strictly linear scope of negation in the German middle field needs to be revised. We further show that inverse negative scope is more common with inferentially given indefinites, indicating that its availability depends on information-structural factors such as givenness.

References

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