Long Distance Negative Concord as Successive Cyclic Movement of Negation in African American English

Anissa Zaitsu

1. Introduction

One prominent way of understanding the phenomenon of Negative Concord (NC) is that it involves a dependency between two negative expressions (Laka 1990, Ladusaw 1992, Zeijlstra 2022). An instance of clausal negation, NEG, licenses the NCI, a morphologically negative expression that has no negative semantics of its own. Omitting the licensing NEG results in unacceptability, or else a distinct interpretation (Herburger 2001):

(1) Italian (Rizzi 1982: 122)
Gianni *(**non**) ha contattato **nessuno**
Gianni *(NEG) has contacted NCI
'Gianni hasn't contacted anybody.' (NC)

Although NC dependencies have mostly been studied in monoclausal environments, there are a handful of reported instances wherein the NC dependency crosses a finite clause boundary, referred to here as Long Distance Negative Concord (LDNC). In Zeijstra's (2004, 2022) influential account of NC, the NC dependency is specified syntactically, and thus, it is expected to be established in a local fashion. These environments are notable because they raise questions about the kind of dependency involved in NC.

(2) a. French (Kayne 1981)
Je **n'ai** exigé [$_{CP}$ qu'ils arrêtent **personne**].
'I have required for them not to arrest anybody.' (NC)

b. Spanish (Herburger 2024)
No creo [$_{CP}$ que Juan dijera que **nadie** haya llamado].
'I don't think that Juan said that anyone has called.' (NC)

c. Italian (Rizzi 1982)
Piero **non** crede [$_{CP}$ che Gianni possa fare **niente**].
'Piero thinks that Gianni can't do anything.' (NC)

d. Hebrew (marked as '?' but possible in Sichel 2018a)
?hi **lo** amra [$_{CP}$ Se-hi pagSa **af exad** *(me-hem)].
'She didn't say that she met any one *(of them).' (NC)

If the NC dependency is specified syntactically, as in Zeijlstra's (2004, 2022) influential account, how should we understand the possibility of NC in these long distance environments? Focusing on LDNC in African American English, I evaluate two plausible hypotheses for maintaining locality in the NC dependency. One involves NCI-movement, first proposed in Kayne 1981, wherein the NCI covertly moves

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to the edge of CP, putting it in the domain of the licensing NEG. The other involves NEG-movement, wherein the licensing NEG is initially merged in the domain of the NCI, and then NEG successive cyclically moves through Spec-CP to the matrix clause.

I demonstrate that the acceptability of LDNC in AAE is dependent on whether the finite clause boundary allows for the NC dependency to be established in a sufficiently local manner, supported by findings from a recently conducted elicitation study. I argue against covert NCI-movement, using novel data from scope-taking properties of NCIs in AAE. I explore the natural alternative: the movement of negation.

Although fully committing to the NEG-movement account may be premature at this point, it provides notable explanatory benefits. As we will see, it helps make sense of the locality conditions on LDNC in AAE, and it more directly accounts for the scope-related behaviors of NCIs in AAE. More broadly, the investigation highlights the relevance of LDNC patterns for distinguishing among the many competing analyses of NC, and it contributes to the understanding of the typology of NC patterns crosslinguistically.

2. Background

2.1. African American English

African American English (AAE) is a class of dialects characterized by a systematic set of morphological, phonological, and syntactic features. It is primarily identified in the speech of those racialized as Black across various regions of the U.S. NC has been documented across several regional varieties (Green 2002, Wolfram 2004).

This study relies on judgment data from seven speakers of AAE: five from the San Francisco Bay Area and two from the Atlanta Metropolitan area. All seven consultants were identified as AAE speakers because they reported using NC along with other canonical morphosyntactic features of AAE, established in a series of influential sociolinguistic studies (Labov et al. 1968, Fasold 1972, Rickford 1999, Wolfram & Thomas 2002). Elicitation studies, such as this one, are rare in the study of AAE, with only a handful of notable exceptions (e.g., Sells et al. 1996, Bender 2000, Green 2002).

One methodological concern, raised by Labov (1972), is that "when speakers of a subordinate dialect are asked direct questions about their language, their answers will shift in an irregular manner toward [or away from] the superordinate dialect." In response to this concern, Sells et al. 1996 report that, for their elicitation study, "this danger was minimized by comparisons with the spontaneous speech data ... and by the fact that our consultants' judgments, elicited separately, converged on many of the crucial cases." In line with the methodology of Sells et al. 1996, the present study gathered data from several consultants, confirming that their judgments consistently converged. Data points that come from the present elicitation study are marked as 'AAE.23-24.'

2.2. Negative Concord in African American English

Negative Concord systems typically display two distinct surface patterns. In Strict NC systems, NCIs must co-occur with an overt marker of clausal negation, while in Non-Strict NC systems, the overt presence of clausal negation is only obligatory—or, at least preferred—when the NCI is postverbal. The variety of AAE that I analyze here has a Non-Strict NC system. The overt marker of negation is optionally present when the NCI appears preverbally.[1]

(3) a. Nobody don't know nothin'
'Nobody knows anything.' (NC)

b. None of them knows nothin' about it.
'None of them knows anything about it.' (NC) (Labov et al. 1968: 74)

[1] This characteristic has been documented both in spontaneous and elicited speech across various regional dialects of AAE, as noted in studies by Labov et al. (1968), Wolfram (1969), and Green (2002), and has been further validated through consultations conducted for this study.

This optional presence of negation in such environments is also found in other Non-Strict NC systems, such as Catalan (Déprez et al. 2015) and West Flemish (Haegeman & Lohndal 2010).

Among my consultants, the use of the sentential marker of negation *n't* is strongly preferred when the NCI is postverbal.

(4) a. I ain't seen nobody today.
'I haven't seen anybody today.' (NC)

b. ??She havin' nothin' for breakfast.
'She is having nothing for breakfast.' (AAE.23-24)

While omitting *n't*, as in (4b), does not lead to unacceptability, it does seem to mark something semantically or pragmatically distinct.[2]

3. Long Distance Negative Concord

LDNC is attested in the spontaneous speech of AAE speakers, as documented in corpus data from CORAAL (Kendall & Farrington 2021), which are aggregated in Robinson & Thoms 2021a and Robinson 2022). It has also been identified in speech elicited through sociolinguistic interviews (e.g., Martin & Wolfram 1998), one instance of which is presented in (5):

(5) He **ain't** say [$_{CP}$ **nobody** was eating with **no** college president].
'He didn't say anybody was eating with any college president.' (NC)

Building on this, this section begins to lay out the conditions on LDNC uncovered in elicitation. As we will see, LDNC is blocked in syntactic environments that produce island effects in the domain of Wh-movement. Specifically, LDNC is blocked when the NC dependency must cross factive predicates, and embedded topicalized phrases. In contrast to Wh-movement, these constraints on LDNC do not lead to outright unacceptability. Instead, they produce an interpretive effect, specifically resulting in Double Negation (DN) readings.

3.1. When LDNC is possible

LDNC is possible across Neg-Raising predicates like *think* and *believe*. When negated, Neg-Raising predicates give rise to an interpretation wherein the negation in the matrix clause is actually interpreted in the embedded clause (Bartsch 1973 a.o.).

(6) a. Ella don't **think** she talked to nobody.
'Ella don't think she talked to anybody.' (NC)

b. Monica don't **think** nobody can get through to Rachel.
'Monica don't think anybody can get through to Rachel.' (NC)

c. Nobody **thinks** Amy gonna do nothin on her trip.
'Nobody thinks Amy is gonna do anything on her trip.' (NC) (AAE.23–24)

Notably, the embedded NCI can occur in both subject and object positions. In French, LDNC is only possible if the NCI is in some non-subject position (Kayne 1981).

LDNC is also possible across predicates like *say*, which is not a Neg-Raising predicate.

[2] In Romance language NC, postverbal NCIs without an overt NEG-licenser are possible, but notably marked (Herburger 2001). The marked status of isolated post-verbal NCIs has been attributed to a low scope reading of negation, which contrasts with the sentential scope of the explicit NEG-licenser. However, Penka 2010 contends that isolated postverbal NCIs can assume sentential scope, thus the reasons for their marked nature remain unclear.

(7) a. Ross didn't **say** that nobody would stay until the end.
'Ross didn't say that anybody would stay until the end.' (NC)

b. Carly ain't **say** she seen nobody at Travis's crib.
'Carly ain't say she seen anybody at Travis's crib.' (NC) (AAE.23-24)

Thus, the possibility of LDNC in (6) cannot be attributed to the fact those embedding predicates permit the Neg-Raising interpretation.

3.2. When LDNC is not possible

LDNC is not possible across factive predicates: predicates that presuppose the truth of their complement (Kiparsky & Kiparsky 1970).

(8) a. Phoebe don't **regret** that nobody showed up.
⇝ What Phoebe doesn't regret is that nobody showed up. (DN)

b. Billy didn't **forget** that John got him nothin for his birthday.
⇝ What Billy didn't forget is that John got him nothing for his birthday. (DN)

c. Nobody **forgot** that Jill found nothing on the treasure hunt.
⇝ What nobody forgot is that Jill found nothing on the treasure hunt. (DN)

d. Nobody **knows** that John likes nobody.
⇝ What nobody knows is that John likes nobody. (DN) (AAE.23-24)

LDNC is also not possible when the embedded clause contains a topicalized phrase.[3]

(9) a. John don't think that [**about that**]$_1$, nobody will care $\_\__1$.
⇝ John thinks that nobody will care about something else (not about that). (DN)

b. Carly ain't said that [**those shoes**]$_1$, Mark would send $\_\__1$ to nobody.
⇝ Carly said that Mark would send a different pair of shoes (not those shoes) to nobody. (DN) (AAE.23-24)

These data strongly suggest that some aspect of the NC dependency is sensitive to conditions on syntactic locality, as would be predicted by a syntactic account of NC.[4]

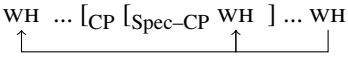
As is well-established, long-distance Wh-movement is degraded across factive predicates (Adams 1985, inter alia), and is likewise blocked when crossing an embedded topicalized phrase (Chomsky 1977). These environments can be unified under a particular view of syntactic locality, which I state informally here. According to Chomsky's (2001) phase theory, syntactic elements must first move to the edge of a phase—such as Spec-CP—in order to establish dependencies with projections higher than that phase. A range of proposals accounts for why Wh-elements cannot escape these clauses, but they converge on the idea that the phase edge is unavailable. This may be due to a topicalized XP occupying Spec-CP (Chomsky 1977; de Vos 2014), the presence of a factive operator at the phase edge (Rooryck 1992), or the syntactic size of the factive complement being too small to project a CP phase edge at all (Kastner 2015). The upshot is that access to Spec-CP is a necessary condition for establishing long-distance movement dependencies.

[3] This test is modeled on examples from Collins and Postal (2014), which were presented as evidence for a syntactic Neg-Raising account of Negative Polarity Items in standard varieties of English.

[4] However, I have also investigated other known syntactic islands, including relative clauses, complex noun phrases, coordination, and Wh-islands. Interestingly, strong islands like complex NPs do not exhibit uniform behavior, nor do relative clauses, challenging the expectations of a purely movement-based analysis, which I develop in the remainder of this paper.

(10) Long distance Wh-movement is blocked

(11) Long distance Wh-movement must proceed successive cyclically



In the next section, I outline a working theory of how the NC dependency is established. I then outline two possible options for how the dependency might adhere to such locality conditions.

4. LDNC and syntactic locality

4.1. Zeijlstra's Agree account of NC applied to AAE

According to Zeijlstra's (2004, 2022) account of NC, all NCIs come with an uninterpretable *u*NEG feature, which must be checked by a corresponding *i*NEG via Upward *Agree*. In this system, NCIs are semantically non-negative, instantiating an existential interpretation. Non-Strict NC is argued to have two NEG-licensers, the overt marker of clausal negation *n't* in AAE and a covert negative operator ($\varnothing_{i\text{NEG}}$).

(12) Distribution of NEG-features

NEG: *n't*$_{i\text{NEG}}$, $\varnothing_{i\text{NEG}}$	semantics of NEG: ¬
NCI: XP$_{u\text{NEG}}$	semantics of NCI: ∃

In this system, postverbal NCIs are licensed by *n't*, while preverbal NCIs are licensed by $\varnothing_{i\text{NEG}}$.

(13) a. *n't* ... V ... NCI
*i*NEG ... V ... *u*NEG
'I didn't see nobody.'

b. ∅ NCI ... V
*i*NEG *u*NEG ... V
'Nobody called.'

Abstract negative operators with licensing capabilities and negative semantics ($\varnothing_{i\text{NEG}}$) may enter the structure if no other licenser is present (Zeijlstra 2004, 2022).[5]

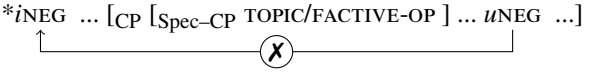
As a syntactic operation, *Agree* is expected to adhere to the Phase Impenetrability Condition (PIC):

(14) *Phase Impenetrability Condition* (PIC) (Chomsky 2001)
In a phase α with head H, the domain of H is not accessible to operations outside α, only H and its edge are accessible to such operations.

By (14), if a probe and a goal are separated by a phase head, *Agree* is expected to be blocked. We have observed that LDNC is sensitive to domains where the PIC is active, particularly when the edge of a finite CP is inaccessible. This is expected on Zeijlstra's *Agree* account.

[5] Several unresolved issues remain concerning the 'last resort' status of covert NEG, especially in terms of how it should be analytically encoded. Covert NEG must be subject to an economy condition to help explain the general preference for overt NEG-licensers with postverbal NCIs and to help constrain DN readings, which are typically unavailable in canonical monoclausal NC environments.

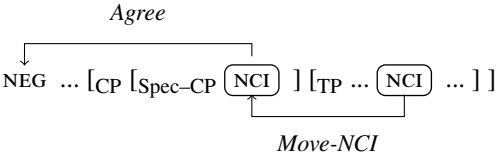
(15) *Agree* is blocked



It is now possible to ask: when the edge of CP is available, what moves? There are two options: NCI-movement or NEG-movement, each of which force us to make a different set of commitments, and also give rise to distinct predictions about the scope of the NCI, to be tested in the next section.

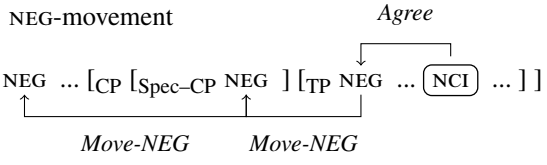
On the NCI-movement approach, the NCI moves covertly to the edge of the CP that contains it to be in the same domain as its licenser (Kayne 1981; Rizzi 1982, Jaeggli 1981, Sichel 2018a,b, Zeijlstra 2018).

(16) NCI-movement



On the NEG-movement approach, the NCI stays in situ, but the NEG-licenser moves from the embedded clause into the matrix clause (an adapted version of the NEG-movement approach of Collins & Postal 2014, Blanchette 2015, Robinson & Thoms 2021b).

(17) NEG-movement

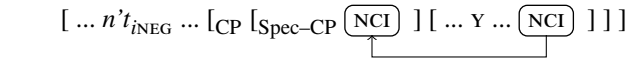


Next, I show that the scope-taking possibilities for the NCI are not limited in the way we would expect if covert NCI-movement facilitated LDNC.

4.2. Scopal predictions for two movement possibilities

If the NCI always undergoes covert movement to the edge of CP in LDNC, the NCI should always be interpreted higher than other elements in the CP. This is due to the principle of Scope Economy (Fox 2000), which states that covert movement of some XP must always result in an interpretive effect; i.e., covert movement cannot be semantically vacuous. If the NCI moved to the phase edge covertly, but was interpreted in its base position, this would violate Scope Economy. Thus, we expect the following scopal possibilities on the NCI-movement account; I use Y as a placeholder for potential scope-taking elements within CP.

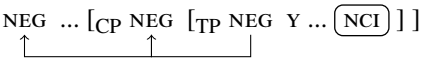
(18) Covert NCI-movement



✓ NCI > Y; ✗ Y > NCI

If, as on the alternative analysis discussed above, the licensing negation moves, the scope-taking possibilities for NCIs should be unaffected; it will either covertly raise–as is possible for existentials more generally–and take scope over Y, or it will stay in situ, taking scope from its base position.

(19) NEG-movement



✓ NCI > Y ; ✓ Y > NCI

These two options can be teased apart by examining contexts in which the existential is forced to take scope below an element, Y. If covert NCI-movement is a necessary step for the syntactic derivation to converge, then we expect LDNC to be incompatible with contexts that force the NCI to take scope from its base position, as this would be a violation of Scope Economy.

4.3. Against NCI*-movement*

Given the view of NC sketched in Section 4.3 NCIs should reflect the scopal behavior characteristic of other existential expressions. In mainstream varieties of English (that do not have NC), negative indefinite expressions like *no employees* have been argued to decompose into a negative and an existential component of interpretation (Penka 2010, a.o.).

(20) 'no employees' = [NEG ∃ employees]

What is relevant here is that there are two interpretive possibilities for the existential component of this kind of negative indefinite. In (21), ∃ can either scope above the modal, *needs to*, or below it.

(21) He needs to fire no employee.

a. There is no employee *x*, such that he needs to fire *x*. NEG > ∃ > MOD

b. It is not required that he fire an employee. NEG > MOD > ∃

It is possible to force ∃ to take narrow scope in two kinds of environments: (i) in existential *there*-constructions (Penka 2007), and (ii) when denying the existential implication that arises in the high scope reading of the existential (Iatridou & Sichel 2011)

(22) a. There needs to be no doctor here. NEG > MOD > ∃

b. They need to write no book about Covid next year. NEG > MOD > ∃

Given the assumption that NCIs are lexically encoded as existential and that covert movement adheres to Scope Economy, it follows that environments requiring the existential quantifier to take narrow scope will be incompatible with LDNC under the NCI-movement hypothesis.

However, the fact of the matter is that LDNC is acceptable in contexts that force the low scope of the NCI, according to speakers consulted in AAE.23-24:

(23) a. Amy ain't said there has to be no doctor here to get the vaccine. NEG > MOD > ∃

b. Amy ain't said they need to write no book about Covid next year. NEG > MOD > ∃

This means that the NCI itself is not what moves, which in turn argues in favor of an alternative account, where other element involved in the NC dependency moves, such as NEG, as already sketched in (17). This alternative is detailed below.

5. The NEG-movement account

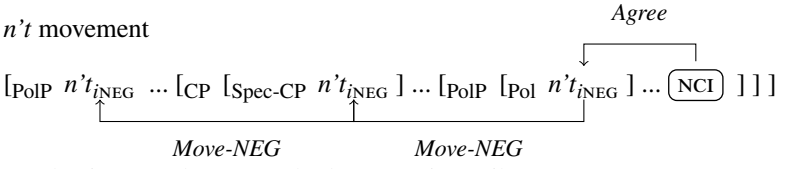
5.1. Accounting for LDNC

A NEG-movement account accommodates the same set of empirical facts we have observed with respect to the locality conditions on LDNC, while straightforwardly accounting for the scopal behavior of NCIs in AAE. To account for LDNC with the NEG-movement account, we will maintain the *Agree*-based account outlined in (12). The two NEG-licensers, *n't* or covert NEG, will originate in the embedded clause to locally license the NCI. I will assume that *n't* originates as the head of Pol, which is the complement of T in English.

In LDNC environments, *n't* may move to a higher PolP if it first moves through the specifier of an available phase edge, assuming that heads may move to phrasal positions (Matushansky 2006, Harizanov

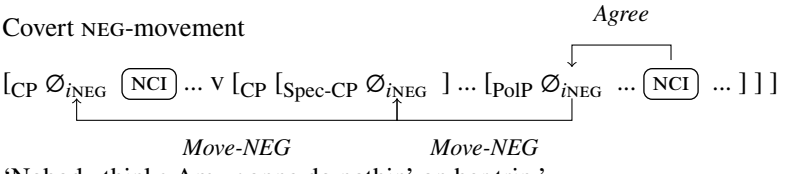
2019). I take no position on whether *n't* ultimately moves to a head or phrasal position in PolP in LDNC. In this system, it will be necessary to assume that the highest copy of *n't* is pronounced at PF and interpreted at LF.[6]

(24) *n't* movement



'Carly ain't say she seen nobody at Travis's crib.'

(25) Covert NEG-movement



'Nobody thinks Amy gonna do nothin' on her trip.'

There is also the possibility that covert NEG originates in the embedded clause when there is no NCI in the matrix clause. This would generate the example in (26a), which is marked. Just like in NC in the monoclausal domain, there is a preference for the overt licenser in LDNC; this is in need of explanation in both kinds of environments (Penka 2010).

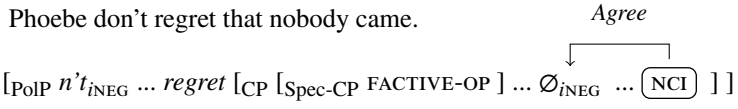
(26) a. ?? John thinks Mary likes nobody.

b. John don't think Mary likes nobody. (AAE.23-24)

5.2. When movement is blocked: Double negation interpretations

Double negation interpretations are predicted to arise in LDNC whenever the specifier of CP is unavailable for an embedded NEG to move to. Since NEG must originate in the same domain as the NCI, and since the specifier of CP will be blocked when either a FACTIVE-OP or TOPIC occupies it, any instance of NEG higher than the embedded CP must have been base-generated there, thus giving rise to DN readings, as schematized in (27).

(27) Phoebe don't regret that nobody came. (=DN)



The NEG-licenser, *n't*, must have originated in the matrix clause in (27) because it would have been impossible for *n't* to establish movement chain with any position inside the embedded clause due to the unavailability of Spec-CP.

6. Conclusion

A movement account for LDNC is useful for understanding why the NC dependency seems to be disrupted in environments that give rise to island effects, e.g. involving factivity and topicalization. The NEG-movement account is particularly attractive in that it straightforwardly accounts for the scopal behavior of NCIs in AAE LDNC.

This analysis also lends itself well to understanding differences in LDNC systems cross-linguistically as a matter of potential parametric variation. Both NCI-movement and NEG-movement hypotheses arise

[6] Both Neg-Raising predicates and non-Neg-Raising predicates permit LDNC (see Section 3.1). Thus, if they are to receive a unified explanation, we should assume that, in both cases, *n't* is interpreted in the matrix clause. The Neg-Raising interpretation would then be due to semantic inference (Bartsch 1973; Gajewski 2007).

according to the assumptions that NC involves syntactic *Agree*, and that *Agree* is constrained by syntactic locality conditions. In languages that have LDNC, some might employ the NEG-movement strategy (e.g., AAE), and another might employ the NCI-movement strategy. For instance, in Hebrew, LDNC is possible, but it is not compatible with contexts that force the narrow scope of the NCI (Sichel 2018b).

(28) *[$_{\text{NEG}}$ lo] amarti Se-yeS [$_{\text{NCI}}$ af sefer] Sel xomski al ha-madaf.
Intended: 'I didn't say that there were any books by Chomsky on the shelf.'

Open questions remain as to how covert NEG might be more principally constrained. If there are two negative operators in NC languages, why don't we find DN readings more generally? DN readings are possible in NC languages, but constrained. Such readings seem to be connected to focus (e.g., Déprez & Yeaton 2022). One current line of investigation takes NCIs to be alternative-introducing expressions, already independently proposed for indefinite expressions in other languages (e.g., Kratzer & Shimoyama 2002). We expect that alternative-introducing NCIs will interact in various ways with focus, which also involve alternatives. This opens up the possibility that covert NEG is a focus-sensitive operator, perhaps parallel to the Q-operator, which evaluates the alternatives associated with Wh-elements (Beck 2006).

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