Morphosyntactic effects of NPI-licensing in Cairene Egyptian Arabic: The puzzle of -š disappearance resolved
keywords: negation, negative polarity, Agree

Introduction. Cairene Egyptian Arabic (CEA) exhibits a two-pattern negation system: the circumfixal maa…š-pattern (1a); and the independent miš-pattern (1b).

1a. 

\[
\text{maa}-\text{š}-\text{saafi}-\text{r}-\text{t-š} \quad \text{miš} \quad \text{ha-saafir}
\]

\[
\text{NEG-travel.PERF-1SG-NEG} \quad \text{NEG}\quad \text{FUT-travel.IPFV.1SG}
\]

‘I did not travel.’ ‘I will not travel.’

In the relevant literature, two main analyses of Arabic negation can be distinguished: -š as a Spec of maa (Ouhalla 2002), and maa…š as a discontinuous Neg head (Benmamoun 1997, 2000).

2a.        NegP Spec      Neg' -š        VP  maa ... V ...

2b.        NegP Spec    Neg'           VP maa...š ... V ...

In this paper, I provide data from sentences with Negative Polarity Items (NPIs), showing that neither structure in (2) is empirically adequate. Instead, adapting a proposal in Zeijlstra (2008), I argue for a Split Neg analysis, whereby maa and -š are separate heads.

The Puzzle. While -š is obligatory in (1), it is strictly disallowed if the NPI ūmr (=ever) occurs in pre-negative position (3a); when ūmr appears postverbally, -š must be realized, however:

3a. ūmr-ii maa-saafir-t(*-š) Masr ever-my NEG-travel.PERF-1SG-NEG Egypt

‘I have never travelled to Egypt.’

b. maa-saafir-t(*-š) ūmr-ii NEG-travel.PERF-1SG-(NEG) Egypt ever-my

‘I have never travelled to Egypt.’

The complementary distribution between -š and ūmr may seem to favor an analysis of negation as in (2a). Such an analysis, however, fails to explain why no such effect takes place with other NPIs such as lissah (=yet):

4a. Mona lissah maa-saafir-it-*($)

Mona yet NEG-travel.PERF-3SGF-NEG

‘Mona has not travelled yet.’

b. Mona maa-saafir-it-*($) lissah

Mona NEG-travel.PERF-3SGF-NEG yet

‘Mona has not travelled yet.’

Similarly, the discontinuous Neg morpheme analysis in (2b) has to assume a sub-morphemic rule, and stipulates that only -š, but not maa, is targeted by this rule. I conclude that neither analysis can account for the puzzle.

Solution. Instead, I argue that a solution is possible if we consider the “formal negativity” of the elements involved. Using synchronic and diachronic evidence, I argue that both -š and lissah are formally marked as negative, whereas ūmr is non-negative. For instance, -š and lissah cannot appear in nonnegative environments such as interrogatives without overt negation (5a,b), but ūmr can (5c).

5a. *(maa)-šuf t-š A mad/ il-nahaa-r-dah?

NEG-see.PERF.2sgm-NEG Ahmad the-day-this

Intended reading: ‘Did you see Ahmad today?’

b. Ahmad gih *(wallaa) lissah?

Ahmad come.PERF.3SGM or.not yet

‘Has Ahmad come or not yet?’
c. ṭinta ṭumr-ak saafir-it Masr?
you ever-you travel.PERF.2SGM Egypt
‘Have you ever traveled to Egypt?’

Similarly, neither -š nor lissah can occur in conditionals, while ṭumr can. Diachronically, both -š and lissah developed from a negative source, whereas ṭumr is derived from the noun for “life/age”. We may thus restate the puzzle of -š disappearance as in (6), incorporating locality, to capture the contrast in (3):
6. Within a local domain, -š is not spelled-out in the presence of an NPI that is formally non-negative; otherwise it is phonologically realized.

**Implementation.** To derive the generalization in (6) in a principled manner, I propose a Split Neg analysis, whereby maa is a (Pol)arity head, the locus of interpretable negation ([iNeg]), and -š is a Neg head specified for an uninterpretable negative feature ([uNeg]). Licensing of Neg takes place under Agree with Pol, as in (7).

7. \[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Spec} \\
\text{PolP} \\
\text{Spec} \\
\text{Pol}_{\text{maa}} \quad \text{NegP} \\
\text{Spec} \\
\text{Neg} \\
\text{TP} \\
\end{array}
\]

Similarly, “negative” NPIs are endowed with a [uNeg] feature; non-negative NPIs are not. Pol licenses NPIs semantically (Ladusaw 1979; Giannkidou 1998), and checks any [uNeg] feature the NPI may have. NPI-licensing takes place via Agree or in a Spec-head configuration. I also assume that “local domain” in (6) corresponds to a phase (CP and vP; Chomsky 2001). Finally, I restate the generalization in (6) as an interface condition:

8. **Minimize formal feature mismatch**: At Spell-out, minimize formal feature mismatch on licensees of the same licenser within a local domain.

Given these assumptions, we can now see why -š disappears with ṭumr, but not with lissah.

9. \[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Spec-head} \\
\text{Agree} \\
\text{CP} \quad \text{Pol}_{\text{uNeg}} \quad \text{NegP} \quad \text{[TP T [vP …]]]} \\
\end{array}
\]

10. \[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Spec-head} \\
\text{Agree} \\
\text{CP} \quad \text{Pol}_{\text{uNeg}} \quad \text{NegP} \quad \text{[TP T [vP …]]]} \\
\end{array}
\]

While semantic licensing in both cases is unproblematic, syntactic licensing of the [uNeg] feature on Neg leads to mismatch in (9), but not in (10), hence forcing -š to delete in the former, but not the latter, as required by (8). If correct, this analysis provides evidence that NPI phenomena, in addition to being a semantic dependency, may also involve formal feature licensing in a minimalist sense, with effects at the syntax-morphology interface.

**References with abbreviated bibliographical entries**