

Covert Negatives in Igbo: a Syntactic-Semantic Analysis

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Abstract

This study is aimed at the examination of the syntactic operation of covert negatives in sentences in Igbo language. Covert negatives are negative operators that are not syntactically evident, but are semantically marked for negation. Previous studies (Emenanjo, 1978, Oluikpe, 1978, Uwalaka, 1997) have emphasized mainly on overt neg. particles in simplex sentences with respect to their tense and aspectual features. The present study focuses on covert negatives with a view to delineating their syntactic positions within the sentence and their semantic implications. The descriptive approach was adopted for analysis. The study found that the operation of covert negations involve the neg. morpheme (ghi) and covert negators: *ɔbɔladɪ*, *ewezuga*, *nke*, and *mayafodu*. The covert negators, *ɔbɔladɪ* and *ewezuga* can be topicalized while the others cannot be topicalized. On the whole, whereas the overt negative morphemes can occur without the covert negatives, the covert negators (*ewezuga* and *mayafodu*) can occur without the neg. morphemes in Igbo, while the covert negatives (*nke* and *ɔbɔladɪ*) cannot occur without the neg. morphemes.

KEY WORDS: Negatives, clauses, covert, Igbo

Introduction

Negation is a universal grammatical category which has proved to be a major subject in syntactic and semantic theories (Anastasia, 2002; Khemlani et al, 2012). Chumbow and Tamanji (1994) posit that negation is a process in grammatical and semantic analysis which typically expresses the contradiction of the meaning of a sentence. Due to the fact that all languages have a concept of negation (Ouhalla and Shlonsky, 2002), Christensen, (2005) suggests that even when the negative marker (not) is not included, the concept of negation is pre-supposed by many other elements like verbs (deny, refuse) and prepositions (without). In terms of semantics, negation is an act of denial of a previous affirmation (Hintika, 2002). Givon (1978) states that negative sentences in natural languages differ from their corresponding affirmatives in that the affirmatives are used to convey new information while the negatives are used in situations where the referential arguments have already been introduced in the preceding context and which serves to correct misguided belief on the assumption of the hearers' error.

In terms of syntax, negation is the process whereby affixes or negative morphemes are introduced into an erstwhile affirmative in order to derive a negative sentence (Anastasia, 2002).

Example:

1. IP[mmiri nà ezò] ‘It is raining’
 NP INFL VP
 rain is falling
 “It is raining”
2. IP[mmiri anaghì ezò]
 NP INFL VP
 rain is not falling
 “It is not raining”

In the simple sentences above, sentence (2) is the negative of sentence (1). Sentence (2) negates sentence (1) by the introduction of the negative suffix ‘-ghi’ and its harmonizing prefix ‘a’ into INFL. The tone of the INFL ‘na’ changes from low in the affirmative to step in the neg. Consequently, the introduction of neg. changes the meaning of the sentence from the affirmative to negative. The definition of negation is not restricted to the simple sentence. Complex sentences are also involved. Example:

3. IP[Àda mà [nà [mmiri agaghì ezò]]]
 NP VP CP NP INFL NEG VP
 Ada know that it will not rain
 “Ada knows that it will not rain”

In this example, there are two clauses: the matrix and the subordinate clause. The neg is hosted by the INFL in the subordinate clause which is introduced by the complementizer ‘na’. Hedzer (2004) affirms that negation is crucial for several reasons: it is present in all languages; it manifests some variations with respect to the manner it is expressed and interpreted; it interacts with many other phenomena in natural languages, and it sheds light on various syntactic and semantic mechanisms and the way they are connected. He further underlines the fact that, although languages use different negative markers to express sentential negation, languages differ both synchronically and diachronically in terms of the number, the syntactic position and the syntactic status of the negative markers.

Earlier Works

Several researches have been carried out on the subject of negation in Igbo by different grammarians in the past. Different approaches were used in some of these works; irrespective of the approach adopted, these past research works have thrown up some interesting conclusions about the subject of negation in Igbo. In Emenanjo (1978) the kind of negation specified are the basic forms which involve the affixation of the negative morphemes ‘ghi’ and na, which harmonize in all the features of the vowel of the verb root. This is coupled with tonal changes that occur in the process of deriving negatives as shown in (4) and (5)

4. Chikē abūghị nwoke
Chikē is not man
'Chike is not a man'
5. Ñke à adīghị ogologo
One this is not long
'This one is not long'

He states that in the underlying structure, the verb takes the harmonizing suffix -ghị or ghi 'not', as the case may be. If the NP(s) is a noun, or a plural pronoun, the verb takes a harmonizing prefix e-/a-; if the NP is a noun or plural pronoun, the tone on the prefix is high tone whereas the tone on the verb stem and the negative suffix are step tone and high tones respectively. Emenanjo further gives instances of other aspectual features where neg morphemes can be employed. Some of these are the perfective, imperative, progressive and future aspects as in examples (6) to (9)

6. 'We have not eaten it' (Perfective)
7. 'Do not sweep the house' (Imperative)
8. 'Ulumma is not eating yam' (Progressive)
9. 'Ada will not buy yam' (Future aspect)

An interesting observation in Emenanjo's account is that the neg. morphemes are either attached to the verb root or the auxiliary verb, depending however on the aspect of the verb in question. The imperatives, indicatives and perfective neg. are formed by attaching the neg. suffixes to the verb while the progressive and the future neg. are formed by attaching the neg. suffixes to the auxiliary verbs. Oluikpe (1979) gives a transformational account of negation in Igbo. He treats this within the context of verb phrase transformational rules. The rules are based on affixes and are divided into two broad headings: the non-auxiliary verb affixation rules and the auxiliary verb affixation rules.

The non-auxiliary verb affixation rules operates in the structure where the verb absorbs the neg. morphemes. This entails that the auxiliary verbs like 'd^{hi}', (progressive action) ji, (habitual action) and ga (future action) (in Ngwa dialect) are obligatorily absent as in examples (10 and (11)

10. Àda nnwèrè nwọọhụ
Àda have (FCT) money
'Ada has money'.
11. Àda enwēghi nwọọhụ
Àda have not money
'Ada has no money'.

Oluikpe states that all –RV suffixes do not co-occur with the negative suffix as evident in the example (xi). Therefore whenever a factative sentence is to be negated, the –RV suffix

is deleted. Lexical verbs accept the high tone vowel prefix –e/ - a, while the neg suffix copies the high tone of the verb stem. This high tone of the verb stem is however, peculiar to the Ngwa dialect which Oluikpe used in his work. Oluikpe states that in some cases the vowel prefix can be deleted in negative verbs. This applies only if the noun phrase immediately following the negated verb is any of the bound personal pronouns as in example (12)

12. Ò nweghi nwọọhụ
 He/she have not money
 ‘He hasn’t money’

The verb stem in the example above bears a high tone with the neg. morpheme in keeping with Ngwa pronunciation. On the other hand, the Auxiliary verb affix Rules operates in the structures where the auxiliary verbs absorb the negative morphemes, as exemplified in (13) to (15):

13. Ọ dighị èmenā
 He/she do not do it
 ‘He/she doesn’t do it’
 14. Ọ gaghị ịga ahịa
 He/she will not go market.
 ‘He/she will not go to market’
 15. Ọ jighị emenyā
 He/she do not do it.
 ‘He does not do it.’

In the examples above the neg. morphemes also assume the tone of the auxiliary to which they are attached. The NPs bear a high tone.

Uba-Mgbemena (1981) gives a descriptive account of negation in Igbo involving simple sentences. He divides negation into two: lexical negatives and grammatical negatives. He claims that lexical negatives result not from a grammatical process but from the use of verbs which imply negation. Example:

- | | | |
|------|--------|---------------------|
| 16.a | ighà | ‘to leave doing’ |
| b | ijū | ‘to refuse’ |
| c | ināgha | ‘to doubt’ |
| d | ikàgbà | ‘to advice against’ |

On the contrary, he claimed that grammatical negatives result from the use of negative grammatical particles and tone patterns. He is of the view that negative markers and tone constitute the operative mechanism of effecting negation in Igbo. Like other grammarians before him, his position is that the verb or auxiliary is the nucleus of the negation process in the sentence. This account of negation is particularly remarkable due to the introduction of the neg. verbs ‘gha’ and ‘jū’ which would be further elaborated upon in this study.

Ndimele (1995) offers a phonological and syntactic characteristics of negation in Echee; an Igboïd lect spoken in the present day Rivers State of Nigeria. Like the earlier grammarians he states that the neg. affixes are hosted by the copula verb or the aux. He went further to suggest that verb stems lose their aspect markers when they host the neg. morpheme. On the basis of that observation, he posits that neg. forbids the inflection of the verb as in examples (17) and (18):

17. Ezè rìrì ji
Ezè eat (FCT) yam
'Eze ate some yam'
18. Ezè adii rie ji
Ezè is not eat yam
'Eze has not eaten some yam'.

In the negative sentences above (17 and 18) the presence of the neg. marker rids the verb of its factitive aspect, evident in the affirmative. The low tone 'ri' is substituted with a high tone 'e' with the introduction of the neg. particle 'adii'. He explains that the reason for this neutralization of aspect by Neg, is that negative aspects are a separate projection since their semantic and syntactic relations are not simply or exactly a subset of those of the affirmatives.

Uwalaka (1997) posits that Igbo negation is achieved through the interaction of affixes and tones and on that basis classified negative constructions into three broad sentence types: Negative declarative, Negative interrogative and Negative imperative. In negative declaratives the subject NP retains its inherent tone while the verb takes a high tone prefix. The stem of a high tone verb takes a step tone, but retains its inherent tone if the stem of the verb is a low tone as in examples (19) and (20)

19. Òbi egbūghi agwọ.
Òbi kill not snake
'Obi did not kill a snake'.
20. Nwata à arāghị ube.
Child this eat not pear.
'This child did not eat pears'.

In negative interrogatives the verb does not take a prefix when a negative question is initiated either by a singular pronoun in opposition to a noun or by a singular pronoun in isolation as in (21) and (22)

21. Ụlụmma o reghi ahịa?
Ụlụmma she sells not market
'Did Ulumma not sell some goods?'

22. Ñkechi ọ raghi ube?
 Ñkechi she eat not pear
 'Did Nkechi not eat (some) pear'?

But the verb takes a high tone prefix if the question is initiated by the 3rd person plural subject as in (23) and (24)

23. Ha azàghì ezi?
 They sweep not yard
 'Did they not sweep the yard?'

24. Ụnụ agāghì aga ọrụ?
 You will not go work
 'Aren't you (pl) going to work?'

The tone of the neg suffix -ghi is conditioned by the tone of the preceding syllable. It takes a high tone after a high tone syllable and a low after a low tone syllable. In negative imperatives, the subject NP does not undergo tonal changes. The imperative neg. verb obligatorily co-occurs with the high tone harmonizing prefix '—e'. As such, the high tone verb takes a step tone while the low tone verbs retain their inherent tones as I (25) and (26)

25. Ụkachi, emēne mkpọtụ
 Ụkachi, do not noise
 'Ukachi, don't make noise'.

26. Ụnụ ezīne ha ụzọ
 You show not they road
 'You (pl) don't show them the way'.

On the whole it can be seen that much research has been carried out on the subject of negation in Igbo. However, earlier scholars concentrated so much on the neg morphemes and particles, neglecting other forms of negative markers in Igbo. The present study will extend the research in Igbo negation by directing attention to the operation of different covert negatives which are yet to receive detailed attention in Igbo.

Negation and Tone

Tone is an indispensable factor in Igbo grammatical analysis. This is more so, being that Igbo is a tone language. In negative sentences tone plays an important role in the derivation of the negative. The introduction of the negative morpheme triggers some adjustments and modifications in the tones of the verb stem or the INFL as the case may be. There are two basic tone groups of verbs in Igbo: the high tone verb and the low tone verb. The third is not a whole tone by itself. Instead it is a lowered high tone. Hence it is termed the step tone. In this analysis the behavior of tones in the derivation of negatives in a sentence will be fully explored.

Methodology

The study is purely a descriptive one. Data was collected through primary and secondary sources. Primary data, represented by the sample sentences used in this study, was collected intuitively, as the researcher is a native speaker of Igbo, as well as an expert in Igbo studies. Secondary data was gathered from materials in the library and the internet. The data were presented using the Leipzig glossing system. The paper is organized in four sections; section one is the introduction, followed by a review of earlier studies in Igbo negation in section two, and section three and four are methodology and analysis of data.

Data and Analysis

The negatives to be analyzed in this section are covert in nature. In their surface forms they do not bear the form of the negative due to the absence of the neg morphemes. These covert negatives include *obuladi*, *ewezuga*, *nke*, and *mayafodu*. Their syntactic and semantic dispositions are discussed below.

The Neg Tag “Òbùlādī” (Not Even)

This is a special case of sentence tag. Its operation is unique because it does not function in the same way as the other sentence tags. Example:

27. [_{IP}[Ezè _{NP} [enwēghī _{VP} [egō _{NP} [òbùlādī _{VP} [sìsì]]]]] _{NP} shilling
Eze have not money not even shilling
“Eze does not have money not even a dime.”
28. [_{IP}[Okoro _{NP} [anughī _{VP} [mmanya _{NP} [òbùlādī _{VP} [otu [_{NP} iko]]]]] _{NP} one cup
Okoro drink not wine not even one cup
“Okoro did not drink wine, not even one cup”

The sentences (27) and (28) above consist of two parts; the matrix clause bearing the neg. morpheme and the subordinate clause headed by the covert neg. “Òbùlādī”. The subordinate clause is a modified repetition of the matrix clause for reasons of emphasis. The high tone verb in the matrix clause takes a step tone and passes the same to the neg. suffix. This is after the high tone harmonizing vowel prefix. There are two syntactic facts to note about the operation of the covert neg. ‘obuladi’. First, the operation of ‘obuladi’ as a neg. tag is different from the normal tags. There are various factors which mark this tag out from the normal sentence tags. The regular tags operate as questions, but in this case we are dealing with an emphatic sentence. In the regular tags the verb of the matrix clause is repeated in the second clause, but in this case the verb is replaced by the neg. in the supposed second clause. This suggests that the neg. is covertly positioned in VP. In the regular tag there is only one neg. morpheme which is found in one of the two clauses, but in this case neg. is found in both clauses. In the regular tags there are two overt NPs, but in the present case the second NP is non-overt. This is due to the modified repetition of the matrix clause which is collapsed in the neg “Òbùlādī”. Second, the neg. morpheme is obligatorily present in the use of this covert neg. operator; in other words, they always co-occur. The reason for this co-occurrence is essentially because of the role of the covert neg.

to emphasize the negation in the matrix clause. The covert neg. ‘obuladi’ is not used to emphasize an affirmative declaration in the matrix clause. For example

29 *Eze nwere ego, obuladi sisi
 ‘Eze has money, not even shilling’

30 *Eze nwere ego, obuladi otu puku
 ‘Eze has money, not even one thousand’

It should also be noted that ‘obuladi’ can be topicalized, that is moved to become the pseudo subject of the matrix clause, as in sentence (31) and (32)

31. obuladi sisi Eze enwegh
 ‘not even shilling, Eze does not have’
 32. obuladi otu iko mmanya Okoro anughi
 ‘not even a cup of wine, Okoro did not drink’

In terms of meaning, the sentence is aimed at emphasizing a truth or reality. The matrix clause is a declaration or an affirmation of the truth while the second part is an emphasis of the statement. The object of the matrix clause ‘ego’ is a generic term for all denominations of money, while the object of the second clause ‘sisi’ is the least of the monetary denominations. Therefore saying that the subject does not possess the least of the denominations is an unequivocal way of declaring the reality of lack.

The Neg “Ewezùga” (Were It Not)

The neg “ewezùga” is a neg which suggests that something would have happened but for one thing or the other. In other words “ewezùga” provides a reason why the thing did not happen. Example:

33. [IP[Obi [gààrà [èje [ahĩa [ewezùga [Ngozi]]]]]
 NP VP AUX NP VP NP
 Obi will+past go market were it not Ngozi.
 “Obe would have gone to market were it not Ngozi.”

34. [IP[Òbi [agāāraghì [èje [ahĩa [ewezùga [Ngozi]]]]]
 NP AUX VPNP VP NP
 Obi will+pastneg go market were it not Ngozi.
 “Obe would not have gone to market were it not Ngozi.”

The neg “ewezùga” co-occurs with the unfulfilled tense marker “gààrà”. In sentence 33 there are two clauses; the matrix clause bearing the unfulfilled marker “gààrà” and the second clause bearing the neg ‘ewezùga’ which operates as a verb. The INFL in the matrix clause retains its LL tones. The stem of the high tone verb retains its inherent tone after a low tone vowel prefix. The NPs retain their inherent tones. The presence of the covert neg ‘ewezuga’ (VP) makes the NP imperative (though non-overt). It is evident that the operation of this covert negator is in contrast with the previous one ‘obuladi’. Whereas ‘obuladi’ always co-occurs with a negative morpheme, ‘ewezuga’ operates with or without a negative morpheme. However, due to the nature of this covert neg to mark a failed action, it always co-occurs with the unfulfilled marker, either positively or negatively. In terms of

meaning, the subject of the main clause ‘Obi’ desired or planned to go to market, but did not fulfill that desire because of ‘Ngozi’.

In sentence 34, the covert neg operates with a negative morpheme in the matrix clause. The unfulfilled marker ‘gaara’ in AUX takes a neg morpheme “ghi” to negate the matrix clause. The presence of this neg suffix makes possible the presence of the high tone harmonizing vowel prefix. As a result, the tone of the AUX (low low) changes to a step tone which is also passed on to the neg suffix. The verb retains its inherent high tone after a low tone vowel prefix. The NPs retain their inherent tones as the neg “ewezuga” retains its inherent tones. Syntactically, this is a negation, but semantically, it is an affirmation of a completed action. The introduction of the neg morpheme changes the meaning of the sentence to suggest that Obi did not desire or plan to go to market, but he went because of Ngozi. This is in contrast with sentence (33) which means that “Obi did not go to market”. As in the previous example, ‘ewezuga’ can be moved to become the pseudo subject of the matrix clause, as in examples (35) and (36).

(35) Ewezuga Ngozi Obi gaara eje ahia
 ‘Were it not for Ngozi, Obi would have gone to market’

(36) Ewezuga Ngozi Obi agaaraghi eje ahia
 ‘Were it not for Ngozi, Obi would not have gone to market’

The Neg Conjunction Ñkè (Not to Talk of)

The conjunction ñkè is used as a negative marker between two IPs. In that position it negates the second IP.

37. [IP[Èmeka [ejebèghi [ahia [ñkè IP[oji [èje [ubi]]]]]
 NP VP NP CP NP VP NP
 Emeka go yet not market conj he to go farm.
 ‘Emeka has not gone to market not to talk of going to the farm.’
38. [IP [Èmeka [o jeela [ahia [ñkè IP[o ji [èje [ubi]]]]]
 NP VP NP CP NP VP NP
 Emeka he go ASP market conj he to go farm.
 ‘Has Emeka gone to market not to talk of going to the farm?’

In sentence (37) and (38) ‘nke’ is situated between two IPs but the two sentences are not the same, syntactically and semantically. Sentence (37) has an overt negative morpheme in the matrix clause while sentence (38) does not have an overt negator but a low toned interrogative pronoun after the subject. Although ‘nke’ is a covert negator and a conjunction in these examples, it has neg in its semantics. In sentence (37), the high tone verb in the matrix clause takes a step tone followed by a low tone neg morpheme and its perfective prefix ‘bè’. In the subordinate clause the high tone verb retains its inherent tone after a low tone vowel prefix and INFL. The high tone subject pronoun in the subordinate clause is co – indexed with the subject NP of the matrix clause to which it is bound. In sentence (38), the low toned interrogating pronoun ‘o’ replaces the neg morpheme, but the tone of the question, in conjunction with ‘nke’ maintains the idea that the subject is not able to accomplish both the primary and the secondary tasks.

Semantically, ‘nke’ is used to establish precedence in a process whereby if that which is easier or less difficult is not done, that which is more difficult will never be done. If the agent is not able to accomplish a low task he would not be expected to accomplish a high task. However, this is based on what is deemed to be more difficult than the other. In this operation, the conjunction ‘nke’ places what is yet to be done by an NP in the matrix clause, against what probably will never be done by the same NP in the subordinate clause. In the two examples, the agent (NP) could not accomplish a simple task (shopping in the market) not to talk of engaging in a more difficult assignment (working in the farm). A unique feature of this sentence is that although there is no overt neg morpheme in both IPs, ‘nke’ served the semantic purpose of negating the sentence, unlike the previous examples.

It should be pointed out here that ‘nke’ in this negative case is not the same as the relative ‘nke’. Relative ‘nke’ has a low high bisyllabic tones while the neg ‘nke’ has a low low bisyllabic tone as seen in (39) and (40)

39. Nwataahụ̀nké dịọcha.
‘The child that is fair’.

- *40. Nwataahụ̀nkè dịọcha.
‘The child to talk of is fair’.

In addition, relative ‘nke’ refers to a particular NP in the sentence, essentially the subject NP. In sentence 39 ‘nke’ is referring to the subject NP ‘nwata’, but in the neg ‘nke’ we are dealing with a comparative relationship between two IPs and not just a particular NP. Furthermore, relative ‘nke’ is verbally and syntactically optional in the sentence where it occurs. Example:

41. Nwokeahụ̀ (̀nké) maramma.
‘The man who is handsome,’

On the contrary, the neg ‘nke’ is obligatory in the sentence where it occurs verbally and syntactically.

The Neg Conjunction ‘Màyafođụ’ (Not to Talk of)

The neg marker ‘màyafođụ’ is syntactically and semantically similar to ‘nke’ and can be substituted for the latter, though with a slight modification in the sentence. The difference between the two is both syntactic and semantic. In terms of syntax, whereas ‘nke’ conjoins two sentences with overt NPs, ‘màyafođụ’ does not have an overt NP in the subordinate clause but involves a co-referential relationship between the subject of the matrix clause and the null subject of the embedded infinitival clause termed PRO. Example:

41. [IP[Ibè [ejebèghì [ụ̀kà [màyafođụ [[PRO] ịnata òriri]]]
NP VP NP CNJ IPθ VP NP
Ibe go yet not church conj to receive communion
‘Ibe has not gone to Church not to talk of receiving the Holy Communion.’

42. [_{IP}[Òbi [_{VP} [jèrè [_{NP} [London [_{CNJ} [_{IPθ} [_{VP} [_{NP} [[PRO] ije Legoosi]]]]]]]]]]]
 Obi go +past Panyaconj to go Lagos.
 'Obi has been to Panya not to talk of going to Lagos.'

In sentence 41, there are two clauses. The matrix clause bearing a neg. morpheme in the NP, and the infinitival clause with PRO as its subject; between them is the neg. 'màyafòdù'. In the matrix clause, the stem of the high tone verb takes a step tone after the high tone harmonizing vowel prefix. This is followed by the low tone neg. morpheme. In the infinitival clause the infinitive takes a high tone and the low high tone verb takes a step tone. PRO is the non-overt subject of the infinitival clause. In this position it is in a referential relationship with the subject of the matrix clause. So PRO is controlled by the NP in the matrix clause. In sentence 42, the matrix clause does not bear a negative morpheme whereas 'màyafòdù' is present in the subordinate clause before the infinitival clause. In this position 'màyafòdù' like in 41, compares the state of affairs in the finite clause with the situation in the infinitival clause. This is an indication that 'mayafòdù' can operate as a negator with or without a neg. morpheme.

Semantically, like 'nke', 'mayafodu' is used in a hierarchical sense to suggest that an agent is challenged with the task of accomplishing two tasks. However, 'mayafodu' is different in that it can function in two disparate ways, negative and positive. Negatively, 'màyafòdù' suggests that since the agent (NP) is not able to do a small task, the same agent is not capable of undertaking a bigger task. Positively, if the agent is capable of accomplishing a big task, the same agent can doubtlessly accomplish a smaller task with ease. In sentence 41, the subject could not do a simple task (church attendance) not to talk of engaging in a more difficult assignment (taking Holy Communion). In sentence 42, a different thing happens; the agent (who is believed to be a Nigerian) is able to perform a big task (travelling to London, a foreign country) not to talk of undertaking a lesser adventure (travelling to Lagos, a local city).

Conclusion

The analyses of covert negatives in Igbo have shown that besides the neg. morphemes, there are other operators that can trigger negation. They are covert in the sense that they are not syntactically evident; but they are semantically marked for negation. The study has revealed that the covert negatives (ewezuga, nke, òbùladi, mayafòdù) can occur with or without the neg. morphemes in a sentence. However, it seems that 'nke' and 'òbùladi' are polar negs in that they occur as complementary negators after an obligatory neg morpheme in the matrix clause. On the contrary, 'ewezuga' and 'mayafòdù' are not polar negators because they can occur alone without a neg morpheme in the matrix clause.

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