An anchoring solution to the loss of preverbal negative concord in Old Spanish

Aaron Yamada (aaronyamada@creighton.edu)
Creighton University

In an exemplar-based model of grammar, speakers use retained episodic memories of linguistic events to aid in the formation of categories whose exemplars, or tokens, share some minimal similarity (see Lacerda 1995; Goldinger 1996, 2000; Johnson 1997; Pierrehumbert 2001, Wedel 2006). Following Goldberg (2006: 86), within such categories there are higher-frequency exemplars which serve as *cognitive anchors*, or "salient standards of comparison" around which other exemplars are attracted and modeled. Empirical evidence for a cognitive anchoring effect has been shown in syntactic acquisition (Casenhiser and Goldberg 2005; Azazil 2020) and synchronic variation (Bybee and Eddington 2006), but still more work would do well to defend this approach in the domain of diachronic syntax. The present paper will apply the notion of a cognitive anchoring effect to certain challenges regarding the diachrony of Negative Concord (NC), or the co-occurrence of multiple negative lexical items that together only express one instance of semantic negation (for early analyses of NC in Spanish see Bosque 1980; Laka 1990).

In Old Spanish, preverbal NC existed but was not realized evenly across different Negative Concord Items (NCIs). Consider (1a), where the preverbal NCI *ninguno* 'no one' coincides with the clause negator *non* 'no', without producing a semantic double negation. As in (1b), though, the NCI *nunca* 'never' was unique in that it avoided preverbal NC, as noted by researchers as early as Llorens (1929).

(1)   a.   *Que **ninguno non** fable con los lidiadores*
             'Let no one speak with the litigators'
             (c. 1218-1250; Anonymous author, *Fuero de Zorita de los Canes*)

        b.   *que **nunca** çesan de gastar la vida del ome*
             'they never cease to waste the life of the man'
             (1251; Anonymous author, *Calila e Dimna*) (examples from CORDE)

Preverbal NC (i.e., the co-occurrence of the negator) disappeared among all NCIs as the language entered the 17th century (see also Camus Bergareche 2006). To explain the loss of preverbal NC in Old Spanish, Posner (1984) suggested that it may have been due to contact with Italian which offered a prestige model that lacked preverbal NC. Poole (2011) correlated the loss of preverbal NC with a shift in the polarity of these items from negative polarity items (not inherently negative items) to NCIs (items able to express negation by themselves). Espósito (1989) and Mackenzie (2019: 220-221) suggested that the syntax was economized such that the redundancy of a preverbal overt negation in addition to the NCI was eliminated. Mackenzie, in particular, argues that the preverbal sentential negator *non* was actually a kind of expletive negation, drawing parallels to expletive negation with verbs of doubt and denial that also disappeared during the same time period.

None of these approaches to the loss of preverbal NC, however, has incorporated the fact that *nunca* avoided preverbal NC. The present paper remedies this issue in arguing that the high relative frequency of the lexical item *nunca* helped to establish it as a cognitive anchor for the other NCIs that lost NC in the preverbal position. To defend this approach, the CORDE database

was first searched for the raw token frequencies of the NCIs *nunca, ninguno, ningún, nada,* and *nadie.* The results are below in Table 1, divided from the 13th to the 16th century.

NCI	1201-1300	1301-1400	1401-1500	1501-1600
nunca	3,474	4,262	10,456	18,073
ninguno	5,567	4,106	6,733	13,546
ninguna	5,776	5,089	7,639	17,604
ningún	2,052	1,662	1,846	9,113
nada	2,240	830	2,647	10,193
nadie	149	10	401	6,408
Total	19,258	15,959	29,722	74,937
% nunca	**18.0%**	**26.7%**	**35.2%**	**24.1%**

Table 1. Token frequency of NCIs in CORDE, 13th – 16th century

Table 1 should draw attention to the fact that *nunca* was a highly frequent NCI, accounting for almost half of the searched NCIs in the 15th century, and that it also increased notably in relative frequency from the 13th to 15th century. Then, all tokens of *nunca, ninguno,* and *nada* were extracted from the CORDE database using a web data scraper and Python code. From this dataset, 100 tokens of each NCI were randomly drawn from each of the four centuries under consideration. Of each set of 100 tokens, tokens featuring NCIs in preverbal configurations were counted, in addition to whether or not those NCIs co-occurred with preverbal negators. The results are below in Table 2.

NCI	1201-1300			1301-1400		
	Preverbal tokens	Preverbal +NC tokens	% NC	Preverbal tokens	Preverbal +NC tokens	% NC
nunca	93	1	1.1%	95	1	1.1%
ninguno	34	28	82.4%	37	34	91.9%
nada	11	8	72.7%	6	5	83.3%

NCI	1401-1500			1501-1600		
	Preverbal tokens	Preverbal +NC tokens	% NC	Preverbal tokens	Preverbal +NC tokens	% NC
nunca	92	0	0.0%	97	0	0.0%
ninguno	50	24	48.0%	59	1	1.7%
nada	11	3	27.3%	15	1	6.7%

Table 2. Preverbal NC, 13th – 16th century

Table 2 shows falling counts of preverbal NC from the 13th to 16th century, and the aforementioned lack of preverbal NC with the NCI *nunca.* The novel data in Table 2 is the strong tendency of *nunca* to appear in preverbal position. Consider the 14th century, where of 100 random *nada* tokens only 6 are found in preverbal configurations, but of 100 *nunca* tokens 95 were preverbal. The present paper argues, thus, that both the increasing relative frequency of *nunca* and its propensity to appear in preverbal configurations without NC helped it to serve as a cognitive anchor around which the other NCIs were assimilated as the language entered the 16th century. That is, other NCIs lost their co-occurring preverbal negator because speakers modeled their usage patterns around the anchor of *nunca.* The larger-picture implication of this study, therefore, is a case study that

supports the role of cognitive anchoring, with frequency patterns of usage at its base, as a catalyst for diachronic change in syntactic structure. The advantage offered by this approach is a cognitive causal explanation for the loss of preverbal NC that accounts for the unique nature of the *nunca* lexical item.

Selected references
CORDE: Corpus diacrónico del español. REAL ACADEMIA ESPAÑOLA: Banco de datos (CORDE) [en línea]. <http://www.rae.es>
Goldberg, Adele E. (2006). *Constructions at Work: The Nature of Generalization in Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Mackenzie, Ian E. (2019). *Language Structure, Variation and Change: The Case of Old Spanish Syntax*. Springer.