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Negation in MA: *A Syntactic-Semantic Analysis*

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Abstract

Negation in MA has caught the attention of several linguists. However, their attempts to account for MA negative sentences have faced serious syntactic and semantic problems. The proposals that linguists have provided to understand the competence of MA native speakers, as far as negation is concerned, can be divided into two categories: non-split Neg and split-Neg proposals. The non-split Neg proposals claim that the negative marker *ma* and the n-word *ʃ* form one Neg head, which means that the two negative elements are necessary for the construction of the Neg head. However, the n-word *ʃ* disappears when another n-word appears, as in the following sentence *ʕəməru ma-lʕəb* (*ʃ) *kura* (He has never played football). The split-Neg proposals claim that the negative marker *ma* is semantically negative and that the n-word *ʃ* is syntactically negative in that *ma* carries an interpretable negative feature [iNeg] and *ʃ* carries an uninterpretable negative feature [uNeg]. However, this claim will wrongly predict that a sentence like *ma-ʕəmru ma-ləʕəb kura* (He has never played football) is positive, since the two negative markers *ma* would cancel each other out, resulting in an affirmative meaning. Because of the shortcomings of the previous works, I propose an alternative solution in which the negative marker *ma* syntactically marks negation, in that it carries an uninterpretable negative feature [uNeg], and the n-words semantically contribute to the negativity of MA sentences, meaning that they carry an interpretable negative feature [iNeg]. In addition, I have proposed that the uninterpretable negative feature [uNeg] of *ma* is checked and deleted via an agree relation with the interpretable negative feature [iNeg] of n-words which is because *ma*, occupying Neg heads, is syntactically higher than the n-words, occupying NI heads.

Key words: MA, Agree, n-words, syntactically-negative, semantically-negative, sentential, MP, negation, negative markers.

Introduction

There have been several attempts to account for sentential negation in Moroccan Arabic (MA). The proposals have provided different results. However, the topic still requires more research, as they have not yet provided satisfactory explanations and have failed to fully account for MA sentences. For the sake of clarity, I describe MA negative sentences, discuss writings related to the topic, and point out their shortcomings. After illustrating the weaknesses of them, I provide an alternative proposal that accounts for negation in MA effectively, by adopting Chomsky's

Minimalist Program (MP) (Chomsky, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2005a, 2005b) as a framework.

MA Negative Sentence Structures

Negation in MA is expressed via two negative markers: the prefix *ma* and one of the n-words. The absence of either renders the sentence ungrammatical, as illustrated in examples (1), (2), and (3) below., as illustrated in the examples (1), (2) and (3) below. However, in verbless negative sentences, it appears that the two negative markers are attached, and that a vowel *i* is added to the morpheme *ʃ*, as illustrated in (4) below. Interestingly, in MA, the postverbal morpheme *ʃ* disappears when n-words such as ħ*ta waħəd* (*nobody*), *walu* (nothing), and *ʕəmər* (never) appear, as illustrated in (5), (6), and (7). Moreover, the suffix *ma* can appear twice in negative sentences, as illustrated in (8).

(1) ma- ʒa -ʃ (he didn't come)

Neg came Neg

(2) *ma- ʒa (*he didn't come)

Neg came

(3) *ʒa -ʃ (*he didn't come)

came Neg

(4) ma- -ʃi sahla (it isn't easy)

Neg Neg easy

(5) ma- ʒa ħta waħəd (nobody came)

Neg came nobody

(6) ma- ʒab walu (he brought nothing)

Neg brought nothing

(7) ʕəmər -u ma- ʒa (he has never come)

never Clitic-Subj Neg came

(8) ma- ʕəmər -u ma- ʒa (he has never come)

Neg never Clitic-Subj Neg came

Review of the Literature

Non-split Neg proposals

Benmamoun (2006): Complex-Neg-Head Proposal

Benmamoun (2006) divides sentential negation in modern Arabic dialects (MAD) into verbal and non-verbal predicates. For instance, In MA, Sentential negation in verbal predicate

contexts is expressed via the discontinuous negative markers *ma-v-ʃ*, while in non-verbal predicates it is expressed via the continuous negative markers *ma-ʃi*, as illustrated in (10), (11):

(10) ma- ʒa -ʃ (he didn't come)

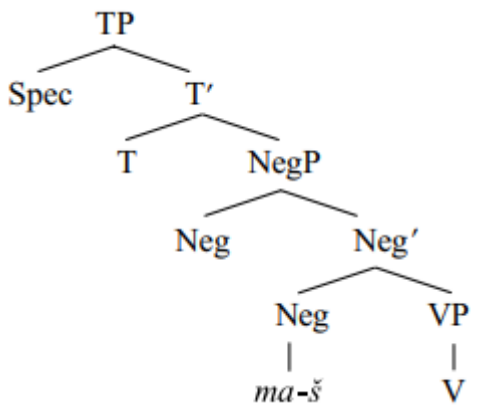
Neg came Neg

(11) ma- -ʃi sahla (it isn't easy)

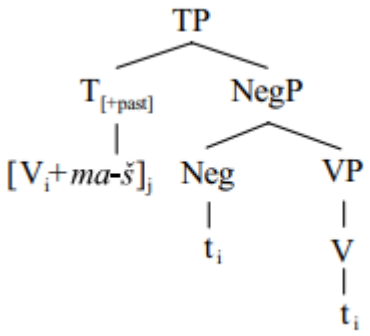
Neg Neg easy

In addition, Benmamoun (2006) states that the Neg head *ma-v-ʃ* is divided into independent and dependent forms. The dependency of the Neg head is related to the optionality of hosting heads. In other words, the Neg head may be dependent (must host a head) or independent (not required to host a head). Syntactically, he states that the negative elements *ma-* and *ʃ* form one complex Neg head, as illustrated in (12) below, and that the negative markers must host verbs when the tense of sentences is perfective (past). This is because verbs must cyclically move from V to Neg, then to T(ense), unlike imperfective (present) sentences, where V to T movement is not required, as illustrated in (13) below:

(12)



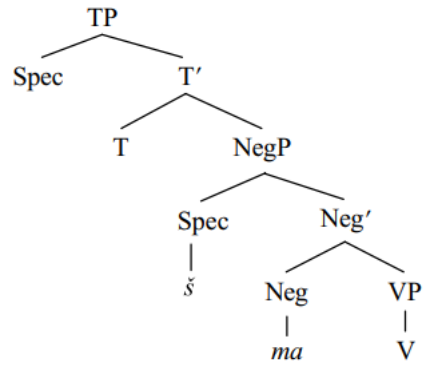
(13)



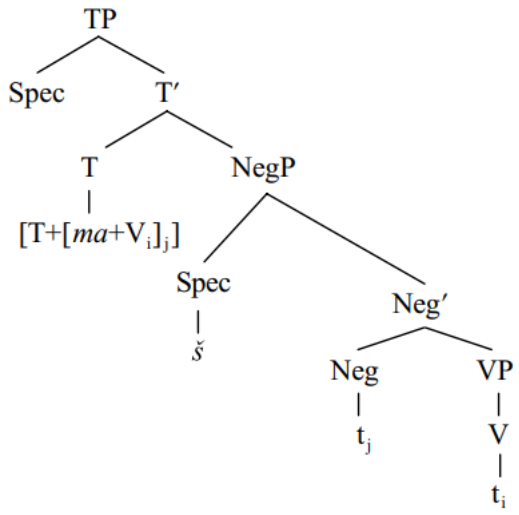
Ouhalla (2002): The NegP Proposal

Ouhalla (2002) attempts to account for sentential negation in MA. He considers the negative markers *ma* and *ʃ*, claiming that they together constitute a negation phrase, with *ma* as head and *ʃ* as its specifier, as illustrated in (14) below. He also claims that in the course of derivation, verbs move to Neg and then to T. After that, the negation *ʃ* is simply attaches to verbs as illustrated in (15) below.

(14)



(15)



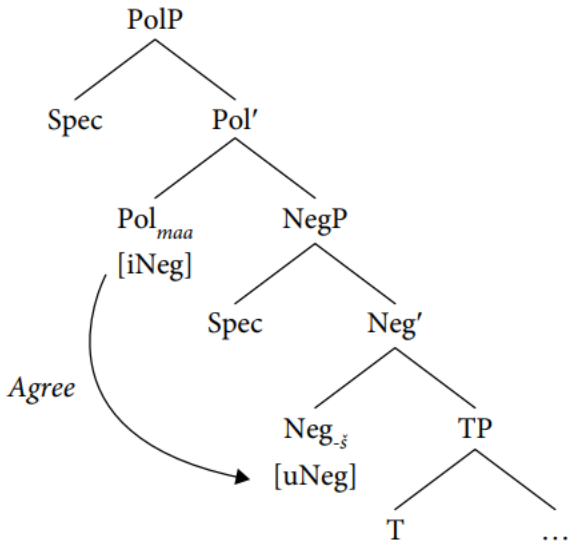
In addition, Ouhalla (2002) claims that sentential negation in MA semantically consists of an operator-variable link, in which negative operator is the marker *ma* and the variable is the negative element *ʃ*. He further adds that the variable *ʃ* is inserted merely to satisfy the negative operator's requirement to bind a variable, which means that *ʃ* is a dummy element, contributing nothing to sentence meaning.

Split Neg Proposals

Soltan (2011, 2012, 2014): *Split-Neg Proposal*

Soltan (2011, 2012, 2014) provides an analysis of sentential negation in Cairene Egyptian Arabic (CEA) by adopting Chomsky' Agree theory (2000, 2001), Zeijlstra' n-words-as-non-negative hypothesis (2004, 2008). He states that sentential negation in CEA consists of two different heads: Pol(arity) and Neg(ation). The Pol head contains the morpheme *maa* and the Neg head contains the morpheme *ʃ*. Following Zeijlstra's (2004, 2008) hypothesis, he argues that the morpheme *maa* carries a semantically interpretable negative feature [iNeg], thereby contributing to sentence meaning, while the morpheme *ʃ* carries a semantically uninterpretable negative feature [uNeg], marking negation only syntactically. To eliminate [uNeg], an Agree relation is established between a Pol and a Neg, as illustrated in (16) below:

(16)



Moreover, Soltan (2012) argues that the Split Neg analysis is applicable to MA, since it contains two negation markers, which fits the analysis. Applying the Split Neg proposal to MA leads to the claim that the negative marker *ma* occupies the Pol head and the negative marker *ʃ* occupies the Neg head. This also means that Neg feature of *ma* is semantically interpretable [iNeg], while the Neg feature of *ʃ* is uninterpretable [uNeg].

Bejja & Dkhissi (2023): The NONN-NONP Proposal

Bejja & Dkhissi (2023) provides a syntactic-semantic analysis of sentential negation in MA. Similar to Soltan (2011), they argue that sentential negation in MA consists of two heads: Pol and Neg. However, they introduce two features, namely Neg(ation) and Pos(itive), to provide a syntactic-semantic explanation. They claim that the Pol head contains an interpretable negative feature [iNeg], while the Neg head carries an uninterpretable negative feature [uNeg] along with an interpretable positive feature [iPOS].

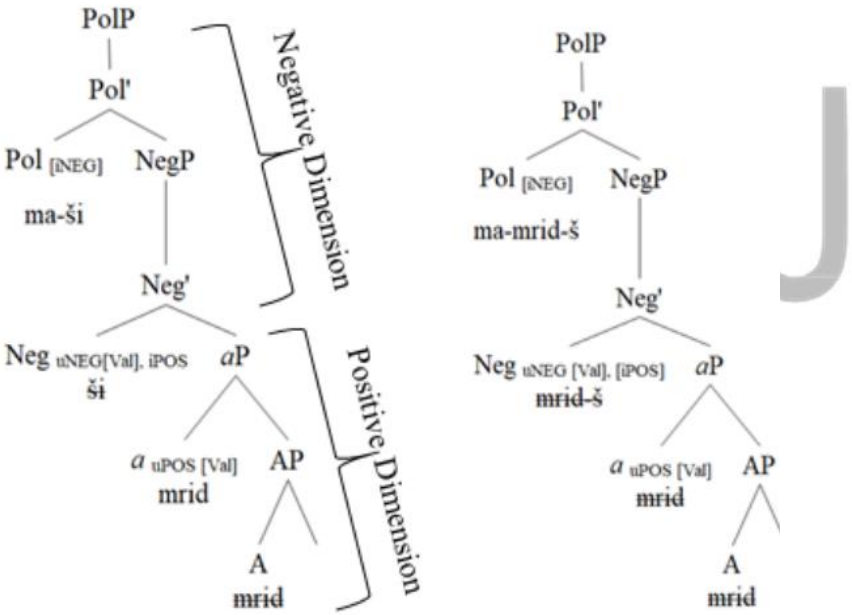
Bejja & Dkhissi (2023) argue that *ma* and *ʃ* must each contain a negative feature for both syntactic and semantic reasons. Syntactically, Pol contains [iNeg], which attracts the [uNeg]

feature of Neg, leading to discontinuous negative structures such as *ma-kla-ʃ (he didn't eat)* or continuous negative structures such as *ma-ʃi mrid (he isn't sick)*. Semantically, *ma* and *ʃ* are negative in nature, meaning they must each contain at least one interpretable negative feature [iNeg].

In addition, Bejja & Dkhissi (2023) argue that *ʃ* must include [iPOS] to satisfy certain syntactic and semantic requirements. Syntactically, the head *ʃ* attracts the positive head following it to value its uninterpretable positive feature [uPOS]. This means that the absence of [iPOS] makes the movement of a positive head, such as verbs, to the head *ʃ* unjustified. Semantically, the head *ʃ* is also positive in nature, since, as Benmamoun (2000) notes, it is derived from the Standard Arabic (SA) noun *ʃajʔ* (*thing*) and has undergone a change from *ʃajʔ* to *ʃ*. This means that *ʃ* is both negative and positive.

To account for continuous and discontinuous negative structures, Bejja & Dkhissi (2023) argue that continuous negation results from the valuation of Pos in situ, without any movement of positive heads. By contrast, discontinuous negation results from the valuation of Pos via movement, leading to the structure *ma-X-ʃ* (with X referring to a positive head). To clarify this idea, they utilize the tree diagrams (17) below:

(17)



Shortcomings in the Literature

The review of the relevant literature indicates that sentential negation in MA has been widely discussed. However, the literature still shows serious shortcomings, which will be discussed in this section.

Benmamoun (2006) claims that the sentential negation markers *ma* and *ʃ* form one complex head, namely Neg, as illustrated in the tree diagram (12) above. This claim cannot account for negative sentences, such as (19), which do not display the complex Neg. He also differentiates between dependent and independent negative heads based on tense. In other words, the negative elements *ma* and *ʃ* must be dependent when verbs are in the past, as in *ma-kəla-ʃ (he*

did not eat). This claim cannot account for present sentences such as (20), in which the verb must move to the negative marker. He also neglects the semantic side of the negative elements, as he does not explain why the use of two negative elements does not lead to double negation.

(19)

ma-	kla	walu (he ate nothing)
Neg	ate	nothing

(20)

ma-	kijakul	-ʃ	l-banan (he doesn't eat bananas)
Neg	eat	Neg	bananas

Ouhalla (2002) claims that the two negative elements fit the NegP hypothesis, in which *ma* is the head and *ʃ* is its specifier. This means that both elements are necessary for his analysis. However, sentential negation in MA is not always expressed via *ma-ʃ* construction. In many cases, the negative element *ʃ* is absent, as in *ma-dar walu* (*he did not do anything*) which also contradicts his claim that *ma* is a negative operator and must bind *ʃ*, treated as a free variable. In addition, he claims that *ʃ* is a dummy element, semantically meaningless, and is only present to satisfy the operator-variable link. To put it differently, he claims that *ma* is semantically interpretable [iNeg] while *ʃ* is semantically uninterpretable [uNeg]. This claim cannot account for negative sentences such as (21) and (22):

(21)

ʕəmər	-u	ma-	ləʕəb	kura (he has never played football)
never	Clitic-Subj	Neg	played	football

(22)

ma-	ʕəmər	-u	ma-	ləʕəb	kura (he has never played football)
Neg	never	Clitic-Subj	Neg	played	football

If we claim that the negative marker *ma* is semantically negative, its double presence will make the sentence positive, since double negation law, which states that double negations cancel out to produce opposite meanings, must be applied. This means that the sentence (22) above must be positive, but it is not. And even if we claim that both the n-word ʕəmər and the negative marker *ma* play semantic role in negative sentences, we would expect the two negative elements in (21) to cancel each other out, which would make the sentence positive.

Soltan (2011, 2012) adopts the Zeijlstra's (2004, 2008) split-Neg hypothesis to account for modern Arabic dialect, including MA which leads him to claim that Pol heads contain the negative marker *ma*, which marks negation semantically, and Neg heads contain the negative marker *ʃ*, which marks negation syntactically. Semantically speaking, this analysis is similar to Ouhalla's (2002) NegP analysis, in that they both claim that *ma* negates sentences. However, this is not the case as the counterexamples (21) and (22) indicate.

Soltan (2011, 2012) adopts a modified version of Chomsky' Agree theory to explain how the semantically uninterpretable feature [uNeg] of *ʃ* is checked via an Agree relation with the

semantically interpretable feature [iNeg] of *ma*. The modified version of Chomsky' Agree theory was first proposed by Zeijlstra (2004, 2008), who argues that probes upwardly search for goals, which opposites Chomsky's proposition, which states that probes downwardly search for goals to agree with. However, this claim fails to explain the motivation behind certain syntactic phenomena, such as complementizer-subject agreement in some languages. For instance, Haegeman (1992) provides data from West Flemish, such as (23), showing agreement between complementizers and subjects:

(23)

Kpeinzen dank ik morgen goan ('I think that I'll go tomorrow')

I.think that1.Sg I tomorrow go

Bejja & Dkhissi (2023) claim that *ʃ* contains two features: [uNeg] and [iPOS]. They state that positive heads such verbs, which contain [uPOS], are motivated to move to the negative head *ʃ* to value its [uPOS], and the absence of [iPOS] presents such movement. However, v-to-Neg movement can occur without [iPOS] if the Neg head *ʃ* contains a strong v feature, which triggers overt verb movement. In addition, they state that the negative head *ʃ* is semantically negative, but at the same time claim that it consists of uninterpretable negative features [uNeg], which means that the negative feature of *ʃ* is semantically meaningless, creating a contradiction. If we claim that *ma* and *ʃ* are semantically negative, we will wrongly predict that sentences such as (24) are positive, in that the two negation elements should cancel each other out. Alternatively, if we claim that *ma* is semantically negative and *ʃ* is semantically non-negative, counterexamples such as (21) and (22), mentioned above, indicate *ma* appears to play no semantic negation role.

(24)

ma- nʕəs -ʃ (he didn't sleep)

Neg slept Neg

Towards an Alternative Proposal

ʃ as a NI

MA is a negative concord language, as opposite to double-negative languages such as English, in that it uses two negative elements, without cancelling each other out, to express negation. The MA negative elements are *ma* (?), *ʃ* (?), *ħta waħəd* (*nobody*), *walu* (nothing), and *ʕəmər* (*never*). It should be noted that at this stage of explanation the equivalent of *ma* and *ʃ* in English is not yet clear. In other words, it is still unclear whether *ma* or *ʃ* corresponds to the English negator *not*. An important point clarify is whether all these elements contain semantically interpretable negative features [iNeg] or not. It is clear that the n-words *ħta waħəd* (*nobody*), *walu* (nothing), and *ʕəmər* (*never*) carry [iNeg], in that they correspond to the English negators. however, in the negative sentence (25), it will be difficult to determine which of the negative elements that corresponds to *not*. To solve this problem, let us consider the following sentences (26), (27), and (28). By observing the negative sentences, we can clearly see that absence of *ʃ* leads to the absence of *not*, even when *ma* is present, which suggests that it is *ʃ*, not *ma,* that semantically contributes to negation. Another piece of evidence is the complementary distribution relation between *ʃ* and the other semantically-contributing negators *ħta waħəd* (*nobody*), *walu* (nothing), and *ʕəmər* (*never*), as shown in the same negative sentences. The

complementary distribution is due to their semantic features, not to their categorial ones, in that they do not share the same categorial feature but share the same negative feature, namely[iNeg].

(25)

ma- kla -ʃ (he did not eat)

Neg ate Neg

(26)

ma- ʃaf (*-ʃ) ħta waħəd (he saw nobody)

Neg saw Neg.nobody

(27)

ma- ʃaf (*-ʃ) walu (he saw nothing)

Neg saw Neg.nothing

(28)

ma- ʕəmər -u ma- ʃra (*-ʃ) tʿunubil (he never bought a car)

Neg Neg.never Clitic-Subj Neg bought a car

ma and NIs

The negative marker *ma* and the NIs affect each other. The NIs are licenced by *ma*, as observable in sentences such as (29), (31), (33), and (35), in which the absence of the negative marker *ma* renders the sentences ungrammatical. Another interesting point is that the absence of NIs in the sentences (30), (32), (34), and (36) also renders the sentences ungrammatical. This means that there is a mutual licensing between the negative marker *ma* and the n-words.

(29)

*(ma)- kla -ʃ

Neg ate Neg

(30)

ma- kla *(-ʃ)

Neg ate Neg

(31)

*(ma)- kla walu

Neg ate nothing

(32)

ma- kla *(walu)

Neg ate nothing

(33)

ħəta-waħəd *(ma)- ʒa

nobody Neg came

(34)

*(ħəta-waħəd) ma- ʒa

nobody Neg came

(35)

ʕəməru *(ma)- ləʕəb kura

never Neg played football

(36)

*(ʕəməru) ma- ləʕəb kura

never Neg played football

Semantic-syntactic contribution of ma and N-words

Sentential negation in MA requires two elements: the negative marker *ma* and n-words. In fact, there are a number of languages, such as French, that employ two negative elements to produce negative sentences. Such languages are called negative concord languages. One question arises about these languages is why two negative elements don't cancel each other out but instead express a single negative reading. The answer is to propose that one of the negative elements (*ma* or n-words) carries a semantically interpretable negative feature [iNeg] (a semantic negative marker), while the other carries a semantically uninterpretable negative feature [uNeg], meaning that it marks negation syntactically (a syntactic negative marker).

I propose that the negative marker *ma* carries [uNeg] while the NIs carry [iNeg], for the following reasons. First, the negative marker *ma* can occur more than once in negative sentences, as in (33) below. If we claim that *ma* is semantically negative, we would wrongly predict that the sentence (33) is semantically affirmative, in that the two negative markers *ma* are going to cancel each other out, as the double negation law dictates. Second, n-words cannot occur twice, as in (34). This indicates that they semantically contribute to sentence negation, which explains why they cannot co-occur more than once in a sentence, and why the negative marker *ma* can occur with n-words, since it carries a [uNeg] feature.

(33)

ma- ʕəmər -u ma- mʃa l- kaza (He has never gone to Casa)

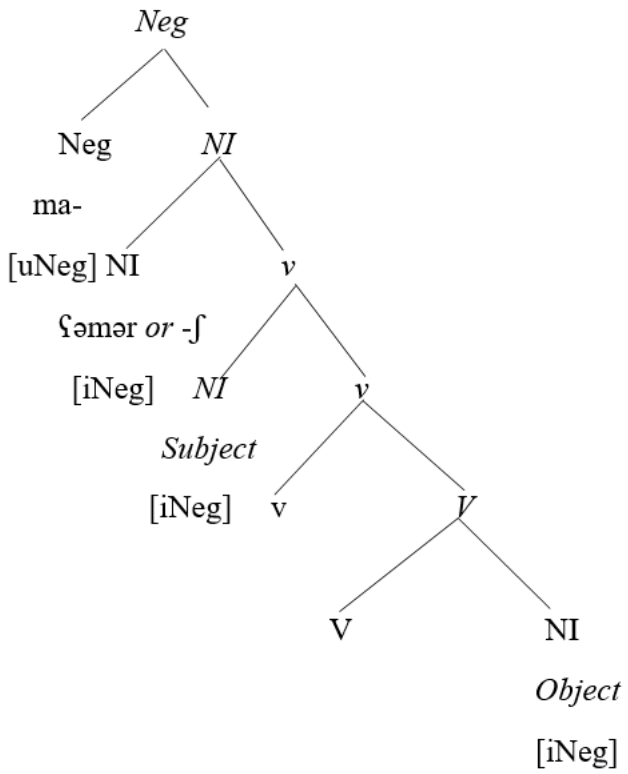
Neg never Clitic-Subj Neg went to Casa

(34)

* ma-	ʃaf	-ʃ	ħəta-waħəd (he saw nobody)
Neg	saw	Neg	nobody

Syntactically, both the negative marker and the n-words belong to two different nodes: negation (Neg) and negative item (NI). Neg heads contain *ma*, carrying [uNeg], and NI heads contain negative items such as *ʕəmər* (*never*), *walu* (*nothing*), *ʃ (not*), and *ħəta-waħəd* (*nobody*), carrying [iNeg]. To eliminate [uNeg], Neg heads Search for NIs to check and value their uninterpretable negative feature, as illustrated in (35):

(35)



Conclusion

The previous attempts to account for negation in MA have revealed serious syntactic and semantic problems. Syntactically, some proposals treat the negative elements as one head. These proposals, however, cannot account for negative sentences expressed without the negative element *ʃ*, such as *ma-kəla walu* (*he ate nothing*). Semantically, all the proposals that attempt to account for negation in MA semantically claim that the negative marker *ma* contributes to the negativity of sentences. In other words, they claim that *ma* is semantically negative and carries [iNeg]. I provided a counterexample such as *ma-ʕəmər-u ma-ləʕəb kura* (*he never played football*.), in which the negative markers co-occur together without affecting the negativity of the sentence. In other words, if we claim that *ma* is semantically negative, we

must conclude that its double presence in the sentence should make it positive. However, this is not the case. Another piece of evidence that n-words hold an [iNeg] feature is the complementary distribution relation among them. This relation is not syntactic but semantic, in that they do not share a common syntactic feature but share the same semantic one: the interpretable negative feature [iNeg].

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