

Nothing / nichts as negative polarity survivors?

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Up on the white veranda
She wears a necktie and a Panama hat
Her passport shows another face
From another time and place
She looks nothing like that
And all the remnants of her recent past
Are scattered in the wild wind
(Bob Dylan "Black Diamond Bay")

In the majority of its occurrences in English, *nothing* is a nominal category which occupies an argument position in the clause: *Nothing will happen. She ate nothing.* etc. In combination with *like that* one finds, however, many examples in which *nothing like that* must be an adjunct. Consider the following examples which were found on the internet:

- (1) I know the Mayor and he **looks** nothing like that
- (2) okay, my dentist's chair **looks** nothing like that
- (3) First of all she **talks** nothing like that, second of all, ...
- (4) Okay, so he looks and **talks** nothing like that character, but he has the same hat and cab
- (5) Now I've burned discs that my player had a difficult time reading before and this current situation **appears** nothing like that
- (6) The StoreFront web site says that their software is highly flexible and scalable, and tops in the industry. It **appears** nothing like that to us. Am I missing something?
- (7) My car **runs** nothing like that though
- (8) Actually, I don't know why they call it *goose step*. Geese **walk** nothing like that
- (9) It is simply the rc plane physics. A dodo **flies** nothing like that

As the bold-faced verbs show, *nothing* cannot be a nominal argument in any of those cases.¹ It must be a nominal adjunct like the phrase in square brackets in *Manfred was working hard [the whole day]*. *Nothing like that* may be compared to *a thing* as in *I didn't understand a thing, Love doesn't cost a thing, I don't want to miss a thing* etc. In these examples *a thing* is a negative polarity item (NPI) which is licensed by a locally preceding negation. The case of *nothing like that* is similar because it carries the same flavor of emphasis that NPIs do. This can be verified by considering the close to synonymous paraphrases with *not ... at all*. (1) corresponds to *I know the Mayor and he doesn't look like that at all*, etc. It differs from regular NPIs, however, by the fact that there is no separate source of negation that would license it. Negation is rather inherent in the negative quantifier *nothing*, and the construction must be taken as a case of sentential negation on all counts.

Modern German does not show an analogous construction. The verb *look* being *aus+sehen* („out+look“), (2) would come out as (10) but not as (11):

- (10) Der Stuhl meines Zahnarzts **sieht** überhaupt nicht wie DER da **aus**
the chair (of) my dentist looks at-all not like THIS there out
- (11) *Der Stuhl meines Zahnarzts **sieht** nichts wie DER da **aus**
the chair (of) my dentist looks nothing like THIS there out

Nevertheless, there are examples in which it is equally impossible to ascribe argument status to *nichts*. In Bavarian, the impersonal passive in (12) could easily be uttered in a situation in which someone illegally rides a bicycle on a walking path.

- (12) Biaschal, do wead fei nix **radl g'foan!**
boy here becomes PRT nothing cycle ridden
„Hey guy, you cannot ride your bike here!“

There is no way to interpret *nichts* as an argument. This is equally true in the following examples which were

¹ My attention was drawn to the English facts by Paolo Acquaviva. My thanks also to Ellen Brandner and Alex Grosu for their help.

found on the internet, and which can be considered slightly sub-standard. The verbs in bold face do not allow a transitive construction with a nominal object.

- (13) Da wird nichts **gelogen**
there becomes nothing lied
 „There will be no lying“
- (14) Mausi war voll tapfer... nichts **geweint**, nichts **gejammert**
M. was fully brave nothing crying nothing lamenting
 „Mausi was really brave ... no crying, no whining“
- (15) Ich habe aber außer dem SuperDrive an der Hardware nichts **herumgespielt**
I have however except the S.D. at the hardware nothing around-played
 „But with the exception of the super drive I have not played around with the hardware“
- (16) Von Freitag auf Samstag hab ich aber fast nichts **geschlafen**
from Friday to Saturday have I however almost nothing slept
 „However, between Friday and Saturday I hardly slept“

Taking a brief look at the origin of these constructions, we see that *nichts* emerged from the Middle High German genitive form *nihtes*. But the analysis as a genitive became obsolete already in the 14th century, as a consequence of which *nichts* could be used like a nominative or accusative NP.² The Grimm dictionary from which the following examples are drawn proposes that *nichts* also acquired adverbial status, in which case it expresses an emphatic negation comparable to *durchaus nicht* („not at all“). Examples in which *nichts* does not fill an argument position are found more frequently in older stages of German than in the present language where they appear to belong to colloquial or dialectal usage. The following examples are from Early New High German (ENHG).

- (17) was got wol gefelt, das **gefelt** den selbigen spöttern nichts
what god well pleases that pleases these very mockers nothing
 „What pleases god this does not please these mockers at all“
- (18) als **gehörten** sie nichts zur kirchen
as belonged they nothing to-the church
 „as if they didn't belong to the church“
- (19) dasz er also sehr verblendet wäre, dasz er der fünf bücher Mosi nichts **achtete**
that he so very misled would-be that he the five books Mose nothing respected
 „that he would be so misled that he would not respect the five books of Mose“
- (20) dasz er doch hierab nichts **erschracke**
that he PRT here-from nothing frightened-became
 „that he did not really get frightened from this“

The arguments of *gefallen* in (17) map onto the Case frame DAT _ NOM, those of *gehören* in (18) onto NOM _ PP, those of *achten* in (19) onto NOM _ GEN,³ and those of *erschrecken* in (20) onto NOM _ PP. In neither of these cases is *nichts* licensed in an A-/Case-position; in other words, it is always an adjunct.

The fact that the negative feature inherent in *nichts* (or some other negative quantifier) can be absorbed in the context of another carrier of negation is undisputed. The following examples from Goethe's writings show not only this but also that *nichts* could be interpreted as an existential indefinite in the scope of a verb of denial as shown in (22).

- (21) hier sei für niemanden nichts gethan, als für den schüler
here be for nobody nothing done than for the disciple
 “For nobody other than the disciple should anything be done”
- (22) nun ist zwar bei großer strafe verboten, nichts in die canäle zu schütten
now is however at big punishment forbidden nothing in the canals to pour
 „It is, however, at the risk of severe punishment forbidden to throw anything into the canals“

² In fact, the genitive use is thoroughly unavailable in the modern language. For the present stage of the language, *nichts* must be considered inflectionless. For reasons why non-inflecting items such as *nichts* can bear structural but not inherent Case, cf. Bayer, Bader & Meng (2001).

³ Notice that in (19) *nichts* cannot be the genitive argument because the argumental genitive appears already on the DP *der fünf bücher Mosi*.

A straightforward explanation of multiple negation in this sense is in my view that there is negative concord (NC), and that the neg-feature of the lower quantifier (here *nichts*) is checked against the sentential negation which may be triggered by a higher (c-commanding) negative quantifier (*niemanden* in (21)) or the negative potential emanating from the verb of denial (*verboten* in (22)). Whatever the exact implementation of checking under NC is, the net effect is that the lower quantifier loses its neg-feature.

The question is whether adjunct *nothing/nichts* can be captured within a theory of NC. My conjecture is that *nothing/nichts* has started out historically as a dependent of a primary source of negation such as the verbal negative prefix *en-*, which has subsequently disappeared in most varieties of Germanic.⁴ The context in which the negative quantifier is able to get rid of its neg-feature is the same as the context which licenses an NPI. Let us assume that *nothing/nichts* has been an NPI at some earlier stage.⁵ One remnant of this stage would be that adjunct *nothing/nichts* continues to elicit an emphatic interpretation. The languages under consideration, English and German, have lost the verbal prefix *en-* and with this the licenser of negation. In the case of *nothing/nichts* it is not hard to imagine that these items could compensate for the loss of the earlier source of negation while retaining the emphasis feature of an NPI. German offers other examples in which an NPI is able to trigger a negative reading by itself. The following examples show that this may be performed by NPIs which do not carry a negative feature in any obvious sense.⁶ (23) and (24) are uncontroversial, and even (25) may be possible for some speakers.

- (23) Das geht dich einen feuchten Kehricht an
this goes you a humid dirt at
 „This is none of your businesses“
- (24) Grimgerde interessiert sich einen Pfeifendeckel für Opern
G. interests REFL a pipe-lid for operas
 „Grimgerde does not care for operas at all“
- (25) ??Karlfried hatte die Bohne Ahnung von Kategorialgrammatik
K. had the bean idea of categorial-grammar
 „Karlfried didn't have the slightest idea of categorial-grammar“

Einen feuchten Kehricht as well as *einen Pfeifendeckel* and may be to some degree also *die Bohne* are NPIs which in certain contexts can trigger sentential negation while retaining the emphatic interpretation typical of these NPIs.⁷ In this case it seems to be even more plausible that elements which overtly carry a neg-feature can qualify as such items.

If these speculations are on the right track, the cases at hand, *nothing/nichts*, can be analyzed as residues of older stages of the two languages in which they were NPIs meaning something like „at all“. Such a finding should be interesting for a number of reasons: First, it would show that negatively marked phrases can be NPIs, a finding which to my knowledge should be non-trivial. Secondly, it would show that these NPIs can recover sentential negation in case the original licenser has been lost. One may then argue that elements which are not perceived as NPIs in the modern language (*not/nicht*, *nobody/niemand*, *nowhere/nirgends*, *never/niemals* etc.) had essentially the same fate as *nothing/nichts*, and that there is a squish by which such elements end up as markers of sentential negation once they have lost the emphatic feature that is normally associated with an NPI. Adjunct *nothing/nichts* would then be an element which has survived as an NPI for centuries, in stark contrast to argumental *nothing/nichts* which has lost its NPI-flavor. If true, this would thirdly show for English that the linguistic incrimination of varieties which use *nothing* rather than the standard *anything* as an NPI would back-fire. Given that *nothing like ...* belongs pretty much to standard English, it would show that even the standard language uses *nothing* as an NPI.

The observations and speculations which have been presented here may set up a research program on negation which could lead to a coherent explanation for the fact that “nominal” negative quantifiers appear

⁴ But see West-Flemish as described in Haegeman (1992).

⁵ This is certainly controversial; see Jäger (2005:253ff) for discussion and reference to relevant literature.

⁶ With reference to Jespersen's cycle it has been argued that bona fide NPIs such as French *pas* (“step”) can turn into primary syntactic means of negation. To my knowledge, negative sentences with *pas* do not carry an NPI flavor. A theory of grammaticalization may tell us under which circumstances an NPI turns into a sign of simplex negation and thus lose the emphasis feature normally carried by an NPI.

⁷ Notice that all three examples are perfectly grammatical with an overt negative antecedent. To show this, consider the dubious case in (25) which improves to general acceptability in the context of, say, *niemand*

(i) Niemand hatte die Bohne Ahnung von Kategorialgrammatik
nobody has the bean idea of categorial-grammar
 „Nobody has even the slightest idea of categorial-grammar“

as adjuncts. Since the issue touches on various facets of negation and NPI-licensing, it should not be seen as a small and isolated problem.

References

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