

***Nicht* as a marker of alterity (otherness)**

This article proposes a new account of the German particle *nicht* ('not'), presenting a semantic approach that challenges the traditional dichotomy between negating and non-negating uses of *nicht*. It is argued that all uses of *nicht* – from lexical negation (cf. (1)), constituent negation (cf. (2)), and sentential negation (cf. (3)) to discourse-structuring (cf. (4) and (5)), and expressive functions (cf. (6)) – can synchronically be derived from a common underlying meaning of the particle: *nicht* functions as a marker of **alterity** (otherness).

- (1) ***Nicht***-Mitglied
- (2) ***Nicht*** Target entdeckte den Angriff, sondern die US-Geheimdienste.
- (3) Er hat Sabine ***nicht*** abgeholt.
- (4) Könnten das ***nicht*** auch gefährliche Dinge sein?
- (5) Wir haben ja auch schon ein bisschen etwas erlebt, ***nicht***?
- (6) Was kann man der Lyrik ***nicht*** alles vorwerfen!

Traditionally, *nicht* is described as a negation operator that reverses the truth value of a proposition (see Jacobs 1991). Blühdorn (2012) develops an elaborate model that makes the conceptual content of negation more tangible by understanding negation as the exclusion of the syntactic constituent marked by *nicht* from a set of selectable alternatives. The non-factuality of states of affairs, the non-truth of propositions, and the undesirability of speech acts can, in this approach, be viewed as implications resulting from the exclusion of the syntactic constituent marked by *nicht*.

This approach already assumes that negation, as an expression of non-factuality or non-truth, derives indirectly from a more abstract function of *nicht*, which Blühdorn describes as exclusion from a set of alternatives. However, this description does not capture the non-negating uses of *nicht* – for instance, as a marker in confirmatory questions (cf. (4)), in tag questions (cf. (5)), or as part of exclamative sentences (cf. (6)). In analyses of such uses, the particle is sometimes described as semantically “empty” (Duden 2022, p. 260) or said to refer to a different domain of meaning, such as sentence mood (Hentschel 1998, p. 221, 233). Neither explanation is fully satisfactory: if the particle is semantically “empty,” why is it used at all? And how can the assumption that it negates the sentence mood be reconciled with the fact that a confirmatory or tag question is still a question, insofar as the addressee must respond in order to be cooperative?

The present article offers a different approach, whose central claim is that *nicht* in all its uses marks a relation of alterity (otherness). The particle signals that the entity referred to is different from what would be expected or assumed based on linguistic context, world knowledge, or general discourse knowledge. In negating uses, this alterity pertains to a lexical concept, a participant or state of affairs as the referent of the marked expression; in non-negating uses, it relates to the current speaker's position and its difference from the interlocutor's position in the discourse, or from the speaker's own position at an earlier point in time. The abstract notion of alterity thus serves as the common semantic

denominator for both the negating functions of *nicht* – which can be understood as reference to an alternative concept, participant, or state of affairs – and the non-negating, discourse-pragmatic functions, which can be described as reference to alternative discursive or epistemic positions. This inclusive conception emphasizes the structural similarity and constant availability of the semantic entities to which *nicht* can refer: lexical concepts (cf. (1)), referents of syntactic constituents (cf. (2)), states of affairs or propositions (cf. (3)), and discursive (cf. (4) and (5)) as well as epistemic (cf. (6)) speaker positions. Which of these references is active at a given point depends on aspects of the syntactic context.

In compounds such as *Nicht-Mitglied* (“non-member”, cf. (1)), *nicht* is part of a complex lexical unit and marks an alternative conceptual categorization. A *Nicht-Mitglied* is someone who is different from a member, but still belongs to the same overarching category (e. g., human, potentially adult, interested in the organization, etc.).

In constituent negation (cf. (2)), the particle refers to a syntactic phrase, marking its referent as different and thereby shifting reference from the mentioned entity to an alternative participant as present in the situation structure. This alternative is often made explicit in a constituent introduced by *sondern* (“but rather”).

In sentential negation (cf. (3)), *nicht* refers to the predicate as the core of the description of a situation and marks the represented state of affairs or proposition as an alternative to the actually relevant one. The reasons for this “detour to truth” are pragmatic – for example, when a corresponding assertion or implicit assumption is in play.

For confirmatory questions (cf. (4)), the relevant context is that of a polar question. Here, *nicht* (apart from specific conditions such as direct follow-up questions) does not serve as an expression of sentential or constituent negation and is therefore “free” for other references. Given the question mode and the involvement of an addressee, epistemic positions in the discourse are saliently established: epistemic responsibility is transferred to the addressee. The marking by *nicht* now applies to the addressee’s epistemic position and marks it as an alternative to the actually relevant one, which is again the alternative epistemic position of the speaker. The speaker retains epistemic authority, but still expects an answer from the addressee, which should confirm the speaker’s assumption. This derivation of the specific meaning of confirmatory questions captures Hentschel’s (1998) intuition that the question mood is negated, but offers a more precise and differentiated account of the underlying semantic mechanism.

In a tag question (cf. (5)), *nicht* functions in the same way as described in the previous paragraph. Here, too, the relevant context is a polar question, but the particle is syntactically detached from the clause it refers to. In this use, the interaction between question mood and alterity becomes even more transparent: the expressive means contributing to the function of reassurance – rising intonation or a question mark for interrogative sentence mood, and *nicht* as an expression of alterity – are syntactically adjacent and follow an assertive statement. Despite this difference in syntactic structure, the semantic composition is parallel to the confirmatory question: interrogative mood and *nicht* create the characteristic combination of turn-taking and retained epistemic authority (see previous paragraph).

In exclamative clauses, the syntactic context is that of a constituent or *wh*-question clause without question intonation or punctuation. Also in this case, *nicht* operates against a background of epistemic or evaluative positioning invoked by the clause type. Still, since there is no prosodic or orthographic marking of interrogative mood and thus no reference to the addressee, the alterity cannot relate to different positions in the ongoing discourse; instead, *nicht* refers to a different position of the same speaker, distinguishable from the present one only diachronically. *Nicht* signals a difference or change in the speaker's epistemic stance – for example, between a new observation and a prior expectation (cf. D'Avis 2013) – which gives rise to the surprise component characteristic of exclamative meaning.

In summary, viewing *nicht* as an expression of alterity overcomes some crucial limitations of previous research. The new approach, through its contextually determined references, offers a unified framework for analyzing one of the most frequent and multifunctional particles in German.

References

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