

***Keineswegs*: an expressive negation word of German**

This article is an investigation of pragmatic and syntactic peculiarities of *keineswegs*, roughly ‘by no means’, in comparison with *nicht* ‘not’. I argue that these peculiarities are due to an expressive meaning component that is missing in *nicht*, namely the illocutionary intention to reject a salient assumption. This meaning component explains differences in the syntactic distribution of *keineswegs* and *nicht* as well as special restrictions on the possible discourse positions of *keineswegs*.

I start by showing that *keineswegs* is only possible in a proper subset of the syntactic environments of *nicht*. In particular, *keineswegs*, in contrast to *nicht*, is often banned from positions within the scope of another negation word. Furthermore, *keineswegs* cannot occur in certain conditional or relative clauses, again in contrast to *nicht*. The same often holds for the argument clauses of emotive factive verbs. Finally, the two negation words differ in their ability to be used in non-declarative sentences, e. g. in certain interrogative or optative sentences, which can host *nicht* but not *keineswegs*. None of these differences follows from the fact that *keineswegs* and *nicht* do not belong to the same grammatical category (sentence adverbial vs. focus particle).

The restricted syntactic distribution of *keineswegs* parallels limitations on the syntactic positions of certain positive polarity items, e. g. of the modal particle *ja*, roughly ‘as you know’ and the sentence adverbial *offen gesagt* ‘frankly’. These limitations have been linked to an aversion to non-veridical environments (cf., e. g., Hoeksema 2018) but this explanation neither covers all of the relevant data nor does it answer the question as to why a negation word like *keineswegs* is subject to similar restrictions as non-negative elements like *ja* or *offen gesagt*.

Turning to discourse, we see the same picture. The ability of *keineswegs* to occur in certain discourse positions is more restricted in comparison with *nicht*. For example, whereas *nicht* can be freely used in negative answers to yes-no questions, the use of *keineswegs* in such answers requires a context in which the assumption is already salient that the proposition negated in the answer is true. If this condition is not met, the context has to be accommodated accordingly to make the use of *keineswegs* pragmatically sensible.

Starting from this observation, I propose that the lexical meaning of *keineswegs* consists of two components: a) propositional negation and b) an expressive component $\text{OPPOSE}(p)$ that represents the illocutionary intention of the speaker to inform the addressee that p is not true under the presupposition that the assumption that p is true is contextually salient. By general principles of rational communication, this intention implies that the speaker assumes $\neg p$.

Via component b), this analysis straightforwardly captures the specific discourse restriction of *keineswegs*. Moreover, many of the limitations on its use in certain syntactic positions follow from the fact that $\text{OPPOSE}(p)$ implies that the speaker assumes $\neg p$, as explained above. Expressing this assumption by using *keineswegs* is only possible when this does not lead to a violation of CONSISTENCY, i. e. of the prohibition against inherently contradictory expressive content, cf. Jacobs (2025). Such a violation typically arises if *keines-*

wegs were to be used within the scope of another negation word because then the propositional negation inherent in *keineswegs* (component a) above) would be cancelled and transformed into an assertion of p , which is inconsistent with the assumption of $\neg p$ implied in the expressive content.

This implication of the use of *keineswegs* is also inconsistent with environments in which the speaker expresses that s/he is not sure whether p or $\neg p$ is the case. Therefore, *keineswegs* is excluded from conditional clauses expressing uncertainty, e. g. clauses with *falls* ('in case'), as well as from certain interrogative and optative clauses.

The fact that *keineswegs* is often ruled out in complement clauses of emotive factives is due to another restriction on expressive content: USEFULNESS prohibits adding an illocutionary intention to the expressive content of an utterance u when the inherent goal of the intention has already been reached when u is made, see also Jacobs (2025). This excludes adding OPPOSE(p), i. e. the intention to inform the speaker that p is not true, to the expressive content of u when the information that p is not true is already in the common ground, i. e. mutually shared by the interlocutors. Therefore, in complement clauses of emotive factive predicates with the proposition $\neg p$, it would often be odd to use *keineswegs* instead of *nicht* to express negation because in such cases $\neg p$ is typically in the common ground.

A third requirement, REFERENTIAL COMPLETENESS, explains why *keineswegs* cannot occur in relative clauses that are used as properties that identify referents. In these uses, the value of the variable corresponding to the relative pronoun is not fixed and, thus, as a consequence of this requirement, stands in the way of adding an illocutionary intention like OPPOSE to the expressive content. This also prevents *keineswegs* from occurring in certain temporal clauses; conversely it is allowed in relative and temporal clauses that are not used to identify referents but as predications over referents that have already been identified in the context, as in appositive or predicative relative clauses.

The parallels to positive polarity items like *ja* and *offen gesagt* (see above) are due to the fact that these elements have expressive meaning components that, *mutatis mutandis*, are subject to the same pragmatic restrictions as OPPOSE and, therefore, are excluded in the same syntactic environments.

References

- Hoeksema, Jack (2018): Positive polarity predicates. In: *Linguistics* 56, 2, pp. 361–400.
- Jacobs, Joachim (2025): Zur Illokutionsfähigkeit abhängiger Sätze. Universität Wuppertal. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.20213.84961.