Negation and aspect in Korean since-clauses

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A meaningless negation?

- The presence of a negative marker in Korean since-clauses 'since' as in (1) has been claimed to be irrelevant to the calculation of the truth conditions of the sentence. 
- Therefore, the negative marker has been viewed as a case of expletive negation, i.e., a negative expression with a null semantics because it has been absorbed (Espinal 1992, 2000) and, in this sense, it is never obligatory (van der Wouden 1994).

(1) [Nay-ka syawe-lul (an) ha-nici] cham olay toyessta.
   J.NOM began-ACC NEG do-since very long time became
   "It has been a long time since I took a shower."

Against the expletive view, we claim that the negative marker in the since-clause does indeed contribute to the sentence meaning by expressing full negation.

Previous accounts


J. Yoon claims that, being part of a double negation construction, the negative meaning of an is neutralized. The other negative element would be olay a long time, which the author describes as having a relativized negative meaning.

But olay ‘a long time’ is not a semantically negative element:
- When an is not present but olay is, the sentence is negative.
- Only negative markers license NPIs in Korean, but olay cannot, as in (2).

(2) [Ciu-wa amwuuto (*an) manna-nici] olay toyessta.
   jiwso-NOM anyone NEG meet-since long time became
   "It has been a long time since Jiwso met anyone."

2. S. Yoon (2011): the presence of an triggers a desirability scale.

S. Yoon claims that an is an evaluative mood marker that conveys the speaker’s attitude and expresses undesirability of the situation described in the sentence (e.g. “not taking a shower for a long time in (1)’).

But the desirability readings are not intrinsically associated with an:
- The desirability readings come from world knowledge, as shown in (3) below.
- Adding an to sentence (3) is not likely to trigger undesirability.

(3) [Minho-ka kekkang-ul wihay tampay-lul (an) phiu-nici] olay toyessta.
   Minho-NOM health-ACC for tobacco-ACC NEG smoke-since long time became
   "It has been a long time since Minho (did not smoke/$smoke for health.)"*

Our observations

1. Started vs finished readings

Korean since-clauses convey different meanings depending on the presence or absence of the negative marker:
- Without an, sentence (4) is ambiguous between a Positive and a Negative Reading.
- With an, sentence (5) is not ambiguous as it has a Negative Reading only.

(4) [Malía na nolay-lul phulu-nici] olay toyessta.
   Maria-NOM smoke-ACC NEG do-since long time became

(5) [Malía na nolay-lul phulu-nici] olay toyessta.
   Maria-NOM smoke-ACC NEG do-since long time became

Positive Reading
― 'It’s been a long time since Maria started singing songs'
   (Maria has been singing songs for a long time)

Negative reading
― 'It’s been a long time since Maria finished singing songs'
   (Maria has not been singing any songs for a long time)

2. For the last time reading

Korean since-clauses may contain modifiers such as macimakulo for the last time depending on the presence or absence of the negative marker:
- Without an, the presence of macimakulo is allowed.
- With an, the presence of macimakulo generates ungrammaticality.

(6) [Nay-ka macimakulo syawe-lul (an) ha-nici] olay toyessta.
   J.NOM began-ACC for last time NEG do-since long time became
   "It has been a long time since I took a shower for the last time."

3. Expectation of iteration reading

Korean since-clauses may convey an expectation of iteration of the eventuality expressed in it depending on the presence or absence of the negative marker:
- Without an, any eventuality can be part of the construction.
- With an, eventualities conceptualized as having one single instance generate ungrammaticality.

(7) [Ku-ka (*an) cwuku-nici] olay toyessta.
   he-NOM NEG die-since long time became
   "It has been a long time since he died."

Our account

1. Without a negative marker, negation is only an implicature.

- Without a negative marker, the sentence asserts that the eventuality p in the since-clause held at some point a while ago. The temporal expression, olay in our examples, measures the time interval between the point when p held and the moment of enunciation (MoE). For the semantics of since, see Bree (1985) and Wickboldt (1998).
- The interpretation that not p held between the point when p held and the MoE is an implicature. As such, it can be cancelled, which is shown by the availability of the Positive Reading.
- The compatibility with the modifier macimakulo for the last time is due to the availability of p in the assertion.

2. With a negative marker, negation is in the assertion.

- With a negative marker, the sentence triggers the presupposition that p occurred until some point, and the sentence asserts that a long time has passed since the point when not p (i.e., p stopped holding).
- The incompatibility with macimakulo is due to the unavailability of p in the assertion (see Cépeda 2017 for a related account on anti-classes).
- One-instance eventualities cannot satisfy the expectation of iteration because it is presupposed that p already occurred.
- Therefore, the negative marker in Korean since-clauses does indicate negation, which is actively present in the assertion.

Conclusion

An expletive account for the negative marker in Korean since-clauses is not accurate. The presence or absence of the negative marker affects the truth conditions of the sentence.

Our account overcomes the problems of the previous approaches and avoids postulating an ad-hoc meaningless negation.

References:

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