**Default Nonliteral Interpretations**

**The case of negation as a low-salience marker**

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1. Introduction

This chapter looks into some emerging negative constructions in Hebrew.[[1]](#endnote-1) It argues that such infrequent utterances convey *novel* nonliteral (e.g., metaphorical, sarcastic) interpretations by default. *Default nonliteral utterance-level interpretation* is a new notion, not yet (sufficiently) discussed in cognitive linguistics. It focuses both on “defaultness” and “nonliteralness”, but importantly, also on the notion of “utterance-level *interpretation*” and the cognitive representations involved in the process. *Default* utterance-level interpretations are singled out in that they differ from conventionalized coded meanings of lexicalized items (meanings listed in the mental lexicon) and from interpretations based on these coded (i.e., salient) meanings, termed here "salience-based interpretations" (Giora et al. 2007). Whereas coded meanings of words and collocations (whether sub- or supra-sentential) are retrieved directly from the mental lexicon (Giora, 1997, 1999, 2003), utterance-level interpretations are novel, noncoded, and have to be construed on the fly (Gibbs, 2002).

Novel noncoded interpretations are low on salience (Giora, 1997, 2003). Albeit nonsalient, the novel nonliteral utterance interpretations to be discussed here are privileged in that they are favored over and processed faster than their noncoded but salience-based, here, literal alternatives. Such findings, attesting to the temporal priority of *nonsalient* nonliteral interpretations over their relatively available *salience-based* literal ones, cannot be accounted for by any contemporary processing model, including the Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora, 1997, 1999, 2003).

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate, instead, that negation - a marker prompting low-salience interpretations by default - can account for the priority of nonsalient nonliteral interpretations over salience-based, literal ones (Giora 2006; Giora et al. 2005, 2010, 2013, in press; Givoni, Giora, and Bergerbest 2013). To allow an insight into the notion of default nonliteral interpretations induced by negation, consider the following natural examples (target utterances in bold, interpretations in italics):

(1) **I am not your wife, I am not your maid,** *I'm not someone that you can lay your demands [on] all of [the] time. I'm sick of this it's going to stop!* (Blige 2007).

(2) I will not use the word “*hater*” but **supportive she is not**. (Lady 2013).

(3) *Tom's wait is currently 3 years*, more-or-less. **Punctuality is not his forte** (Marzluf, 2011).

(4) sorry, my **French is not my best attribute**, in fact it is *awful*!! (Anonymous 2010).

In (1), the target constructions (*I am not your wife, I am not your maid*) are of the form “X is not Y”. They convey a low-salience metaphorical interpretation (*I'm not someone that you can lay your demands [on] all of [the] time*), while rendering literal, defining features (*married, hired*) pragmatically irrelevant.[[2]](#endnote-2) This interpretation is highlighted via the rejection of the concepts (*your wife,* *your maid*) by means of the negation marker. In (2), the target construction (*Supportive she is not*) is of the form “X s/he is not”. It conveys a low-salience sarcastic interpretation which is brought to the fore via the rejection of the concept (*supportive*) within the scope of negation. It thus suggests a contrastive reading (similar to *hater*) of what is negated. In (3), the target construction (*Punctuality is not his forte*) is of the form “X is not his/her forte”. It too conveys a low-salience sarcastic interpretation, suggesting the opposite of the negated concept (indicating a long delay of *3 years*, which makes the protagonist very late rather than punctual). In (4), the target construction (*French is not my best attribute*) is of the form “X is not his/her best attribute”. It conveys a low-salience sarcastic interpretation by suggesting the opposite (*awful*) of what is negated (*best attribute*). As will be shown here, such nonliteral interpretations, albeit low on salience, are the preferred, default interpretations of such utterances.

Recall that the nonliteral interpretations of these emerging constructions are not lexicalized but need to be construed. No wonder they are often made explicit by their users. For instance, *I am not your wife* in (1) is used differently in (5). While metaphorical too, here, in (5), it is a protest, leveled by a wife against her husband who *didn’t treat her with respect like one should treat one’s wife* but instead shamed her by *cheating on her, deceiving her*, etc. Here too, negation invites low-salience features of “wife” (*should be treated with respect*), while rendering literal, defining features (*married*) pragmatically irrelevant (Giora et al. 2013):

(5) "**I am not your wife**. *You cheated me; you deceived me. You did not tell me that you were involved with Pakistanis. You did not tell me what were you up to*," she said loudly (Singh 2002).

The notions of default, preferred, or privileged utterance-interpretation prevalent in the field are either agnostic with regard to degree of (non)literalness, or assume a literalness-based interpretation. Thus, the classical view (Aristotle 350 BCE; Beardsley 1958; Black 1954, 1962, 1979; Richards 1936), promoted by the Standard Pragmatic Model (Grice 1975; Searle 1979; see also Levinson 2000), assumes that an utterance default interpretation is literal, which, for the most part, is context independent. Literal utterance-level interpretations are, therefore, activated first, regardless of contextual information to the contrary (see discussions in Gibbs 1994, 2002; Hamblin and Gibbs 2003; Gibbs and Moise 1997; Récanati 1989, 1995).

The Graded Salience Hypothesis (Giora 1997, 1999, 2003) also assumes a context independent view of default utterance-interpretation, which, however, is not necessarily literal, but salience-based. A salience-based interpretation is an utterance-interpretation, based on the salient meanings of the utterance components. Salient meanings of linguistic (and nonlinguistic) components are coded in the mental lexicon, and enjoy prominence due to a number of factors, regardless of degree of (non)literalness. Factors contributing to salience might be cognitive, such as degree of prototypicality, or related to amount of exposure, such as degree of frequency, conventionality, and experiential familiarity (even if private, or related to the unspoken/unsaid that is often on our mind).

Given that utterance components might have either literal and/or nonliteral meanings high in salience, salience-based interpretations are agnostic with regard to degree of (non)literalness. Less-salient meanings - meanings low on prototypicality or degree of exposure - are also coded in the mental lexicon, regardless of degree of (non)literalness. However, they are low on prominence and might take a while to reach a threshold even in a supportive context. In contrast, novel, nonsalient meanings or interpretations are not coded, and are not considered default interpretations. Rather, they have to be learnt or constructed, often on the basis of contextual information. They can, however, be both, literal or nonliteral.

According to the Graded Salience Hypothesis, then, salience-based interpretations are default interpretations. They are, therefore, expected to be activated initially, regardless of contextual information. On the other hand, nonsalient meanings and interpretations are not derived by default and may therefore lag behind, even when contextual support is strong (Fein, Yeari and Giora 2014; Giora 2003, 2011; Giora et al. 2007; but see Peleg, Giora and Fein 2001 for the effects of predictive contexts).

In contrast to the Standard Pragmatic Model and the Graded Salience Hypothesis, most of the views of default utterance-interpretations postulate richer notions of defaultness, varying with respect to degree of context dependency. Some are more constrained such as “explicatures” (Carston 2002, 2012; Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995), and some are more flexible such as “privileged interactional interpretations” (Ariel 2002), or “primary meanings” (Jaszczolt 2005a,b, 2009, 2010). However, these default interpretations too are indifferent to degree of nonliteralness (Ariel 2002, 2008, 2010; Bach 1994; Carston 2002; Gibbs and Moise 1997; Hamblin and Gibbs 2003; Jaszczolt 2005a,b, 2009, 2010, 2011; Récanati 1989, 2001, 2004, 2005; Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995). This chapter, however, focuses on nonliteralness. It outlines the conditions for a novel notion termed here “default nonliteral utterance-interpretation”.

2. Default nonliteral utterance-interpretation

The view of default nonliteral utterance-interpretation has been proposed, developed, and tested in our recent experimental studies, using contrived Hebrew stimuli, based, however, on natural instances, and read by native speakers of Hebrew. In addition, native speakers of Hebrew, English, German, and Russian were involved in corpora-based studies, which are not reported here (but see Giora 2006; Giora et al. 2010, 2013; Giora, Drucker and Fein 2014). In these studies we outlined the conditions for default nonliteral interpretations (specified in 6 below), which require that utterances be a priori potentially ambiguous between literal and nonliteral interpretations. These conditions, then, stipulate that cues, known to prompt nonliteralness, whether utterance external or internal, should be excluded, so that one interpretation may be favored over another *by default*:

(6) Conditions for default nonliteral interpretations

(a) Constituents (words, phrases, utterances) have to be *unfamiliar* so as to exclude salient/coded nonliteral *meanings* of expressions and collocations. For instance, salient nonliteral meanings of familiar idiomatic (*spill the beans*), metaphorical (*backseat*), sarcastic[[3]](#endnote-3) (*you don’t say*), or any conventional formulaic expressions (Bybee 2006**;** Fillmore, Kay, & O'Connor 1988; Gibbs 1980, 1981; Giora 2003), as well as prefabs (Erman and Warren 2000), or conventionalized, ritualistic utterances, (Kecskés 1999, 2000) should be excluded. If negative utterances are considered, they should not be negative polarity items (NPIs), but should, instead, have an acceptable affirmative counterpart, so that conventionality is avoided.[[4]](#endnote-4)

(b) *Semantic anomaly* (known to invite metaphoricalness, see Beardsley 1958) or any kind of opposition between the elements of a phrase or proposition (known to trigger a sarcastic reading, see Barbe 1993; Partington 2011) should be avoided so that both literal and nonliteral interpretations may be allowed. For this reason, “epitomizations” - negative object-subject-verb (OSV) constructions (“X s/he is not”) - in which the fronted constituent is a proper noun, (*Einstein he is not*) - must be excluded. Such constructions are also metaphorical, not least in their affirmative version (Birner and Ward 1998; Ward 1983; Ward and Birner 2006; see also Prince 1981).

(c) Specific and informative *contextual information* should not be involved so that pragmatic incongruity - a breach of pragmatic maxims or contextual misfit (Grice 1975) - on the one hand, and supportive biasing information, on the other, (Gibbs 1981, 1986a,b, 1994, 2002; Katz 2009; Katz, Blasko, and Kazmerski 2004) may not invite or disinvite a nonliteral or a literal interpretation. Contextual or pragmatic cues such as *metaphorically speaking*, *sarcastically speaking, literally, pun intended* (see Givoni, et al. 2013; Katz and Ferretti 2003), marked intonation/prosodic cues, whether nonliteral, such as sarcastic, effective even outside of a specific context (Bryant and Fox Tree 2002; Rockwell, 2007; Voyer and Techentin 2010), corrective, such as assigned to metalinguistic negation (Carston 1996; Chapman 1996; Horn 1985, 1989), or nonverbal, such as gestures or facial expressions (Caucci & Kreuz 2012), should be avoided so that nonliteralness would neither be invited nor blocked.

The view of default nonliteral interpretation predicts that certain constructions, complying with the conditions for default nonliteral interpretations, will be perceived as such compared to an equivalent alternative (a) when presented outside of a specific context, (b) regardless of degree of structural markedness. Consequently, when embedded in a strongly biasing context, they (c) will be processed nonliterally initially, regardless of contextual information to the contrary. Given the preference and temporal priority of their nonliteral interpretation, (d) such utterances will convey a nonliteral interpretation when used by speakers and therefore (e) their contextual environment will resonate with and reflect this nonliteral albeit nonsalient interpretation. (For corpus-based evidence supporting predictions d-e, see Giora et al. 2010, 2013; Giora, Drucker and Fein 2014).

In the studies reported here, we tested predictions (a-c) using both offline and online measures (Giora 2006; Giora et al. 2010, 2013, 2015). We showed that negation is an operator generating novel nonliteral utterance-interpretation by default. Below I review our findings with regard to negative constructions such as “X is not Y” (*This is not Memorial Day*) which are primarily metaphorical (section 2.1), and “X s/he is not” (*Punctual he is not*), “X is not her/his forte” (*Punctuality is not* *her forte*), and “X is not her/his best feature” (*Punctuality is not* *her best feature*), which are primarily sarcastic (section 2.2).

2.1 Default metaphorical utterance-interpretation: X is not Y constructions

Consider the following natural instances, exemplary of the kind of construction discussed in this section (target utterances in boldface, interpretations in italics):

(7) *I’ve heard about your needs/wants/desires/witnesses/mother’s health a thousand times*… **I am not your social worker***/psychologist/person you vent to*. I am your lawyer. So, if I don’t *speak to you every other day about your ‘feelings’* … (Seddiq, N.A., retrieved on August 28, 2012)

(8) My name is Mary K. Hill. *I am a Licensed Independent Social Worker*. **I am your Social Worker** at Hmong International Academy. (Hill 2012)

(9) There is such a *racket* going on downstairs, between *doors slamming and dogs barking*. - Makes me want to open the door and scream “**THIS IS NOT A DISCOTHEQUE**!” (Gordon 2011).

(10) Located in Walking Street up on the right hand side from Beach Road, upstairs from Candy Shop and opposite Soi Diamond, just find as it lights up Walking Street with a laser sign. **This is a Discotheque** *with live band, the music is House/ Techno/ Blip Blip*. Closed in Spring 2009. [http://www.pattayabarreview.com/tag/live-band/ retrieved on August 28, 2012]

In (7), the negative target utterance *I am not your social worker* is used metaphorically, getting across some non-defining features of the concept (*social worker*) via rejecting them (e.g., “heard about your needs/wants/desires/witnesses/mother’s health”, “you vent to”, or “speak to you every other day about your ‘feelings’”). This metaphor is further reinforced by similar figures of speech, such as “I am not your…psychologist/person you vent to”. In contrast, in (8), the affirmative counterpart, *I am your Social Worker* gets across some defining features of the concept, such as “I am a Licensed Independent Social Worker”. In (9), the target utterance *THIS IS NOT A DISCOTHEQUE*! focuses on a metaphorical nondefining feature of the negated concept *discotheque*, which here refers to disturbing noise(*racket*, *doors slamming and dogs barking*). Its affirmative counterpart in (10), however, highlights its defining features (*live band, the music is House/ Techno/ Blip Blip*).

Will such negative utterances be perceived as metaphorical, compared to their affirmative alternatives, when presented in isolation (section 2.1.1)? Will they be processed faster when embedded in metaphorically than in literally biasing context, as predicted by the view of negation as an operator inducing nonliteral interpretations by default (section 2.1.2)?

2.1.1 Evidence from offline measures

Our previous studies (Giora et al. 2010) show that some novel negative utterances (e.g., 7, 9), involving no semantic anomaly, were perceived as more metaphorical compared to their equally novel affirmative counterparts (e.g., 8, 10), when presented in isolation. Items were followed by a 7-point metaphoricalness scale, which (randomly) instantiated either a literal or a metaphorical interpretation at the scale’s end. Participants were asked to indicate the proximity of the utterance interpretation to any of those instantiations at the scale’s ends (or otherwise propose an alternative).

Results showed that the metaphorical interpretation, albeit nonsalient, was the preferred interpretation of the novel negative items, scoring high on metaphoricalness (M=5.50 *SD*=0.96). In contrast, the preferred interpretation of their equally novel affirmative counterparts was the salience-based, literal one, scoring significantly lower on metaphoricalness (M=3.48 *SD*=1.27), *t*1(47)=10.17, *p*<.0001; *t*2(14)=4.36, *p*<.0005 (Giora et al. 2010).

2.1.2 Evidence from online measures

Given their preference for metaphoricalness, the view of negation as inducing nonliteral interpretations by default predicts that such negative utterances (as discussed in section 2.1.1) will be read faster when embedded in a context biasing them toward their metaphorical than toward their (equally strongly biased) literal interpretation. In Giora et al. (2013), we tested this prediction with regard to the utterances tested offline in Giora et al. (2010). Utterances were embedded in contexts controlled for equal strength of literal/nonliteral bias. They were followed by a two-word spillover segment, which allows testing whether difficulties in processing a target utterance spill over to the next utterance. The target utterances, followed by the spillover segment, were presented in context non-final position (to avoid wrap-up effects).

Participants were asked to read short paragraphs, which they advanced segment by segment by pressing a key, and answer the question that followed. Reading times of the target utterances and the spillover segments were measured by the computer. Results showed that, as predicted, the negative utterances were read faster when embedded in a context strongly biasing them toward their nonsalient metaphorical interpretation than toward their (equally strongly biased) salience-based literal interpretation, *t*1(37) = 2.57, *p<* .01; *t*2(11)=1.51, *p*=.08 (see Figure 1). There were no spillover effects.

FIGURE 1 Mean reading times (in ms) of metaphorically and literally biased targets

Such results support the view that negation generates nonliteral interpretations by default.

2.2 Default sarcastic utterance-interpretation: “X s/he is not” constructions

Consider the following natural instances, exemplary of the kind of constructions discussed in this section (target utterances in boldface, interpretations in italics):

(11) Katherine may be courageous, but **smart she is not**. In fact, I *wonder*

*whether she has ever rubbed more than three brain cells together*. [http://www.drphil.com/messageboard/topic/2873/55/ Retrieved on October 16, 2012]

(12) Meg is a *smart* girl, maybe she's not pretty, but **smart she is**" says Scott.

[<http://m.fanfiction.net/s/5142465/7/> Retrieved on October 16, 2012]

(13) **Smart he is not**… Let it be said at once that Sharon may be as sharp as a whip, as cunning and elusive as an eel, but - as the Nahal Brigade troupe used to sing - "he's *not so smart*." Certainly *not so smart* as many, himself included, may think. (Rosenblum, 2004).

The negative utterance in (11) (smart she is not) is used sarcastically, suggesting that the person in question is far from being smart and is in fact stupid, as the context clarifies (*wonder whether she has ever rubbed more than three brain cells together*). The alternative affirmative (*smart she is*) in (12) conveys a literal interpretation of the same concept (Meg is a *smart* girl). In (13), the negative construction (Smart he is not), does not convey the opposite of what is said but allows, instead, a mitigated version of the negated concept (Certainly *not so smart* as many, himself included, may think), which is a case of the construction being used literally.

Will such negative utterances be perceived as sarcastic compared to affirmative alternatives when presented in isolation (section 2.2.1)? Will they be processed faster when embedded in sarcastically than in literally biasing contexts (section 2.2.2)?

2.2.1 Evidence from offline measures

Our previous studies (Giora et al. 2013) show that some novel negative utterances of the form “X s/he is not” (*Ambitious she is not; Mesmerizing he is not*), involving no semantic anomaly or any internal incongruity, were interpreted sarcastically when presented in isolation. Items, controlled for novelty, were followed by a 7-point scale, instantiating either a literal or a sarcastic interpretation (randomly) displayed at the scale’s ends. Participants were asked to indicate the proximity of the utterance interpretation to any of those instantiations at the scale’s ends (or otherwise propose an alternative).

Results showed that the sarcastic interpretation, albeit nonsalient, was the preferred interpretation of the novel negative items, scoring high on sarcasm, (M = 5.59, *SD* = 0.87), significantly higher than 5 on a 7-point sarcasm scale, *t*1(18) = 2.99, *p<* .005; *t*2(17) = 4.65, *p<* .0005.

To verify that the interpretations of the negative items were indeed perceived as sarcastic (rather than only as the opposite of what is said), sarcasm ratings were collected. Participants were asked to rate degree of sarcasm of the negative items and their affirmative counterparts (all of similar novelty controlled for by a pretest). Items, presented in isolation, were followed by a 7-point sarcasm scale, ranging between 1 (not sarcastic at all) and 7 (highly sarcastic). No interpretations were provided.

Results showed that the negative items (*Ambitious she is not*) were significantly more sarcastic (M =5.92, *SD*=0.94) than their novel affirmative counterparts (*Ambitious she is yes*[[5]](#endnote-5)) (M =2.67, *SD* = 1.33); *t*1(42) = 11.53; *p<* .0001; *t*2(17) = 45.55, *p<* .0001.

2.2.2 Evidence from online measures

Given their default sarcastic interpretation, the view of negation as inducing nonliteral interpretations by default predicts that such negative utterance as discussed in section 2.2.1 will be read faster when embedded in a context biasing them toward their nonsalient sarcastic interpretation than toward their (equally strongly biased) salience-based literal interpretation. In Giora et al. (2013), such utterances were embedded in contexts controlled for equal strength of literal vs. nonliteral bias. They were followed by a two-word spillover segment. The target utterances, followed by the spillover segment, were presented in context non-final position and were followed by a Yes/No comprehension question.

  As before, participants were asked to read the short paragraphs which they advanced segment by segment and answer a comprehension question. Reading times of the target utterances and the spillover segments were measured by the computer. Results showed that, as predicted, the negative utterances were read faster when embedded in a context strongly biasing them toward their nonsalient sarcastic interpretation than toward their (equally strongly biased) salience-based literal interpretation (see Figure 2), *t*1(43) = 1.75, *p<* .05; *t*2(17) = 1.20, *p* = .12. There were no spillover effects.

FIGURE 2 Mean reading times (in ms) of sarcastically and literally biased targets

Such results support the view of negation as a low-salience marker generating novel nonliteral interpretations by default.

2.3 Default sarcastic utterance-interpretation: “X is not her forte” constructions

Consider the following natural instances, exemplary of the kind of constructions discussed in this section (target utterances in boldface, interpretations in italics):

(14) **Moderation** **is** **usually** **not my forte**--*I'm more of an all-or-none person*. [http://www.letsrun.com/forum/flat\_read.php?thread=3020834&page=4 Retrieved on July 27, 2014]

(15) **Maintaining quality is our forte**, *so we ensure that every kind of business functions are monitored on each stage with best co-operation and co-ordination among various departments by a galaxy of supremely qualified and dedicated quality analysts… The stringent quality control measures are strictly being implemented at each step* … [http://www.phoenixbiologicals.net/company-information.html Retrieved on October 25, 2012]

(16) Piolo Pascual has admitted to having had *a bit of difficulty doing comedy*, acknowledging that **the genre is not his “forte.”….** The 35-year old actor-singer maintained that the movie is quite *the change of pace for him* considering that his body of work consists mostly of romantic dramas… the actor believes that people will find the movie quite *entertaining* since it’s “more *relaxing*, hindi siya nakaka-pressure.” (RAMOS 2012).

The negative utterance in (14) (*Moderation is usually*not my forte) is used sarcastically, suggesting that the speaker is far from being moderate but is, instead a person of extremes (*an all-or-none person*). The affirmative construction (*Maintaining quality is our forte*) in (15) conveys a literal interpretation (*The stringent quality control measures are strictly being implemented at each step* …). In (16), however, the negative construction (*the genre [comedy] is not his “forte”*) is a case in which such utterances convey a mitigated, literal interpretation (*the actor believes that people will find the movie quite* *entertaining*) rather than the opposite of what is said.

Will such negative utterances (as in 14) be perceived as sarcastic when presented in isolation (section 2.3.1)? Will they be processed faster when embedded in sarcastically than in literally biasing contexts (section 2.3.2)?

2.3.1 Evidence from offline measures

Our recent studies (Giora et al. in press) show that some novel negative utterances of the form “X is not her/his forte” (*Alertness**is not his forte*), involving no semantic anomaly or any internal incongruity, were interpreted sarcastically when presented in isolation. Items, controlled for novelty, were followed by a 7-point scale, instantiating either a literal or a sarcastic interpretation, (randomly) displayed at the scale’s ends. Participants were asked to indicate the proximity of the utterance interpretation to any of those instantiations at the scale’s ends (or otherwise propose an alternative).

Results showed that the sarcastic interpretation, albeit nonsalient, was the preferred interpretation of the novel negative items, scoring high on sarcasm (M=5.51, SD=0.35), significantly higher than 5 on a 7-point sarcasm scale, *t*(13)=5.44, *p*<.0001.

To verify that the interpretations of the negative items were perceived as sarcastic (rather than only as the opposite of what is said), sarcasm ratings were collected. Participants were asked to rate degree of sarcasm of the negative items and their affirmative counterparts (all controlled for novelty by a pretest). Items, presented in isolation, were followed by a 7-point sarcasm scale, ranging between 1 (not sarcastic at all) and 7 (highly sarcastic).

Results replicated previous findings, showing that the negative items (*Alertness**is not his forte*) were significantly more sarcastic (M=6.02, SD=0.78) than their novel affirmative counterparts (*Alertness**is his forte*) (M=2.67, *SD*=1.01), *t1(39)=15.43, p<.0001; t2(13)=22.07, p<.0001*.

Will these novel negative utterances be interpreted faster when embedded in contexts biasing them toward their nonsalient sarcastic interpretation than toward their salience-based literal interpretation?

2.3.2 Evidence from online measures

Given their preferred sarcastic interpretation, the view of negation as inducing nonsalient nonliteral interpretations by default predicts that such negative utterance, as discussed in section 2.3.1, will be read faster when embedded in a context biasing them toward their nonsalient sarcastic interpretation than toward their (equally strongly biased) salience-based literal interpretation. In Giora et al. (in press), we tested this prediction. Utterances were embedded in contexts controlled for equal strength of literal vs. nonliteral bias. They were presented in context non-final position and followed by a two-word spillover segment. Contexts were followed by a Yes/No comprehension question.

  Participants were asked to read the short paragraphs which they advanced segment by segment and answer a comprehension question. Reading times of the target utterances and the spillover segments were measured by the computer. Results showed that, as predicted, the negative utterances were read faster when embedded in contexts strongly biasing them toward their nonsalient sarcastic interpretation (M=1349 ms, *SD*=401) than toward their (equally strongly biased) salience-based literal interpretation (M=1790 ms, *SD*=579), *t*1(43)=4.69, *p*<.0001, *t*2(13)=4.48, *p*<.0005 (see Figure 3). Additionally, there were spillover effects showing that, as predicted, following sarcastically biased targets, reading times of spillover segments were faster than those following literally biased targets, *t*1(43)=2.90, *p*<.0005; *t*2(13)=1.94, *p*<.05, suggesting processing difficulties in the literal but not in the sarcastic condition.

FIGURE 3 Mean reading times (in ms) of sarcastically and literally biased targets

Such results support the view that negation is a low-salience marker, generating novel nonliteral interpretations by default.

2.4 Default sarcastic utterance-interpretation: “X is not her strong point” constructions

In this section we look at similar constructions to those studied in section 2.3, only short of their semantics (*not her/his* ***forte***), which, despite their proven novelty, might already be associated with sarcasm. To replicate previous findings, the utterances tested here employ equivalent alternatives but keep the construction constant (*not her/his most distinctive feature*, *not her/his area of expertise/not what she excels at*). The following natural instances are exemplary of the kind of constructions discussed here (target utterances in boldface, interpretations in italics):

(17) The Baron of Hartlepool, Lord Mandelson, **humility is not his strong point**? This morning on The Andrew Marr show whilst being interviewed showed his inability to admit his wrongs and the *sheer arrogance* of his lordship(lol) was breathtaking to watch (Johnny D. 2008).

(18)… **his deliverance of the stories is his strong point**. *His prose has been polished to the point that it sparkles and contains more than a good deal of poetry* (Voegele NA).

(19) … if he is played in the lam/cam role on a consistent basis, he can arguably become *the best Asian player in football*. With the possible addition of RVP, I hope we see him used in the lam role rather than the central midfield role or benched in favor of a rooney /RVP partnership. Even without RVP, I hope SAF knows *he is capable of playing in this role*, and wide players are capable of playing more centrally. However, I doubt that as...erh... **tactics is not his strong point**. [http://community.manutd.com/forums/p/244135/2145052.aspx Retrieved on October 26, 2012]

In (17), the negative construction (*humility is not his strong point*), is used sarcastically, conveying the opposite of what is said (“*sheer arrogance*”). In contrast, the affirmative version in (18) (*his deliverance of the stories is his strong point*) conveys a literal interpretation (“*His prose has been polished to the point that it sparkles*…”). However, (in 19), the negative construction (*tactics is not his strong point*) conveys a mitigated, literal interpretation, given that he is good at other things (*the best Asian player in football; I hope we see him used in the lam role rather than the central midfield role or benched in favor of a rooney /RVP partnership. Even without RVP, I hope SAF knows he is capable of playing in this role*), rather than the opposite of what is said.

Will such negative utterances (as in 17) be perceived as sarcastic, compared to affirmative alternatives (19), when presented in isolation (section 2.4.1)? Will they be processed faster when embedded in sarcastically than in literally biasing context (section 2.4.2)?

2.4.1 Evidence from offline measures

Our recent studies (Giora et al. in press) show that some novel negative utterances of the form “X is not her/his best attribute” (*Alertness**is not her most pronounced characteristic*), involving no semantic anomaly or any internal incongruity, were interpreted sarcastically when presented in isolation. As before, items, controlled for novelty, were followed by a 7-point scale, instantiating either a literal or a sarcastic interpretation (randomly) displayed at the scale’s ends.

Results showed that sarcastic interpretations, albeit nonsalient, were the preferred interpretation of the novel negative items, scoring high on sarcasm (M=5.55, *SD*=0.29), significantly higher than 5 on a 7-point sarcasm scale, *t*(11)=5.52, *p*<.0001.

To verify that the interpretations of the negative items were perceived as sarcastic (rather than only as the opposite of what is said), sarcasm ratings were collected. Participants were asked to rate degree of sarcasm of the negative items and their affirmative counterparts, all controlled for novelty. Items, presented in isolation, were followed by a 7-point sarcasm scale, ranging between 1 (not sarcastic at all) and 7 (highly sarcastic). No interpretations were provided.

Results replicated previous findings, showing that the negative items (*Alertness**is not her most pronounced characteristic*) were significantly more sarcastic (M=5.96, *SD*=0.76) than their novel affirmative counterparts (*Alertness**is her most pronounced characteristic*) (M=3.29, *SD*=1.06), *t*1(39)=12.72, *p*<.0001, *t*2(11)=13.95, *p*<.0001.

2.4.2 Evidence from online measures

Given their preferred sarcastic interpretation, the view of negation as a low-salience marker, inducing novel nonliteral interpretations by default, predicts that such negative utterances (as discussed in section 2.4.1) will be read faster when embedded in a context biasing them toward their nonsalient sarcastic interpretation than toward their (equally strongly biased) salience-based literal interpretation. In Giora et al. (in press), we tested this prediction. Utterances, presented in context non-final position, followed by a two-word spillover segment, were embedded in contexts controlled for equal strength of literal vs. nonliteral bias.

  As before, participants were asked to read the short paragraphs, which they advanced segment by segment, and answer a question that followed. Results showed that, as predicted, the negative utterances were read faster when embedded in a context strongly biasing them toward their nonsalient sarcastic interpretation than toward their (equally strongly biased) salience-based literal interpretation, *t*1(51)=6.19, *p*<.0001; *t*2(11)=2.93, *p*<.01 (see Figure 4). Additionally, there were marginal spillover effects showing that, as predicted, following sarcastically biased targets, reading times of spillover segments were somewhat faster than those following literally biased targets, disclosing processing difficulties in the latter condition, *t*1(51)=1.48, *p=*.07; *t*2(11)=<1, n.s.

FIGURE 4 Mean reading times (in ms) of sarcastically and literally biased targets

Such results support the view that negation is a low-salience marker generating novel nonliteral interpretations by default.

2.5 Default sarcastic utterance-interpretation: negation vs. structural markedness

Recall that the view of negation as inducing default nonliteral interpretation predicts that certain negative constructions, complying with the conditions for default nonliteral interpretations, will be perceived as nonliteral, regardless of degree of structural markedness (prediction b, section 2). Given that the sarcastic utterances tested here are structurally marked, involving a fronted constituent, it is necessary to tease apart negation from markedness effects. Which of the two plays a primary role in affecting nonliteralness by default?

Already at this stage, some of our findings argue against the markedness hypothesis. Recall that the constructions at hand are structurally marked both in the negative and the affirmative. In addition, some of them are also obligatorily marked (in Hebrew) for affirmation (*Ambitious**she is* ***yes***). Regardless, results showed that, whereas the negative constructions were interpreted sarcastically by default, the affirmative counterparts were not, which renders the markedness hypothesis suspicious. Still, negation vs. markedness effects should be examined directly.

To weigh degree of negation (not/yes) against degree of markedness (+/-fronting) in a more systematic way, we ran 2 experiments. In one, we looked at “X s/he is not/yes” constructions (*Ambitious she is not*/*yes*) (Giora et al. 2013); in the other, we looked at “X is not/yes her/his forte/most prominent feature” constructions (*Alertness is not/yes his forte/*/*most prominent feature[[6]](#endnote-6)*) (Giora et al. in press). We compared them with structurally unmarked alternatives differing only in negation vs. affirmation (*She is not*/*yes Ambitious; His forte/*/*most prominent feature is not/yes alertness*)*.* We predicted that the negative versions of the utterances will always be more sarcastic than their affirmative counterparts, regardless of degree of structural markedness. Structural markedness, however, may have an additive value.

In each experiment participants were presented 2 different constructions – marked and unmarked (20-23; 24-27), varying between whether they included a negative (not) or an affirmative (yes) marker. There were also 24 filler items, varying between sarcastic, literal, and metaphorical utterances. Four booklets were prepared so that participants saw only one version of a concept; the constructions were counterbalanced. In addition to the 24 filler items, each booklet then contained 8 structurally marked constructions, half negative and half affirmative, and 8 structurally unmarked constructions, half negative and half affirmative:

20. Ambitious she is not

21. Ambitious she is yes

22. She is not ambitious

23. She is yes ambitious

24. Alertness is not her forte/most prominent feature

25. Alertness is yes her forte/most prominent feature

26. Her forte/most prominent feature is not alertness

27. Her forte/most prominent feature is yes alertness

Participants were asked to rate the degree of sarcasm of each utterance on a 7-point sarcasm scale (where 1=not sarcastic at all and 7=highly sarcastic). Results for the first construction (*Ambitious she is not*) and its variations showed that the negative versions were always rated as more sarcastic than their affirmative counterparts. Markedness also played a role. However, as demonstrated by Figure 5, although the difference in sarcasm between negative and affirmative utterances was larger in marked condition, it was significant in both the Marked (*F*1(1, 47) = 26.22, *p<* .0001; *F*2(1, 15) = 55.07, *p<* .0001) and Unmarked conditions (*F*1(1, 47) = 4.25, *p<* .05; *F*2(1, 15) = 13.77, *p<* .005):

FIGURE 5: Mean sarcasm ratings for affirmative and negative utterances

Results for the second construction (*Alertness is not her forte/most prominent feature*) and its variations showed that markedness did not play any role in affecting sarcasm. Instead, it was only negation that played a crucial role in inducing sarcasm by default (*F*1(1,59)=128.87, *p*<.0001; *F*2(1,15)=799.72, *p*<.0001), as demonstrated by Figure 6:

FIGURE 6: Mean sarcasm ratings for affirmative and negative utterances

These results support the view that negation, rather than structural markedness, plays a critical role in affecting novel nonliteralness by default.

3. General discussion

Findings in Giora et al. (2010, 2013, in press) show that negation is an operator eliciting novel metaphorical and sarcastic utterance-interpretation by default. For an utterance to be interpreted nonliterally by default, it has to meet the conditions for default nonliteral interpretation. These conditions guarantee that utterances are *prima facie* ambiguous between literal and nonliteral interpretations. They should therefore be free of utterance external and internal hints known to prompt nonliteralness. Utterances should therefore be

* *unfamiliar* so that salient/coded nonliteral *meanings* of expressions and collocations will not be involved;
* free of *semantic anomaly* or any kind of internal incongruency (known to trigger nonliteralness), so that both literal and nonliteral interpretations be permissible;

and

* presented outside of biasing *contextual information* so that any pragmatic incongruity or supportive information may neither invoke nor block a specific interpretation.

In this article, the focus is on a certain set of negative constructions, which, under such conditions, generated nonsalient nonliteral interpretations by default. Negative (metaphorical) utterances of the form “X is not Y” (*This is not a bus*) and negative (sarcastic) utterances of the form “X s/he/it is not” (*Supportive* *she is not*), “X is not her forte” (*Punctuality is not her forte*), “X is not her most distinctive attribute”(*Alertness is her most* *distinctive feature*), were found to be rated and interpreted as nonliteral compared to their affirmative counterparts when presented in isolation, regardless of degree of structural markedness. When embedded in contexts, they were processed faster when strongly biased toward their nonsalient nonliteral interpretation than toward their (equally strongly biased) salience-based literal interpretation (Giora et al. 2010, 2013, in press). (For corroborating corpus-based evidence, see Giora et al., 2010, 2013; Giora, Drucker and Fein 2014).

Our studies use a variety of methodologies, whether offline, online, or corpus-based measures. They adduce robust support for the view of negation as an operator inducing low-salience nonliteralness by default.

These results are unprecedented and cannot be accounted for by existing processing models of nonliteral interpretations. For instance, the priority of nonsalient nonliteral interpretation cannot be explained by salience (Giora 1997, 1999, 2003); recall that according to the Graded Salience Hypothesis, nonsalient interpretations of utterances are not expected to be activated prior to their salience-based interpretations. Nor can semantic anomaly (Beardsley 1958), internal incongruity (Partington 2011), or pragmatic incongruity (Grice 1975) explain these results, given that these factors were excluded. Neither can contextual information (Campbell and Katz 2012; Gibbs 1986a,b, 1994; Ortony et al. 1978; Katz 2009; Katz and Ferretti 2003) account for these findings, given that, when employed, contexts were equally strongly supportive of both the literal and nonliteral interpretations of the negative items.

Would construction grammar theories account for the results? Given that the interpretations of our stimuli, both in their negative and affirmative versions, are not coded, but have, instead, to be constructed (hence they are often spelled out or strengthened by similar examples, see examples 1, 5, 7), they might not be considered grammaticized. They might therefore be hard to account for by e.g., Bybee’s (2006), Fillmore, Kay, & O'Connor’s (1988), or Goldberg’s (1995) views, according to which pairings of form and meaning are conventionalized in a way that is similar to the conventionalization of lexical items (Croft 2007). However, given that the items considered here show a strong association between specific negative constructions and nonliteral interpretations and specific affirmative constructions and literal interpretations (of whatever sort), this may be explained by Ariel’s (2008) concept of “salient discourse profile”. Salient discourse profile represents stored correlations between specific forms and their discourse functions. Such associations demonstrate a strong, though not necessarily coded, form/function association.

Given our focus here on the interpretations of novel negative constructions, we further propose that the view of negation as a low-salience marker may account for these results. As a low-salience marker, highlighting nonsalient interpretations via rejecting them, negation may account for the priority of novel nonliteral interpretations. (On negation and other low-salience markers bringing to the fore low-salience meanings and interpretations, see Giora et al. 2010, 2013, in press; Givoni, Giora and Bergerbest 2013; On negation inducing sarcastic interpretation via rendering utterances into understatements or litotes, see Giora et al. 2005). And although a detailed analysis of the constraints of such negative constructions should await further research, the priority of nonsalient over salience-based interpretations challenges contemporary models of processing and interpretation.

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Rachel Giora

Tel Aviv University, Israel

1. On emerging constructions in cognitive linguistics and construction grammar, see e.g., Bybee (2006); Divjak & Caldwell-Harris (this volume); Israel (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The view of metaphor adopted here is similar to Glucksberg and Keysar’s (1990) and to Carston’s (1997, 2012) “broadening” and “narrowing” processes involved in metaphor interpretation. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “Sarcasm” also relates to “sarcastic irony” and “verbal irony”. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. On NPIs exhibiting asymmetric behavior in minimal pairs of negative and affirmative sentences whereby, as a result of conventionalization, affirmatives are almost nonexistent, see Horn (1989), Israel (2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In Hebrew the affirmative version is obligatorily marked for affirmation by an explicit marker. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In Hebrew, such utterances may also be marked for the affirmative (“yes”). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)