Negative quantification and existential sentences

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Abstract

This paper gives an insight into a productive type of construction in Italian that can be broadly characterised by the absence of verb, the presence of an initial n-word—from a surfacy point of view, and is interpreted as a full sentence, more precisely as a negative existential sentence. It is proposed that the sentential interpretation is possible because the negative expression requires tripartite structure at some abstract level of representation. The negated existential type of the sentence is linked to the intersective relation imposed by the n-word and the constraint of empty intersection. The use of different n-words is interpreted as an overt marking of different perspectives on the situation described and result in different ways of satisfying Conservativity.

1 Introduction

Italian n-words *niente* (nothing) and *nessuno* (no/nobody) can enter the productive constructions in (1) and (2), characterised by the absence of verbs and yet interpreted as full sentences.

(1)   Nessun testimone intorno a lei
         (there were) no witnesses around her

(2)   Niente processo per la truppa (13/9/2003IM)
         (there will be) no trial for the troops

A feature of these constructions is the presence of an n-word quantifying over entities at the beginning of the sequence, at least from a surfacy point of view, in case preceded by some topic material. These sequences appear to be internally structured, despite the absence of verbs, and denote in the set of truth values. They can therefore be analysed as equivalent to clauses, in particular as negative existential statements. In uttering (1) or (2), the speaker commits herself to the truth of the description of a given situation. Hereafter, the first case will be referred to as an instance of *nessuno*–construction and the second case as an instance of *niente*–construction. As it will become clear below, the fact that the predicate is missing does not mean that it has been elided, and at least in the case of (2) its presence would lead to unacceptability.

A second feature is represented by the fact that these clauses convey particular assessments, not propositions corresponding to general truths. Despite the absence of a verb, they appear to be temporally anchored. In examples (1) and (2), the temporal differences highlighted in the English renderings come from information in the context of occurrence and should not necessarily be attributed to material in the clauses.

Another point to note is that both constructions are interpreted as negated existential clauses, in broad terms, but they differ in subtle ways related to expectations, presuppositions and information articulation. Still, in certain cases it seems possible to substitute one construction for the other, especially out of context.

A peculiarity specific to the *niente*–construction is constituted by the sequence *niente* plus nominal, which is hardly accepted elsewhere. Therefore, we seem to have a licensing problem as far as the distribution of the sequence goes, and a compositional problem as far as its interpretation goes.

In this paper, we focus our attention on how to characterise these verbless sequences so that they are interpreted as sentences and on their interpretation as negated existential sentences. Our proposal is cast inside the framework of Generalised Quantifier Theory. The alternative of treating n-words as indefinites will not be discussed. The n-word is analysed as an operator that takes restrictor and scope arguments. The resulting tripartite structure is reinterpreted as the representation of a sentence. The proposal extends to all determiners, with restrictions due to a definiteness effect.

The second part tries to capture some of the differences between the two constructions. The initial characterisation as 'existential' is a cover term for two types of sentences. Indeed, there is a wealth of studies on the existential vs. locative interpretation of existential constructions in the literature. We propose that aspects of this distinction can be found also in negative existentials. In particular, we hypothesise that *nessuno*– and *niente*–constructions are specialised ways to describe a situation. In (1) the description is structured around the object named by the noun, similarly to locative sentence. In (2), the situation is looked at from the perspectival centre of the domain of existence and says what is/isn't there. A further complication in the story is due to the question of the referential properties of the negated DP used to name what the negated existential broadly is about. Formally, the shift in perspective is captured by modifying the constraint of Conservativity that characterises generalised quantifiers.

2   Background

The two n-words concerned by the phenomenon under examination are *nessuno* (nobody/none/ no) and *niente* (nothing). As reviewed in section 2.1, *nessuno* is a determiner and a quantifier/pronoun, and as a determiner combines only with singular countable nouns and some abstract mass nouns. On the contrary, *niente* is only a quantifier/pronoun. Thus, in a way their distribution leaves gaps in negative quantification over entities in Italian, because there are no negative determiners that combine with plural countable nouns or with singular concrete mass nouns. However, when *niente* linearly precedes a noun, such a nouns can be concrete mass, plural countable but also singular countable in many cases, hence the *niente*–construction does not really fill a gap in this respect.

Then, it will be shown that the *nessuno*– and *niente*–constructions under discussion are averbal existential clauses. But section 2.2 briefly recalls that Italian has other ways to form tensed positive and negated existential sentences. Thus, the averbal constructions do not fill a gap in this respect either.

2.1 N-words as determiners and quantifiers/pronouns

Nessuno (nobody/none/no) semantically is a quantifier and syntactically a pronoun, and is also a determiner. As a quantifier, its domain is made of animate entities, cf. (3a), and not so easily of inanimate entities, see (3b)[1]. As a determiner, it takes both types of domains, see (4), and combines only with countable nouns in the singular form and abstract mass nouns of the intensive type (Tovena, 2001, 2003a), cf. (5).

(3)   a.   Nessuno salta sul letto
              noone is jumping on the bed

        b.   #Nessuno ha cinque ruote
              noone has five wheels

(4)   a.   Nessun bambino salta sul letto
              no child is jumping on the bed

        b.   Nessun libro racconta la vera storia di Luisa
              no book tells the true story of Louise

(5)   nessuna bambola / *bambole / *acqua / pazienza
        no doll / dolls / water / patience

The formal definition of the determiner *nessuno* is an open issue in itself. The standard definition of the English determiner *no* in Generalized Quantifier Theory, given in (6), captures the general meaning of a negative determiner, but does not take into consideration number information and differences in the structure of the domain. Rightly so, because *no* applies to singular and plural count nouns as well as to uncountable nouns.

(6)   NO $(X)(Y) = 1$ iff $X \cap Y = \emptyset$

But the data in (4) and (5) show that *nessuno* is sensitive to the structure of the domain of the restrictor set. Chierchia (1998) has proposed to distinguish the class of SINGULAR determiners, that require a domain composed only of atoms via a function that checks whether a predicate foregrounds a set of atoms or not. However, since this function is undefined when applied to a mass noun denotation, cases such as *nessuna pazienza*, cf. (5), are wrongly predicted to be impossible (Tovena, 2001, 2003a). This point is very interesting, although not crucial for the issue under discussion, and further research would be desirable.

The other n-word entering the constructions under discussion is *niente*. In its standard use, it corresponds to the English negative pronoun *nothing*, in that its domain is made of inanimate entities, and it does not work as a determiner, cf. (7).

(7)   a.   Niente brilla nel cielo stasera
              nothing twinkles in the sky tonight

        b.   *Niente stella/stelle brilla/brillano nel cielo stasera
              nothing star/stars twinkles/twinkle in the sky tonight

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[1]The '#' sign is used to indicate that the expression is pragmatically odd in the intended interpretation.

However, the construction under examination allows an 'extension' in its use that, at least at first sight, bears similarities with the function of determiner, contrast (7b) with (2). In these cases *niente* can be translated into English as *no*, i.e. as a negative determiner. An open question is how to characterise this extended use. In this paper we strive to clarify the interpretation resulting from this use. The issue of how to get to it compositionally will not be tackled, we will only add some speculations at the end of the paper.

In a short aside, let us note that the construction in (2) is not the only case where one finds an extended use of *niente*. Tovena (2003b) provides two more cases, see the examples of lists in (8) and perception of some basic feelings in (9).

(8)   a.   Per questa torta ci vogliono tre etti di farina, un uovo, due mele e niente zucchero
             for this tart one needs 300gr of flour, one egg, two apples and no sugar

        b.   Daniele mangia pesche, pere, niente mele e poca uva
             Daniel eats peaches, pears, no apples and a few grapes

(9)   a.   Non ho niente voglia
             I have no desire (i.e. I don't feel like it at all)

        b.   Non fa niente freddo
             it is not the least bit cold

Tovena (2003b) observes that in all these cases, the noun after *niente* is an NP, as shown by the possibility of modifying it by an adjective in pre and post nominal position and the impossibility of inserting a determiner.

She notes that by far the most common case is the one presented in (2), a point that raises the question of why this extended use of *niente* should be restricted almost exclusively to verbless sentences. The literature does not offer an explanation for this behaviour. As we will see shortly, a previous analysis treats (2) as a case of verb ellipsis, hence it puts it together with tensed clauses.

In (8), *niente* occurs inside a conjunction.[2] Depending on the preferred analysis of coordination, these sentences might also be taken as more instances of verb ellipsis. As for the sentences in (9), this is a case where language alternates between 'have' and 'be'. Tovena (2003b) notes that these examples could be treated as cases where *niente* works as a degree adverb that strengthens the predication, in alternative to an analysis as a determiner. In other words, (10a) would be considered as a paraphrase for (10b).

(10)   a.   Non ho niente fame
             I am not a bit hungry

        b.   Non ho affatto fame
             I am not hungry at all

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[2]The sentences in (8) are special insofar as they do not satisfy the constraint of negative concord. Simplifying a little, negative concord in Italian requires negation—i.e. the negative marker *non* (not) or an n-word—to be expressed in a preverbal position for the sentence to be allowed to contain more n-words in postverbal positions. This type of flouting negative concord marking is discussed shortly in (Tovena, 1998).

In sum, there are a few characteristics that split the collection of instances of the extended use of *niente* and set the use we are interested in aside from the other two. First, examples (8) and (9) are explicitly tensed clauses, unlike (2). They are not existential constructions. Second, in (8) and (9) bare nouns could occur in place of the *niente*+nominal sequences and the sentences would still be grammatical. Instead, (2) does not admit such a substitution. A reason for this behaviour is that bare singular nouns are excluded from argument positions in general in Romance languages. There are no bare singular countable nouns in Italian, except for occurrences in coordinated structures. It has to be noted that (8a), (9) and (10a), and their positive versions, exhibit mass nouns—which have been argued to be inherently plural—and have quasi idiomatic status.

2.2 Tensed existential construction

The basic tensed existential construction in Italian is constituted by the sequence *c'è/ci sono* (there is/there are), a determiner phrase and a coda, cf. (11).

(11)   a.   C'è una stella nel cielo
              there is a star in the sky

           b.   Ci sono poche stelle nel cielo
              there are few stars in the sky

This construction can be negated in the standard way, by adding the negative marker *non* (not), as in (12).

(12)   a.   Non c'è nessuna stella nel cielo
              there isn't any star in the sky

           b.   Non ci sono stelle nel cielo
               there are no stars in the sky

As argued by Kim (2001) for English, and the same holds for Italian, the interpretation of (positive and negative) tensed existential sentences does not correspond to subject-predicate sentences without *there* (correspondingly, without *c'è* or the initial n-word in the constructions under examination), exemplified in (13).

(13)   a.   Una stella è nel cielo
              a star is in the sky

           b.   Nessuna stella è nel cielo
              no star is in the sky

In particular, the sentences in (13) presuppose the existence of stars, whereas (11) and (12) do not. In this respect, averbal sentences pair with tensed existential sentences. The contrast in the interpretation of these types of sentences suggests that in subject-predicate sentences the subject has topic status, whereas such a characterisation is not appropriate for the 'semantic' subject of existential sentences.

3 Clausal structure and existential interpretation

As said in the introduction, the averbal clauses that instantiate *niente*– and *nessuno*–constructions denote truth values like sentences.

3.1 Averbal existentials

We account for the clausal interpretation of (1) and (2), repeated below, by exploiting the generalised quantifier's definition of determiners as operators that take restrictor and scope arguments and result in a sentence (Keenan, 1996).

(1)   Nessun testimone intorno a lei
        (there were) no witnesses around her

(2)   Niente processo per la truppa (13/9/2003IM)
        (there will be) no trial for the troops

The n-word is able to trigger the tripartite structure commonly used in the representation of sentences. In particular, it can do the predicative job otherwise done by the verb, i.e. denoting a relation, and there is no need to delete or reconstruct a verbal form at some level of representation.

This step allows us to predict also that these sentences have assertive illocutionary force in their default interpretation. In the absence of overt indication of a different type of act, e.g. via a question mark, the n-word fulfils the role of the unique operator.

If we admit that it is the pronoun/determiner that has the effect of turning the averbal sequence into a clause, one might expect this possibility to be open to positive and negative determiners at large. This seems to be the case for weak determiners, cf. (14a-e), but not for strong ones. The sequences in (14a-e) have clausal interpretation beside their interpretation as DPs, whereas those in (14f-i) that are acceptable as modified nominals but do not have clausal interpretation.

(14)   a.   Una stella nel cielo
             (there is) a star in the sky

        b.   Due stelle nel cielo
             (there are) two stars in the sky

        c.   Qualche stella nel cielo
             (there are) some stars in the sky

        d.   Molte stelle nel cielo
             (there are) many stars in the sky

        e.   Poche stelle nel cielo
             (there are) few stars in the sky

        f.   #Ogni stella nel cielo
             every star in the sky

        g.   #Ciascuna stella nel cielo
             each star in the sky

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h.　#Questa stella nel cielo
    this star in the sky

i.　#La stella nel cielo
    the star in the sky

Specific indefinites are also not suitable to yield existential averbal clauses, see (15) and the English counterparts.

(15)　a.　#Una certa stella nel cielo
         A certain star in the sky

　　　b.　#Una particolare stella nel cielo
         Some particular star in the sky

Existential sentences are peculiar because they do not admit all types of DPs. This is the so-called definiteness restriction. Strong determiners (Milsark, 1977; Reuland and ter Meulen, 1987) cannot occur in averbal clauses, cf. (14), analogously to what is observed in *there*–constructions. The data in (14) show that the definiteness effect is replicated in averbal clauses.

It has to be noted that the frequency with which the negative constructions exemplified in (1) and (2) are used does not compare with that of the examples in (14a-e). Averbal positive clauses of the type in (14) are mostly confined to instructional texts, e.g. for describing the setup of a scene in a play. An explanation for their uneven use can be put forth in terms of the difference between predicative vs. proportional characterisation of quantifiers (Partee, 1995). The interpretation of simple cardinality quantifiers can be reduced to a property that is predicated of the set which is the intersection of restriction and nuclear scope. On the contrary, other quantifiers are essentially relational and require tripartite structure at some level. Universal quantifiers are typical proportional only quantifiers. Negative quantifiers are among those whose truth conditions can be expressed in terms of proportion as well as with an expression of number. The idea, then, would be that the reducibility of a potentially relational analysis to a predicational one for a given quantificational expression undermines the potential of this expression in bringing about a clausal interpretation, precisely because the relation no longer has high informational priority.[3] Relational only determiners are excluded because they are strong determiners.

In line with a relational perspective on determiners (Zwarts, 1983), a link between the nature of the clause and the nature of the quantificational expression can be hypothesised, because the latter contributes the operator. The fact that a determiner expresses a relation of intersection, independently of constraints on the cardinality of the intersection, supports the existential interpretation of the quantificational structure in examples (1), (2) and (14a-e). Intersectivity is the property used by Keenan (1987) to characterise determiners that can occur in there-constructions. This point covers the data but possibly is not strong enough to predict them.

Next, given that *nessuno* and *niente* are negative, the constraint of emptyness they impose on the intersection yields negative existential clauses.

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[3]However, it remains to clarify why (14d) also seems to be rarely used with clausal interpretation despite the fact that *molte* is genuinely ambiguous between cardinal and proportional readings, as claimed for its English corresponding *many* (Partee, 1989).

As for the syntactic structure of existential constructions, the DP and XP following the *there is* expression have been considered to be sisters of the verb (Milsark, 1974) or forming a constituent. This constituent has received the structure of postnominal modification in (Williams, 1984). Alternatively, the term of small clause has been introduced in general to refer to the structure of a subset of constructions expressing a predicative relation (Williams, 1975; Stowell, 1983) but where the predicate is not an inflected verb, and specifically it has been used to characterise the constituent composed by a DP and a coda. The term of small clauses also conveys the idea that this type of clauses are morphologically less complex than full clauses.

(16)   a.   #Una bambina malata
                a girl ill

          b.   *Luisa malata
                Louise ill

It is a known fact that Italian is not a zero copula language, see (16). It is therefore plausible to assume that, syntactically, the constructions exemplified in (1) and (2) are matrix small clauses. We will not attempt an implementation of this hypothesis.

3.2   Comparing with other constructions and across languages

The constructions discussed in this paper appear to have received little attention in the literature. To the best of our knowledge, there has been only one proposal of analysis, by Manzotti (1991), that tries to relate them both to tensed clauses and to reduce their peculiarities. We discuss it first to show that these peculiarities are real and for the sake of completeness. We then point at possible parallelisms with constructions in other languages.

Manzotti has proposed to analyse averbal clauses containing *niente* such as in (17) as cases of sentential negation with ellipsis of the verb. If we understand his proposal correctly, the deep reason for postulating a verb ellipsis is to get a way to equate these cases to 'normal' clauses hence to account for their interpretation as full sentences. However, this type of analysis raises several questions. It does not explain why verb ellipsis would be obligatory in (17). These putative 'reduced' clauses cannot be paralleled with any corresponding 'full' clauses, since *niente* does not work as a determiner in verbal clauses. Furthermore, an ellipsis implies that the thing being omitted has already been expressed, which does not seem to be the case for the verbs in these clauses.

(17)   a.   Niente età limite per le adozioni (25/7/1996IM)
                no maximal age threshold for adoptions

          b.   Niente pensione a chi risiede all'estero
                no pension to the citizens living abroad

Moreover, *niente* and *nessuno* phrases in averbal clauses undergo a particular thematic restriction, noticed in Tovena (2003b). Neither of them can discharge what would be the agent role in the event described by the corresponding full clause. When needed, this role is discharged by a PP, see the portions in italics in (18) and (19), which makes us suppose that if one wants to reword the sequence into a full sentence, the use of a passive verb form may

be more appropriate. But a thematic or voice restriction of this type does not follow from an analysis in terms of verb ellipsis.

(18)   *Dal Csm* nessuna censura al procuratore Vigna (19/2/1998IM)
          no reproof [is made] to attorney Vigna by the CSM

(19)   Niente scherzi *dalla Bundesbank* (22/3/1998IM)
          no tricks [were played] by the Bundesbank

Referential and thematic restrictions on the interpretation of the quantifiers in *nessuno*– and *niente*–constructions call to mind non-agentivity that typically characterises existential sentences, and the hypothesis of unaccusativity that has been invoked in their treatment. Recall that passive sentences have also been analysed as unaccusative in syntax, see Perlmutter (1983).

Finally, let us say a word on the nature of the verb that could be 'added' in interpreting these averbal clauses. If one tries to build full tensed sentences corresponding to these averbal constructions, as we have tried to do in our English renderings for (18) and (19) for instance, one enjoys a certain degree of freedom in choosing the predicate. The selection primarily depends on the lexical content of the noun following the n-word, but more than one option is often available. However, the main contribution of these predicates to the truth conditions of the sentence appears to be the same as that of an expression of existence. In a word, these constructions support the 'Presupposed Equivalence' Borschev and Partee (1998) establish between existence predicates and verbs occurring in negated existential sentences that exhibit the phenomenon of genitive of negation in Russian. Roughly put, these authors suppose that the variety of verbs concerned by the phenomenon contribute a presupposition according to which if an entity V-ed under certain circumstances, this implies that it WAS under those very same circumstances, where capital letters mean an abstract notion of existence. For instance, if something shines on the table, then it is on the table. The implication going in the opposite direction, from BE to V, is assumed to be a specific presupposition of the existential construction that allows genitive of negation and is not encoded in the lexical entries of the verbs. A similar case can be made for our averbal clauses. 'Reproofs' were not 'made' in (18) and 'tricks' were not 'played' in (19), but in both cases reproofs and tricks did not 'exist' in those very same spatio-temporal locations. The way in which events are associated with nominals varies according to the semantic class of the nominal and the information attached to the head noun.

The distinction between various negative existentials we work at calls to mind work on genitive of negation in Russian existential sentences (Babby, 1980; Borschev and Partee, 2002). In Babby's terminology, Negated Declarative Sentence (NDS) exhibit subjects in the nominative case and are sentences where the description is structured around the object named by the noun. In a Negated Existential Sentence (NES), the subject is in the genitive case and the perspectival centre is on the domain of existence. The idea that the variation between nominative vs genitive case in negated existential sentences in Russian realises different perspective structures, has been recently taken up and developed by Borschev and Partee (2002) and in this volume. Our proposal for Italian is inspired by similar intuitions.

Babby's analysis has been adopted by Heldner (1992) to account for the distribution of the French expressions *aucun* N (no N) and *pas de* N (no N, lit. not of N). These expressions

occur in full as well as averbal clauses. As said below in subsection 4.2, *aucun* is a negative determiner and quantifier/pronoun. As for *pas de* N, *pas* is the negative marker that forms the embracing sentential negation *ne...pas* and the nature of *de* is open to discussion, whether it is a preposition or a determiner. Interesting to notice, in averbal sentences the two cannot be separated, see (Tovena, 2004). Heldner claims that examples with *pas de* N are good parallels to those where Russian uses genitive case. Heldner's analogy is interesting for our discussion because *aucun* N and *pas de* N are frequently used in averbal sentences which are negative DPs like those under examination. Averbal sentences with *niente* usually have *pas de* N as French rendering, and those with *nessuno* have *aucun* N. We will come back to French at several points in the discussion.

Finally, as suggested by a reviewer, the *nessuno*– and *niente*–constructions might be compared with the *no* N/*not a* N pair in English. Example (20a) says that he is not a member of the denotation of doctor—and presumably implicates that this set is not empty—and (20b) that he does not have the typical properties of a doctor, but does not rule out that he might be one, adapting from (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002).

(20)   a.   He is not a doctor
          b.   He is no doctor

The clearest difference between *no* N and *not a* N shows up in predicative position, elsewhere it seems to reduce to emphasis (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002). Comparing them with the Italian constructions is problematic because *nessuno* and *niente* don't occur in predicative position. In the other contexts, *not a* N is a scalar expression and corresponds to Italian *non un (solo)* N.[4] This is an interesting case but also a different problem.

4   Comparing *nessuno*– and *niente*–constructions

As mentioned in the introduction, the two Italian constructions are felt to be close as far as their main communicative goal of making a negative existential statement is concerned. But they also differ both in syntactic and semantic/pragmatic terms. This section compares the two constructions and attempts to pin down at least some of the shades that characterise their interpretation and hence their use and distribution in discourse. These shades are not unique to the Italian constructions under discussion, but are shared with French *aucun* N (no N) and *pas de* N (no N).

Before we proceed, we should bring out a further distinction. The negated existential clauses introduced by *niente* come in two varieties, so to speak, as the noun that follows *niente* can be in the singular form, as in (2), repeated here, or in the plural, as shown in (21).

(2)   Niente processo per la truppa (13/9/2003IM)
        (there will be) no trial for the troops

(21)   Niente prove che l'Iraq possieda armi di sterminio (15/2/2003IM)
        no evidence that Iraq possesses weapons of mass distruction

It is this second variety that is often perceived as near substitute for constructions with *nessuno*.

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[4]French also has the combination *pas un* N.

4.1 Restrictions on possible pairs of substitutes

Tovena (2003b) discusses a number of cases where *niente* can be substituted by *nessuno* in averbal clauses, and viceversa, to a reasonable degree of acceptability and under certain constraints. Taking the perspective of each case in turn, we summarise her results in (22) to (24), where the symbol $\rightsquigarrow$ says that substitution is felt to be acceptable by native speakers and $\not\rightsquigarrow$ that it is not a viable solution.

(22)   *nessuno* $N_{singular}$
        $\rightsquigarrow$ *niente* N_{plural}
        $\not\rightsquigarrow$ *niente* $N_{singular}$

(23)   *niente* N_{plural}
        $\rightsquigarrow$ *nessuno* $N_{singular}$

(24)   *niente* $N_{singular}$
        $\not\rightsquigarrow$ *nessuno* $N_{singular}$

For instance, the sequence of type *nessuno* $N_{singular}$ in (25a) could be reworded as shown in (25b) but not as in (25c). Next, most speakers accept to turn (26a) exhibiting the sequence *niente* N_{plural} into (26b). Finally, the sequence *niente* $N_{singular}$ exemplified in (17b), repeated below, cannot be replaced by a construction with *nessuno*.

(25)   a.   Nessuna reazione invece dalla presidenza della Repubblica (19/4/1998IM)
              on the contrary, no reactions from the presidency of the Republic

        b.   Niente reazioni invece dalla presidenza della Repubblica

        c. ?*Niente reazione invece dalla presidenza della Repubblica

(26)   a.   ONU Francia, Russia e Cina: niente mozioni contro l'Iraq (7/9/1996IM)
              ONU: France, Russia and China [oppose any] motion against Iraq

        b.   ONU Francia, Russia e Cina: nessuna mozione contro l'Iraq

(17)   b.   Niente pensione a chi risiede all'estero
              no pension to the citizens living abroad

Recall that *nessuno* determiner does not combine with plural nouns. Its non-singularity allows it to combine with abstract mass nouns such as names of mental states. In (27), the n-word cannot be substituted simply because *nessuno* determiner does not combine with concrete mass nouns, leaving aside the taxonomic reading.

(27)   Ieri è stata rispettata la tregua, niente letame sulle autostrade o trattori sui binari
        (29/11/1997IM)
        yesterday the truce was respected, no manure on the motorways nor tractors on the
        rails

A word of warning should be spent on these substitution schemata before we carry on discussing the results. Speakers' willingness to accept the substitutions listed above is inversely proportional to the amount of cotext or contextual information provided. Meaning shifts are often reported relatively to the type of reading, e.g. partitive readings alternate with non partitive ones, and to the type of speech act, i.e. assertion alternates with injunction in cooccurrence of names of mental states.

At least two conclusions can be drawn from the schemata and the data presented in this subsection. First, distributional restrictions typical of *nessuno* as a determiner closely match those observed in averbal constructions—namely the impossibility for it to combine with plural countable and (singular) concrete mass nouns—a point that provides support to an analysis of *nessuno* as determiner in *nessuno*–constructions too. Second, the relevance of morphological number in the interpretation of *niente*–constructions is highlighted.

In the remainder of this section we look first at interpretive peculiarities of the specific n-words before we move on to interpretive differences of the averbal constructions they enter.

4.2   N-words and presupposition of existence

Several major Romance languages have a double series of negative quantifiers. French, Portuguese, Spanish and Rumanian have two ways of expressing negative quantification over animate and inanimate entities, namely *nadie* and *ninguno* (S), *personne* and *aucun* (F), *nimeni* and *niciunul* (R) and *nenhum* and *ninguém* (P). This is not the case for Italian, that has only one element, namely *nessuno*.

In (Tovena, 2003c), negated existential sentences have been used to classify the elements of the two series. One element has the peculiarity of relying on information provided in the discourse domain or that must be accommodated, because it is associated to a presupposition of a nonempty domain for the restriction set. The other element does not convey any implications. It is this second type of element that occurs in existential sentences.

(28)   a.   F Il n'y a personne dans le jardin
            there is nobody in the garden

       b.   S No hay nadie en el jardín

       c.   P Não há ninguém no jardim

       d.   R Nu e nimeni in grădină

(29)   a.   F *Il n'y a aucun dans le jardin
            there is nobody in the garden

       b.   S *No hay ninguno en el jardín

       c.   P *Não há nenhum no jardim

       d.   R *Nu e nici un in grădină

In Italian, *nessuno* has properties of both series, compare (30a) where *li* functions as antecedent and *nessuno* has a context dependent reading, with (30b) where there isn't any dependency, from (Tovena, 1998), and the existential sentence in (31).

(30)   a.   Li ho interrogati di persona e nessuno mi ha risposto.
                them have questioned personally and nobody to-me has answered

         b.   Ho provato a telefonare e non mi ha risposto nessuno.
                have tried to telephone and not to-me has answered nobody

(31)   Non c'è nessuno in giardino
         there is nobody in the garden

In all these languages, one of the pronominal forms also works as a determiner. In the languages that have a double series, it is the presuppositional quantifier that performs the double task. Note that when these elements function as determiners, it becomes possible for their restrictor to have an empty denotation domain, i.e. the presuppositional constraint is waived, cf. the French examples in (32). In (32a) there is no set of patience that was not shown, while in (32b) there is a contextually relevant set of colleagues whose patience was not tested.

(32)   a.   Il n'a fait preuve d'aucune patience
                he didn't show any patience

         b.   Il n'a mis à l'épreuve la patience d'aucun collègue
                he tested the patience of no colleague

Next, the form used as a determiner is also the one used in partitive constructions, e.g. *personne/aucun de tes étudiants* for French. The use of an overt partitive form pairs with an existential presupposition, cf. (33).

(33)   a.   ??Non ha letto nessun libro sulla tavola
                s/he did not read any books on the table

         b.   Non ha letto nessuno dei libri sulla tavola
                s/he did not read any of the books on the table

As just said, Italian does not lexicalise the difference in presuppositional status of the denotation in the domain of the restrictor. The possibility of having an empty denotation seems always open for *nessuno* determiner in full sentences, modulo lexical entailments imposed by the verb on some of its arguments. On the other hand, the data discussed in the next subsection suggest that the situation is more constrained when *nessuno* is used in averbal sentences. Yet, at this stage of the research it is not clear whether it is always a question of presuppositions on the denotation of the domain of quantification.

In sum, constraints on the empty/non-empty domain of denotation cannot be encoded directly in the representation of the determiner in Italian. A more promising solution is to associate them with the use of the item in the negative existential sentences.

4.3   Interpretive differences

A description of the meaning of *nessuno*– and *niente*–constructions cannot be properly achieved without taking into consideration the informational structure of the surrounding text and the role of the utterances in discourse. In the following we discuss some of the relevant features.

At the first blush, the two constructions appear to differ in the presupposition of existence they associate to the domain of denotation of the noun. In clauses instantiating the *nessuno*–construction, the domain of denotation of the noun is expected to be nonempty. On the contrary, instances of the *niente*–construction do not carry this presupposition.

4.3.1   The speaker's point of view

The minimal pair in (34) shows that the use of *niente* makes it possible to deny the existence of something, and when emphasis is added, it can even convey the notion of interdiction. Sentence (34a) was used to report Cernomyrdin's successful opposition to Lebed's getting an office of vice-president in Russia. It may be useful to recall that the office of vice-president does not exist in Russia. On the contrary, (34b) was used to say that the existing function of president of that particular committee had not yet been assigned. The members of the committee make up the set of candidates to such a function and the nomination will certainly single out one of them in the end. The set of potential presidents is given.

(34) a. Cernomyrdin a Lebed: niente vicepresidenza (05/07/1996LU)
          Cernomyrdin [said] to Lebed: no vice-presidency

      b. Commissione di Vigilanza: nessuna presidenza (06/08/1997RR1)
          [as for the] Commissione di Vigilanza: no presidency [has been assigned]

The choice of a *niente*–construction may work as a hint that the speaker—in direct and indirect speech—is against the existence of entities of the N type in a particular situation. For instance, (35) was produced by a minister at a time when it was discussed whether to use the army to stop boats arriving illegally in Italy from Albania. The existence of an Italian army was not under discussion. It is not its coming into being that is negated in (35). What is negated is the stable presence of the army in the specific place and time and for a given understood purpose.

(35)   ANDREATTA Niente esercito in Puglia, altri blitz se sarà necessario (7/3/19s97IM)
        Andreatta [said]: no army in Puglie, more interventions if needed

Even clearer cases are (36), where the restrictor is a proper name, and (37) that contains a sequence of instances of *niente*–constructions.

(36)   Bossi: "Niente Lega alle elezioni padane" (20/7/1997IM)
        Bossi said: No Lega at the elections in the Po valley

(37)   Ma niente bermuda alle Bermuda, niente Galliani, Confalonieri e compagnia in cal-
        zoncini corti, come in passato. Niente jogging con i collaboratori più stretti. Nessun
        rischio di fotografi nelle vicinanze. (28/12/1996LS)
        But no bermuda shorts at the Bermuda, no Galliani, Confalonieri and the company
        with short trousers, as in the past. No jogging with the closest members of his team.
        There won't be any risk of finding photographers nearby'

In these cases, the existence of the entity/ies that constitute the denotation of N may be undisputed, but they are presented as not being already in the discourse domain and the

domain of quantification is not contextually defined. Then, what is more important, the entity is not introduced at that point through a given event, since the sentence is interpreted as denying existence to it in a spatio-temporal location. At that time and place there is no event of the described type that could introduce a discourse referent of the N type. Thus, the sentence asserts the nonexistence or the complete absence of the entity spoken about relatively to a situation.

For positive existential indefinites such as *a*, the need of taking into consideration the epistemic dimension has been claimed at least as early as in (Fodor and Sag, 1982) within the generative tradition. These indefinites have an epistemic specific construal when the speaker has a particular entity in mind when uttering a sentence that contains an indefinite. The analysis of constructions based on n-words we are discussing reveal the need of making room for an epistemic dimension also for negative items, with systematic appeals to psychological aspects of communication.

4.3.2 Differences in discourse transparency

Negative existential averbal clauses seems to be selectively opaque contexts. In *nessuno*-constructions the denotation of the N is discourse transparent. In (38), the context sentence introduces the antecedent that makes it possible for *settore* to be interpreted as bridging anaphora. The data show that this possibility is not open to *niente*-construction, with a singular or plural noun as restrictor.

(38)   a.   [Il maltempo colpisce l'industria del nord.] Nessun settore al riparo dalla tormenta
            Bad weather hits the industry in the North. No sector [is] sheltered from the storm

       b.   [Il maltempo colpisce l'industria del nord.] *Niente settore al riparo dalla tormenta

       c.   [Il maltempo colpisce l'industria del nord.] *Niente settori al riparo dalla tormenta

Heldner (1992) proposes to test the discourse transparency of a negative quantified expression in French by substituting it with an overtly partitive rewording, as done in (39a) for Italian and (39b) for French.

(39)   a.   Nessuno dei settori dell'industria al riparo della tormenta
            no sector of the industry sheltered from the storm

       b.   Aucun des secteurs de l'industrie à l'abri de la tourmente
            no sector of the industry sheltered from the storm

However, this test can be used only for *aucun* and *nessuno*. In the case of the *pas de* N-construction, *de* cannot be modified since it is part of the construction itself. In the case of the *niente*-construction, the test cannot be applied because no material can be inserted between *niente* and the noun.

Number variation in *niente*-construction can be expected to have an impact on discourse transparency, but I have no clear way to test it at the moment.

4.3.3 A presupposition of plurality

A characterisation that concentrates all the discriminative power on the cardinality of the restriction may be too strong and not sufficient at the same time. First, in the case of *nessuno*–constructions the presupposition of existence of the entity spoken about seems to be better characterised as a presupposition of plurality. The use of the *nessuno*–construction is marginal with nouns that name unique entities in the real world, see the contrast in (40).

(40) a. Niente sole quest'estate
          no sunshine this summer

      b. #Nessun sole quest'estate
          none of the suns this summer

Sentence (40b) strongly suggests that there is more than one sun. The presupposition of plurality, in order to be accommodated, forces an interpretation whereby the sentence conveys a claim about an astronomical situation that exceeds our galaxy. The fact that sentence (40a) is the standard way of talking about a given type of weather can be explained by considering the impossibility of *nessuno* to combine with mass nouns of this type.

It has often been said that singular forms are the unmarked option, being singular by default. In sentences instantiating *nessuno*–constructions the default association between morphologically singular nominals and an atomic domain is systematically overridden. The reason for this systematic overriding is not clear at the moment. Nevertheless, the property of non-atomicity imposed on the restrictor of *nessuno* in averbal sentences offers a clue for understanding the possibility of substitution between *nessuno* $N_{singular}$ and *niente* N_{plural} cases.

Second, the characterisation is too strong also because it does not seem possible to state the constraint of plurality just observed in sentences instantiating the *nessuno*–construction—which looks pretty sound—directly, or at least exclusively, in terms of a presupposition of nonempty domain for the denotation of the noun. To see this we can imagine the case of someone feeling nervous in a place that looks deserted and who shouts to check if anybody is hidden behind a cupboard. Suppose it is all quiet. The following text containing a *nessuno*–construction is felt to be appropriate, while the choice of *niente* would not do.

(41) "C'è nessuno lì dietro?". Nessuna risposta
      Is there anybody behind there? No answer

In this case, it is hard to claim that there is a set of answers that is presupposed. It seems rather a case where someone was expecting an answer. The fact that it is possible to have a point of view in which the existence of answers cannot be excluded seems decisive in the choice of the n-word.

This example also reveals that the parallelism between the Italian and French constructions is extensive but not total. First, the most natural translation of (41) in an analogous context is (42a), which breaks the parallelism. Second, the *pas de*-construction is also possible, see (42b) and despite the preference for (42a), no clear interpretive difference is reported, which reduces the impact of the first point but highlights another contrast. Indeed, the *niente*-construction is not possible, see (43).

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(42) a. "Il y a quelqu'un?" Pas de réponse
         Is there anybody? No answer

      b. "Il y a quelqu'un?" Aucune réponse
         Is there anybody? No answer

(43) "C'è nessuno?". *Niente risposta
      Is there anybody? No answer

At the present moment, for wanting of an account of the difference between the two languages, we can only point out an additional piece of empirical evidence. The acceptability of (43) in context increases a little if the noun is marked for plural. On the contrary, the acceptability of (42a) seems to decrease if the noun is plural.

4.3.4 Deverbal nouns

Examples (41)–(43) exhibit deverbal nouns as restrictors. Sentences of this type are often interpreted as negating the coming into being of an instance of type N through an event situated at a given time and location. A precise set of events is not presupposed. However, it is not clear whether the noun necessarily gets an eventive reading in (41) and a result reading is ruled out.

The pair in (44) and (21), repeated below, confirms the substitution schema in (22) and (23), and blurrs our attempt to tear the two constructions apart. There is no clear interpretive difference, in particular notice that the deverbal noun gets a result reading only, in both cases.

(44) Nessuna prova degli "inconfutabili" legami fra Saddam e al-Qaeda.(6/10/2004IM)
      no evidence of the 'irrefutable' links between Saddam and al-Qaeda

(21) Niente prove che l'Iraq possieda armi di sterminio (15/2/2003IM)
      no evidence that Iraq possesses weapons of mass distruction

We do not get mixed data with all event nouns, from the distributional point of view. Consider once only events, as in example (45), used to report that the stoning sentence against Amina Lawal had been quashed. Here, it is not possible to replace *nessuno* for *niente*.

(45) Niente lapidazione per la trentunenne nigeriana, assolta ieri in appello. (26/9/2003IM)
      no stoning for the thirty-one years old Nigerian woman, dismissed yesterday in appeal

Had *nessuno* been used, the noun should have denoted in a non-atomic domain, but (45) explicitly mentions the potential patient of the event and only one event of stoning can be considered in relation to one specific patient. In (46) non-atomicity gets accommodated by forcing a taxonomic reading, but the sentence is pretty strange because it is not common to think about subtypes of this type of event.

(46) #Nessuna lapidazione per la trentunenne nigeriana
      no type of stoning for the thirty-one years old Nigerian woman

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Note that if there are no constraints on the possibility of considering several instantiations of the same type of event, i.e. a plurality of events of the same type, *nessuno* is perfectly fine, see (47).

(47)   Nessuna lapidazione negli ultimi dieci anni
        no stoning in the last ten years

In (45)-(47), the deverbal noun only gets an event reading. The data are consistent and equally clearcut in French, where *aucune lapidation* is rejected and its taxonomic reading is judged implausible.

4.3.5 Proper names

Typically, existential sentences are not about any particular entity and are used to make assertions concerning only the fact that the set of entities with a particular property is empty or that it is not empty. Examples (36) and (37) illustrate that proper names can occur as restrictor in *niente*-constructions under the 'interdiction to be present' interpretation. The combination of *nessuno* and a proper noun is not acceptable or not possible when the noun is interpreted as a unique rigid designator, see the contrast between (48) and (49).

(48)   Niente Gianni a lezione
        Gianni (was) not (among those) at the lecture

(49)   #Nessun Gianni a lezione
        nobody (named) Gianni (was) at the lecture

The interpretation of proper nouns can be shifted into a property, like bare nouns. In (48) the noun is interpreted as providing a relevant description that does not apply to entities in the spatio-temporal location. In the context of the lecture, there was nothing to which a characterisation as Gianni could apply. In (49) the requirement of non-atomic domain forces an interpretation whereby the proper name provides the criterion of membership for subsets in the restriction set over which *nessuno* quantifies. The sentence requires a very specific discourse context to be felicitous. Facts replicate in French.

4.4 Summary

In order to capture the different role these constructions can have in discourse, we may need to talk about the epistemic status of an agent. In the case of *nessuno*–construction, the denotation of the restrictor is associated with some degree of existence. However, it is too strong to assume that links with the preceding contexts may be assumed in all cases. The existence may not be presupposed with respect to the world, but relatively to the perception of the world of a given agent, as in the case of example (41) for instance.

In the case of *niente*–constructions, no presupposition of existence is associated with the restrictor, which is different from saying that the restrictor set is presupposed to be empty. The speaker may be characterised as the agent who believes to be responsible for the resulting situation described by the sentence, not only the one who believes its truth. Indeed, certain instances of *niente*–construction have a volitional flavour. Example (35) reports the words

of the minister of home affairs. Similarly, the items in (37) for instance, be them things or people, are ruled out by the speaker himself and their presence is intentionally barred as a consequence of his will, all of them except for the last one which is beyond his direct control. In this particular case, the entity is introduced by *nessuno*. The existence of elements in the domain of denotation of the restrictor set looks like a conventional implicature associated with the negative existential construction realised by *nessuno*. Crucially, this does not apply to *niente*–constructions.

5 Averbal negative existential sentences

The existential vs. locative interpretation of existential constructions has been repeatedly studied in the literature. The discussion that precedes has shown that aspects of this distinction can be found also in negative existentials. The hypothesis discussed in this section is that *nessuno*– and *niente*–constructions are specialised ways to describe a situation and that it is the use of these different n-words that marks overtly different perspectives on the situation described. In *nessuno*–constructions the description is structured around the object named by the noun. In *niente*–constructions, the situation is looked at from the perspective of the domain of existence.

Formally, we propose to capture the shift in perspective by varying the constraint of Conservativity that characterise generalised quantifiers. This step allows us to take into consideration the question of the referential properties of the negated DP used to name what the negated existential broadly is about, cf. Cartwright (1960), Atlas (1988) among others.

5.1 The role of Conservativity

In Generalised Quantifier Theory various claims have been made about universal properties of determiners in natural languages. *Conservativity* is one of such properties (Keenan and Stavi, 1986). A determiner that satisfies Conservativity, defined in (50), uses its first argument as its local universe.

(50)   **Conservativity (on the left argument):**
         A determiner D satisfies the constraint of conservativity on its left argument iff for all $A, B \subseteq E$:
         $D_E \, AB$ iff $D_E \, A \, (A \cap B)$.

This constraint can be seen as a property of the syntax-semantic interface, as it constrains the relevant occurrences of determiners to have the form (Det N) Predicate. Intuitively, it says that entities that do not have the property determined by the N do not have to be taken into consideration to determine the meaning of a sentence of the form Det N VP.

This constraint has also been considered to encode the presupposition of nonempty domain usually associated with the first argument. Partee (1991) has noted that there is some correlation between the background of a sentence (the topic) and the restrictor on the one hand, and the focus and the nuclear scope on the other hand.

The hypothesis we explore says that in averbal negative existential sentences in Italian either argument may play the role of local universe, under specific circumstances. In case the

set B has to play this role, the constraint of conservativity has to be satisfied on the right argument. The definition of this type of conservativity goes as follows.

(51)   **Conservativity on the right argument:**
         A determiner D satisfies the constraint of conservativity on its right argument iff for all A, $B \subseteq E$:
         $D_E\ AB$ iff $D_E\ A \cap B\ (B)$.

Nessuno– and *niente*–constructions differ in the way information is conveyed. *Nessuno*–constructions exemplify a regular quantificational structure, where *nessuno* is the determiner, the common noun it combines with is the restrictor and the XP following it is the nuclear scope. Conservativity is satisfied in the traditional form defined in (50). The situation is different in the case of *niente*–constructions where, as mentioned above, *niente* is a generalised quantifier. Usually it does not behave as a determiner and does not take an overt left argument. The exceptional use of *niente* as an element that triggers a tripartite structure in negative existential constructions is to be interpreted as marking overtly the fact that the noun following it is not a standard left argument and does not play the role of restrictor. Conservativity is satisfied in the form defined in (51) extended to operators expressing conservative functions.

This formulation of our hypothesis accounts for the basic facts. In *nessuno*–constructions the denotation of N is assumed to be nonempty and in *niente*–constructions no constraints apply to the denotation of N. However, the data discussed in section 4.3 suggest that it is desirable to reformulate this hypothesis and add an epistemic layer to it. It seems necessary to move from an opposition between empty or nonempty domain of entities spoken about to a range of epistemic states. An agent may believe the possibility of existence of the entities the sentence is about or believe their existence. The belief of existence implies the belief of possibility, but the reverse is not true. In this line of reasoning, what is presupposed in (41), repeated below, is the existence of an epistemic state in which the possibility of there being answers is envisaged. What is not presupposed is the existence of an agent who believes that there are answers. Adding this refinement to the current analysis will be a challenge for the future. The proposal sketched in subsection 5.3 is partly different. The belief of the possibility of existence is ascribed to an agent who is a participant in the conversation but who is not identified nor necessarily identifiable.

(41)   "C'è nessuno lì dietro?". Nessuna risposta
         Is there anybody behind there? No answer

The idea behind the current hypothesis is that the constraint of conservativity may be satisfied in ways that interact with information articulation. A relevant example from the literature is the discussion of *many* as a possible counterexample to the universality of Conservativity by Westerståhl (1985). His example exploits the capacity of focus to affect the truth conditions of a sentence. When *Scandinavians* is interpreted as the restrictor in (52), the sentence means that the number of Scandinavians who are winners of the Nobel prize in literature is large and *many* behaves as a conservative determiner. In order to get the interpretation that a large number of those who have won the Nobel prize in literature are Scandinavians, *be a winner of the Nobel prize in literature* has to be taken as the restrictor. In the case of this example prosody signals the shift.

(52)   Many Scandinavians have won the Nobel prize in literature

A similar line of attack has been adopted by Keenan (2003) to account for the distribution of DPs in existential *there*–constructions in English. In his proposal, the distribution follows from a property pinned on the determiners, as commonly done. However, it is claimed that the definiteness effect should not be explained in pragmatic terms by ascribing differing presupposition triggering properties to the determiners, but in semantic terms. The determiners that occur in *there*–constructions decide their truth by limiting their universe to the set denoted by the coda, hence they satisfy conservativity on the left argument. The discussion of the two Italian cases show that in *nessuno*– and *niente*–constructions the satisfaction of Conservativity on the right argument cannot be said to be a characteristic of certain determiners. Moreover, it cannot constitute a generalisation over negative existential sentences, because of the difference between *nessuno*– and *niente*–constructions, although all averbal clauses were shown to exhibit the definiteness effect.

5.2   More on Conservativity and the definiteness effect

It is a known fact that *there*–constructions may be interpreted in other ways that purely existential clauses. There is the locative interpretation, but also the so-called list, presentational… readings, see Ward and Birner (1995) among others. Interesting to notice, strong determiners and definite DPs, usually ruled out in existential readings of this construction, can occur in *there*–constructions under these other readings.

The satisfaction of conservativity on the right argument may be taken to characterise *there*–constructions in their existential interpretation. Possibly, in the other readings determiners satisfy the traditional form of conservativity. This hypothesis extends to *there*–constructions the proposal formulated for averbal sentences. Although it has some appeal, it is also very costly, because it severs the link between a property of the determiners and the construction. The old question of how to characterise the definiteness effect now would take the form of the question of which version of conservativity is to be satisfied and when. Hence the power of the characterisation proposed by Keenan would be lost.

Conversely, the variety of interpretations for *there*–constructions triggers the question of whether the possibility of choosing between two lexical items to form averbal negative existential sentences is to be taken as a way to lexicalise a similar variety, at least the existential vs. locative interpretations.

The negative cases are not the simple mirror image of the positive ones. Indeed, asserting that an entity is at a particular location implies asserting that it exists. Hence, positive sentences such as *there*–constructions remain existential even in their locative interpretation. On the contrary, when one denies that an entity is to be found at a particular location, it does not follow that one asserts that such an entity does not exist, although this situation may be compatible. From there we may carry on and derive the extreme usefulness of having two distinct forms of negative existential sentences, one simply to reject a localisation and another utterly to deny existence. English shows that this option is not uniformly available.

An open issue is why regular negative determiners, i.e. *nessuno* and French *aucun*, are not the forms used to realise the more straightforward negative version of existential averbal clause, and instead serve to produce sentences closer to the negation of locative statements. A correlate question is why these languages use what look like syntactically special forms for

'plainly' asserting non-existence. The third form 'not an N' is kept to negate the minimal quantity in both languages.

5.3 Sketch of a discourse oriented analysis

The move from the situation where conservativity is satisfied on the first argument to a situation where it is satisfied on the second one, as in Keenan (2003), can be understood as a way to implement the view that the definiteness effect is in some way a novelty constraint, because it is the second argument that receives a topic status leaving the first free to convey focus information. The proposal of opening the possibility of using either argument in averbal constructions, though, should not necessarily be taken to contrast this view.

This section is very speculative. The sketch we presente is an attempt to bring into the picture other agents than the speaker and to give them a role. The idea we are exploring invokes the need to distinguish between different discourse participants to whom to ascribe the commitment on the empty vs. nonempty denotation of the intersection and of the common noun in the restrictor. Their views are considered from the standpoint of the speaker who is the one who chooses how to shape the sentence. The proposal that the choice between the two n-words marks that a different perspective is adopted on the described situation remains valid.

In shaping her sentence with a *niente*, the speaker commits herself to the belief that the intersection between restrictor and nucleus is empty. Although this is formally imprecise, we can say that intuitively she claims that the denotation of the quantifier is empty. Furthermore and more importantly, she marks it as a point that is not open to discussion. In other words, the empty denotation is taken to be in the common ground. The notion of common ground we need extends the proposal of Stalnaker (1998) by taking into consideration the relevant stretch of discourse that precedes the utterance of a given sentence, is related to the same object of discourse and is present to the mint/attention of the participants in the conversation.

For instance, example (53) describes the journey back of an Italian hostage killed in Iraq. The averbal sentence reports on a situation that was the result of a decision by the authorities and as such could not be legally opposed. The absence of photographers is presented as a fact which is added directly to the common ground.

(53)   E' atterrato all'aeroporto di Ciampino l'aereo che riportava in Italia il corpo di Quattrocchi. Niente fotografi. (25/5/2004IM)
the plane bringing back to Italy the body of Quattrocchi landed at Ciampino airport. No photographers

In shaping her sentence with a *nessuno*, the speaker also commits herself to the belief that the intersection between restrictor and nucleus is empty, but signals that this may be a point open to discussion, or rather that this is the question under discussion. As a consequence, she must admit the possibility that a participant in the conversation entertains the belief that the denotation of the intersection is not empty and therefore that the common noun in the restrictor also has a non empty denotation.

For instance, sentence (54) describes the stand taken by non governmental organisations against the conference of donors in Madrid. Funds for the military occupation of Iraq were pledged by some countries even before the start of the conference, so it is clearly not the

case that non governmental organisations were deluding themselves about their non existence. The sentence conveys the message that as far as their convictions and power of action was concerned, these organisations were opposing the inclusion of 'funding for the occupation' in the common ground of that discussion within the international community.

(54)   Nessun finanziamento all'occupazione militare dell'Iraq (18/10/03IM)
         zero funding to the military occupation of Iraq

This discourse oriented proposal has been developed on the basis of the Italian data. Whether it extends to French is a very delicate question to test. Empirical evidence brought up in subsection 4.3.3 revealed aspects of the complexity of the issue.

6   Existential constructions and incorporation

It has been noted (Bende-Farkas and Kamp, 2001) that existential sentences and incorporating structures share a number of properties, e.g. incorporated nominals have an existential construal and a narrow scope, like weak NPs in existential sentences. Indeed, it has been proposed to treat existential constructions in West Greenlandic and Dutch as involving semantic incorporation (van Geenhoven, 1998). This type of analysis has been generalised to English and Hungarian and existentials at large by Bende-Farkas and Kamp (2001).

The study of the properties of incorporated nominals and of analyses of existential constructions in terms of incorporation may be relevant for our study of negative existential averbal clauses for at least two reasons. First, as we noted, the two pairs of Italian-French constructions exhibit differences in discourse transparency. Manifestations of this type have been noticed in incorporated nominals. However, the question of the opacity of these contexts led us to record a wrinkle in the smooth parallelism between Italian and French.

The second reason is that incorporation phenomena may provide a key to unravel the compositional puzzle of *niente*-constructions. It could be hypothesised that some version of incorporation is involved in the semantic composition of these constructions. Noun incorporation is not a free option in Italian, but this specific case meets its standard requirements, e.g. the noun does not support discourse links. In the remainder of this section we sketch two options that can be explored.

In the first option, *niente* acts as an existential predicate and its internal argument gets incorporated. This could correspond to a case of 'doubling' in the classification discussed by Mithun (1984) if we decompose *niente* into its components non+ente (not+entity) where 'entity' is the covert restrictor which is doubled by the noun that acts as overt restrictor. Note that this sequence respects the increased specification observed by Mithun, since 'entity' is most likely to be the hyperonym of the following noun. In this view, the noun after it simply restricts the argument, as nouns can do when incorporating (Chung and Ladusaw, 2003). Number differences may affect discourse transparency, see the possibility of substituting *niente*-constructions with a plural nominal for *nessuno*-constructions. Different shades of discourse transparency are reported for Hungarian incorporated nominals by Farkas and de Swart (2003), i.e. if the nominal is plural, it can be discourse transparent.

The second option builds on the analysis of existential sentences proposed by Bende-Farkas and Kamp (2001). These authors propose that existential sentences involve a form of binding

by the verb or by the expletive+ verb complex of *there*-constructions. This binding creates an opaque context, with exceptions. The internal argument DP is more like a secondary predicate to the verb than a proper argument. Following this perspective for Italian, the pronominal nature of *niente* would be reinterpreted as corresponding to an expression of negated existence plus an expletive, like in the positive form *there is*. The negation it introduces outscopes all the rest. It is also taken to expect a property type argument and its representation contains a placeholder variable P that is bound/unified with the predicate contributed by the bare noun.

7   Summary and concluding remarks

In this paper, first our attention has focussed on how to characterise *nessuno*– and *niente*–constructions, two averbal sequences in Italian. We claim that they are interpreted as negative existential sentences. It has been proposed that the sentential interpretation is possible because the negative expression requires tripartite structure at some abstract level of representation. The negated existential type of the sentence has then been linked to the intersective relation imposed by the n-word and the constraint of empty intersection.

Second, we have tried to capture some of the interpretive differences between the two constructions. We propose to interpret the use of different n-words as a way to mark overtly that different perspectives are taken on the situation described. The change of perspective has been analysed as a different way of satisfying Conservativity. We have pointed to the necessity of taking into consideration the existence of different epistemic states, an approach that is here left to explore.

Next, if we draw analogies with negated existential sentences that exhibit variation between nominative vs. genitive case in Russian, and the *aucun/pas de* alternation in French, we can notice that, first, Italian, Russian and French seem to exploit different strategies to produce linguistic objects whose interpretations can be linked to two main types of negated existential sentences. Second, special linguistic solutions are devised in all of these languages to express the case where no commitment is taken on the existence of a referent for the noun of the entity the negative existence statement is about.

If these remarks are accepted, then a number of points may follow. First, we can assume that there are negative existential predication in Italian. Second, variation in the degree of what can be called specificity, familiarity, presupposition or referentiality of the entity spoken about, may be a feature characteristic of negated existential constructions independently of their realisation in a language. Third, this type of variation can be further constrained by the requirements of the lexical elements that realise negation of existence overtly in a construction. It can also be sensitive to information expressed in morphological terms, cf. the relevance of number in sentences instantiating *niente*–constructions, which has not been discussed in the paper.

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