‘N-words’ in Negative Structures in ‘English’

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Abstract

This paper will seek to answer the following two questions: (i). How can it be that in a language such as English, multiple ‘n-words’ can be used to express a single semantic negation? And (ii). What is the status of words such as nothing and nowhere, n-words, in the ‘English’ lexicon? It will be shown that a semantic re-evaluation of n-words has occurred historically, with such words originating as a kind of morphologically-complex ‘n-marked’ Negative Polarity Item (which entered into a ‘concord’ relationship with other negative expressions) that later underwent lexicalisation to become Negative Quantifiers capable of expressing negation independently. Although this change is in keeping with the Jespersen Cycle, this paper will show that the change was not ‘across the board’ in English, with both regional dialects and ‘the vernacular tongue’ preserving the older system of negation, Negative Concord, until the present day. This has resulted in a rich and complex system of negation in modern English which has a similarly complex semantics.

Key Words: negative concord, n-word, dialect, polysemy, lexicalisation.