Negating the verum
The syntax and semantics of preposed negation in Danish

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Abstract In Danish the base position of the negation (and negated quantifier phrases) is between the subject and the finite verb in embedded clauses. However, in embedded clauses introduced by a non-veridical complementizer such as *hvis* ‘if’ or *om* ‘whether’, the negation can also appear between the complementizer and the subject. This little-studied phenomenon is referred to as preposed negation. The article investigates the syntax and semantics of preposed negation from a primarily descriptive point of view. It is argued that preposed negation is associated with negated verum-focus of a clause lacking an (aboutness-)topic. The negation of a verum predicate explains why preposed negation—like other constructions with verum-focus—fails to license strong negative polarity items and fails to rule out positive ones. The lack of a topic explains why preposed negation is preferred with non-referential subjects and with weak readings of indefinite subjects and why preposed negation is incompatible with topic-binding particles. It is further argued that preposed negation is not a lexical head (or part of a compound), but that it projects a phrase with wide scope, which is selected by the complementizer, rather than adjoined to the following clause. Two possible analyses of preposed negation are presented: an account where the preposed negation is in the specifier of a (selected) Polarity Phrase, and one where the preposed negation is selected as an optional complement by the complementizer.

Keywords Negation · Verum-focus · Information structure · Non-veridical contexts · Polarity items · Danish
1 Introduction

In Danish, sentential negation canonically occupies a fixed position in the clause: it marks the left edge of the VP and it can neither (or only marginally) be fronted, nor can it occur in a VP-final position. Sentential negation is even used as a test for V2: if the negation follows the finite verb, the clause is V2, and if the negation precedes the finite verb, the finite verb is in its base position and the clause is not V2. Thus in clauses with verb fronting (V1- or V2-clauses), sentential negation immediately precedes the non-finite verbs (if present) or other VP-internal material. In clauses without verb fronting, sentential negation immediately precedes the finite verb. Non-subject negative quantifier phrases (NegQPs) can also occupy the position of the sentential negation even though NegQPs as complements of the verb ought to occur in the canonical position of complements, namely after the main verb (as discussed e.g. in Sells 2000 and Christensen 2005). I will refer to negation at the left edge of the VP as ordinary negation. Cf. the following examples.1

1 Examples marked with a superscripted DK are extracted from the 56-million-words corpus KorpusDK of Det Danske Sprog- og litteraturselskab: http://ordnet.dk/korpusdk. Examples from the Internet are provided with URL and the date they were last inspected. Examples with no indication of source, finally, are constructed. In the examples I utilize square brackets to highlight the phenomenon that the example is supposed to illustrate, e.g., the position of the negation or the use of a negative polarity item.

(1) a. fordi det ny system [ikke] tillader ansøgere under 15 år.
   because the new system not allows applicants under 15 years
   ‘because the new system doesn’t allow applicants younger than 15 years.’

      the new system allows not applicants under 15 years
      ‘The new system doesn’t allow applicants younger than 15 years.’

   c. fordi familien [ingen penge,] havde _.
      because family.DEF no money had
      ‘because the family had no money.’

In (1a) the negation precedes the finite verb in an embedded clause without verb-fronting. In (1b) the negation follows the finite verb in a declarative clause with verb-fronting (V2). In (1c) a NegQP precedes the finite verb in an embedded clause without verb fronting, even though the canonical position of the object is to the right of the verb within the VP.