High Negation in Subjunctive Conditionals and Polar Questions

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It has been known since Anderson (1951) that the counterfactuality message in subjunctive conditionals is a cancellable implicature, as shown in (1). However, counterfactuality has been argued to be uncancellable in the presence of so-called ‘high negation’, which can be detected in that it doesn’t anti-license PPIs (Schwarz and Bhatt 2006, Ippolito and Su 2009), as the contrast between high and low (=regular) negation in (2) shows.

(1) If Jones had taken arsenic, he would have shown the symptoms that he indeed showed. So, it is likely that he took arsenic.

(2) If there hadn’t been some PPI / there had been no Low oil in the tank, the furnace would have made just exactly the kind of noise that it in fact did. So, it’s likely that the tank was indeed empty.

An interpretive contrast between high and low negation is found in polar interrogatives too: (3S) with high negation necessarily conveys an original epistemic bias of the speaker towards p (= ‘John drank alcohol tonight’) and it is thus infelicitious in the given context (Ladd 1981), whereas (3S’) with low negation can be used in an epistemically neutral way (Romero and Han 2004).

(3) a. (#We need a sober driver. What about John?) Didn’t High he drink some PPI alcohol tonight?
   b. (We need a sober driver. What about John?) Did he drink no LowNeg alcohol tonight?

Analyses of high negation in the literature have targeted one construction or the other, but not both. The goal of this paper is to provide an unified analysis of high negation that derives its interpretive effects in both environments. This will be done by (i) examining the behaviour of Common Ground (CG)-managing operators like e.g. German ja, (ii) elaborating on previous accounts of high negation in polar interrogatives, and (iii) advancing a new proposal for high negation in subjunctive conditionals.