

Du sollst nicht sein oder nicht sein. Verwirrendes über die deutsche Negation

Typically, a German sentence is negated by the particle *nicht*, which can be inserted at various positions; accordingly, it affects the meaning of the entire sentence in different ways, which go far beyond traditional distinctions such as "sentence negation" and "constituent negation". In this talk, I will argue that the negation particle combines two functions, called here "difference function" and "incompatibility function". The former is scope-dependent; it serves to mark that, according to the speaker, some "different sentence" than the one in which the particle is contained is true. The latter, which accounts for the familiar notion of truth-reversal, is not scope-dependent; it marks that the proposition expressed by the underlying sentence and the proposition expressed by the "other sentence" are incompatible. The scope of *nicht* primarily depends on its position; as a rule, it "goes to the right"; some apparent exceptions are shown to result from familiar properties of German syntax. It is also shown that the negation does not associate with the focus of the sentence; it always makes the same meaning contribution, independent of its position and the focus structure of the sentence.