Some specificities of the n-word \textit{plus} in French

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Our starting point in this work is the observation that the French n-word \emph{plus} (no more) has to be distinguished from the other common n-words like \emph{rien} (nothing), \emph{nulle part} (nowhere), \emph{jamais} (never), \emph{personne} (nobody) with respect to its behavior with the sentential negation adverb \emph{pas} (no).

In synchrony, sentential negation is realized in French with the optional particle \emph{ne} and either the negative adverb \emph{pas} (1a), or an n-word (1b), but, normally, not with both (1c).

\begin{enumerate}
\item a. Luc ne voit pas. \hfill (1a)
\quad \textit{Luc} \textit{NE sees} not
\item b. Luc ne voit personne. \hfill (1b)
\quad \textit{Luc} \textit{NE sees} nobody
\item c. * Luc ne voit pas personne. \hfill (1c)
\quad \textit{Luc} \textit{NE sees} not \textit{nobody}
\end{enumerate}

However it has been noticed that a combination like (1c), although very marginal, is not completely excluded, and many instances can be found in (large enough) corpora. In such cases, the combination can receive two interpretations: one called \textbf{double negation}, where both the negative adverb and the n-word contribute a logical negation (2a), the other called \textbf{negative doubling} (Larrivée 2016) where the n-word and the negative adverb contribute together only one negation (2b).

\begin{enumerate}
\item a. $\neg \exists x \left( P(x) \land S(l,x) \right)$ \hfill (2a) $\leftarrow$ I don't see nobody (double negation)
\item b. $\neg \exists x \left( P(x) \land S(l,x) \right)$ \hfill (2b) $\leftarrow$ I don’t see anybody (negative doubling)
\end{enumerate}

Such combinations of n-words with the negative adverb \emph{pas} are relatively easy to find in large corpora, at least for n-words \emph{rien}, \emph{nulle part}, \emph{personne}. However, when it comes to the n-word \emph{plus}, it turns out to be almost impossible to find, even though in theory it should be possible, as foraged example (3) suggests.

\begin{enumerate}
\item --- On me dit que Jean ne va plus au cinéma ? \hfill (3)
\quad --- Non, il ne va pas plus au cinéma, il y va moins souvent.
\quad \hfill (I'm told Jean no longer goes to the movies?)
\quad I'm told Jean no longer goes to the movies, he goes there less often.
\end{enumerate}

Our first aim is to try and come up with a quantitative assessment of this rarity, which requires large corpora and many manual annotations. We will provide in the full paper the detailed outcome of a corpus study that confirms that the combination of \emph{pas} and \emph{plus} is significantly rarer than the combination of \emph{pas} and any other n-word. Our second aim is to understand what makes \emph{plus} so special in this respect, and we will propose in this paper a (partial) inventory of the specificities of \emph{plus} among French n-words.

While in many neighbor languages, what is expressed by \emph{plus} in French is expressed by a combination of a comparative word and a negation (Italian \emph{non più}, Portuguese \emph{não mas}, English \emph{no more}, German \emph{nicht mehr}), in French the same word \emph{plus} has become ambiguous between a comparative word (\emph{more}) and an n-word (\emph{no-more}). As a consequence, the combination \emph{pas+plus} in instances like (4) will be ambiguous in a
rather systematic way. As a matter of fact, the combination *pas+plus* when *plus* is comparative is quite frequent in corpora.

(4) Jean ne dort pas plus.
   *Jean NE sleeps not (more/no more)*

If we focus now on cases where *plus* is an n-word (noted *plus_N*), a second ambiguity problem arises for the combination *pas+plus_N*, coming from the fact that *plus_N* is a presupposition trigger. When a sentential negation combines with a presupposition trigger, it can be interpreted either as a descriptive negation, which leaves aside the presupposed content (5a), or as a metalinguistic negation, whose effect is precisely to target the presupposition (5b) (see, e.g. Horn 1989, ch. 6).

(5)  
   a. Jean ne dort pas plus, il dort encore.
      *Jean is not no longer sleeping, he is still sleeping (descriptive negation)*
   b. Jean ne dort pas plus, il n’a jamais dormi!
      *Jean is not no longer sleeping, he was never asleep! (metalinguistic negation)*

So the combination *pas+plus* is ambiguous in two different manners, and this fact, along with the observation that *pas+plus_N* can be expressed more simply with the adverb *encore* (*still*), may explain why speakers tend avoid this combination. We want to highlight other observations about *plus* which put it apart from the other n-words. First, it is well-known that n-words in French can combine together (with *ne*) to form a single negation (concord, illustrated in (6)). In this respect, *plus_N* behaves like other n-words, but contrarily to other n-words, it can appear either in its canonical position (7a) or in an unexpected prefix position (7b) (with a concord interpretation).

(6) Max ne dit rien à personne.
   *Max NE says nothing to anyone*

(7) a. Rien ne sera plus comme avant.
    *Nothing NE will be any more as before*
   b. Plus rien ne sera comme avant.
    *Nothing any more NE will be as before*

Second, it can be shown that *plus_N* is not quantificational, while arguably all other n-words are (contrarily to the claim often made that *plus_N* quantifies over times). In this respect, *plus_N* is more like the full negation *pas* than like an n-word. And since it is well established that full negation cannot be used recursively (8), it may also explain why *pas+plus_N* is not preferred.

(8) * Jean ne (ne) dort pas pas.
     *Jean is not not sleeping*

These observations lead us to a proposal that was already present in spirit in (Muller, 1991), namely that *plus_N* should be analysed as a composite word, combining a sentential negation and a temporal presupposition trigger, which puts it half way between common n-words and full negation, and that this explains its peculiar behavior.

References