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Little or Nothing

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1 Different Kinds of Negation

In addition to the use of a dedicated negative marker such as *not*, the determiner *no*, noun phrases like *nothing*, and adverbs like *nowhere*, *never*, English has at least two other means for conveying negative meanings. The first involves the use of counterfactual morphology and the second, which will be our focus here, the use of expressions like *few* and *little*.

- (1) a. I wish I was tall.
b. I read *few* Basque novels/ate *little* fried cheese during my stay in Spain.

The properties of the dedicated negative marker and the fact that the South Asian languages only use the sentential negation strategy (*nahī*-, *na*-, *mat* in Hindi-Urdu) and lack altogether nominal negation has been well-documented (Bhatia (1978), Bhatia (1979), Kumar (2006) i.a.). The use of counterfactual morphology - the untensed habitual in Hindi-Urdu - to construct negative meanings has also been noted (Masica (1991)).

- (2) a. kaash mĒ amiir ho-taa:
'wish' I rich be-Hab.MSg
'I wish I was rich.'
b. [tum amiir ho-te] to tumhē gairō-ke-saamne haath nahī: phailaa-ne
you rich be-Hab.MSg then you.Dat others-Gen-front hands Neg spread-Inf.MPI
par-te
have.to-Hab.MPI
'If you were rich, you wouldn't have to spread your hands in front of others.'

In contrast the *few/little* strategy has not received much attention within the discussion of South Asian languages. In fact I am not aware that the existence of this strategy has even been documented. (3) provides an example of this strategy.

- (3) mĒ kitaab phaar-taa thoṛii. (sirf dhamkii de rahaa thaa)
I book tear-Hab.MSg LITTLE only threat give Prog.MSg be.Pst.MSg
'I wouldn't (actually) have torn the book. I was just threatening to do so.'

2 Nominal Usage of *thoraa*

The word *thoraa* ‘few/little’ is ordinarily a adjective-like element that appears in the nominal domain. It can combine with the adverbial *bahut* ‘very’ and with the element *-saa* ‘like’. Like other adjectives ending in *-aa*, it agrees with the head noun. The noun modified by *thoraa* can be mass or count but if the noun is a count noun, it has to be plural. The overall pattern can be summarized as follows: if *thoraa* displays plural agreement, it can be translated as *few*, otherwise as *little*.

(4) a. count noun:

(bahut) thoṛii(-sii) kitaabē bik-ī:
 very little.f-LIKE.f book.FPl sold-Pfv.FPl
 ‘Very few books sold.’

b. mass noun:

thoṛii(-sii) mirch/bewafaai
 little.f-LIKE.f chillies/infidelity
 ‘a little chillies/infidelity’

c. singular agreement: mass noun

thoṛa(-saa) namak/*thoṛaa(-saa) baccaa
 little.MSg-LIKE.MSg salt.M/*little.MSg-LIKE.MSg by.MSg
 ‘a little salt/*few boy’

d. plural agreement: count noun

thoṛe(-se) amruud/*namak
 little.MSg-LIKE.MSg guava.M/salt.M
 ‘a few guavas/*a few salt’

thoraa ‘little’ does not behave as negation when it appears as a nominal modifier. In the nominal domain, it functions purely as a marker of low quantity.¹

In this it contrasts with the English *few/little* and patterns instead with *a few/a little*.

(5) a. John reads few books, if any.

(= ¬(John reads many books); compatible with John having read none.)

b. John read a few books, #if any.

(= There is a small number of books s.t. John read them; incompatible with John having read none.)

c. John did little preparation for the exam, if any.

(= ¬(John did much preparation); compatible with John having done no preparation.)

d. John did a little preparation for the exam, #if any.

(= There is a small amount of preparation that John did for this exam; incompatible with John having done no preparation at all.)

¹There is also a marker of high quantity *zyaadaa* ‘lot’.

a few/a little has existential import, which is not the case with *few/little*. And the nominal usage of *thoraa* has a similar existential import. Thus (6) would not be true in a circumstance where no book sold at all.

- (6) *thoṛii(-hi:) kitaabē bik-ī:*
 few.f-only book.FPl sold-Pfv.FPl
 ‘(Only) a few books sold.’

That we do not get the negative meaning in the nominal domain can be seen as part of the general absence of the nominal expression of negation in the South Asian languages, which has been noted above.

3 Adverbial *thoṛii* as Negation: Parallels with *naḥĩ:*

To get the negative meaning, we have to go to the adverbial/sentential domain. We have already seen one example in (3). Further examples are provided in (7).

The adverbial counterpart is always *thoṛii*, never *thoṛe/aa*.

- (7) a. Mahesh-ko kisi-ne invite *thoṛii* kiyaa thaa
 Mahesh-KO someone-Erg invite LITTLE do.Pfv be.Pst
 ‘No one had invited Mahesh.’
- b. Timur Manu-ko ḍā:ṭ-taa *thoṛii* thaa
 Timur Manu-KO scold-Hab LITTLE be.Pst
 ‘Timur didn’t used to scold Manu.’
- c. yeh saamaan bik-egaa *thoṛii*
 this stuff sell-Fut.MSg LITTLE
 ‘The stuff won’t well.’

(7a-c) are well-formed even without the *thoṛii*, though of course the polarity is flipped. The meanings of (7a-c) are close to the corresponding sentences with *thoṛii* replaced by the negative marker *naḥĩ:*.

3.1 Indeclinability

One difference between adverbial *thoṛii* and its nominal counterpart is that the former is indeclinable. The adverbial counterpart does not agree with any nominal element and is always *thoṛii*, never *thoṛaa*.

It is possible that *thoṛii* is a contraction of *thoṛe* plus the focus marker *-hii*. This is suggested by the fact that some speakers pronounce this element as *thoṛe-hii*. *thoṛe* is the oblique form of *thoṛaa* ‘little’.²

²For me, the *thoṛe-hii* form is dispreferred. I wonder if the speakers who can use *thoṛe-hii* can optionally drop the *-hii* and just use *thoṛe* also.

Such a decomposition of *thoṛii* is attractive in that we have an additional parallel with *nahī:*, which has also been claimed to consist of *naa* plus the focus marker *-hii*.

We also are able to explain the otherwise puzzling ‘feminine’ inflection on *thoṛii*. One does not expect the default/indeclinable form to be the feminine form.

But it should be noted that the interchangeability between *thoṛe-hii* and *thoṛii* is only limited to the adverbial/negation environments. In its nominal usage *thoṛe* plus *-hii* is not interchangeable with *thoṛii*:

- (8) *thoṛe-hii*/**thoṛii* *akhbaar* *bik-e*
 little.MPI-Foc/LITTLE newspaper.m sell-Pfv.MPI
 ‘Only a few newspapers sold.’

3.2 Constituent Negation

Another parallel with the negative marker is that just as *nahī:* can be used as a marker of constituent negation, so can *thoṛii*. Constituent negation in Hindi-Urdu right adjoins to any XPs it modifies. This is also the case with *thoṛii*. As a result, *thoṛii* can appear in practically any position other than sentence-initial. In general, its acceptability in a position parallels the acceptability of *nahī:* in that position.

- (9) (**thoṛii*) *Mona-ne* (*thoṛii*) *Ghizala-ko* (*thoṛii*) *ḍā:ṭ-aa* (*thoṛii*) *thaa* (**thoṛii*)
 LITTLE Mona-Erg LITTLE Ghizala-ko LITTLE scold-Pfv LITTLE be.Pst LITTLE
 ‘Mona hadn’t scolded Ghizala.’
 (The exact meaning depends upon the placement of *thoṛii*. If it follows *Mona*, it would mean ‘It wasn’t Mona who had scolded Ghizala’)

But the parallel between constituent negation by *nahī:* and constituent negation by *thoṛii* is not complete. Constituent negation by *nahī:* seems to require a counterpart of the negated constituent.

- (10) a. without counterpart: degradation
 #*Mira-ne* *Tushar-ko* *nahī:* *kitaab* *dii* *thii*
 Mira-Erg Tushar-Dat Neg book.f give.Pfv.f be.Pst.f
 ‘#Mira had given the book not to Tushar.’
- b. with counterpart: good
Mira-ne *Tushar-ko* *nahī:* *Madhukar-ko* *kitaab* *dii* *thii*
 Mira-Erg Tushar-Dat Neg Madhukar-Dat book.f give.Pfv.f be.Pst.f
 ‘Mira had given the book not to Tushar but to Madhukar.’

The judgements with *thoṛii* seem to be reversed. Here the counterpart-less cases are perfect but the cases with a counterpart seem slightly degraded.

- (11) a. without counterpart: good

Mira-ne Tushar-ko thoṛii kitaab dii thii
Mira-Erg Tushar-Dat LITTLE book.f give.Pfv.f be.Pst.f

‘#Mira had given the book not to Tushar.’

- b. with counterpart: midly degraded

??Mira-ne Tushar-ko thoṛii Madhukar-ko kitaab dii thii
Mira-Erg Tushar-Dat LITTLE Madhukar-Dat book.f give.Pfv.f be.Pst.f

‘Mira had given the book not to Tushar but to Madhukar.’

3.3 A constraint against Double Negation

Hindi-Urdu does not allow for two instances of negation to appear within a minimal finite clause. This restriction seems to hold even if the two instances of negation are not of the same kind syntactically i.e. if one is a sentential negation and the other is a constituent negation.

- (12) a. two(?) sentential negations:

*Deepesh-ne kitaab nahī: nahī: paṛh-ii
Deepesh-Erg book.f Neg Neg read-Pfv.f

intended meaning: Deepesh didn’t not read the book.’

- b. one sentential negation and one constituent negation:

???Deepesh-ne nahī: Mona-ne kitaab nahī: paṛh-ii
Deepesh-Erg Neg Mona-Erg book.f Neg read-Pfv.f

intended meaning: It was Mona, not Deepesh, who didn’t read the book.’

Any combination of *nahī:* and *thoṛii* leads to ungrammaticality, or at least oddness.

- (13) two(?) sentential negations:

- a. *Deepesh-ne kitaab nahī: thoṛii paṛh-ii
Deepesh-Erg book.f Neg LITTLE read-Pfv.f

intended meaning: Deepesh didn’t not read the book.’

- b. *Deepesh-ne kitaab thoṛii nahī: paṛh-ii
Deepesh-Erg book.f LITTLE Neg read-Pfv.f

intended meaning: Deepesh didn’t not read the book.’

- c. *Deepesh-ne kitaab thoṛii thoṛii paṛh-ii
Deepesh-Erg book.f LITTLE LITTLE read-Pfv.f

intended meaning: Deepesh didn’t not read the book.’

- (14) one sentential negation and one constituent negation:

- a. ???Deepesh-ne nahī: Mona-ne kitaab thoṛii paṛh-ii
Deepesh-Erg Neg Mona-Erg book.f LITTLE read-Pfv.f

intended meaning: It was Mona, not Deepesh, who didn’t read the book.’

- b. ???Deepesh-ne thoṛii kitaab thoṛii paṛh-ii
 Deepesh-Erg Neg book.f LITTLE read-Pfv.f
 intended meaning: It wasn't Deepesh who didn't read the book.'

Curiously the following where the *thoṛii* contributes the constituent negation and the *nahī:* the sentential negation seems a bit better:

- (15) (??)Deepesh-ne thoṛii kitaab nahī: paṛh-ii
 Deepesh-Erg LITTLE book.f Neg read-Pfv.f
 intended meaning: It wasn't Deepesh who didn't read the book.'

4 Adverbial *thoṛii* as Negation: Divergences from *nahī:*

But *nahī:* and *thoṛii* are not fully parallel. The negative meaning contributed by *thoṛii* always has an emphatic element. It would be odd out of the blue.

Consider again (3, repeated below as 16) - this is felt to respond to a situation where the hearer thinks that the speaker is about to tear the book.

- (16) mĒ kitaab phaṛ-taa thoṛii. (sirf dhamkii de rahaa thaa)
 I book tear-Hab.MSg LITTLE only threat give Prog.MSg be.Pst.MSg
 'I wouldn't (actually) have torn the book. I was just threatening to do so.'

Likewise in (7a-c, repeated below as 17a-c), there is a background proposition which is assumed or at least being entertained. In (17c), the hearer might think that the things will sell and the speaker is disabusing the hearer of this notion.

- (17) a. Mahesh-ko kisi-ne invite thoṛii kiyaa thaa
 Mahesh-KO someone-Erg invite LITTLE do.Pfv be.Pst
 'No one had invited Mahesh.'
- b. Timur Manu-ko dā:ṭ-taa thoṛii thaa
 Timur Manu-KO scold-Hab LITTLE be.Pst
 'Timur didn't used to scold Manu.'
- c. yeh saamaan bik-egaa thoṛii
 this stuff sell-Fut.MSg LITTLE
 'The stuff won't well.'

4.1 The Presuppositional Nature of *thoṛii*

The intuition is that the proposition negated by *thoṛii* needs to be in the immediately preceding discourse. A structure with *thoṛii* can only indicate disagreement with the polarity of the relevant proposition. It cannot actually introduce the proposition itself.

This is shown clearly by the following contrast between *nahī:* and *thoṛii:*

(18) I say to my friend: ‘Tell me something about your friend Yashesh’. He replies:

a. ok response:

Yashesh-ko aalsii log pasand nahī: hĒ
Yashesh-Dat lazy people like Neg be.Prs.Pl

‘Yashesh doesn’t like lazy people.’

b. bizarre response:

#Yashesh-ko aalsii log pasand thoṛii hĒ
Yashesh-Dat lazy people like Neg be.Prs.Pl

‘Yashesh doesn’t like lazy people.’

Intuition: The negation contributed by *thoṛii* can only deny propositions that have already been asserted in the discourse.

We could formalize this in the following manner:

(19) *thoṛii* (p)

a. Presupposition: p has been asserted in the preceding discourse

b. Assertion: p is false

A consequence that follows from this formalization:

– the negation contributed by *thoṛii* takes scope over everything else in the clause.

4.2 Scope with PPIs and NPIs

This intuition is supported by the fact that positive polarity items like *kuchh* ‘some.Pl’, which escape the scope of *nahī:*, are unable to escape the scope of *thoṛii* leading to ungrammaticality.

(20) a. kuchh laṛkō-ne mujhe tohfe nahī: diye
some.Pl boys-Erg me.Dat presents.M Neg give.Pfv.MPl

‘Some boys did not give me a present.’

b. #kuchh laṛkō-ne mujhe tohfe thoṛii diye
some.Pl boys-Erg me.Dat presents.M LITTLE give.Pfv.MPl

(21) a. Yashesh-ne kuchh kitaabē nahī: paṛh-ī:
Yashesh-ne some.Pl books.FPl Neg read-Pfv.FPl

‘There were some books such that Yashesh did not read them.’

b. #Yashesh-ne kuchh kitaabē thoṛii paṛh-ī:
Yashesh-ne some.Pl books.FPl Neg read-Pfv.FPl

‘There were some books such that Yashesh did not read them.’

(22) NPI-Licensing

a. ek-bhii larke-ne Mona-se baat nahī: kii
 one-PSI boy-Erg Mona-Instr talk.f Neg do.Pfv.f
 'Not even one buy talked to Mona.'

b. ek-bhii larke-ne Mona-se baat thoṛii kii
 one-PSI boy-Erg Mona-Instr talk.f Neg do.Pfv.f
 'Not even one buy talked to Mona.'

(23) Anti-licensing of Positive Polarity Compound Verbs

a. Mina-ne phal khaa (#nahī:) liyaa
 Mina-Erg fruit.msg eat Neg TAKE.Pfv.MSg
 'Mina ate the apple.'

b. Mina-ne phal khaa (#thoṛii) liyaa
 Mina-Erg fruit.msg eat Neg TAKE.Pfv.MSg
 'Mina ate the apple.'

4.3 Licensing of Auxiliary Deletion

The *nahī:* negation allows for optionality of the present tense auxiliary in the habitual and the progressive.

(24) a. negation of present habitual:

Ramesh doodh nahī: pii-taa
 Ramesh.M milk Neg drink-Hab.MSg
 'Ramesh doesn't drink milk.'

b. negation of counterfactual:

agar tum us-se kah-te to-bhii Ramesh doodh nahī: pii-taa
 if you him-Instr say-Hab.MPl then-also Ramesh.M milk Neg drink-Hab.MSg
 'Even if you had told him to do so, Ramesh wouldn't have drunk milk.'

c. negation of counterfactual: (consequent)

Ramesh doodh thoṛii pii-taa
 Ramesh.M milk LITTLE drink-Hab.MSg
 'Ramesh wouldn't have drunk milk.'

d. negation of counterfactual:

Ramesh doodh pii-taa thoṛii
 Ramesh.M milk drink-Hab.MSg LITTLE
 'Ramesh wouldn't have drunk the milk.'

e. negation of present/past habitual:

Ramesh doodh pii-taa thoṛii hai/thaa
 Ramesh.M milk drink-Hab.MSg LITTLE be.Prs.Sg/be.Pst.Sg
 'It's not the case that Ramesh drinks/used to drink milk.'

- it is not in the right syntactic environment to license auxiliary deletion. Cases like (24d) do not actually involve auxiliary deletion - only a counterfactual which always lacks an auxiliary.

- does not license deletion of auxiliary with the progressive *rahaa*

(25) context: sister complaining about her brother to their mother:

a. *nahī*: licenses auxiliary deletion with the progressive:

Mahesh doodh nahī: pii rahaa
Mahesh.m milk Neg drink Prog.MSg

'Mahesh is not drinking milk.' (he is refusing to drink milk.)

b. *thorīi* does not:

*Mahesh doodh thorīi pii rahaa
Mahesh.m milk Neg drink Prog.MSg

'Mahesh is not drinking milk.' (he is refusing to drink milk.)

c. control example:

Mahesh doodh thorīi pii rahaa hai/thaa
Mahesh.m milk Neg drink Prog.MSg be.Prs.Sg/be.Pst.Sg

'Mahesh is not drinking milk.' (exact meaning depends upon intonation and placement of *thorīi*, no refusing-to-drink meaning)

5 Distribution of Little

5.1 Embeddability

The presuppositional requirements of *thorīi* which require that the proposition negated by *thorīi* be asserted in the preceding context and that only matrix propositions can be asserted impose strict restrictions on the possibility of *thorīi* in embedded environments.

because clauses:

(26) a. *nahī*: can be embedded in a *because* clause:

Nirupama-ne Shirish-se mil-naa band kar diyaa kyō-ki Shirish
Nirupama-Erg Shirish-Instr meet-Inf stop do GIVE.Pfv because Shirish.m
us-ke daddy-ko pasand nahī: aa-yaa
Dem.Obl-Gen.Obl daddy-Dat like Neg come-Pfv.MSg

'Nirupama stopped talking to Shirish because her father did not like him.'

b. *thorīi* cannot:

*Nirupama-ne Shirish-se mil-naa band kar diyaa kyō-ki Shirish
Nirupama-Erg Shirish-Instr meet-Inf stop do GIVE.Pfv because Shirish.m
us-ke daddy-ko pasand thorīi aa-yaa
Dem.Obl-Gen.Obl daddy-Dat like LITTLE come-Pfv.MSg

'Nirupama stopped talking to Shirish because her father did not like him.'

counterfactuals:

- (27) a. kaash [mĕ̃ gariib na: ho-taa]
wish I.MSg poor Neg be-Hab.MSg
'I wish I was not poor.'
- b. #kaash [mĕ̃ gariib thoṛii ho-taa]
wish I.MSg poor LITTLE be-Hab.MSg
'I wish I was not poor.'
- (28) a. [agar Prakhar-ne chori: nahī: ki: ho-ti:] [to vo aaj yahā ho-taa]
is Prakhar-Erg theft.f Neg do.Pfv.f be-Hab.FSg then he today here be-Hab
'If Prakhar hadn't stolen, he would have been here today.'
- b. [agar Prakhar-ne chori: (#thoṛii) ki: ho-ti:] [to vo aaj yahā ho-taa]
is Prakhar-Erg theft.f LITTLE do.Pfv.f be-Hab.FSg then he today here be-Hab
'If Prakhar had stolen, he would have been here today.'

embedded complement clauses:

- (29) a. mujhe pataa hai ki Prakhar beimaan nahī: hai:
me.Dat known be.Prs.Sg that Prakhar.M dishonest Neg be.Prs.Sg
'I know that Prakhar is not dishonest.'
- b. ??mujhe pataa hai ki Prakhar beimaan thoṛii hai:
me.Dat known be.Prs.Sg that Prakhar.M dishonest LITTLE be.Prs.Sg
'I know that Prakhar is not dishonest.'

'expletive' negation in until clauses:

- (30) a. (for some speakers but not all *nahī:* is optional here.)
[jab-tak train nahī: aa-ii] [tab-tak Saimaa platform-par baiṭhii rah-ii]
when-till train.f Neg arrive-Pfv.f then-till Saimaa.f platform-on seated.f stay-Pfv.f
'Saimaa stayed at the station until the train arrive.'
- b. #[jab-tak train thoṛii aa-ii] [tab-tak Saimaa platform-par baiṭhii rah-ii]
when-till train.f Neg arrive-Pfv.f then-till Saimaa.f platform-on seated.f stay-Pfv.f
'Saimaa stayed at the station until the train arrive.'

5.2 Interactions with Questions

Negation is possible in both Y/N questions and *wh*-questions.

- (31) a. Y/N question + Neg:

kyaa Mohit-ne Sita-se baat nahī: kii?
Q Mohit-Erg Sita-Instr talk.f Neg do.Pfv.F
'Did Mohit not talk to Sita?'

- b. *wh*- question + Neg:

Mohit-ne kis-se baat nahī: kii?
Mohit-Erg who-Instr talk.f Neg do.Pfv.F
'Who did Mohit not talk to?'

But *thorīi* is not compatible with either kind of question.

- (32) a. Y/N question + *thorīi*: *

*kyaa Mohit-ne Sita-se baat thorīi kii?
Q Mohit-Erg Sita-Instr talk.f LITTLE do.Pfv.F
'Did Mohit not talk to Sita?'

- b. *wh*- question + *thorīi*: *

*Mohit-ne kis-se baat thorīi kii?
Mohit-Erg who-Instr talk.f LITTLE do.Pfv.F
'Who did Mohit not talk to?'

This is reminiscent of a similar restriction noted in Kidwai (2000) for the topic marker *-to*:

- (33) a. Y/N question + *-to*: *

*kyaa Mohit-ne-to Sita-se baat kii?
Q Mohit-Erg-Top Sita-Instr talk.f do.Pfv.F
'Did Mohit talk to Sita?'

- b. *wh*- question + *-to*: *

*Mohit-ne-to kis-se baat kii?
Mohit-Erg-Top who-Instr talk.f do.Pfv.F
'Who did Mohit talk to?'

This restriction follows from the presupposition of *thorīi* - it needs to negate an asserted proposition. This leads to a pragmatic confound.

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