**What is right to say about light negation?**

As has been observed by Schwarz (2004) and Schwarz & Bhatt (2008), inclusion of a negative marker like German *nicht* in front of indefinite or definite DPs, as in (1), renders a sentence ill-formed:

(1) a. Fritz kann (*nicht) eine Fremdsprache.
    *Fritz knows not a foreign language*

b. Fritz hat (*nicht) Frage 3 beantwortet.
    *Fritz has not question 3 answered*

Remarkably, such negative constructions are, however, fine, once they are embedded in NPI licensing contexts; e.g. the interrogative version of (1a) is fine:

(1) c. Kann Fritz nicht eine Fremdsprache?
    *Fritz knows not a foreign language*

The question is whether the facts in (1) are due to the fact that *nicht* here is a special NPI, dubbed *light negation*, homophonous to the negative marker (as has been proposed by Ladusaw 1979, Schwarz 2004 and Schwarz & Bhatt 2008), or whether the negative marker is a regular negation in (1) and (2) and some other mechanism is responsible for the ungrammaticality of the sentences in (1). In this paper I explore the latter approach, hypothesizing that all cases currently analyzed as light negation involve in fact regular negation and that the ungrammaticality of the examples in (1) results from particular pragmatic inferences. Let's first focus on (1a) and assume that the underlying structure of (1a) is as in (2a), where *nicht* c-commands *eine Fremdsprache*; negation thus scopes over the indefinite DP:

(2) [Frits kann [nicht [eine Fremdsprache]]]  
    [¬ > [∃ NP]]

For most scholars, the syntactic structure in (2) is different from the structure of sentence containing a regular negative indefinite (such as (3)).

(3) Frits kann keine Fremdsprache
    *Fritz knows no foreign language*

For some a negative indefinite is a negative quantifier of some sort (Geurts 1999, De Swart 2000, Abels & Marti 2010); others take it to be lexically decomposed into a negation and a non-negative indefinite (Jacobs 1980, Rullman 1995, Zeijlstra 2011). Finally, Penka (2010) takes it to be a non-negative indefinite that needs to stand in an agreement relation with an abstract negative operator. Under the view that negative indefinites are negative quantifiers, as well as for Zeijlstra (2011), the syntactic structure of the sentence containing *keine* is as in (2b), where a negative indefinite takes the NP as its complement. For Jacobs (1980), Rullman (1995) and Penka (2010) (3) is ambiguous between [¬ > [∃ NP]] and [[¬ > ∃] > NP].

(4) Frits kann [keine [Fremdsprache]]
    [[¬ > ∃] > NP]

Adopting the former approach, it now follows that (1a) and (3) exhibit different scopal relations between the negation, the indefinite and the NP. Moreover, replacing *nicht + eine* by *keine* in (1a) results in a good sentence (3). Since *keine* is a single morphological word and *nicht eine* is not, it also makes good sense to assume that *nicht eine* is marked w.r.t. *keine*. Following Horn's (1984, 1989) division of pragmatic labour, unmarked expressions are generally used to convey unmarked messages and marked expressions are generally used to convey marked messages. Applying this to (1a) and (3), this means that it can be inferred that a speaker uttering (1a) does not want to convey the meaning of (3). However, this yields a contradiction: the speaker wants to convey that Fritz does not know a foreign language, but at the same times the speaker does not want to convey that Fritz knows no foreign language. This is what explains that ill-formedness of (1a): uttering a construction that contains light negation gives rise to a conversational implicature that contradicts it.

This analysis makes a number of predictions. First, since sentences like (1a) have syntactic structure [¬ > [∃ NP]], (1a) should be fine with a reading which is not yielded by (3). This is indeed correct. (1a), if properly modified, is fine with a reading where the
indefinite scopes over negation (by LF-raising $\exists$ NP over the negation). Also (1a) can be uttered with focus on eine. Crucially, these readings can never be yielded by (3).

(5) a. Fritz kann nicht eine Fremdsprache die man in Frankreich spricht
   b. Fritz kann nicht EINE Fremdsprache.

Second, since the effect that by uttering (1a) the speaker does not want to convey the meaning of (3) is a conversational implicature (cf. Horn 1984, 1989), this implicature should be cancellable. This is indeed correct as well, as shown in the following question-answer pair:

(6) Q. Kann Fritz nicht eine Fremdsprache?
   A. Nein, Fritz kann nicht eine Fremdsprache. Er kann keine Fremdsprache

Third, implicatures of this type disappear in downward entailing contexts (cf. Levinson 2000 amongst many others for discussion). Therefore, it is predicted that light negation constructions are fine when they are embedded under a downward entailing operator, deriving their NPI-like distributional behaviour. Again, this is indeed correct, as shown in (1c) and in (7), taken from Schwarz & Bhatt 2008.

(7) Wir haben keinen angenommen, der nicht eine Fremdsprache kennt
   We have no one hired, who not a foreign language knows

Fourth, the implicature can only arise when nicht eine and keine stand in competition. Consequently, once lexical material intervenes nicht and eine, nicht + X + eine can no longer be replaced by keine and the construction is fine again, as shown in (8). Note that this also prevents the analysis from overgeneralizing to languages like English that lack light negation.

(8) Fritz denkt nicht an eine Fremdsprache
   Fritz thinks not of a foreign language

Fifth, the analysis naturally extends to other cases of light negation. For instance, (1b), contains a definite expression under the scope of negation. Given that definite expressions presuppose the existence of their referent and that such presuppositions survive under negation, the sentence is truth-conditionally equivalent to a sentence where the definite expression outscapes negation, as in (9). Once it is assumed that (8) and (9) stand in a markedness relation as well, albeit a markedness relation of a syntactic/semantic kind ((9) is an instance of plain sentential negation; (8) is a special type of constituent negation), the ill-formedness of (8) immediately follows.

(9) Fritz hat Frage 3 nicht beantwortet.
   To conclude: there is nothing special about light negation. Light negation involves regular negation and its limited distribution follows from independently established pragmatic mechanisms.