Is metalinguistic negation really responsible for unexpected interpretations?

Metalinguistic negation is very often invoked to explain the availability of readings which are unexpected according to a certain theory.

A classical example is the case of presupposition cancellation in a sentence like 'The king of France is not bald, since there is no king of France'. Another example, in the domain of quantity implicatures, involves so-called intrusive implicatures, where a scalar item retains its 'strong' reading under negation, contrary to what a simple Gricean approach predicts (as in 'John didn't eat SOME of the cookies, he ate ALL of them'). Among other examples, less often mentioned, where metalinguistic negation could in principle be invoked, are certain unexpected readings of gradable predicates under multiple negations. For instance, even though "John is both tall and not tall" can be assigned a non-contradictory interpretation, experimental results by Egré & Zehr (Egré & Zehr 2016) show that it sounds more contradictory than "John is neither tall nor not tall" - despite the fact that, on a simple, classical analysis of negation, these two sentences should be equivalent.

In all these cases, resorting to a special mechanism called `metalinguistic negation' to explain the facts is convincing only to the extent that it provides a truly unified account of all the cases where the notion is used.

Now, metalinguistic negation is often conceived of as a negation which targets the *form* of sentences, as opposed to classical negation which targets the truth-conditional content of a sentence. As we will see, there is clear evidence for such a use of negation, and also evidence that expressions like "it is false that..." do not license such uses. So, to know whether an apparently anomalous reading involves metalinguistic negation, one can try to determine whether the anomalous interpretation is or is not still available when negation is replaced with, say, `it is false that'. For all the cases mentioned above, the answer appears to be positive, which suggests that the relevant anomalous readings do not in fact involve metalinguistic negation.

I will discuss alternative accounts for the relevant facts, and will specifically suggest a compositional approach where some 'accommodation operators' are responsible for the relevant readings, and where the use of such operators is governed by general economy principles (partly on the basis of Fox & Spector, forthcoming).