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An Analysis of Negation in English

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT

This paper offers an overview of the different constructions used to express negation in English. Based on previous research in the literature, several negation types have been identified. It has been shown that certain negative affixes such as dis-, un-, anti-, -less, etc. can be attached to the base word and negate it without affecting the remainder of the sentence. The second form of negation is the standard negation, where English adds the particle not (or its contracted form n't) to the primary verb or to the auxiliary. Negative imperatives are made of *do not / don't + infinitive*, while only *not* is used before infinitives and –ing forms to express negation. It has also been noted that there are several instances in English where negative quantifiers and indefinite pronouns can mark a clause negative. And, one of the major findings at this level is that the replacement of the *not*-negation (*not...anybody, not....anyone*) by *no*-negation constructions (*nobody, no one*) is often possible. However, the use of *no*-negation form at the beginning of the clause is more grammatically accepted due to the principle of negative attraction. The study finally shows that subject-auxiliary inversion in negative sentences can be considered optional sometimes.

1. Introduction

Negation is a language universal, found in all known languages, and unique to human languages (Lindstad 2007). In the words of Horn (2001: 1) 'the capacity to negate is the capacity to refuse, to contradict, to lie, to speak ironically, to distinguish truth from falsity – in short, the capacity to be human'. Further, as Dahl (1979) observes in his linguistic typology of negation, there is substantial cross-linguistic evidence to suggest that grammatical negation is a universal category. This universal category finds expressions in a range of linguistic forms.

For Hulse (2010: 30), 'the phenomenon of negation can be defined in a number of different ways in English. It is an abstract phenomenon whereby some forms of contradiction or opposition are expressed, though this is achieved either grammatically or semantically, which is realized by a grammatical construction or by applying a specific process'.

It can be noted then that negative expressions also vary from one language to another like the other grammatical constructions. This is why both speakers and language learners need to learn how negative forms are constructed in this specific language.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the different ways negation operates in English. To that effect, I first identify the words and phrases that can express negation. The second objective consists of describing the structure of the words and sentences containing negative items. The paper is organised as follows: in section 2, I provide some background on the related literature and introduce the research methodology in section 3. Section 4 and 5 respectively discuss the details of the analysis and present some concluding remarks of the study.

2. Research Background

Miestamo (2017) makes an overview of typological studies of negation among which Dahl (1979) surveys standard negation in a sample of 240 languages. Dahl makes a basic distinction between syntactic and morphological negation. In the former, negative markers are particles or auxiliary verbs and in the latter affixes (with a few exceptions). Some attention is also paid to other structural

aspects of negatives. The placement of negative markers is discussed at length. Similarly, Payne (1985) addresses various aspects of negation but focuses mostly on standard negation. Three main types of negative marking are identified: morphological negation, negative particles and negative verbs. Some notes on "secondary modifications", i.e. additional changes in the structure of negatives with respect to the corresponding affirmatives, are also made.

Dryer's work on word order (1988, 1992) addresses the position of negative markers with respect to clause-level constituents. Dryer's (2013) looked at the geographical distribution of the three main types of negators identified by Dahl and Payne and double negation (in the sense of negation expressed with two (or more) negation elements simultaneously present). In Dryer (2013 [2011], 2013c [2011]), the position of the different types of negative markers with respect to the verb and other clausal constituents are examined in great detail.

Klima's (1964) well-known distinction between sentence and constituent negation is based on four well-known syntactic tests: the *neither / too*-test, the *not even*-test, the question tag test and the *neither*-test. Sentences which can combine with (*n)either*, positive question tags and *not even* give rise to sentence negation, whereas those that cannot are either affirmative or consist of a constituent negator, which is a broad term also encompassing cases of affixal negation Klima 1964: 261-265).

Basically, the Klima-tests distinguish between negative markers that have wide scope over the tensed predicate and can be said to have a low(er) negative scope. A similar distinction as the one found in Klima can also be found in the work of Jespersen (1917). Jespesen referred to sentence negation as *nexal* negation and all other negation types as *special* negation. The term *nexal* refers to the fact that a negative form unites two different "ideas" (Jespersen 1917: 43), as in (1). In this sentence, the "idea" *he* and the "idea" *coming* are "negative" by the nexus n't.

1. he doesn't come

Jespersen also points out that the distinction between special and nexal negation is clear in principle but that there are ambiguous instances. He discusses the example in (2), which displays nexal negation and can actually be traced back even further.

Jespersen states that sentential negation typically involves negating the finite (non-lexical) verb, since this may be said to be the link of the sentence or the 'nexus' "as the (finite) verb is the linguistic bearer of a nexus, at any rate in all complete sentences. We therefore always find a strong tendency to attract the negative to the verb" (Jesperson 1917:44). Constituent negation means one of the constituents is negated without the result being a negative sentence as shown in (2).

2. They live **not** far from here.

Although the sentence contains the negative element *not*, it is not interpreted as negative: *not* negates the constituent *far from here*. This could be argued to be because the negative element follows the finite lexical verb and thus does not have scope over the verb. However, even when the negated constituent precedes the finite verb, local negation is possible, as the following examples illustrate (Kilima 1964, in Mohsen 2011:2).

3. In not many years will Christmas fall on a Sunday

   (in not many years = not often)

4. In not many years will Christmas fall on a Sunday, Will it?
5. In not many years Christmas will fall on a Sunday
   (In not many years = soon)

6. In not many years Christmas will fall on a Sunday, won't it?

Sentence (3) is negative; sentence (5) is not. This is proven by the fact that in (3) the preposed negative element triggers inversion, while in (5) it does not. The tag questions in (4) and (6) also confirm this, only preposed negative elements with sentential scope trigger inversion, and negative sentences require positive tag questions.

According to Hageman, the contrast between sentential and constituent negation may be explained in terms of operators: "negative constituents which trigger inversion are operators and those that don't trigger inversion are not" (Haegeman 1996 in Mohsen 2011:3). In other words, sentential negation seems to require a negative operator. Negative constituent may also be accounted for in terms of operators: one (negative) operator binds a number of variables through absorption. From this follows that in all instances of sentential negation negative constituent should be an available option.

As mentioned earlier, the main objective of this research is to identify the words and phrases used in English to express negation. Special attention will also be paid to the position of these negative elements in the sentence.

To that effect, the following questions should be addressed.

1. Do words in English behave similarly or do they have different negative markers?
2. How is negation in different clauses expressed?
3. Are there any other negative constructions / expressions that are not covered above?

Based on the previous above mentioned literature, it can be predicted that negative constructions in English are not as simple as one can suppose. Negation in English may include more specific characteristics than universal ones.

3. Methodology

To describe the different ways negation operates in English, examples have been taken from the existing literature, mainly from Haspelmath (1997), Mateyak (1997), Mohsen (2011) and Muñoz (2020). The remaining data has been gathered from Huddleston's (2005) *English Grammar: an outline* and from Michael Swan's (1996) *Practical English Usage*. All these data are analysed through the descriptive method.

4. Findings and discussions

The analysis and discussion of this paper focus on an examination of what Tottie (1980) describes as 'affixal' (morphological negation) and 'non-affixal' or (sentential negation).

4.1 Affixal negation

Affixal or morphological negation in English is realized by the attachment of certain negative affixes to the base word, though the addition of a negative affix negates only the base word and does not grammatically affect the remainder of the sentence.

Anna Serhieieva (2015) lists16 negative affixes in English: 1 negative suffix (-*less*) and 15 negative prefixes (*un-*, *dis-, di-, mis-, de-, non-, be-, counter-, a-, under-, ill-, mal-, pre-, ter-, ex-*). All of them are word-building; there are no for-building affixes.

It has also been noted that the most productive affixes are –*less, un-, in-, anti-, dis-*. Prefix *in-*, as a rule, coins negative adjectives and nouns from corresponding adjective stems (*artistic – inartistic = tasteless*) and seldom verbs from verbal stems. Prefix *dis-* forms verbs both from verbs and nouns/adjectives (*disable, disapprove*). Prefix *un-* is the only originally English prefix that stays a productive word-building element during language development (*wealthy – unwealthy, grateful, ungrateful*).

The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1996), for instance, lists a total of 86 word negatively prefixed with *a-*; 47 words negatively prefixed with *dis-*; 336 words with *il-, im-, in-* or *ir-*; 113 words with the prefix *non-*; but a total of 1, 262 words negatively prefixed with *un-* (Hulse, 2002: 97). This strongly indicates that the prefix *un-* is by far the most common, and potentially, therefore, the most productive of the negative prefixes.

Hulse further observes that suffixal means of negative semantic expression is characteristic just for English. Negative meaning of suffix –*less* is "lack of what is stated in the motivating stem" (*regardless*). Besides –*less* there is also the suffix –*free* for expression of absence or shortage of something (*homeless*, *sugar-free*).

Generally, it may be stated that morphological means of negation are closely connected to lexical level since separately, morphemes do not carry sense load but in combination with the stem form new negative lexical.

4.2 Sentential negation

4.2.1 Standard negation

Standard negation refers to the basic way(s) a language has for negating declarative verbal main clauses. According to Ulse (2010), often in English, negation is achieved sententially by the addition of the negative particle *not* (or its contracted form *n't*) to the primary verb (e.g. '*He is not tall*'), or to the first auxiliary verb (e.g. '*She wouldn't have been going anyway*'), and the scope of the negation then conventionally continues from the negative particle to include the remainder of the clause or sentence.

Also, in Huddleston (2005: 143-144) 'the most straightforward kind of negative clause in English has what we will call 'verb negation' – either inflectional (e.g. weren't) or analytic (were not). Such clauses must contain an operator: if the corresponding positive has no operator, dummy **do** is added. Thus the negative form of <u>They helped us</u> is <u>They didn't</u> / <u>did not help us</u>, and so on'.

4.2.2 Imperatives/infinitives and -ING forms

Negative imperatives are made with *do not/ don't* + *infinitive* (7) and (8). The same forms are also used to make the negative imperative of *be* (9). On the other hand, only *not* is used before infinitives and –ing forms whereas do is not required in (10) and (11).

7. Do not expect quick results when you start learning a language (*Expect not ....)
8. Do not worry – I'll look after you. (*Worry not....)

9.   Don't be rude.
10. It's important not to worry (*to don't worry…)
11. The best thing about a holiday is not working (*to not working).

Swan (1996:352-353).

There are other ways of marking a clause negative than by verb negation; the principal such markers are given and illustrated in the following sections.

4.2.3 Negative quantifiers

In English, there are several instances where '*not*' can grammatically negate the subject of a sentence Mateyak (1997). But, negation of the subject of a sentence with *not* is not syntactically valid if the subject does not contain a quantified noun phrase. Thus, a sentence such as **Not Salome came to the party* is ungrammatical while sentences with quantified noun phrases, as illustrated in (12) – (14) are in fact grammatical.

12. Not everyone can afford a fifty-dollar haircut.
13. Not many discuss throwers can claim to have accomplished such a feat.
14. Not one thing was left untouched by the wrath of the tornado

However, it is shown that not all sentences containing '*not*' modifying a quantified noun phrase subject are grammatical. Mateyak (1997: 4-5) develops then a unified analysis of the grouping of quantifiers according to their ability to be negated by *not*. The analysis rests on the claim that negation by *not* is only allowed when the denotation of the negated noun phrase has a readily definable interpretation; more specifically, the set of possible sizes for the set denoted by the negated noun phrase must be a continuous range of values. To begin his investigation, he first gains a sense of exactly which quantified noun phrases can be negated by *not*. The following table displays the behaviour of *not* with different kinds of noun phrases.

Table 1. Example sentences demonstrating when it is grammatical (or interpretable) to negate a noun phrase with *not*. Note the contrasts in behaviour between determiners that are usually grouped together, such as *very/each/all*.

Grammatical	Ungrammatical
1. Not **every** company expects to report increased earnings.	10. *Not **each** citizen files a tax return.
2. Not **all** of NASA's space-science work will be so auspicious.	
3. Not **a** peso is offered.	11. *Not **some** pesos are offered.
4. Not **one** thing in the house is where it is supposed to be.	
5. Not **many** people came to the meeting last week.	12. *Not **several** people came to the meeting last week.
6. Not **any** person can just walk right in there and get what they want.	
7. Not **more** than half of the team showed up last Friday.	
8. Not **more** than 200 people attended the opening gala celebration.	13. *Not **most** of the team showed up last Friday.
9. Not **less** than one million people enjoy listening to ABBA Gold every day.	14. *Not **few** people left.
	15. *Not **no** man left.
	16. *Not **the** man walked into the store.
	17. *Not **John** came on time.

Mateyak (1997:5)

For the author, the most important thing to note about table 1 is that several determiners that are normally grouped together in terms of their semantic behaviour display opposite trends in grammaticality when used in coordination with negation. For example, *every x* and *all x* can be part of negated noun phrase, while *each x* cannot be negated in this manner. Additionally, other semantic groupings such as *some /a* and *many /several*, also fail to hold in terms of their ability to be negated. Perhaps, most intriguing is the fact that *more than half x* can be negated, while *not most x* is ungrammatical.

4.2.4 Negative indefinite pronouns

According to Haspelmath (1997), indefinite pronouns normally occur in SERIES which have '*no*' member for each of the major ontological categories such as person, thing, property, place, time, manner, amount, plus a few others. Some examples of different indefinite pronouns are given below:

English	*some*-series	*any*-series	*no*-series
Person:	*somebody*	*anybody*	*nobody*
Thing:	*something*	*anything*	*nothing*
Place:	*somewhere*	*anywhere*	*nowhere*
Time:	*sometime*	*anytime*	*never*
Manner:	*somehow*	*anyhow*	*no way*
Determiner:	*some*	*any*	*no*

Haspelmath (1997: 27)

Haspelmath explains that in the most common case, indefinite pronouns consist of (i) a stem indicating the ontological category, plus (ii) a formal element shared by all members of an indefinite pronoun series, such as *some-*, *any-*, *-no* that he calls indefiniteness markers.

As for negative indefinite pronouns, they have been intuitively defined as pronouns that somehow express the negative sense by themselves, inherently, without additional verbal negation. For instance, English '*nothing'* always expresses negation. For Tottie (1991), the replacement of the not-negation by a *no*-negative construction is possible in most instances. However, it must follow a set of correspondences (see table 2).

Table 2: Correspondences of Not-negation and non-negation

	Not-negation	*No*-negation
Determiners	Not...a/an/any/	No
Pronouns	Not...anybody Not...anything Not...one/any Not...anyone	Nobody Nothing None No one
Adverbs	Not...ever Not...anywhere	Never Nowhere
Others	Not...either...or	Neither...nor

According to Swan (1996), negative indefinite pronouns such as *nobody*, *nothing, never* etc. are rather emphatic. We often prefer to use *not anybody*, *not anything*, *not ever* etc. Note that *anybody*, *anything*, *ever* etc. are not themselves negative words. They have to be used with *not*, as shown in table (2), to give a negative meaning. Examples (15) and (16) illustrate this point.

15. I opened the door, but I *couldn't* see *anybody*
16. I'm sorry, I *can't* tell you *anything*.

It is, however, agreed that at the beginning of a clause, only the negative pronouns *nobody*, *nothing* etc., are used rather than their *not*-counterparts as exemplified in (17) and (18).

17. Nothing matters.
18. Nowhere is safe.

This view is further explained by Labov, who claims that negative indefinites e.g., *nothing*, *no one*, *nowhere*, *no* etc. may alternatively be substituted for negative polarity items (*anything*, *anyone*, *anywhere* or just *any*) in negative clauses. But, according to the principle of negative attraction, the negative element should be introduced as early as possible in the clause and never be preceded by any polarity items. In other words, the negative pronoun is attracted to the first indeterminate / indefinite, obligatory if this is the subject (Labov 1972). Consequently, sentence (19) is ungrammatical since it breaks this principle by not giving the polarity item *anything* negative for *nothing*.

19. *Not anything matters.

Due to the principle of negative attraction this would have to be expressed as (17) (*Nothing matters*).

4.3 Negative Polarity items
Some series of indefinite pronouns in some languages are also associated with negative environments but are not restricted to the expression of non-existence. In addition to negative clauses, they can also be used in conditional and interrogative clauses,

standard comparison, and further environments. Expressions that show this distribution are generally called negative polarity items. Negative polarity items are used to express existential quantification in the scope of negation.

For instance, we do not usually use *some*, *somebody*, *something* etc. in negative clauses. Instead, we use the 'non-assertive words *any*, *anybody*, *anything* etc. Swan (1997: 353). Compare sentences in (20).

20. a. I've found *some* mushrooms.
    b. I haven't found *any* mushrooms

In Huddleston (2005: 146), the main negative polarity items in English that he labelled non-affirmatives are **any** and its compounds (*anything*, etc.); **ever**; **either**; **at all** (*She didn't like them at all*); **yet** (*She doesn't know the result yet*); **dare** and **need** (*He needn't go*); **can help** / **stand** + present-participial complement (I can't help/stand forgetting things); **give a damn**, **lift a finger** and similar idioms (*He didn't give a damn who heard it*). Adverbs like **never**, **seldom**, **rarely**, **hardly ever** etc., can also make a clause negative. In addition to that, certain verbs contribute an inherent negative meaning. **Fail** in (21b) patterns with **deny**, **refuse**, **reject**, **dissuade**, **doubt** in this respect.

21. a. Mary did not manage to secure her job
    b. Mary *failed* to secure her job.

However, Huddleston recognizes that negation does not always apply to all uses of the items – so that we should, in general, talk of non-affirmative uses rather than simply non-affirmative items (negative polarity items). Stressed **any**, for example, meaning roughly "no matter which / what" and hence often, by implication, "**every**", can occur in affirmative contexts, as in (*Any doctor will tell you it's bad for you)*. So too can **ever** with the sense "all time", as in (*I'll love you for ever)*. **Either** is non-affirmative only in its cohesive use (*I didn't like it either*). **Yet** is non-affirmative only in the sense "so far, by this / that time", as in *I haven't read it yet*: contrast the less usual "still" sense of *There is yet time*. Finally, **dare** and **need** are non-affirmative only in their use as operators (where they have only tensed forms and no person-number distinctions): *contrast She had dared to contradict him, he needs a haircut.*

The range of non-affirmative (negative polarity item) contexts is illustrated in (22):

22. a. He will never do any better   Negative
    b. Do you want any more to eat?   Interrogative
    c. If it gets any worse, call the doctor.   Conditional
    d. Liz worked harder than any of the others.   Comparative
    e. Ed is too tired to do any more.   Too
    f. Only john knows anything about it.   Only
    g. Max forgot to tell anyone.   Forget, etc

Huddleston (2005: 146)

4.4 Negative inversion
Negative inversion is a non-canonical syntax phenomenon in which a negative constituent appears in a non-canonical position in the left periphery of the sentence triggering subject-auxiliary inversion as in (23) Muñoz (2020).

23 a. Never have I been abroad.
    b. Under no condition would I leave this town

Negative inversion can affect both adjuncts (24) and arguments (25).

24 Not until December can we go to see grandma (adjunct).
25 None of those would he want to eat (complement).

Muñoz further explains that in (26) below, when the negative constituent (*Not until the next morning(*, which is adjunct, is preposed, the sentence without inversion is ungrammatical (26.a), while the inverted counterpart is grammatical (26.b). Whereas, as we can see in (27), when the negative constituent (*None of them*) which is a compliment, is preposed, both sentences (27.a) without inversion and (27.b) with inversion are grammatical.

26 a. *Not until the next morning she realized how serious it was.
    b. Not until the next morning did she realize how serious it was.
27 a. None of them he found useful.

b. None of them did he find useful.

Haegeman (2000) claims that inversion is always compulsory, considering the grammaticality of negative preposed elements without inversion as an elliptic form in informal speech. Sentence (28.a) appears without inversion because it is the elliptic form of (28.b).

28   a. Nothing I have seen that could rival the pyramids
     b. [There is] nothing I have seen that could rival the pyramids

Cormark and Smith (2000), however, consider both (29.a), with inversion and (29.b), without inversion, equally grammatical sentences.

29   a. Nothing did I eat for breakfast.
     b. Nothing I ate for breakfast

Some scholars such as Buring (2004) state that inversion is optional in some cases. The explanation is that negative preposed elements, which are adjuncts obligatory, trigger subject-auxiliary inversion (26), whereas inversion with negative preposed complements is optional (27) even though examples of negation inversion with complements (27.b) are rare.

5. Conclusion

This paper has analysed negation in English, explaining several ways it operates. The analysis of previous research in the literature allows us to identify several constructions expressing negation in this language. It has first been shown that certain negative affixes such as *dis-*, *un-*, *anti-*, *-less*, etc. can be attached to the base word and negates it. This type of negation called affixal or morphological negation does not, however, affect the remainder of the sentence.

The study also indicates that English adds the particle not (or its contracted form n't) to the primary verb or to the auxiliary in standard negation. While negative imperatives are made of *do not / don't + infinitive*, only *not* is used before infinitives and –ing forms to express negation.

There are also several instances in English where negative quantifiers and pronouns can mark a clause negative. And, one of the major findings of the research is that the replacement of the *not*-negation (*not...anybody*, *not....anyone*) by *no*-negation constructions (*nobody*, *no one*) is possible in most instances. Yet, the use of *no*-negation forms at the beginning of the clause is more grammatically accepted.

The study finally analysed subject-auxiliary inversion in negative sentences where it has been indicated that negative preposing inversion can be considered optional as stated by scholars like Buring (2004).

Even if this paper is concerned with only a few negative expressions, it still describes the main ways negation is constructed in English; and contributes then, to the teaching and learning of this language. However, further research on this sense is needed to explore other negative constructions, including negative conjunctions, double negation, negation in elliptic contexts or *Only*-inversion in negative sentences, etc. Future comparative studies between English and other languages could also be conducted.

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