Double and Multiple Negatives
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_No_ is one of the most powerful words in the English language. When toddlers grasp how powerful _no_ is, they often become intoxicated with it, saying _no_ to everything, even the things they want. It gets a response, people pay attention, and it infuriates parents. As children grow, they use _no_ differently, but its raw, naked power is always there: Used at the right time, _no_ can stop people in their tracks.

How we express _no_ has, and continues to be, a dynamic feature of the English language. As with small children, people through history who have had no power have been able to express some tiny element of power just by saying _no_. But how they express that _no_ has been the subject of social and grammatical wrangling through the ages.

For many centuries, all elements of the English-speaking world used the double, even triple, negative to express negation. Fowler defines the double or triple negative as the “[r]epetition of uncancelling negatives” (p. 226), as in, “I’m not working no overtime tonight.” Geoffrey Chaucer used the multiple negative in the Prologue to _The Canterbury Tales_ to describe the Knyght: _He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde_, (line 70). Two centuries later, Shakespeare used it in _Twelfth Night:_ _Nor never none / Shall mistress be of it, save I alone_ (Act III, scene i). David Crystal asserts that “[c]onstructions involving a double negative (I cannot go no further) were commonplace” in the Renaissance (p. 70), and Fowler says they were “the regular idiom in OE and ME in all dialects” (p. 226).

Then, in the eighteenth century, everything changed. Up until this point, Latin had been the language used in the world of commerce, and in the classroom and the textbook (Mitchell, 2001, p. 32). It was the language of the elite. But English was
supplanting Latin—the living language was beginning to dominate the dead one. Latin has a logical, unchanging grammar, and self-appointed prescriptivist grammarians, such as Robert Lowth, felt that if English was to become a legitimate language, i.e., one worthy of the position of power, it must have a codified grammar that would stop the language from changing or being “corrupted” (Mitchell, 2001, p. 35). According to Baugh and Cable, Lowth’s attitudes towards grammar were conservative, which meant that “[h]is grammar was more in accordance with the tendencies of the time” and “[a]t least twenty-two editions [of his grammar] appeared during the eighteenth century” (p.273).

Lowth wrote in his “Short Introduction to English Grammar” (1762) that the double negative was no longer acceptable. Here, he was superimposing Latin grammar on English: since Latin has no double negative, suddenly multiple negation was now deemed incorrect. He (and subsequent prescriptivist grammarians such as Lindley Murray) claimed a logical rationale, saying that “Two negatives in English destroy one another, or are equivalent to an affirmative.” The problem with this argument, however, is that in an algebraic equation such as \((-x) + (-x) = (-2x)\), two negatives do not cancel each other out, but rather such an equation “yields approximately the same result as the old multiple negative—simply a stronger negative” (Merriam-Webster, 1994, p.365).

If anyone noticed this faulty logic, they did nothing to challenge it, preferring, presumably, to embrace the idea of a systematic, legitimate English.

In superimposing Latin grammar on English, the educated class was creating a new, “better” English. If you used this new English, you showed that you were of the educated class—especially important if you were from the middle class, which wanted no
association with the lower class and aspired to the ruling class (Mitchell, p. 38). In a
world in which the elite had had Latin as one of their tickets to membership, the
disappearance of Latin, it can be argued, created a void. The vacuum was filled with an
enhanced, grammatically correct English—a Standard English.

The double negative that is acceptable in Standard English commonly uses not
followed by un-, a construction which Fowler calls “local negation” (p. 790). It results in
a weak positive. An example of this is “Fifi was not an unintelligent student,” meaning,
“She was sort-of intelligent.” This double negative, in fact, achieves what Lowth wanted:
the two negatives cancel each other out and create a weak positive—a sometimes overly
subtle construction that can appear wishy-washy. This form is used most frequently in
writing, and it “may well create difficult English… and sentences which require mental

Merriam-Webster states that “[t]he old multiple negative and the common or
garden double negative were passing out of literature in Lowth’s time” (p. 365), so
grammarians were just speeding up their demise. They continued to exist in “familiar
use” but “since old forms persist the longest among the least educated, the double
negative became generally associated with the speech of the unlettered” (p. 365).

And so from this point on, the use of the double negative was stigmatized. Its use
is still considered “to be a certain indication of poor education and of linguistic deficit”
(Fowler, 2000, p.227) that “mark[s] speakers of Vulgar English” (Columbia Guide to

So while anyone can say no, only some of us say it properly.
Those who speak dialects of English such as Gutter Scots (the name itself indicates the status of the dialect), Appalachian English, and African American Vernacular English (AAVE), for example, routinely use the double negative, and thus are saying no in a way that some dismiss as “substandard” (A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language, 1985, p.18)--simply not worth listening to. It’s a lot easier to ignore someone saying no if it sounds like “Ah dinna(e) waant nane” (Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language, 2005, p. 267), or “We ain’t had no breakfast, we’re going hungry, so what do you mean we can’t get no relief?” (Nannie Washburn quoted in Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage, 1994, p. 366), or “But don’t you think that I’m not gon’ take it. Not me, no” (Howe and Walker, 2000, p. 131).

Each one of these statements is an emphatic negative, yet for some speakers of Standard English, the first impression is that the speaker is not speaking correctly, that she or he is uneducated and, well, lesser. Condemning the form makes it easier to ignore the message.

Of the various non standard dialects that use the double negative, AAVE is particularly interesting because it is “the most prominent and significant sociocultural variety of American English” in use today (Wolfram, 2000, p. 130). Its origins have been extensively researched and examined, and conclusions tend to fall into two (contentious) camps. The first is that AAVE is very closely related to English Caribbean Creoles (Bahamian and Guyanese), from which it gets much of its grammar (Sidnell, 2002, p. 16). The second camp contests this finding: “No distinct creole behavior is ever observable within the negation system of Early AAE (or, for that matter, contemporary AAVE.)” (Howe and Walker, 2000, p. 135). Howe and Walker go on to say “that the
variable patterns in negation in Early AAE can be traced directly to colonial English and, in the case of negative concord, to the very origins of the English language” (p. 135).

The use of the double negative in AAVE is changing, according to Howe and Walker. Their findings suggest that the “frequent or near-categorical usage [of clause internal negative concord] in contemporary AAVE is a recent and spectacular development,” and they feel that “what appears to be the relic of a prior creole upon investigation turns out to be a recent development” (p. 135). Wolfram also finds a recent increase in the use of multiple negatives among young AAVE speakers, and argues that this is a significant example of “linguistic features [which] provide support for the perpetuation of ethnolinguistic distinctiveness” (p. 130).

This current uptick in the use of negation in AAVE is intriguing: Is it a statement of disaffection? *I don’t belong, therefore I’ll use the form that also doesn’t belong, and bothers those who are in charge.* Or, is it a way to strengthen the bonds within the group? *Use this form as we do and we identify you as belonging to our group.* Or is it both?

Lowth and the other prescriptivist eighteenth century grammarians created an exclusive group with their condemnation of the double negative: Use *no* in the right way—if you don’t use our form, you don’t belong. Young speakers of AAVE are also creating an exclusive group with the double negative: the difference, of course, is that in the eighteenth century, the self-created group had power, and young speakers of AAVE don’t.

In a front page article in the April 6, 2009, issue of “The Washington Post,” Krissah Thompson writes that the African American community is divided over how to
discuss Barack Obama, the first African American president. She writes that there are “those who want to continue to praise Obama and his historic ascendancy, and those who want to examine him more critically now that the election is over.” Jeff Johnson, whom Thompson describes as a “young black radio and TV political commentator,” is quoted as saying, “With the state of the economy, the fact that we’re at war on at least two fronts, we’re dealing with 50 percent dropout rates for some high school students, we’re losing jobs—we don’t have time to celebrate nothing.”

Johnson is using the double negative as it was used in Middle and Old English, and as it is used in AAVE: As an emphatic negative. Perhaps, as an African American member of the “commentariat,” he and others like him are uniquely placed to bring together the old and new stigmatized form—and create a new acceptance of what has variously been called a “construction [that] is obviously a comfortably natural way of expressing the idea” (Fowler, 2000, p.226) and “a rustic and uneducated form” (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage, 1994, p. 365). After all, our contemporary media has power in much the same way that the prescriptivist grammarians did: they are self appointed, and we listen to them.
References


Thompson, K. *Blacks at odds over scrutiny of president*. The Washington Post, Monday, April 6, 2009; p. 1.