

Chapter Eight

Saying no without offending

Grammar focus. Negation

Introduction.

Because of its interactive nature, conversation is filled with negatives as people agree and disagree with each other. On the other hand written prose has fewer negatives because it generally presents only one point of view. As a result, we might expect that people who are learning English on the street to have fewer problems with negative than those who learn English through textbooks.

However, this is not the case. Not only does the grammar of the negative have some hidden surprises, but the spoken language hides the negative so it is hard for English language learners to even hear it. Before we look at the grammar of the negative, let us do two awareness activities to see how this is so.

Awareness Activity 8.1 Hearing the negative

Because we are educated and are used to seeing the negative in writing, we think that the negative in English is some form of *not* (*She did not come* or *She isn't here.*) and that it should be easy to hear. In careful speech that might be so. But what does the negative sound like in normal conversation? Have someone read the following pairs of sentences out loud as in normal conversation rather than as in slow, carefully enunciated classroom English. Listen carefully. What does the negative sound like? It is the *not* or is it something else that tells you the sentence is negative?

- I can do it.

I can't do it.

- She'll be here.

She won't be here.

- I really do like it.

I really don't like it.

Did you notice that the *n't* form or **enclitic** form of the negative disappears? An enclitic is what linguists call a word that cannot stand by itself but is attached to the previous word. Enclitics in English come from abbreviations of *not* (*She isn't funny.*) and *be* and *have* (*I'm ready, We 're here, She's gone.*). In writing, the *not* looks like it is disappearing because it is written *n't*. But in spoken English it actually may disappear. Some call this the **disappearing negative**. It happens in American English because the *t* disappears in rapid speech when it follows *n*. Disappearing *t* also occurs in words without the enclitic *n't*. *Want to* sounds like *wanna* and *going to* as *gonna*. *Winter* often sounds like *winner*. The city of *Atlanta* sounds like *Atlanna*. The words *tent* and *ten* sound the same. Of course in carefully enunciated speech, the *t*'s can be heard, but in normal conversation they disappear. (*I want to buy a winter coat in Atlanta in a tent sale* becomes *I wanna buy a winner coat in Atlanna in a ten sale.*)

If we can't hear the *t*, what does our brain listen for to differentiate the positive from the negative with these high frequency auxiliary verbs *will*, *can*, and *do*? Have your friend read the sentence pairs again in rapid conversational style

and listen to the pronunciation of the auxiliary verb in the positive and negative versions. Pay close attention to the pronunciation of the vowel.

- I **can** do it.
I **can't** do it.
- She'**ll** be here.
She **won't** be here.
- I really **do** like it.
I really **don't** like it.

Can you hear the difference? In the negative, the auxiliary is stressed because of the enclitic *n't* and the vowel sounds different. For many people, the *t* disappears and the resulting word final *n* also disappears leaving only a nasalized vowel.

You can tell if this is the case in your speech by saying *Don't come* to yourself in a regular conversational style and noticing if your tongue touches your gums before you say *come*. If it doesn't, you aren't forming either the *t* or the *n*. (They are said in the same part of the mouth.) Only the sound of your nasalized vowel tells your listener that the sentence was negative. Fascinating, isn't it?

Awareness Activity 8.2. Interpersonal versus academic English

Another type of negative is very frequent in academic English. Read the following pairs of sentences. Which one sounds more like the English one might expect in academic prose rather than in a conversation with friends?

- That comment wasn't appropriate.
That comment was inappropriate.

- Reconciliation was impossible.
Reconciliation wasn't possible.
- The solution didn't seem logical.
The solution seemed illogical.

Did you decide that the sentences with the affixed negation (*inappropriate, impossible, illogical*) seemed more academic and thus best suited for written prose rather than a conversational interchange? The academic version is called **lexical** negation

Grammar.

Let's first look at sentence negation and lexical negation before we look at how pragmatics and discourse affect negatives.

Sentence Negation. If you were to stop someone on the street and ask how to make the negative in English, they might say, "Just add a *no* to whatever you are saying." This is the rule that little children follow as they are learning English (*No go. No eat.*) As adults we can add *no* to nouns (*I have no money. No friends came to the party.*), but this rule of adding *no* to verbs does not work.

- I swam a mile today.
*I no swam a mile today.
- She can eat everything.
*She no can eat everything.
- She has cleaned up her room.
*She no has cleaned up her room.

The actual rule of thumb is to place a *not* after the first auxiliary verb or the operator. If there is no operator, add a *do* and move the tense and verb agreement from the verb to the *do*. Then place *not* after the *do*. Note that *can + not* is usually written as one word.

- Jose can come over tonight.

Jose cannot come over tonight.

- I have seen him outside.

I have not seen him outside.

- Maria wants that.

Maria does not want that.

As we saw in question formation, *be* behaves as an operator whether it is an auxiliary or a main verb.

- The new computer program is not working today.
- The programmers are not here.

Rules of thumb. Sentence negation.

1. Place a *not* after the operator. *I have finished* >> *I have not finished*. *She can come* >> *She cannot come*.
2. If there is no operator, insert a *do* before the verb and transfer verb agreement and tense from the verb to the *do*. *He sees it* >> *He does not see it*.

Lexical Negation. Sometimes rather than make the verb negative using *not*, we attach a negative prefix (e.g. *un-*, *dis-*, *a-*, *ir-*, or *non-*) or suffix (e.g. *-less*) to a

word or even a *no* (*unwrap, disconnect, amoral, irreligious, noncombatant, clueless, nowhere*). The problem is that it is not predictable which affix applies to which word. For example, *un-*, probably the most commonly used of these prefixes for verbs (*uncork, unleash, unseat*) cannot be added to all verbs (**untake out, *unstudy, *unfight*). Most are even more restricted (*dislocate, disconnect*, but **discork, *disfight*).

Sometimes there are two or three alternatives, each with a slightly different meaning (*dysfunctional, nonfunctional, unprofessional, nonprofessional, immoral, amoral, unmoral*). Sometimes the same prefix takes different forms depending on the following sound. The prefix *in-* takes the alternative forms of *im-*, *il-* and *ir-* depending on the consonant which follows it. *In-* is most common (*incompatible, indecisive, infinite*). *Im-* precedes consonants said with the two lips (*impossible, immobile*), *il-* precedes a word starting with *l* (*illogical*), and *ir-* precedes a word starting with *r* (*irrational*). Notice that adding an *in-* in one of its various forms (*irrational, immoral*), *dis-* (*dysfunctional, disbelief, disloyal, disinterested*), and often *un-* (*unprofitable, unprofessional*) tend to be pejorative. *Non-* (*nonrational, nonfunctional, nonbelief, nonprofit*) and *a-* (*amoral, atheoretical*) tend to be more objective. Two thirds of negatives in writing are of this lexical nature whereas two thirds in spoken language use *not*.

Pragmatics and Discourse.

Let's look at three areas where pragmatics and discourse cause problems with negatives. The first problem comes from trying to hear the negative in

conversation. The second is closely related, recognizing an implied negative. The third concerns problems that children have with negatives.

Hearing the negative. As we saw in the awareness activities, in conversation and in informal writing the *not* may be contracted to *n't* and be attached to the preceding word as an enclitic.

- Jose can't come over tonight.
- I haven't seen him outside.
- Maria doesn't want that.
- John isn't swimming today.
- Marta isn't here.

In conversation, sometimes the operator is contracted with the preceding word leaving *not* in its full form.

- He's not coming.
- We're not here.
- He's not slept in weeks.
- I'll not promise anything.

Usually these operator contractions are with pronouns rather than nouns. In other words, *'re not* and *'s not* are more common with pronouns, *aren't* and *isn't* with nouns.

- Dinner isn't ready yet (the expected pattern)
- Dinner's not ready yet.
- It's not ready yet. (the expected pattern)
- It isn't ready yet.

Academic prose prefers the full form. *May* and *might* don't contract with *not*.

- We might not do that now.
- *We mightn't do that now.

Usually the contracted or enclitic negative can be heard as its own unstressed syllable (e.g. *didn't*, *wouldn't*, *haven't*, *shouldn't*, *couldn't*, *isn't*). However, as we saw in AA 8.1, with three high frequency contractions, *don't*, *won't*, *can't*, there is not a separate syllable. In fact the negative disappears because the *t* follows an *n*. The *n* then disappears because it is at the end of the word, leaving only a stressed nasalized vowel to indicate that the sentence is negative. Again, check if your tongue is touching your gums when you say the negative for the following in normal rather than carefully enunciated conversation.

- She won't come.
- We can't see him now.
- They don't want it.

Notice another problem, especially in short answers using *can* and *can't*.

- Can you come with us?

I can.

I can't.

In a sentence, we can hear the difference between positive and negative *can* because in the positive sentences, the *can* is unstressed so the pronunciation of the vowel changes to an *uh* sound. However, when a negative is added, stress is placed on *can* so the vowel is pronounced the way it is spelled.

- I can come

- I can't come

In the short answers to *Can you come with us?*, both *can* and *can't* are stressed because of the principles of end focus. They are the focus information of the answers. Therefore the vowels sound the same in both of them. In normal conversation, the *t* still disappears and the positive and negative sound almost alike. If you listen closely, you may hear that the *n* on the negative *can't* is a little bit shorter. Can you see why negatives cause trouble for English language learners when they try to apply their textbook English to the English they are hearing on the streets?

Although these contracted forms predominate in the spoken language, they are avoided in formal writing. American English is beginning to allow these contractions in writing as part of the informalization process that is taking place to make writing more reader friendly, as we have done in this textbook.

In spite of this informalization process, some contractions are **stigmatized forms**. *I am not* is always contracted as *I'm not* rather than *I ain't*. The negative question is *Aren't I* rather than *Ain't I*. *Ain't* is fairly common in some conversation, but is considered uneducated. Sometimes educated people use it jokingly, perhaps to show unity with the uneducated. In fact for some people it has become the all-purpose negative contraction for *have* and *be* for all persons, not just for first person singular.

- John ain't had breakfast yet.
- We ain't going along.
- You ain't seen nothing yet.

It never occurs in academic texts but is fairly common in conversation and popular music, especially country western, but much less so than regular negation. Of course it appears in fiction in its dialogs. Notice that in the last example, *ain't* appears with a second negative *nothing*. Double negatives are another socially stigmatized form that is common in conversation.

Another complication comes with the alternation of *not* with *no* forms. We teach our students not to use *no*, yet they will hear *no* and other negative words beginning with *n* in a sentence. Historically, to make things negative, we could add a *ne* prefix to a word. The following are some of these *ne* words that we still use: *never, nor, neither, none*. *No* can also be added to nouns and to certain indefinite words (e.g. *nothing, nobody, no one, nowhere*). These *n-forms* alternate with *not-any* (e.g. *I have no friends, I don't have any friends. I see nobody. I don't see anybody. He did nothing. He didn't do anything.*) The *not* version is more neutral (*He's not a gentleman.*) the *no* form more evaluative (*He's no gentleman.*). The *no* form is also more emphatic (e.g. *No shoes, no shirt, no service*). In the preverbal or S position only the *no* form can be used (e.g. *Nobody said anything*). The *no* forms are infrequent in conversation but more common in news, fiction, and academic prose. In conversation they occur mostly with the transitive *have* (e.g. *I have no desire to..., I have no reason to ..., I have no intention to..., I have no choice...., It has no effect....*) or with the *there's* construction (e.g. *There's no evidence..., There's no light. There's no doubt about it. There's no need..., There's no way...*)

Implied negatives. When we looked at tenses and modals we saw how the past tense forms and modals can be used to politely say *no*, or to at least hint at a *no*.

- Are you coming with us?
I would, (but.)
- Could you give me some money?
 - Yes, I could, but I don't have any.
 - Yes, I can, but you'll have to wait until tomorrow.

Another way to imply the negative is to change the subject or to suggest an alternative.

- I'd like some turtle soup.
Sorry, we're out.
- How would you like some cream of hamburger soup?
I think I'll just have a sandwich.

Implied positives. We saw with tag questions and negative yes/no-questions, two grammatical structures which are frequently used by teachers in classroom management, that sometimes when we hear a negative, there are no negative implications. The negative that we hear is actually an **implied positive** making the question a polite way of directing the activities of children. Compare the following.

- Do you have a pen?
- Don't you have a pen?

- You have a pen, don't you?
- Don't you have a coat? It's cold outside.
- You have a coat, don't you? It's cold outside.
- Don't you think it would work better this way?
- It would work better this way, wouldn't it?

In the first example without the negative, we are simply asking if the student has a pen. No action is implied, though this might lead up someone asking to borrow a pen. The second implies that the student should take out a pen and use it. The same is true with the tag question. The fourth implies that the student should put on a coat, as does the tag question. The sixth implies that the student should do the activity a different way, as does the tag question.

Inherent negatives. Some words are **inherent negatives**. There is no prefix or suffix to indicate that the word is negative. Some are verbs (*fail, forget, lack, exclude*). Others are adverbs of frequency (*seldom, rarely, hardly, scarcely*). Others are quantifiers, words which indicate how much there is of something or how many things are being considered (*few, little, any*). Notice how these inherent negatives work with verbs.

- We lack four brushes. (i.e. We don't have four brushes.)
- These elements were excluded. (i.e. These elements weren't included.)

These inherently negative verbs are sometimes used to avoid using a *not*, especially in academics.

The negative adverbs of frequency have a special effect on sentence structure. Adverbs of frequency, whether positive (*usually, always, sometimes,*

often) or negative (*seldom, rarely, hardly, scarcely*), are usually found between the S and the V where auxiliaries are also found. They are usually between the auxiliary and the verb, but often are before the auxiliary.

- John usually eats tacos.
- John has usually eaten tacos.
- John usually is eating tacos.
- John rarely eats tacos.
- John rarely has eaten tacos.
- John has rarely eaten tacos.

However, the adverb of frequency can be put first in the sentence for emphasis. In the case of positive adverbs of frequency, the SVO word order expected in a sentence is maintained. However, if a negative adverb of frequency is placed first for emphasis, there must be subject operator inversion, as in a question. In fact this is one way that native speakers can test if an adverb of frequency is positive or negative. Place it at the beginning of the sentence and see if it sounds best to have subject operator inversion.

- Usually John eats tacos.
- Usually John has eaten tacos
- *Usually has John eaten tacos.
- Rarely does John eat tacos.
- Rarely has John eaten tacos.
- *Rarely John has eaten tacos.

Quantifiers can be particularly troublesome. For some to be negative (*much, many*) the negative is clearly expressed (*not much, not many*). For others the positive (*a few, a little*) and the negative (*few, little*) counterparts are not differentiated by a *not* or a negative affix. So a person who has *a few* friends has more friends than someone with *few* friends. Someone with *a little* money has more money than someone with *little* money. The *a* in these cases makes the quantifier positive.

Some and *any* deserve special attention since they are fairly common in social interaction. *Some* implies an unspecified few. With a negative it changes to *any* to emphasize nothingness since as we saw earlier, *not-any* is the equivalent of *no*.

- John has eaten some tacos today.
- John hasn't eaten any tacos today.
- John has eaten no tacos today.

If *some* is used with the negative, it maintains the meaning of an unspecified few.

- John hasn't eaten some tacos today. (implying he has eaten the rest of them.)

A stressed *any* in a positive statement or question implies that there is doubt or the amount doesn't matter. In a question the expected answer is *no*.

- Can anybody hear me? (no)
- Anyone can do that. (no limit to the number)
- Would you like any help? (I didn't think so.)

Some implies a limited few and in a yes/no-question expects a yes answer.

- Can somebody hear me? (yes)
- Someone can do that. (a limited number)
- Would you like some help? (I thought so.)

Children and Negation. What are the special problems that young school children have with negatives? Of course, we might expect them to use stigmatized forms, such as *ain't*, if they are learning English on the streets. They might also have trouble with the disappearing negative, especially with the high frequency modal *can* that is used so much in asking for and granting permission. Our first concern should be teaching lexical negation, since it is a mark of academic English and is less common in conversation. We can't expect children to pick it up on the streets since it plays a lesser role in street English.

Another problem has to do with the implied negative that comes with using the past tense forms for "let's pretend" English. These situations are often set up using *if*-clauses. Suppose you have a pet rabbit and it is hopping around the room. One of the children wants to hold the rabbit. You might say:

- If we have time, you can hold the rabbit.

The *if*-clause gives the condition and the following gives the subsequent action. In this case the child might expect to hold the rabbit if nothing delays the class. Notice the semantic complications when past tense forms are used.

- If we had time, you could hold the rabbit.

In this case the child needs to be patient and perhaps wait for tomorrow because the use of the past tenses implies that there will be no time. Can you see how this use of tense to create a negative might be confusing for a child?

Suppose during the science unit the teacher says

- If we didn't have a rabbit food, what would the rabbit eat?

If the children have been feeding the rabbit, they know that they have food. The use of the past tense doesn't mean that the class is now talking about the past but that it is pretending that something that isn't true is true. Is that confusing enough? Teachers need to be aware that children slowly but surely learn that past tense forms don't always refer to the past time. These other uses of past tense forms they also hear in warnings, threats, and polite requests as in the following:

- You had better do that.
- Would you please clean this up?

To add to the confusion, sometimes teachers alternate using *if* and *unless* when suggesting the desired behavior for the children. However, in the following sentences notice that the implications of *if* and *unless* are the opposite even though the other words in the sentence are the same.

- We won't be able to play with the rabbit unless you are quiet.
- We won't be able to play with the rabbit if you are quiet.

In the first sentence, if the children are quiet, they will be able to play with the rabbit. In the second, if they are quiet, they will not be able to play with the rabbit.

Can you see why K-3 children have problems with instructions, especially when we are trying to be “perfectly clear” and use *if*-clauses and paraphrases with *unless* to give conditions? What the teacher of young children needs to keep in mind is that *if* clauses in themselves cause problems because of how the meaning changes depending on which tense is used. Using *unless* to clarify things, may actually be confusing. Teachers need to use these structures in class so the children can learn how they work. However, they need to be cautious when using *if* and *unless* clauses in instructions on tests for younger children, especially on math tests with word problems since the implied negatives interacting with expressed negatives can be confusing. Otherwise the instructions themselves become a language test.

Reflections.

Some Concepts.

- The form of the negative differs in conversational and academic English.
- The negative is often hidden in discourse.
- Children and other language learners have trouble with these hidden negatives.

Some Key Terminology

- **disappearing negative**—the negative *n't* disappears when attached to the operators *can*, *do*, and *will*. (*can't*, *don't*, *won't*) in the middle of a sentence. Because it isn't pronounced as a separate syllable, the *t* isn't pronounced after

the *n* and the *n* itself often disappears. The negative is identified by listening to the vowel of the operator.

- **implied negatives**—modals and tenses which are not inherently negative yet have negative implications in certain contexts, e.g. the past tense form of modals in responses to requests, (*Can you help me? I could*) or the use of past tense forms in if clauses, (*If I had time, I'd go.*)
- **implied positives**—using a negative in a question as a polite way of giving positive encouragement, (*Don't you have a coat? It's cold outside*)
- **inherent negatives**—words that are not marked by prefixes or suffixes as negative, yet are, (*scarcely, fail, few.*)
- **lexical negation**—negation formed by adding a negative prefix or suffix to a word, (*unlikely, illogical, hopeless.*)
- **negative contraction**—the negative *not* is usually contracted with the operator, (*They can't play tonight.*) This causes it to disappear when attached to *can*, *do*, and *will* because it is not pronounced as a separate syllable. Usually operator contraction rather than negative contraction happens if the subject is a pronoun and the verb is some form of the verb *be*, (*He's not here* versus *The dog isn't here.*)
- **operator contraction**—the operators *am*, *is* and *are* are usually contracted when the subject is a pronoun. (*I'm coming. She's there. We're ready.*)
- **sentence negation**—negation formed by placing a *not* or *n't* after the operator in a sentence, (*Sarah isn't arriving until 9.*) If there is no operator, it

is placed after a *do* with the proper tense and agreement, (*He doesn't like tuna fish.*)

- **stigmatized forms**—grammatical patterns that are avoided since Standard English has declared them to be signs of lack of education, (*I'm not coming* versus (stigmatized) *I ain't coming.*)

Some Reflective Activities

1. In a cartoon two teenage friends are talking to each other as they walk down the street.

Teen A: May I really am stupid but nobody has bothered to mention it to me. Harold, you're my friend. You would tell me if I was stupid, wouldn't you?

Teen B. Of course I will.

The two teens continue their walk. Suddenly

Teen A. "Will"???

Teen B. The challenge is going to be finding words that are small enough for you to comprehend.

Based on the principles of politeness we have discussed in these last few chapters, why is the response "Of course I will" a source of concern for Teen A?

2. What went wrong? Give the rules of thumb that were broken.
 - *I not understand this lesson very well.
 - *Mary may have not any time.

- *Although he had few close friends, he was very lonely.
 - *We didn't be at school today.
 - *Seldom John is here on time.
3. Negation on the phone. Suppose it is Friday and you are ordering something by phone. It is an emergency and you want it as fast as possible. The person on the other side says *We can't ship that on Monday*. Why would you probably ask them to repeat what they said? (Perhaps have someone read to you what the person said at normal conversational speed so you can hear the problem.)
4. Social implications of careful speech. Some English language learners insist on using very careful speech, pronouncing every syllable clearly and distinctly. They use the uncontracted form of the negative in speech and often put extra stress on the *not* to make sure they are clearly understood. Suppose an English language learner was to carefully say the following in response to an invitation from you. As a fluent speaker of English what would be your reaction? Would such an answer arouse negative feelings concerning the attitude of the other person? What might be the implications for this English language learner making and keeping English speaking friends?
- I do **not** want to go.
 - I can **not** go with you.
 - I will **not** go with you.

When would it be appropriate to use the full form of the negative?

5. What would be the lexical negation for the following? Which have alternative forms?

happy appropriate possible logical relevant ordered typical sense
 drip rational believer functional professional theoretical moral thing
 body one where

6. *Some* and *any* at a party. Suppose you are the host of a party. At the beginning of the party, you are carrying a tray of shrimp and circling among your guests. As you offer them shrimp which would you say

- *Would you like some?*
- *Would you like any?*

The party is over and almost all the guests have left. As you clean up, you notice there are still a few shrimp left. Before you take the tray to the kitchen, which would you say to the last guests?

- Would you like any?
- Would you like some?

Did you say the same thing at the first and the end of the party? Why or why not?

7. Negatives with children. Suppose you are working in a preschool. Johnny loves to play with the toys. You've just straightened up and are getting ready for story time. Johnny goes over to play with the toys some more. You kindly say, *Johnny, you can't play with the blocks.* He answers, *OK, teacher.* and continues playing. What may have happened? Is the child being willfully disobedient?

Grammar Detective 8. Finding negatives in comic strips.

For this grammar detective let's see how cartoonists use a variety of negations.

Instructions.

1. Find five comic strips that illustrate the various ways we can say *no* in English. No more than three of the examples you select can use some form of *not* or *no*.
2. Cut them out or copy them and attach them to the same sheet of paper.
3. Number your cartoons and underline the example negatives. Don't forget about lexical negation, inherent negatives, and implied negatives.
4. Write a phrase or sentence explaining what aspect of negation in English each illustrates.
5. Be prepared to discuss your findings in class. What types of negation predominated in your search?

Teaching Ideas.

1. **Negative placement.** Using the word strips that you prepared for teaching questions, add *n't* and *not*. Display a practice sentence and have the students decide where the negatives would go after the operators. Be sure to have *do*, *does*, and *did* for sentences without an operator.
2. **Not-any.** Show pictures of people doing things. Model to the class the alternatives of *no* + noun and *not* + *any* + noun by telling them something that the person or people in the picture do not have. (e.g. *He has no shoes.*) or something that's missing in the picture (*There's no food.*) Then

give the not-any alternative (*He doesn't have any shoes. There isn't any food.*). Put the students in small groups and give them pictures. Have the students take turns telling what the people in the picture don't have or what's missing using first the *no* and then the *not any* pattern.

- 3. Hearing the negative.** Show pictures of people involved in activities. Make positive and negative statements based on the picture that may be true or false. (e.g. *His hair isn't combed. He can see himself in the mirror. He didn't go to be very early.*) Be sure to use a wide variety of operators. Have the students agree or disagree with a short answer depending on whether your statement is true or false (e.g. *Yes, it is. No, he can't.*).