

Double Negation

Comparing the Weak Positive and Negative Concord

Taylor Bitton

Using two forms of grammatical negation in the same clause characterizes the double negative. However, this construction has two possible meanings: negative concord, in which the two negatives make the negative idea more emphatic, and the weak positive, in which the two negatives cancel out and yield a positive meaning. The author presents a study of two example texts, Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, and examines how negative concord is used to portray dialect or low educational level, and how the weak positive is used to create irony and show high education level.

What does the language of 1960s band The Rolling Stones and former American president Barack Obama have in common? They are connected by their use of the double negative. The Rolling Stones' hit song "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" uses the same construction that Obama used when he said "time is not unlimited" in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly (Obama, 2012). The double negative is characterized by two forms of grammatical negation in the same clause. However, this construction has multiple potential interpretations. "I Can't Get No Satisfaction," for example, is semantically negated only once; the intended meaning is that the speaker cannot get any satisfaction. The use of two negatives here serves to make the negative idea more emphatic. However, Obama's intended meaning when he said "time is not unlimited" was that time was actually limited. In this case, the two negative elements cancel each other out and make a weak positive. A strong understanding of the grammar in and the usage of these conflicting meanings is essential to navigating the double negative.

This variation in negation begs the following questions: How does each form function grammatically? How are they used? Is one form clearer than the other? It is important to make these distinctions because "when [the double negative] takes place, we do not face a minor, tangential misinterpretation of the speaker's intention, but rather its diametric reversal" (Moore, 1992, p. 308). The possible meanings are complete opposites of each other, so it is crucial to know the differences between them. A thorough study and comparison of two example texts, namely Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, can help us understand these differences. *Huckleberry Finn* contains multitudinous examples of negative concord, showing how it functions and how it can be used to portray dialect and low educational level. *Pride and Prejudice* contains several uses of the weak positive, showing how this form differs from negative concord and providing insight into how it can be used to portray high educational level and create an ironic writing style. Comparing the frequency with which

each construction appears in these two texts reveals how clear each meaning is. Examining these patterns reveals how writers can use the double negative to achieve their intended meaning.

Negative Concord in *Huckleberry Finn*

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a particularly useful source of negative concord because the use is dialect specific. Both Huck and Jim, the story's main characters, use negative concord frequently. However, Jim speaks only a nonstandard variety of English while Huck speaks Standard English, revealing how the double negative can function in both varieties. For example, Jim employs negative concord when he explains "You wants to keep 'way . . . en don't run no resk" (Twain, 2011, p. 75). *Not* modifies *do* in this sentence, and *no* has the equivalent meaning that *any* would in Standard English. This intended meaning of *no* takes away the second grammatical negation, so the sentence is semantically negated only once. However, *no* is a negative word, so while the sentence is only negated once, the negative idea is still reinforced, making it more emphatic. The correlative *not . . . no* construction is by far the most common way Jim uses negative concord. This negative indefinite *no* is a distinctive feature of African American English, or AAE. In fact, negative concord in general "is a complex, clause-level syntactic process and is part of the negation system that many African American children develop in the acquisition of AAE grammar" (Coles-White, 2004, p. 213). Because negative concord is common in AAE but is not used in Standard English, its use is often associated with AAE and nonstandard dialects. Jim's use of negative concord, then, is meant to mark him as a speaker of AAE, demonstrating how negative concord can be used to indicate that the speaker does not speak Standard English.

Huck's use of negative concord, however, fulfills a different purpose than dialectal portrayal. When he says "I couldn't stand it no longer," he is using the same *not . . . no* construction that Jim often uses (Twain, 2011, p. 56). This

is also the most common way Huck expresses negative concord. *Not* modifies the verb *stand* in this example, and *no* is again a replacement for the Standard English use of the word *any*. However, it is clear that Huck does not speak AAE, where this construction is common and grammatically correct. Twain consistently alters the spelling in Jim’s dialogue to make it sound more accented, while Huck’s spelling is consistent with Standard English. We also know that Huck is taught Standard English because his caretaker speaks it. Huck, then, is simply an uneducated speaker of Standard English. His use of negative concord is a shibboleth, and Twain employs this construction to mark him as the poor, uneducated boy that he is.

The use of negative concord predates the use of the weak positive, and negative concord became a shibboleth in Standard English after the weak positive form was introduced. The English language underwent a grammatical renovation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a renovation that included prescribing a new rule for the double negative. Grammarian Robert Lowth prescribed the Latin rule for the double negative in English in 1764, stating that “two negatives in English destroy one another, or are equivalent to an affirmative” (p. 142). This change was embraced by other grammarians and thus became “correct.” People began to use the double negative according to its new definition, and “since old forms persist the longest among the least educated, the double negative became generally associated with the speech of the unlettered” (Merriam-Webster, 1994, p. 366). So, speakers may also be marked as uneducated for their use of negative concord.

The Weak Positive in *Pride and Prejudice*

The double negative as a weak positive, however, has a different meaning and construction from negative concord. Jane Austen employs the weak positive when she writes in *Pride and Prejudice* that Elizabeth Bennet “was not so unwilling to comply with [Mr. Bingley’s] proposal” (1991,

p. 37). In this sentence, the two negative elements come from the word *not* and the prefix *un-*. *Not* modifies *was*, and *un-* plainly modifies the connected word *willing*. This means that the sentence is semantically negated twice, contrary to the examples of negative concord in *Huckleberry Finn*. This true double negation comes because neither of the negative elements can be interpreted to mean something positive in Standard English, like the AAE use of the word *no*. Here, Austen is following Lowth's rule of double negation. When Austen writes that Elizabeth "was not so unwilling" (1991, p. 37), negating both *was* and *willing* cancels the negation of the phrase, making it positive. The positive idea is weak, however, because the negative elements make the positivity difficult to discern. The use of a second negative prefix is one of the most defining features that distinguishes the weak positive from negative concord. The *not . . . un-* construction is the most common way Austen forms the weak positive, but she uses several similar constructions with negative prefixes to create this form, including *not . . . de-*, *not . . . il-*, and *no . . . in-*. These prefixes notify readers that the weak positive form of the double negative is being used.

The weak positive use of the double negative has a few implications. First, since this construction is technically "correct" grammar, its use indicates education. While negative concord is grammatically incorrect in Standard English and "is no longer acceptable to educated people," speakers of Standard English who use the weak positive show their knowledge through their "correct" use of the double negative (Ebbitt, 1990, p. 95). This is reinforced by Austen's use of the construction. *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel of manners highlighting the lives of the upper middle class in Regency England. The speakers are meant to be educated, and Austen's grammatical choices, including her use of the weak positive, portray that idea. Second, the weak positive can be an appropriate choice when portraying an ironic style. Austen is well known for her style of writing, heralded because "as always she means the opposite of what, with apparent innocuousness, she is saying" (Conrad, 1991, p. x). The weak positive is a very effective way of creating this

ironic writing because the construction itself, with negative elements creating a positive one, is contradictory. When Austen writes that Sir William Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice* “received no inconsiderable pleasure from [a] sight,” she is employing the weak positive for the ironic style (1991, p. 22). By using the weak positive, Austen downplays his pleasure, adding irony to the scene and creating the contradictory style of writing for which she is famous. The reader knows from context that this character was actually quite pleased with what he had seen.

Conclusion

The frequency with which each meaning of the double negative is used also gives insight into each construction’s clarity. Negative concord is used extraordinarily often in *Huckleberry Finn*, with multiple examples on every page. Jane Austen is known to repeatedly use the weak positive, but instances thereof are significantly less common than *Huckleberry Finn*’s negative concord. The weak positive is used perhaps two or three times per chapter in *Pride and Prejudice*. This is because the weak positive is much more difficult to understand than negative concord. A weak positive “creates a momentary puzzle for the reader, who is then put to the task of deducing the intended meaning” (Copperud, 1980, p. 266). The meaning of a weak positive is not immediately apparent, so using this construction too frequently could make the writing tedious and convoluted. Renowned author George Orwell was no advocate of the weak positive and showed his contempt for it when he wrote, “a not unblack dog was chasing a not unsmall rabbit across a not ungreen field” (1968, p. 138). His sentence shows that the weak positive can be confusing and unnecessary. Negative concord is much more direct and understandable because the reader does not have to work to deduce the intended meaning. The negatives are easily seen, so the meaning is easily interpreted. However, just as the weak positive should be used sparingly because of its confusing nature, negative concord should also be

avoided in Standard English because it is considered grammatically incorrect.

Overall, then, a study of the double negative in *Huckleberry Finn* and *Pride and Prejudice* has yielded answers to our original questions. How does each form function grammatically? Negative concord is most often characterized by the *not . . . no* construction, and the weak positive most often uses *not . . . un-* or another negative prefix. How is each form used? Negative concord is used to portray dialect or low educational level; the weak positive shows high education and creates irony. Is one form clearer than the other? Negative concord is much easier for readers to understand while the weak positive is more convoluted. However, neither should be used excessively. These two constructions vary greatly in meaning, which makes the differences between our original examples of The Rolling Stones' song "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" and Obama's statement that "time is not unlimited" even more extreme. The fact that this construction can be used in rock songs, the most casual of writing, and in presidential speeches, the most formal of writing, speaks to its flexibility. The double negative can be applied to a wide spectrum of writing, so knowledge and correct use of this construction can add both flair to writing and nuance to meaning.

References

- Austen, J. (1813). *Pride and Prejudice*. Reprinted with an introduction by Peter Conrad. A.A. Knopf, 1991.
- Coles-White, D. (2004). Negative concord in child African American English: Implications for specific language impairment. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 47(1), 212–222.
- Copperud, R. H. (1980). *American usage and style, the consensus*. Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Ebbitt, W. R. (1990). *Index to English* (D. R. Ebbitt, Ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Lowth, R. (1774). *A short introduction to English grammar*. A Millar, R. & J. Dodsley.
- Merriam-Webster. (1994). Double negative. In *Merriam-Webster's dictionary of English usage*. Merriam-Webster, Inc.
- Moore, M. (1992). Double negation. *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 49(3), 305–309.
- Obama, B. (2012, September 25). Remarks by the president to the UN general assembly. *Obama White House Archives*. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/25/remarks-president-un-general-assembly>
- Orwell, G. (1968). *The collected essays, journalism, and letters of George Orwell*. Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Twain, M. (2011). *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (S. Railton, Ed.). Broadview Press.