

Q. Please write a column about double negatives. They always slow me down. When I come across them I have to stop and try to figure out what the drafter really meant.

A. The lawyer who sent this comment has a point. Double negatives cause wordiness and sometimes ambiguity, but the often-heard claim that they change meaning is not always valid. Neither the speaker nor the listener would believe that “I ain’t got no time for a vacation” means anything except “I have no time for a vacation.”

Until the 18th century, multiple negatives were acceptable, used often for added emphasis. The authors of the Old English epic *Beowulf*, and the great Middle English author Chaucer included triple and even quadruple negatives for emphasis. One illustration is Chaucer’s famous description of the “noble Knight” in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer declared that his noble knight “nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde” (“never said anything bad”). In his emphatic comment Chaucer piled on three negatives, “nevere, no, and ne”!

But centuries later, the Age of Reason dawned, bringing into prominence schoolmasters who believed that the English language was in terrible shape. It had “decayed” from its previously “pure” condition and now offended “against every part of grammar.” Thus the writing of even the most eminent current authors was fraught with “gross improprieties.”

Fortunately, hope was at hand. The leader of a movement to correct the ills of the English language was one Bishop Robert Louth, whose opinions are quoted above. Bishop Louth was a theologian, a Hebraist, and a professor of poetry at Oxford and later Bishop of London and Dean of the Chapel Royal, but he was no linguist. He led a small but influential group of scholars with no knowledge of linguistics, who believed, incorrectly, that English grammar had descended from Latin grammar.

These well-meaning schoolmasters were sure that they alone could eliminate language decay. In this, the Age of Reason, they would apply to English the rules of Latin grammar and the logic of mathematics, permanently “fixing” the language.

So they proceeded to make rules, one of which was the “double-negative rule” that two negatives make a positive (for which we can credit Bishop Louth). He reasoned that “two Negatives in English destroy one another, or are equivalent to an Affirmative.” (That rule perseveres in some quarters even to this day, forming the rationale of the double-negative rule.)

The rule makes some sense but not for the reason it was promulgated. The danger of two or more negatives lies in sentences like the following, from the Model Penal Code, § 5.01(2): “*Without negating* the sufficiency of other conduct, the following, if strongly corroborative of the actor’s criminal purpose *shall not be held insufficient* as a matter of law.” (emphasis added)

By deleting the negatives in that sentence the meaning becomes clear and more forceful, as in its affirmative form: “Although other conduct may also suffice, the following, if strongly corroborative of the actor’s criminal purpose, shall be held sufficient as a matter of law.”

Negative statements can be ambiguous even if there is only one statement, as in this announcement seen in the local newspaper: “Florida’s greatest problem is not being able to attract and hold its school teachers.” The ambiguity is caused by the placement of the negative phrase “not,” which has created a “squinting modifier.” Does it mean that Florida’s greatest problem *is* that Florida cannot attract and hold its teachers? Or does the sentence mean that Florida’s greatest problem *isn’t* that Florida can’t attract and hold its teachers and that Florida’s problem is something else? The negative is said to “squint” because the reader does not know whether *not* modifies the clause it follows or the clause it precedes—whether it looks forward or back.

Another way to confuse readers is to add to a negative statement the small word *all*. For example, if you make the comment, “All cats are gray,” you are

making a statement about totality, and what you have said is clear—though not true. But if you say, “Not all cats are gray,” you might intend to make a clearly negative statement. But the statement is not clear. It says nothing about totality. When you say, “Not all cats are gray,” you are saying that some cats, though not all, are gray.” Your statement is correct, but unclear.

To make a statement about totality, you have to say, “No cats are gray.” Now you are back to making a clear—though incorrect—statement. (All these sentences are nonsensical, of course; they indicate only the danger of negatives.)

The administrator who attached the following announcement to an office bulletin board was obviously unaware of this curious characteristic of negative statements that contain the word *all*. The announcement read: “On Monday June 8 and Tuesday June 9 all regularly scheduled classes will not meet.” (That is, some scheduled classes *will* meet?) And much more risky is an ophthalmologist’s prescription for eye drops: “Use 3 or 4 drops every day. You can’t use too much.” (Does *can’t* mean “shouldn’t” or “it’s not possible to”?)

But deliberately ambiguous negatives do have a virtue—they can convey lukewarm enthusiasm. The poet Alexander Pope recommended the linguistic tool “to damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer / And without sneering, teach the rest to sneer.”

Other deliberately ambiguous statements: “I do not oppose the chairman’s motion” does not mean that I favor it. The instructor who says that a student’s writing is not bad does not mean it is good. And, finally, a court that allowed the removal of a kidney from an incompetent man held that although he had not given permission for the surgery, “[It] is not without benefit to him.” Perhaps the moral is: Be ambiguous only when you want to be. **TFL**

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