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# Negation: Form, Function and Effect

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## Research questions:

*Negation has the interesting property that allows us to conceptualise and understand the world in terms of what doesn't happen or what attributes something does not have. It is not only that we can conceptualise negative states, but that these states are both relevant and meaningful. This research takes a theoretical approach and aims to answer the questions of what textual appearance negation has, how it functions to instantiate and deny or reject a previous assertion, and what effect this has in natural language.*

## Form

### Types of negators

**Syntactic**                    **Prototypical**

My dog is <u>not</u> barking.

**Morphological**

John <u>un</u>fastened his shoes

**Inherent/lexical**

The bus <u>failed</u> to arrive on time

**Conditional**

If the bus had arrived late
I could have caught it

**Modals**                       **Peripheral**

He should have moved.

"They want to maintain an attitude that keeps women unhealthy, <u>un</u>fed, <u>un</u>educated. This is <u>not</u> culture. This is <u>not</u> custom. This is criminal."
Hillary Clinton in Times Online 14/01/09

## Function

**Negation functions to deny or reject a previous implicit or explicit assertion. It can also instantiate the opposite positive counterpart from which the hearer/reader constructs a mental representation of that which is being rejected.**

"I know exactly what you <u>never</u> said. You <u>refrained</u> from saying it very loudly." Terry Pratchett (2007) Making Money

Prototypically, negation instantiates the opposite positive counterpart which is rejected by the negator. In this example the conceptualisation of the positive is heightened by the idea that the speaker knows 'exactly' what isn't said, and that the event that didn't take place, didn't take place loudly.

## Effect

'No drain tuna from John West. It's delicious tuna <u>without</u> the drama'

tv advert

The effect that the use of negation has on understanding texts can be powerful. In non-fictional texts such as advertising, the creation of a non-state can manipulate readers/hearers into assuming that the background positive counterpart is the norm.

In the above example, the use of negative accommodation, the simultaneous construction of an expectation and defeat of it, creates a background norm that tinned tuna is usually associated with drama or stress, a problem which 'no drain tuna' solves.

As our assumption about negation is that it denies a prior assertion, when negative accommodation is used, the default assumption is that a prior assertion has been made. As such, negation has the potential to manipulate people into believing there are problems that need solving even if there didn't appear to be any problems at all.

For further details on this research see: Nahajec, L (2009 forthcoming) 'Negation and the Creation of Implicit Meaning in Poetry' Language and Literature