Class Handout:
Negation and Negative Concord in English

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[A] The Jespersen Cycle

1. Read the following passage from Nevalainen (2006: 258–259):

Jespersen’s Cycle

In Old English (before c. 1100), *ne* was the principal sentential negator, which could co-occur with other negative elements. In Middle English (c. 1100-1500), it was reinforced with *nought* or, increasingly, with its reduced form *not*. This two-part negator could be accompanied by other negative elements (*ne . . . not . . . never*, etc.). In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, *not* progressively replaced *ne* as the principal sentential negator. In the course of the Late Middle and Early Modern English periods, between 1350 and 1650, the other negative forms accompanying *not* (*not . . . never/nothing*) were replaced by nonassertive items (*not . . . ever/anything*) in most kinds of writing. In English historical linguistics, this shift from a state with one negator to a two-part one and back to one again is known as Jespersen’s Cycle (Jespersen 1917, 4).

2. Observe the three sentences below. On the basis of Nevalainen’s description of the Jespersen Cycle, as well as our class discussion, decide which period of English (e.g. Old, Middle, Early Modern) each sentence is from. Then, use the glosses to provide a contemporary English translation for each sentence. (The sentences are taken from Wallage (2012).)

(i) *I know nat the cause*
   *I know not the cause*
   Translation:

(ii) *we ne mugen þat don*
    *we NEG can that do*
    Translation:

(iii) *I ne may nat denye it*
     *I NEG may not deny it*
     Translation:
[B] Negative Concord

1. Observe the four English NC sentences below (also from Wallage (2012)), none of which are in contemporary English. Circle all of the negative markers and draw a box around all of the negative constituents. Based on the distribution of the negative markers, state the approximate historical period that you think each sentence is from. Lastly, knowing that these are NC sentences (and therefore sentential negations), use the gloss to provide two contemporary English translations for each sentence, one using negative constituents (e.g. ‘no X’, ‘nothing’), and one using negative polarity items (‘any X’, ‘anything’).

(i) he ne may noëping wel cone
    he NEG may nothing well know

Translation with negative constituents:

Translation with negative polarity items:

(ii) Thou ne shalt nat eek make no leysynges in thy confessioun
    you NEG shall not also make no falsehoods in your confession

Translation with negative constituents:

Translation with negative polarity items:

(iii) and he wolde not make noo confession unto no pryste...
    and he would not make no confession to no priest

Translation with negative constituents:

Translation with negative polarity items:

(iv) nan þing he ne answarode
    no thing he NEG answered

Translation with negative constituents:

Translation with negative polarity items:
2. Observe the following table from Nevalainen (2006: 262) (which she constructed based on an analysis of written data by speakers in various regions of Britain). Then, read the text in the box below (also from Nevalainen, p. 262) and answer the questions. Note: When Nevalainen uses the term “non assertive forms”, she is referring to what we have been calling negative polarity items.

Figure 1
Negative Concord According to Social Rank; Percentage of Negative Concord

![Bar chart showing percentage of negative concord by social rank and period.]

Note: Upper ranks: royalty, nobility, gentry; middle ranks: professionals, merchants, social aspirers; lower ranks: other ranks below the gentry (Nevalainen 1999, 523).

Table 1 shows the early stages of the process in male writing from 1460 to 1600, adapted from Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (2003, 151). Three social categories are singled out from the rest: nonprofessional upper ranks (nobility and gentry who did not hold administrative offices), upper-rank professionals (members of the gentry who were holders of administrative offices or worked as lawyers or secretaries for the nobility and gentry), and social aspirers (those born to social ranks below the gentry who moved up to the gentry or to the upper clergy). The table indicates that single negation with nonassertive forms largely replaced negative concord among upper-ranking men by the late sixteenth century. It also singles out social aspirers among the professionals as leaders of the process: the differences in frequency distributions in the last two periods are statistically significant ($\chi^2$ test, $p < .01$).
Questions:

• What does the following sentence mean? Try paraphrasing it.

“The table indicates that single negation with nonassertive forms largely replaced negative concord among upper-ranking men by the late sixteenth century.”

➢ How does the table indicate this?

• Why might the pattern shown in the table have emerged in the use of NC? Write down any ideas you have.

[C] Contemporary NC, negative inversion, and reverse negative concord

1. Read the attached pages from Green (2002). Note: Green sometimes uses the term “multiple negation” to refer to Negative Concord. The “non-inverted” forms she discusses are what we have been referring to as ‘reverse negative concord’. Lastly, she calls negative constituents ‘negative indefinites’.

2. What does Green mean by the following (from page 77):

“A traditional prescriptive ‘rule’ in general American English states that ‘double’ negatives are not grammatical because they make a positive. The formula multiplying two negatives yields a positive does not work for AAE.”

Try paraphrasing this.

Why doesn’t this “formula” work for AAE?

Do you think this formula works for “general American” or “Standard” English?

3. Observe the NC sentences below, and classify them according to the following three categories: (a) regular Negative Concord (b) negative inversion (c) reverse negative concord (i.e. NC with a non-inverted negative subject and auxiliary). Then, provide a translation for each sentence that includes only one negative element. In other words, translate each sentence into “Standard” English.

(i) Wasn’t nothin’ but acorns on the ground. (AppE; Wolfram & Christian 1976)

Translation:
(ii) I ain’t seen nobody today. (West Texas English (WTE); Foreman 1999)

Translation:

(iii) Nobody didn’t see him. (AppE; Wolfram & Christian 1976)

Translation:

(iv) Ain’t none of the students done their homework. (WTE; Foreman 1999)

Translation:

(v) Nobody wants to do nothing. (New York English; Tortora 2008)

Translation:

4. Answer questions (a) through (d):

(a) What is wrong with the sentence below in (vi)? Why is it judged unacceptable (*)?

(vi) *Did nothing stop us from getting there on time.

(b) How can you convert (vi) into an acceptable NC sentence?

(c) What is wrong with the sentence in (vii)? Why is it judged unacceptable (*)?

(vii) *Didn’t John stop us from getting there on time.

(d) How can you convert (vii) into an acceptable declarative (not interrogative) sentence?
References