An Abundance of Negatives
Prolegomenon to the Historical Study of Negation in English

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In a bizarre example of attributing to Lowth not only prescriptive and proscriptive practices but also the ability to dictate the course of development of the grammatical usage of a whole generation of Standard English speakers and writers and their descendants (see Stein & Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1994), he is credited with having introduced into English the rule that 'two negatives make a positive'. (For a good example of multiple negation in OE see the example below.) The *locus* is usually given as the first edition of the *English Grammar* (1762), and a reference to the section on the Adverb in the Section on Words (Morphology, or Etymology), where it does not ever appear, with inaccurate page references (1762:90-91).

In the first edition, and then repeated in later editions as an introductory statement to the now extended text, all Lowth has to say about the syntax of the Adverb is the laconic: 'ADVERBS have no Government.' (1762:126). There are no further statements and no illustrative 'critical notes'.

This suggests very strongly that those critics who give this rule and reference 'Lowth 1762' have not actually looked into the 1762 or any other edition of Lowth's *Grammar*, but have picked up the information from somewhere else that Lowth's *English Grammar* (somewhere) contains this rule, and associate it with the date '1762', which would be usual in general citations as the date of the first but not of the subsequent, corrected and enlarged, editions.

In fact, the rule was added in *The Second Edition, Corrected*, in the section on 'Sentences' (or syntax), in the passage dealing with Adverbs (1763:138-140).

> Two Negatives in English destroy one another, or are equivalent to an Affirmative:[1] as,

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[1] Horn 1989:297 remarks:

> '(Even Bishop Lowth does not commit himself to just which affirmative two negatives are equivalent to.)'

This may be literally true, but Lowth's plain intention could not have been mistaken by the readers to whom his work was adressed. Many of them would know the logical basis for this formulation. Perhaps Horn would have been satisfied if Lowth

> *"Nor* did they *not* perceive the evil plight
> In which they were, or [*sic*] the fierce pains *not* feel."[2]

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had written: '... or are equivalent to *the* Affirmative.'

[2]   This line seems to have caused present-day literary critics some difficulty.

> The reader's inability to tell whether or not "they" do perceive ... [is] part of the line's *meaning*, even though [it] take[s] place in the mind. ... Subsequently, we discover that the answer to the question "did they or didn't they [perceive]," is, "they did and they didn't." (p 27)

(Stanley Eugene Fish (*b* 1938). 1980. *Is there a Text in This Class*? *An Authority of Interpretative Communities* Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press.)

Fish's decision to give this line an Empsonesque ambiguous reading is certainly incorrect, although his account of the effect of the double negation on the reader seems plausible and is in accord with Milton's practice of constantly bringing the reader up short by means of syntactic gymnastics, often by means of an enjambment, a typically English poetic conceit.

One line, which seems to have terminated in grammatical or syntactic closure, is shown to have a different intended interpretation from this simple form by its continuation without syntactic break in the next line, forcing the reader to reconsider and to reshape his initial interpretation. A good instance of this is the first two lines of Shakespeare's Sonnet XXXIII:

> Full many a glorious morning have I seen
> Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye, ...

The first line is complete as it is: 'Full many a glorious morning' is a direct object. But when we read the second line, we see that it is the subject in a so-called 'small clause', 'a glorious morning flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye'. A syntactic lurch or change of direction of this kind never loses its freshness, or ability to confuse and amuse.

Fish is certainly right in pointing out how expectations are aroused, only to be cancelled out and having to be replaced by new ones. However, the poetic effects are not just the result of a linear accretion, adjustment, and readjustment of meaning as the reader goes through the text or lines word by word and line by line from left to right, as stated by Fish, as if the reader's linguistic and interpretive competence could be expressed in the form of a finite state grammar. The perception of the syntax of a sentence of English involves hierarchical (non-linear) processes as well, otherwise the ambiguity effects that Fish sees in the interpretive process, if there are any, would not be possible.

The Empsonian conceit of multiple simultaneous meanings would not have made sense to contemporaries of Shakespeare, except in obvious intentional verbal or syntactic puns.

Note the unexpected *or* instead of the now usual *nor*. On this Franz 1939:471 says:

> Anmerkung. An ein durch *neither* eingefügtes erstes Glied eines disjunktiven Satzes können andere durch *or* anstatt *nor* angefügt werden, da die Negation über die ganze folgende Reihe fortwirkend gedacht wird. Diese Freiheit wird, obwohl früher nicht selten, neuerdings nicht mehr allgemein anerkannt. (Syntax; Konjunktion § 545—593; *neither—nor* § 587—588, pp 468-471; § 488, pp 588-570: § 488, p 471.)

> 'Note. Other clauses with *or* instead of *nor* can be attached to a first member of a disjunctive sentence [his term for an instance of correlative conjunction] with an inserted [*sic*] *neither*, since the negation is thought of as having a continuing effect over the whole sequence. This freedom, although formerly not rare, is nowadays not acceptable.'

As Lowth might be considered as the original discoverer of gapping, Franz may be considered the first to discover the concept of the scope of negation. Neither, however, was immediately interested in the principle itself as such, but rather as an explanation for the superordinate phenomenon they were investigating.

There are two further examples (1762:139-140) from Shakespeare, and the passage from the Knight's 'Prologue' (*Canterbury Tales*, see below), and two from Richard Bentley (1662-1742), not quoted here, in later editions. The examples from Shakespeare and Chaucer are:

> "Give me not counsel,
> *Nor* let *no* comforter delight mine ear."
> Shakespeare, *Much Ado* [Act 5 Scene1]

> "She cannot love,
> Nor take no shape nor project of affection.
> Ibid. [*Much Ado*, Act 2 Scene1] (1762:139)

Shakespear uses this construction frequently. It is a relique of the antient style abounding with Negatives, which is now grown wholly obsolete:

> "And of his port as meke as is a maid,
> e *never* yet *no* villany *ne* said
> In all his life unto *no* manner wight;
> He was a very parfit gentil knight.   Chaucer. (1762:140)

See the modern edited text from Chaucer below. From his quotation it might be possible to know which edition of Chaucer of his day Lowth was using.

Lindley Murray, in his version of this rule (Rule XVI) of Syntax in his *English Grammar* (71.5% of a page), in order to make the import of the rule and the example from Milton crystal clear, adds the gloss: 'that is, "they did perceive him." '

In the smaller print reserved for annotations and explanations, Murray gives six further varied examples of the putatively improper usage of two negatives to make a negative, of which the fourth is the edited relevant portion (*l* 2) of the first of Lowth's examples from Shakespeare.

Example two clearly shows that even an initial, left-dislocated adverbial positive element can tolerate a *not* in what appears to be its original home clause, after it too has been turned into a negative by Franz's 'rule' of the scope of negation:

> "Never no immitator grew up to his authority:" "*never did any*," etc. [Example 2]

The canonical form of this structure is:

> *No immitator *ever* grew up etc.

The preposed *ever* is negated by the *no*, as Franz's rule of negative scope predicts. All this clearly shows how even an initial, left-dislocated *never* can tolerate a *no* in what appears to be its original home clause.

Murray's example three with his correction appears to provide evidence for double negation in a later text:

> "I cannot by no means allow him what his argument must prove;"
> "I cannot by *any* means," &c. or, "I *can by no means*."

This construction may be exceptional, because of the possiblity that the offending phrase *by no means* has been moved into the verb from post-

verbal adverbial position, as a special instance of Franz's scope of negation. But this would have to be investigated further.

The discussion is designed to show how to carry out an investigation of double or multiple (iterative) negation in English on the basis of an unprejudiced, empirical examination of real cases. The instances listed by Franz, Murray, Visser, and others provide a rich classified corpus of exmples on which to work. From the structural variety of instances adduced here, one should be clear that there is no single phonomenon called 'double' or 'multiple negation', but rather a kind of amorphous category of expressions containing more than one negative and with varied syntactic configurations, each of which requires an indvidual analysis, unless it repeats the syntax of another instance.

In fact, double negation is a commonplace of Logic, one of the Seven Liberal Arts, The Trivium: Grammar, Rhetoric, and Logic, the Scholastic curriculum, that *duplex negatio affirmat*, 'double negation affirms'. It is quite ancient and is found in logical systems throughout the ages, including in texts in Sanskrit, which has double negation. See Mates 1961:31-32; 95.

Multiple negation had in fact already virtually disappeared from educated (literate) English by 1600, beginning with the English Renaissance (1550-1660), possibly in translating legal texts from Latin into English, in order to avoid potential ambiguity.[3] (This last observation is due to Anthony Warner.)

This seems to have begun as a natural process, not motivated by the force of observing any arbitrary grammatical strictures.[4]

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[3] Queen Elizabeth's letters show only a few traces. The study by Evans (2013) contains a very useful discussion of multiple negation in the writing of Queen Elizabeth both before and after her accession, to the effect that her practice was far in advance of most persons of her rank and education, but the evidence is taken from a variety of corpus studies which characteristically list the classified examples without a detailed syntactic analysis of the classifications themselves.

[4]   This may not be strictly speaking true. English grammars had begun to be written and produced in increasing numbers in the second half of the 17thC, and many had sections on punctuation, which those eager for learning about the new vernacular would have as a matter of course assiduously studied. This is an area, historical punctuation, that needs to be further investigated. In this connection, the following is of interest:

> It would seem to be the case that toward the mid-century [of the 17thC] punctuation, like other practices in grammar or like spellings and word usages, was becoming more standardized, systematic and logical. No doubt the movement setting in strongly toward 1650 to regulate and fix various aspects

Wittgenstein has commented (*Philosophische Grammatik* (1969); *Philosophical Grammar* (1974), both Oxford, Blackwell, *passim*) that the formula, $\sim \sim P \supset P$; or: $\sim (\sim P) \supset P$, is not in fact a rule of logic or grammar at all, but merely a consequence of the behaviour (interaction) of symbols such as '$\sim$', 'P', and '$\supset$'.

The putative examples from Shakespeare, *eg* 'Be not too tame, neither' (Hamlet's speech to the players, Act 3, Scene 2) are not in fact instances of double negation at that time, since the scope of the negative is the minimal, not as later, the maximal clause: the negative value of *neither* comes from (has been carried over to) the *not* in 'Be not too tame', as Franz suggests. The structure can be represented as we have done with relative clauses:

S[Be not too tame, S[neither]]

However, the *not* controls the *neither*, and not *vice versa*. The *neither* does not then rebel and return to the lower minimal clause to interact with its governor *not*, creating a positive, neither in Shakespeare's time, nor today.

When multiple negatives occurred in earlier English, they did indeed interact, but not as algebraic signs as in the logical formula. The

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of the language extended itself to punctuation also. Certainly, the system of punctuation prescribed in 1633 by a manual such as Charles Butler's *English Grammar* is founded on a coherent set of logical rules. And as David Masson (1822-1907) said [*Works ... of Milton* (1874) I. civ-cv], they are good rules, although not altogether like our own. The earlier concern with stressing oratorical design is still present in Butler, but it is less predominant, and there is more concern with reconciling the needs of oratorical design with that of punctuating correctly according to the grammatical importance of the member [clause; constituent phrase]. The two kinds of demands can be made compatible, if oratorical symmetry is shown only within the sentence and not in the larger period.

(Mindele Anne Treip. 1970. *Milton's Punctuation and Changing English Usage* 1582-1676. London: Methuen & Co Ltd. Part III. Mid Seventeenth-Century Punctuation. 2. *Punctuation after* 1625. *Butler*. [Charles Butler (*d* 1647), *The English Grammar, or the Institution of Letters, Syllables, and Words in the English Tongue* (1633).])

Here, the changes in notions of grammatical style are linked to changes in punctuation practice. While this would seem to support the spontaneous-regulation view, it is not incompatible with the alternative, interventionist account, so popular with the critics of EModE grammars.

first indefinite word or else the verb if it had no negative to the left of it spread its negativity over every successive indefinite, and also the verb, if it were to the right of it, giving us these two comparable OE and Very Late Middle English (VLME) examples, both well-known to every student and undergraduate who ever read these texts:

The second VLME example is from the 'Prologue' to *The Canterbury Tales* ('The Knight', Robinson, Second Edition, 1957, p 18*a*, *ll* 69-72):

> And of his port as meeke as is a mayde.
> He nevere yet no vilenye ne sayde
> In al his lyf unto no maner wight.
> He was a verray parfit gentil knyght.

Going backwards in time, which has the same effect as going forward — some older things disappear and new things appear to replace them or take up a new place in the language — we find this decisive example of rule-governed multiple negation from the OE translation of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice from Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book III, Metre 12.

> Ða sceolde se hearpere weorðan swa sarig þæt he ne meahte ongemong oðum mannum bion ac teah to wuda ond sæt on ðæm muntum ægðer ge dæges ge nihtes, weop ond hearpode ðæt ða wudas bifedon ond ða ea stodon, ond nan heort ne onscunode nænne leon ne nan hara nænne hund ne nan neat nyste nænne andan ne nænne ege to oðrum for ðære mergðe ðæs sones.

Edited text of King Alfred's OE prose translation of the Latin *De consolatione philosophiæ* ('The Consolation of Philosophy') by Anicius Manlius Severimus Boetheus (*c*480-524). OE text from *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse*. Revised throughout by Dorothy Whitlelock (1901-1982). Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1967, pp 12-14. Macrons and superfluous commas omitted.

After the death of Eurydice and her descent into Hades (OE *hell*), Orpheus is inconsolable. The following annotated working translation restores the multiple negatives so as to recreate very roughly the structure of the original OE text, but not the effect, because we have irretrievably lost the rule of multiple negation. Square brackets have been added to interpolated explanatory phrases.

Then he was said [*sceolde* = German *soll*(*te*)] [to have] become so sorrowful that he not could [bear to] be among other men but took to the woods and sat on the mountains both by day and by night, wept and harped [so] that the woods trembled [as in an earthquake] and the rivers stood [still; *sc* stopped (flowing)] and no hart avoided [feared; shunned; tried to evade] no lion nor no hare no hound nor no beast [cattle] not knew no malice nor no fear towards others because of the beauty of the music.

Alfred uses *sceolde* 'was supposed (to have)' lest anyone should think that he believes *ðæs leasan spell* ('these fictitious tales') which nevertheless teach us many moral lessons. While it is a translation from the Latin, Alfred expressly says in the *Proem*:

Hwilum he sette word be worde, hwilum andgit of andgite swa swa he hit þa sweotolost and andgitfullicast greccan mihte ... (pp [8]-9)

'Sometimes he put [or: translated] it word by word, sometimes sense from sense, so that he could translate it the most clearly and the most intelligibly.'

Alfred uses the same commonplace at the end of his circular letter ('On the State of Learning In England') prefixed to his version of the *Cura pastoralis* ('Pastoral Care') of Gregory I the Great (*c*540-604). After an extensive list of motivating precedents and compelling reasons for his undertaking, he says that he then began to translate the *Pastoral Care* into English (Sweet-Whitelock 1967:7), as above:

[...,] hwilum word be worde, hwilum andgit of andgite, [...]

Many changes can be rung on this commonplace, 'word for/by word not/and/or sense for/by sense'. It goes back at least to Cicero (*De optimo genere oratorum* 'On the best kind of public speaker'). Certainly Alfred could not possibly have got the multitude of pleonastic (as we see them) negatives from Latin, where two negatives do indeed make a positive, as in *non numquam = umquam*.

The point of this digression is to show that the Anglo-Saxon scholars devoted great attention to problems of translation, following the precepts on translation in the classical texts of Cicero, Jerome, and other 'authorities'.

Whitelock (1967:224 'Note') says that this OE tag '... translates a well-known Latin tag, *verbum ex verbo, sensum ex sensu*. Asser [(8thC), wrote *Life of Alfred*; cited by Alfred in this preface as one of his Latin teachers] says Bishop Wærferð [to whom this copy of the preface is addressed] translates *aliquando sensum ex sensu*.'

Returning now towards the present, we have been fortunate in having two complementary texts of the same Very Late ME—Very Early Modern English version of Sir Thomas Mallory's *Morte Darthur*.

W is from the Winchester Manuscript of the *Morte Darthur*, first discovered in the Fellows' Library of Winchester College in 1934. This version was originally completed in 1469-1470. The quotation is from the following definitive edition:

Eugène Vinaver (1899-1979) (ed.), *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*. Second Edition. In Three [continuously paginated] Volumes. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1967. II:492-493. First edition, 1947. Details of glossaries etc omitted. Third edition, revised by Peter John Christopher Field (*b* 1939), Three Volumes, 1990. This last edition, used by Tieken 1995, to whom this example is due, was not available for consultation at the time of writing.

C is from the first printed edition (1485) by William Caxton (1422?-1491), taken from the following definitive edition: James W. Spisak (ed.), *Caxton's Malory*. Two Volumes. A New Edition of Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Based on the Pierpont Morgan Copy of William Caxton's Edition of 1485. Edited with an Introduction and Critical Apparatus by James W. Spisak. Based on work begun by the late William Matthews (1905-1975). With a Dictionary of Names and Places by Bert Dillon. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press; London, England: University of California Press, Ltd., 1983. Volume I:260-261. Two continuously paginated Volumes. Volume I has the text and front matter; Volume II the Critical Apparatus etc, including very useful 72-page Glossary.

W.

Than sir Dynas and dame Brangwayne brought sir Trystram and sir Kehydyns prevaly into the corte, unto the chambir whereas La Beall Isode assygned them. And to telle the joyes that were betwyxte La Beall Isode and sir Trystramys, there ys no maker can make hit, nothir no harte can thynke hit, nother no penne can wryte hit, nother no mowth can speke hit.

C.

> Thenne Sir Dynas and Dame Brangwayne broughte Syre Tristram and Kehydins pryuely vnto the courte, vnto a chamber whereas La Beale Isoud hadde assygned hit. And to telle the ioyes that were betwixe La Beale Isoud and Sire Tristram, there is no tonge can telle it, nor herte thynke hit, nor pen wryte hit.

Caxton has deleted Malory's *no*s, now considered pleonastic, that are in fact the source of the *nothir*/*nothor*s.

If we take seriously the notational difference between the two representations of double negation in their logical notational form, in the second, $\sim(\sim P) \supset P$, where for P substitute S, we could say that while in logic the two negatives do indeed yield a positive, in Shakespeare's grammar of English they did not. The other version, $\sim \sim P \supset P$, where the negatives are adjacent in the same minimal P, or S, does not seem to be attested in Shakespeare.

Bibliographical Notes

Evans, Mel. 2013. *The Language of Queen Elizabeth I: A Sociolinguistic Perspective on Royal Style and Identity*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. Publications of the Philological Society 46.

See the sections on multiple negation, pp 91-101. An extensive listing of negative structures across the range of Queen Elizabeth's writings. Is quite useful as a database but, like virtually all such treatments of this topic, fails to show the hierarchical syntactic structure, which is so easy to discern.

Franz, Wilhelm. 1939. *Die Sprache Shakespeares in Verse und Prosa, unter Berücksichtigung des Amerikanischen entwicklungsgeschichtlich dargestellt*. Shakespeare-Grammatik in 4. Auflage. Überarbeitet und wesentlich erweitert. Earlier versions: 1899-1900; 1909; 1924. Halle/Saale: Max Niemeyer Verlag. Reprinted Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1986.

The final version of Franz's pioneering work. A very useful compilation of classified data and constructions, with useful and often original analyses.[5]

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[5] Franz (1859-1943) was the first professor of English Philology (Language & Literature) in the University of Tübingen, 1903, emeritus 1929. His post was later split into two: Literature and Language. The first chair of English language was held by Hans Marchand (1907-1978), appointed in 1957, emeritus in 1973. This chair was split into two, Linguistics I and Linguistics II. The holder of the chair Lingustics II

Horn, Lawrence R. 1989. *A Natural History of Negation*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; London: The University of Chicago Press, Ltd.

Lowth, Robert. 1762. *A Short Introduction to English Grammar: With Critical Notes*. London: A. Millar and R. and J. Dodsley.

Mates, Benson. 1961. *Stoic Philosophy*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press; London, England: Cambridge University Press. University of California Publications in Philosophy. 1953. Second Printing (with new Preface).

Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Ingrid. 1995. *The Two Versions of Malory's Morte Darthur*: *Multiple Negation and the Editing of the Text*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer. An imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd, Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, NY. Arthurian Studies xxxv.
  Accepts and supports the latest view that Caxton's text (C) was edited from the Winchester Manuscript (W), and that they are not, as was formerly accepted, distinct descendants of distinct descendants of the putative original text. On the basis of this view she draws some conclusions, not only about the forms and evolution or decline and demise of multiple negation in English, but also about the literary and social circumstances of publication. She surmises, on the basis of the circumstantial evidence that seems to point in this direction, that the editor of the text, who not only increased the incidence of multiple negation but added other archaisms, was Robert Copland (*fl* 1508-1547), translator, author, and printer, who worked for Caxton and later for Wynkyn de Worde (*d* 1534?). The large quantities of classified data and the many original observations, analyses, conclusions and speculations make this an interesting and important study.

Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Ingrid; Tottie, Gunnel; van der Wurff, Wim (eds). 1998. *Negation in the History of English*. Berlin; New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
  Has 12 papers, most of them dealing with multiple negation (negative concord) or the mobility of the negative element [*aka* as iterative negation. DAR]. Representing different theoretical and

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was Hans Berhard Drubig, now emeritus. DAR was appointed to the chair of Linguistics I in 1975, emeritus 1996, the successor to Marchand. DAR is therefore indirectly in the line of succession from Franz to the present day.

methodological approaches, 4 papers are written within the generative framework; most of the others offer a quantitative perspective and seek functional explanations of the problems investigated.

Tottie, Gunnel. 1991. *Negation in English Speech and Writing. A Study in Variation* San Diego [etc]: Academic Press, Inc. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers. Quantitative Analyses of Linguistic Structure 4.

       A corpus-based study, using the LOB (Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus) and other corpus material. Treats a wide variety of negative and related constructions in English from syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and communicative points of view. Of especial syntactic interest is the variation in the distribution and use of affixal negation, *not* (...) *a*/*any* + N, called *not*-negation, *vs no* + N, called *no*-negation, which are by no means always mere alternatives of each other, and to which she devotes especial attention. The variations in use between speech and writing are quite striking. Very many corpus-based real examples, which are not always analysed in full, but are simply listed for illustrative purposes, although they are not always exactly parallel. Particularly disturbing is that linear strings of negative constructions are treated as if the analysis into constituents and negative constructions are self-evident, although they are not always analysed, or analyzed correctly, into bracketed (hierarchical) structures, so that supposed contrasts are not such.

       She adopts the method, which can be recommended over the method of inventing examples ("data") *ad hoc* for illustrative purposes in order to instantiate grammatical principles, of creating alternative, parallel, contrasting, or ungrammatical instances by manipulating real examples. Despite this, there is the usual number of questionable grammaticality judgements; some contrasts between possible and impossible sentences involve the juxtaposition of non-parallel examples. As in the case of other examples (see above), these are all too often left unanalysed as if their construction and relevance were self-evident. There are numerous charts and statistical tables, and a very comprehensive and useful 8-page list of References (bibliography).

Visser, Fredericus Theodorus. 1963-1973. *An Historical Syntax of the English Language*. Three Parts in Four Volumes. Leiden: E. J. Brill.