

DOUBLE NEGATIVES: NOT (NECESSARILY) UNGRAMMATICAL



Despite the rallying cries of grammarians to banish the double negative, many people see the construction as a logical and vital part of the English language.

The grammar rules enforced by grade-school teachers can stick in the brain as reflexive laws that must be followed: It is incorrect to start a sentence with “but” or end one with “of”; make sure your subjects and verbs agree; double negatives are illogical, etc. But many matters in grammar are not straightforward, and the double negative is a good example.

Not a Mathematical Matter

The common objection to the double negative goes something like this: Using logic analogous to algebra, two negatives make a positive. Therefore, saying, “I am not unhappy” is logically equivalent to saying, “I’m happy.” The problem is that words convey meaning, and in most cases this meaning is not simply negative or positive. The double negative is used in languages worldwide to convey the many nuances between “yes” and “no.”

There are several types of double negatives, and most respected grammar books accept some grudgingly and reject others outright. One kind uses the double negative to express a weak affirmative, or to stealthily affirm something without coming right out and saying it. Referred to as the rhetorical figure *litotes*, these constructions convey understatement by denying the contrary, and they’re often used to avoid an overstrong presentation. Examples include “I don’t dislike him” or the aforementioned “I am not unhappy.”

Don’t Be So Negative!

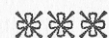
The double negative that provokes strong negative reactions is the type that uses two or more negatives to convey a nuanced or emphatic negative meaning. Examples include “I’m not going nowhere,” “You ain’t heard nothing yet,” and “We don’t need no stinking education.”

Using the double negative in this way follows consistent rules of grammar, yet this particular usage has fallen out of favor. In this case, words such as “no” and “nothing” serve as the logical equivalents to “any” and “anything,” transforming the previous sentences into “I’m not going anywhere,” “You haven’t heard anything yet,” and “We don’t need any stinking education.” In most languages, two negatives are preferred to the “negative-plus-any” construction. Yet, according to the “two negatives equals a positive” argument of grammarians, the sentences would translate roughly as “I’m going somewhere,” “You’ve heard something,” and “We need a stinking education.”

Old and New Opinions

The double negative fell out of favor in the 18th century, when English and American academics attempted to create a standardized language that could be used in writing. Although the double negative had long been treasured as a powerful rhetoric device—Erasmus once deemed it “graceful” and “elegant”—many came to see the double negative as either illogical or vulgar; George Orwell felt it should be “laughed out of existence.” The double negative of the “don’t need no” variety came to be associated with the lower classes and was condemned as illogical. The “not unhappy” variety, which was still used by many in the upper classes, was permitted.

Double negatives in English are alive and thriving today, and according to linguist Jenny Cheshire, “They’re used in all the dialects, whether rural or urban, Southern Hemisphere or Northern Hemisphere; they occur in African American English and in all the English Creoles. It is only in the standard variety of English that double negatives have fallen out of favor.” It would probably be a bad idea to use the double negative in a college application essay, but as far as the logic of the double negative is concerned, it’s not incorrect to say it’s okay.



- “Now, correct me if I’m incorrect, but was I not told it’s untrue that the people of Springfield have no faith? Was I not misinformed?” —Brother Faith, in The Simpsons episode “Faith Off”