

# CLS 27

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### Part Two: The Parasession On Negation

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## Duplex negatio affirmat...: The Economy of Double Negation

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O grammar rules, O now your virtues show;  
So children still read you with awful eyes,  
As my young dove may, in your precepts wise,  
Her grant to me by her own virtue know.  
For late, with heart most high, with eyes most low,  
I crav'd the thing which ever she denies:  
She light'ning love, displaying Venus' skies,  
Lest once should not be heard, twice said No, No.  
Sing then my Muse, now Io Paeon sing,  
Heav'n's envy not at my high triumphing:  
But grammar's force with sweet success confirm:  
For grammar says—O this dear Stella weigh—  
For grammar says—to grammar who says nay?—  
That in one speech two negatives affirm!  
(Sir Philip Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*  
(1581), Sonnet LXIII)

It is mere cowardice to seek safety  
in negations.  
(Philip to Maggie in George Eliot's *Mill  
on the Floss* (1860), Book V, Chapter IV)

Nothing shows why  
At this unique distance from isolation,  
It becomes still more difficult to find  
Words at once true and kind,  
Or not untrue and not unkind.  
(Philip Larkin, "Talking in Bed" (1964))

My name is Larry and I'm a negaholic. In her important recent monograph, Chérie Carter-Scott diagnoses the negaholic syndrome as an addiction "based upon the physiological, chemical rush you experience every time you engage in negative thoughts, words, or actions" (1989: 8). If you are a fellow sufferer, as your interest in the proceedings of this parasession betrays you to be, you can take comfort in the finding that your affliction is curable, but to escape its clutches you must "really want to take control of your negaholism, turn it around so that you get what you want and can refocus your energy in a positive way" (219). While Carter-Scott outlines various useful therapeutic means toward this end, their common technique is to overcome or negate the negation within you. This traditional prescription, with the patent label DUPLEX NEGATIO AFFIRMAT, may be just what the metaphysician ordered for you "confirmed negaholics" who seek to attain "a positive self-image" through adopting "an external program in which to detoxify yourself from the negative demon within" (Carter-Scott 1989: 6).

My humble contribution to this therapy program<sup>1</sup> must perforce concentrate on those varieties of double negation in which each negative marker retains its semantic identity, thus (essentially, if not exactly) tending to annul rather than reinforce each other (see Horn 1978: §3 for a typology of multiple negation). The expectation that two negatives SHOULD cancel out is a linguistic reflex of the logical Law of Double Negation (LDN),  $\sim(\sim\alpha) = \alpha$ , a law whose co-sponsors include the Stoics of Greece and the Buddhist and Nyaya logicians of India, and whose conscientious objectors include the Intuitionists and—if only by his eloquent silence—Aristotle (cf. Horn 1989: 22, 84, 135 for details).

Prescriptivists have long enlisted this law in defense of the position that, as the influential Bishop Lowth (1762: 126) puts it, "Two negatives in English destroy one another, or are equivalent to an affirmative."<sup>2</sup> Traditional grammarians trained this dogma to bark at the reinforcing or concordial negations that have always flourished in nonstandard dialects (and in certain constructions within the standard dialect; cf. Jespersen 1917, Labov 1972, Horn 1978a: §3.2), typically attributing negative concord to logical immaturity:

It is natural in early forms of language to strengthen the negative...but as the users of a language grow more logical they come to feel that doubling a negative in a sentence is negating a negation and there that it is not correct except in the rare cases where it is desired to express such a round-about affirmative. (*No one who is not familiar with it...*)  
(Earle et al. 1911: 54)

But other grammarians have been more understanding:<sup>3</sup>

When a boy in the street declares that he "hain't seen no dog", it is not true that 'two negatives make one affirmative', for he intends simply an emphatic negation...In other words, two negatives may make an affirmative in logic, but they seldom do in English speech...The somewhat artificial 'not unnecessary', 'not impossible' and the like (imitated from the Latin) are almost the only exceptions in English.  
(Greenough & Kittredge 1901: 220)

In older, popular English...2 or 3 negatives were felt as stronger than a single negative, on the same principle that we drive in two or three nails instead of one. (*I can't see no wit in her*, letter from Lamb to Coleridge, 1797)...Under Latin influence, we have come to feel that two negatives make an affirmative statement.  
(Curme 1931: 139)

Despite their differences over reinforcing negatives, where two negs are stronger than one, grammarians on both sides of the fence converged to dismiss the use of logical double negation as a marginal, superfluous, and suspiciously Latinate phenomenon.

One early dissenter, however, was the best-selling American authority Lindley Murray, who after first endorsing the party line on condemning the double negative—

Two negatives, in English, destroy one another, or are equivalent to an affirmative: as, "*Nor* did they *not* perceive him"; that is, "they did perceive him." "His language, though inelegant, is *not ungrammatical*", that is, "it is grammatical". It is better to express an affirmation, by a regular affirmative, than by two separate negatives, as in the former sentence.  
(Murray 1803: 136-7)

—suspended the sentence in his second, "improved" edition:

but when one of the negatives is joined to another word, as in the latter sentence, the two negatives form a pleasing and delicate variety of expression.  
(Murray 1814: I.187)

Murray's milquetoast mid-Lowthian stance would hold no sway with Tesnière (1959: 233), who excoriates *nec non dixit* ('nor did s/he not say', i.e. 'and s/he said') as "*une des fausses élégances du latin*", much less with that redoubtable redundancy hunter George Orwell (1946: 357, 365), whose favored prey was the dread *not unjustifiable assumption*:

Banal statements are given an appearance of profundity by means of the *not un-* formation...It should be possible to laugh the *not un* formation out of existence...One can cure oneself of the *not un* formation by memorizing this sentence: *A not unblack dog was chasing a not unsmall rabbit across a not ungreen field.*

It should be noted that Tesnière cites a frozen DN of an unusually elevated, not to say pedantic, character (see Hoffmann 1987: 92-94 on the *nec non* construction) and that Orwell's prescribed laughing-cure depends on the exploitation of a variety of constraints on the distribution of doubly negative prenominal adjectives (cf. Langendoen & Bever 1973) rather than on double negation per se. There are at least two distinct environments in which negation is directly associated with an already negated constituent:

- (2)a. He's not an unhappy man.                      c. He's a not unhappy man.  
b. It's not an impossible task.                      d. It's a not impossible task.

In the predicate position of (2a,b), the outside negator has sentential scope and the sentence constitutes a PREDICATE DENIAL, NEXAL, or SENTENCE negation in the terminology of Aristotle, Jespersen, and Klima respectively. In the prenominal position of (2c,d), both negative elements function as TERM, SPECIAL, or CONSTITUENT negations.

Crosscutting the syntactic differentiation by columns is an equally salient semantic differentiation by rows. Full redundancy would demand an equivalence of *not unA* and *A*, but no such equivalence can be semantically sustained for the pair in (2a,c). The unanswered question here is just WHAT the duplex negatio affirmat, a question on which even Bishop Lowth was silent. When the semantic cancellation of the twin negations apparently does proceed, as in the *impossible* pair of (2b,d), why does a speaker bother to employ them? What is the logic behind the use of duelling negatives? One diagnosis is provided by the usual consultation with Dr. Jespersen (1924: 332):

Language has a logic of its own, and in this case its logic has something to recommend it. Whenever two negatives really refer to the same idea or word the result is invariably positive; this is true of all languages...The two negatives, however, do not exactly cancel one another so that the result [*not uncommon, not infrequent,...*] is identical with the simple *common, frequent*; the longer expression is always weaker: "this is not unknown to me" or "I am not ignorant of this" means 'I am to some extent aware of it', etc. The psychological reason for this is that the *détour* through the two mutually destructive negatives weakens the mental energy of the listener and implies...a hesitation which is absent from the blunt, outspoken *common* or *known*.

On most maps, Jespersen's *détour* is depicted as an elevated road. Thus, Marchand comments that "Natural linguistic instinct would not make the sophisticated detour of negating a negative to obtain a positive" (Marchand 1960: 151-2). *Not uncommon, not unhappy*, and (even less convincingly) *not bad*, while possible collocations, would thus fall outside what is permitted by "natural linguistic instinct."

Seright (1966: 123) too sees logical double negation as "limited to the speech of the educated", while he echoes Jespersen in observing that the doubly negated adjectives of (3) do not simply affirm the corresponding positive:

- (3) a. That is not unlikely                      → That is likely  
b. That is not unnatural                      → That is natural  
c. That is not inconceivable                      → That is conceivable  
d. That is not impossible                      → That is possible

But there are really two different sides to the nonredundancy of these forms, depending on the architecture of the duplex in question. This can be explored through the Aristotelian distinction between contradictory and contrary opposition, as schematized in (4). Crucially, contradictory opposites are mutually exhaustive as well as mutually inconsistent, while contrary opposites do not mutually exhaust their domain (cf. Horn 1989 for elaboration).

- (4) CONTRADICTORY OPPOSITION:                      CONTRARY OPPOSITION:
- |         |         |         |         |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| (not-G) | (not-F) | (not-G) | (not-F) |
| F       | G       | F       | G       |
- 
- |           |          |
|-----------|----------|
|           |          |
| white     | white    |
| odd       | [neither |
| male      | poor     |
|           | happy    |
| non-white | black    |
| even      | rich     |
| female    | unhappy  |
- Contradictory opposition is governed by the Law of Contradiction (LC) and the Law of Excluded Middle (LEM): if F and G are (one-place) contradictories, then
    - (i) by LC, for any x in the relevant domain,  $\sim(Fx \ \& \ Gx)$ .
    - (ii) by LEM, for any x in the relevant domain,  $(Fx \vee Gx)$ .
  - Contrary opposition is governed by LC but not by LEM.
- (5) CONTRADICTORY (CONTRARY (Adj<sub>i</sub>))  $\neq$  Adj<sub>i</sub>  
CONTRADICTORY (CONTRADICTORY (Adj<sub>i</sub>)) = Adj<sub>i</sub>

When the negative-prefixed adjective is a CONTRARY of its stem, a contradictory negation will not simply destroy it: what is *not unlikely* may be likely, but may instead fall within what Sapir (1944) calls the ZONE OF INDIFFERENCE, that which is neither likely nor unlikely. Someone may be *not unhappy* because she is happy, or because she is feeling blaah. But if something is *not inconceivable* or *not impossible*, what else CAN it be but *conceivable* or *possible*? Where is the zone of indifference, the unexcluded middle, in these cases? Why don't these doubly negated forms, amounting to the contradictory of a CONTRADICTORY, result in complete redundancy? Nor are these examples rare: the majority of the *not un*-forms cited in the OED (under *not*, 10c), including *not unuseful*, *not inconsiderable*, and *not unclever*, strike us as negations of logical contradictories. To ascribe to someone "a certain air of dignity, not unmingled with insolence" (OED citation, 1900) is not to assume a zone of indifference where dignity cavorts neither mingled nor unmingled with insolence. Nor is it clear how finding a suggestion *not unuseful* differs from finding it *useful*, or how Jespersen's description (1917: 70) of Kant's table of categories as "not unobjectionable" fails to reduce to declaring it objectionable.

If the *not unA* collocation is, as Zimmer (1964) notes, "logically quite justified" when *unX* is the contrary of *A*, it must be pragmatically or rhetorically justified elsewhere—or at least not unjustified. While Orwell's *not unblack* dogs and *not unsmall* rabbits may remain beyond the pale, an earlier and perhaps subtler stylist, Erasmus (see below) recommended the use of the double negative as "graceful". We have already encountered Lindley Murray's reconsideration of double negatives as forming "a pleasing and delicate variety of expression", and more recently, Sharma (1970: 60) lauds its use as "often extremely useful and by no means superfluous", as when *not impolite* is used "to convey the fact that the person in question was not polite either." But what quality could render a given construction simultaneously laughable, faux-elegant, graceful, pleasing and delicate, and extremely useful, depending on the context and the evaluator? What, precisely, is the

difference between *X* and *not unX*, when *unX* is not clearly a contrary negation of *X*? What motivates a sophisticated detour, when the through road is (not im)passable?

The standard position is Jespersen's: a doubly negated adjective is perceptibly weaker, more hesitant than the corresponding simple positive, whether the weakening is identifiable in the semantics (*not unhappy*, *not unintelligent*, *not impolite*) or is only pragmatic or rhetorical. For Seright (1966: 124), the use of double negation "results from a basic desire to leave one's self a loophole: certainly it is much easier to get out of a situation, to equivocate, if one has said 'it is not unlikely' instead of 'it is not likely' or 'it is likely'." With the conscious or tacit goal of loophole-procurement, the speaker describes something as *not unX* in a context in which it would be unfair, unwise, or impolitic to describe that entity as *X*. We see this in the attestations in (6), contributed by an essayist and two cartoonists:

- (6) a. I do not pretend to be a "pure" bachelor. I was married for five years, and it was, to use a cowardly double negative, not an unhappy experience.  
(Phillip Lopate, introduction to *Bachelorhood* (1981))
- b. Abject employee to boss: "Chief, I'm truly sorry!"  
Boss: "Oh, very well, Thornapple, you are not unforgiven"  
Employee, walking off: "You never know just how to interpret him..."  
(Comic strip "The Born Loser", *New Haven Register*, 2/21/90)
- c. [Scene: Couple standing before doormat inscribed NOT UNWELCOME]  
Wife to Husband:  
"See what I mean? You're never sure just where you stand with them."  
(Cartoon in *New Yorker*, 2/8/71)

The implication in each case is clear: a not unhappy marriage is not precisely a happy one, the not unforgiven employee's insecurity is not entirely alleviated, and Mr. and Mrs. Dinner-Guest are left feeling not exactly welcome.

Related to this loopholistic property, there is often a sense that the positive evaluation associated with the doubly negated adjective represents a concession, wrung out reluctantly from the source of the lefthanded *not un-* compliment. This understanding is especially salient in the *not unX...but...* collocation. When Naomi Bliven writes of Kevin Starr's book on the California Progressive movement (*New Yorker* 8/12/85),

I wish Mr. Starr had been kinder to California's Progressives. He is certainly not unjust in pointing out their limitations, but it seems to me that we do not recognize all that the pre-WWI reform movements in this country accomplished...

her syntax tends to suggest that one might have considered Mr. Starr to have been unjust (or to have thought Bliven so considered him), a suggestion the *not un-* phrase explicitly dispels. When another *New Yorker* reviewer writes that "[Anais] Nin's life was not uninteresting", we contextualize the remark either AS a concession ("Contrary to what might have been expected from the foregoing,...") or as ANTICIPATING one ("but perhaps not as interesting as she suggests"). To say that Seright's analysis is *not unlike* Jespersen's, or that a sneeze is physiologically *not unlike* an orgasm, is to suggest that one might have expected more of a dissimilarity between the terms of comparison. Similarly, while *not without X* may be a frozen elaboration on *X* (as in the motto NON SANS DROICT on Shakespeare's crest), its function as a conventional rhetorical turn in e.g. *The life of a*

*millionaire is not without its compensations*, like the related double negative *nothing if not* (*He's nothing if not earnest*), plays off the actual or implicit suggestion that one might otherwise have thought the contrary (i.e., that such a life WAS without compensations, that he is NOT earnest). In each case a concessive *but-* clause seems to be tacitly understood.

This understanding is stressed by Fowler, who foreshadows Orwell by consigning the doubly negated attribute to the ashheap of "faded and jaded elegance", but then finds sufficient grounds to spare its life:

The very popularity of the idiom in English is proof enough that there is something in it congenial to the English temperament, & it is pleasant to believe that it owes its success with us to a stubborn national dislike of putting things too strongly. It is clear that there are contexts to which, for example, *not inconsiderable* is more suitable than *considerable*; by using it we seem to anticipate & put aside, instead of not foreseeing or ignoring, the possible suggestion that so-&-so is inconsiderable.  
(Fowler 1926: 383)

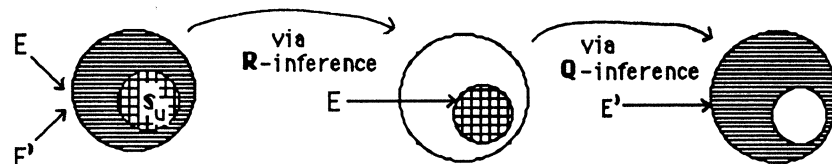
In its prototypic exemplars, as in the lovers' search for those elusive "words at once true and kind, or not untrue and not unkind" in the Larkin epigraph, *not un-* is used à la Jespersen to assert more weakly, tentatively, or circumspectly the content of the simple positive. As shown by the standard scalar diagnostics in (7), even double contradictories (as in (7b-d)) pattern as weaker than their corresponding simple affirmatives, whether by infection from the parallel negation-of-contrary cases or perhaps through the iconic connection between circumlocution and attenuation:<sup>4</sup>

- (7) a. She's happy, or at least not unhappy. (\*not unhappy, or at least happy)  
b. It's possible he can do it, (\*not impossible, or at least possible)  
or at least it's not impossible.  
c. Not only is it not untrue, it's true! (\*not only true, but not untrue)  
d. It's not even not untrue, (\*not even true, let alone not untrue)  
let alone true.

But rather than appealing for an explanation, with Jespersen, to the rather Victorian image of double negation sapping the listener's mental energy, we can assimilate this effect to a tendency I have elsewhere (cf. Horn 1984; 1989: Chapter 3) identified as the DIVISION OF PRAGMATIC LABOR: the use of a longer, marked expression in lieu of a shorter expression involving less effort on the part of the speaker tends to signal that the speaker was not in a position to employ the simpler version felicitously.

Within the dualistic Zipfo-Gricean model I propose, the R Principle is an upper-bounding speaker-oriented correlate of the Law of Least Effort dictating minimization of form, while the Q Principle is a lower-bounding hearer-based guarantee of the sufficiency of informative content. There is an R-motivated correlation between the stylistic naturalness of a given form, its relative brevity and simplicity, and its use in stereotypic situations. The corresponding periphrastic forms, stylistically less natural and more complex, are correspondingly Q-restricted to those situations outside the stereotype, for which the unmarked expression could not have been used appropriately, as seen in the diagram in (8) and paradigm in (9).

(8)



- (9)a. Black Bart caused the sheriff to die.  
Black Bart killed the sheriff. (McCawley 1978: 250)
- b. I'd like to see something in pale red.  
I'd like to see something in pink. (Householder 1971: 75)
- c. My brother went to the church (the jail, the school, the bed).  
My brother went to church (jail, school, bed).
- d. He wants him to win. (cf. Chomsky 1981 on AVOID PRONOUN;  
He wants Ø to win. also Reinhart 1983, Levinson 1987, et al.)
- e. I am going to marry you.  
I will marry you. (cf. Searle 1975 on Indirect Speech Acts)
- f. I need a new driller./cooker.  
I need a new drill. /cook. (cf. Kiparsky 1983, AVOID SYNONYMY)
- g. I was knitted this sweater by my father's wife.  
I was knitted this sweater by my mother.
- h. It's not impossible that the Kurds will survive.  
It's possible that the Kurds will survive.

Thus the speaker who opts for the periphrastic causative in (9a) suggests that Bart acted indirectly, *pale red* in (9b) suggests a tint within that portion of the color space not pre-empted by pink, the longer version of (9c) implies literal motion to the specified location without the socially stereotypic connection R-associated with the corresponding institution on the anarthrous version, the speaker's avoidance of the gap or PRO in (9d) signals the absence of the coreferential reading associated with that syntax, the periphrastic form in (9e) blocks the indirect speech act function of promising that the modal is conventionally used to convey, while in (9f) the agentive *-er* nominals are excluded on the meanings pre-empted by the more lexicalized zero-derived deverbals: a driller can only be an agent, given that drills are instruments, but a cooker can only be an instrument, given that cooks are agents. In (9g), the referent of *my father's wife* would normally be inferred as distinct from that of *my mother*, unless the extra information is relevant in the context (*You have to remember: she is my father's wife*). The same equilibrium is illustrated by the use of "logical" double negation, as in (9h), where the two negatives do not cancel out functionally or rhetorically even when they do logically.

From this perspective, we would expect to find a range of contexts in which the use of the double negative might be motivated by a desire to avoid the simple positive description, including contexts in which *not unX* might come out not weaker but STRONGER than *X*. Some have in fact seen double negation as functioning characteristically to reinforce rather than qualify a description. Sigwart (1895: 149) anticipates Jespersen in his remark that even when the doubly negated adjective is not "richer in meaning" than the simple positive alternative, "it is not altogether to no purpose [!] that this circuitous route is taken", but the purpose he imputes is precisely the opposite of Jespersen's: "Resisted attacks increase

the psychological firmness of conviction; the affirmation which has fought through a negation seems to stand firmer and to be more certain." While Sigwart's line may seem less plausible than the standard Jespersen-Seright-Sharma story on double negation, especially when we consider the negated-contrary (*not unhappy*, *not unintelligent*) class, the two views are not incompatible. When a prefixal negative is itself negated so as to yield a positive, any one of a number of motivations may be at work, not all of which are subsumable under a single metaphor, be it Sigwart's doubly-negated-affirmation-as-good-soldier, Jespersen's weakened mental energy, Marchand's sophisticated detour, or Seright's loophole. When a simple positive description gives way to the prolixity and potential obscurity of a double negation, there is always (given the Division of Labor) a SUFFICIENT reason, but it is not always the SAME reason.

This point would not have been lost on Erasmus, who—under the heading *Commuta in Negationem* ('Change it into a Negative') in his *Colloquia*—recommends the use of double negation as a discreet means for conveying a strong positive, e.g. *non ineloquens* for the blatant and overdirect *eloquentissimus*, 'Your letter was no small joy', 'Wine pleases me not a little'. More precisely, Erasmus (1517/1965: 617-18) slyly observes,

You shouldn't be left uninformed [!] that we use this sort of diction in two ways: for the sake of modesty, especially if we're talking of ourselves, and the sake of amplifying. For we say correctly and gracefully "not ungrateful" for "very grateful", "not vulgarly" for "singularly". [*Non ingratum, pro valde grato: non vulgariter, pro singulariter, recte & venuste dicimus.*]

Erasmus here closely follows Brown & Levinson's (1986: §5.4) exposition of the role of negative politeness in maintaining the concept of negative face.

Double negation, as extolled by Erasmus, qualified by Jespersen, savaged by Orwell, and pardoned by Fowler, typically instantiates the classical rhetorical figure of LITOTES, that species of understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by the negation of the contrary.<sup>5</sup> Here follow two standard Renaissance-era descriptions of the figure:

Leptotes [sic] is when the speaker by a negation equipollent doth seem to extenuate the which he expresseth...Thus, He is not the wisest man in the world, that is, he is not wise at all: this and such like forms of speaking are used for modesties sake, or it were not so seemly to say that he lacketh wit or that he is a fool...This form of speech tendeth most usually to praise or dispraise, and that in a modest form and manner. (Peacham 1593: 150-51)

[In "Liptote"] we temper our sense with words of such moderation, as in appearance it abateth but not in deed...it becomes us many times better to speak in that sort qualified, than if we spake it by more forcible terms, and nevertheless is equipollent in sense. [exx: *I know you hate me not 'you love me very well', I am not ignorant 'I know well enough', Such a man is no fool 'He is a very wise man'*]...Such moderation of words tend[s] to flattery, or soothing, or excusing. (Puttenham 1589: 184)

It is but a short step from Peacham and Puttenham to Leech's portrayal of litotes (1983: 148) as "a way of underplaying pragmatically disfavored aspects of meaning, to mitigate both self-praise and criticism of others."<sup>6</sup>

Like the *not un-* formation in particular, the superordinate (or overlapping) category of litotes has not enjoyed a particularly favorable press, especially from the vitriol-dipped pen of "Martinus Scriblerus" (1727: 115)—a pseudonymous stand-in for the triumvirate of Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, and John Arbuthnot—in *The Art of Sinking*, where our poor figure is defaced as "the peculiar Talent...of Ladies, Whisperers, and Backbiters." It is presumably just such individuals who might have reason, through choice or necessity, to conceal their true feelings, avoid overstatement and direct commitment, and allow themselves loopholes.

The history of the application of this figure in classical rhetoric predates the term. We turn first, as usual, to Aristotle, whose *Rhetoric* offers an early account of maxim clash, with speakers urged to apply whichever rule their discourse purpose dictates. Thus, he recommends (III.5) the use of specific words and not vague general terms; to "avoid ambiguities, unless indeed you prefer to be ambiguous, as those do who have nothing to say but pretend to mean something", those whose circumlocutions remind us of diviners that speak in vague generalities, "because their predictions are thus less likely to be falsified." And who thereby manage, in Gricean (1975: 49) terms, "to quietly and unostentatiously violate" the submaxim Avoid Ambiguity.

Similarly, to achieve *ὀγκος* or impressiveness of style (III.6), use a description rather than a name to refer, unless you aim at brevity, in which case use the name. Use overt connectives, or for brevity omit them and use the asyndetic form. And then there's the negative description: "Describe a thing by mentioning attributes it does not possess...You may apply this method of treatment by negation either to good or bad qualities, according to which your subject requires" (III.6.7).

The anonymous first century B.C. Latin author of the *ad Herennium* was clearly aware of the concept of negative politeness later explicated by Erasmus, Brown & Levinson, Leech, et al., in recommending the discreet use of negative description to avoid "invidium in vita et odium in oratione".

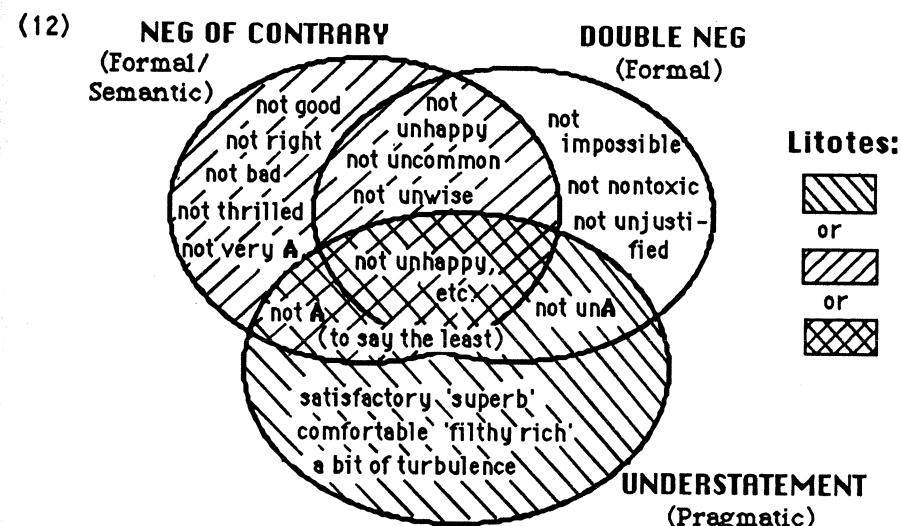
Understatement [*deminutio*] is when we say that...we or our clients possess an advantage which, to avoid arrogant ostentation, we diminish and attenuate in our speech, in this fashion: "...I have striven to be no laggard in military discipline." If the speaker had said "...to be the best", he might have spoken truly, but would have seemed arrogant. This way he has said enough to avoid envy and garner praise.

[Or, pointing out the financially secure status of a client accused of theft,]

"Avarice? His father had left him a patrimony that was—I do not wish to exaggerate—not the smallest." Here too calling it "large" or "very large" was avoided. (Auctor ad Herennium, quoted in Hoffmann 1987: 24-5)

A century later, Quintilian described the figure of attenuation (*species minuendi*): "We may say that one who *struck* another merely *touched* him, and that one who *wounded* another merely *hurt* him" (Quintilian/Butler 1921: VIII.iv.1), or to choose a more negative class of substitutions (X.i.12), "Instead of 'I know', we say 'I am not ignorant', or 'The fact does not escape me', or 'I have not forgotten', or 'it can be doubted by none.' [*Scio Non ignoro et non me fugit et Non me praeterit...et Nemini dubium est*]." This device is related to PERIPHRAISIS (*circumlocutio*), applying to whatever "might have been expressed with greater brevity", but is expanded for purposes of ornament, a method sometimes (*nonnunquam*, lit., 'not never') necessary for expressing what would be indecent to mention

directly, as in Sallust's "*Ad requisita naturae*", 'to meet the demands of nature' (VIII.vi.59-61). I have argued elsewhere (Horn 1984) that such instances of euphemistic vagueness are characteristic of R-based socially motivated narrowing and as such are not dissimilar to the more conventionalized versions of litotes; a similar instance of euphemization figures in the first actual use of the term *litotes* in a Latin text, in the 3rd century commentator Porphyrio's gloss on Horace's use of *olens* ('smelling') for *putidus* or *foetens* 'stinking' (compare English *Something smells here*, discussed in Horn 1984: 33). Notice that litotes, so defined, does not require single, let alone double, negation. In fact, the scope of the term has been variable, although the prototypic instances of litotic understatement have generally involved double negation, negation of the contrary, or both, as is perhaps not entirely obscured in (12):



Litotes via the negation of the contrary is first discussed under the Greek label *ἀντεναντίωσις* 'saying the opposite of the opposite', illustrated by the denial of the superlative in the oft-cited Homeric turn *not the weakest of Achaeans* for 'the strongest'. The fourth century rhetoricians Donatus and Servius initiated the received characterization of litotes (*not slow* for 'very quick', *no small matter* for 'a matter most important') as a figure in which we say less and mean more, *minus dicimus et plus significamus* (cited in Hoffmann 1987: 28-9). In the analogous terms of the anonymous author of the *Carmen de Figuris* (c. 400 A.D.), the denial of the contrary, a.k.a. *exadversio* or *ἀντεναντίωσις*, is when you show the most by the least, *minimis si maxima monstras* (Hoffmann 1987: 30). Thus litotes encapsulates pragmatic inference, for we have here in embryo Grice's celebrated contrast of what is said and what is meant, along with Levinson's dictum (1987: 402) for R-based inference that "the less we say the more we mean."

In his insightful study of litotic negation, Bolinger points out (1972: 116) that logically speaking, "the denial of the negative leaves the entire positive range open to whatever degree is appropriate", the context narrowing down the intended range actually intended by



the speaker. Thus, to cite two of his examples, *I was not unaware of the problem* may convey 'I was damn well aware of it', while *It was a not unkindly meant remark* might suggest that the remark in question was not intended as particularly kind or unkind. Similarly, as Hoffmann (1987: 109-10) notes, *non ingratum* ('not unpleasant') could range over 'not disagreeable', 'not unwelcome', or 'generally acceptable'. This point, related to the observations of Erasmus and Puttenham on the multiple motivations for concealing strong positive assertions in weakened and/or doubly negated clothing, would have been old hat to Hermogenes, the second century A.D. Greek commentator on Homer, who observes that when a negation does not have the same force as the positive, its force is sometimes less ('when we restrict our speech for safety's sake', as in Homer's *not-evil*, *not-witless* in lieu of the stronger *good*, *sensible*, when positive attribution cannot be confidently ascribed) and sometimes more (*not the weakest* = 'the strongest', *not glad* = 'very much distressed'). In the former case the first quantity maxim (or my Q Principle) is constrained by Quality, in the latter by social and cultural considerations. Perhaps it is observations like these that led my spell-checker to propose that when I write *Gricean* I really mean *Grecian*.

After this brief history of classical litotes, our prescriptivists can be seen smirking and heard muttering in the wings, "imitated from the Latin", "under Latin influence." And indeed, the use of the litotic double negatives of the form *vir non indoctus* type are pervasive in both Greek and Latin texts. But as shown by Bracher (1937), Hollander (1938), and Shuman & Hutchings (1960), early Germanic literature—Old Norse poetry in particular but also Old English poetry and prose and Middle High German—are rife with negated negatives ('it is not unknown to you', 'it is not ill-advised', 'it is not unexpected', 'it is not altogether unlikely') and other expressions with litotic force, with or without a perceptible ironic flavor. Significantly, rhetorical understatement is more frequent in Beowulf and other early OE texts, BEFORE Latin influence could be plausibly implicated.<sup>8</sup> Hollander (1938: 2) remarks that Middle High German litotes "goes precisely with the garrulousness and excessive padding that mark so much of the literature", presumably as reflexes of that same Germanic character trait surfacing to the west in the Anglo-Saxon's antipathy, identified by Fowler, against "putting things too strongly."

As an expression of litotes, double negation violates not only the R-based Brevity maxim, but also the Q-based informativeness criterion corresponding to the first Quantity maxim (Grice 1975: 45: "Make your contribution as informative as is required") or its ancestors and rivals.<sup>9</sup> An investigation of the Division of Pragmatic Labor (Horn 1990b) reveals a dichotomy between those cases in which linguistic economy or least effort is overridden on Q-based grounds typically involving the avoidance of homonymy, as against those in which the override is motivated by non-informational, rhetorical considerations.<sup>10</sup> An instance of the former variety of motivated non-economy is provided by redundant affixation or double marking (Horn 1988), including but not limited to the redundant negative prefixes of *unthaw*, *unloosen*, *debone*, and *irregardless*, while the latter variety is exemplified by redundant affirmation (Horn 1991), in which the affirmation of *q* when informationally redundant on a proposition *p* already established as true in the discourse will be discourse-acceptable if *q* counts as argumentatively distinct from—or, more generally, rhetorically opposed to—*p*. What makes double negation particularly worthy of study in this light is its potential to instantiate BOTH varieties of anti-economic modes of expression.

This can be seen from an (admittedly inexhaustive) annotated taxonomy or *catalogue raisonné* of motivations for employing DN, and the *not unA* construction in particular.

- (14)a. Quality: S is not sure A holds, or is sure it doesn't (where *unA* is contrary of A).
- b. Politeness: S knows (or strongly believes) A holds, but is too polite, modest, or wary to mention it directly.
- c. Irony: S acts as if she is is hesitant, unsure, modest, etc., even when these propositional attitudes are put on for the occasion.
- d. Weight or impressiveness of style: S violates brevity precisely to avoid brevity.
- e. Absence of corresponding positive: *not unA* is motivated by the non-existence of A, or by the impossibility of using A appropriately in the context.
- f. Parallelism of structure: *not unA* is in juxtaposition with earlier *unB*, as in the construction *B<sub>neg</sub> {if/but} B'*, where *B'* is more naturally realized as a DN.
- g. Minimization of processing, in contexts of direct rebuttal or contradiction: S's assertion *x is not unA* is triggered by an earlier assertion (or suggestion) to the effect that *x is unA*.

(14a) is the epistemically-triggered negation of the contrary, where a speaker must violate Brevity and Quantity because she is bound by the need to observe Quality: if I'm not sure he's happy, as Hermogenes recognized, *He's not unhappy* may be the best I can do. Thus, typically,

"These days all marriages seem to be doomed", said Barney. "Who's happy?"  
 "I'm not unhappy", Mike offered. Gael Greene, *Doctor Love* (1982), p. 209

(14b) collects the loopholistic, gracious, and cowardly DNs: S seeks to avoid the direct expression of a face-threatening act (Auctor ad Herennium, Leech, Brown & Levinson). As seen from the Seright and Sharma observations cited above, *not unA* may also be read as a negation of the contrary. Not surprisingly, contexts of politics, religion, and literary criticism abound. (Boldface is added to these and later citations to mark the relevant DN.)

[An unidentified senior Republican source] said there were also widespread rumors that Brent Scowcroft, the national security adviser, was "**not displeased**" at the Gray-Baker fight. N. Y. Times article (3/29/89: A16) on "vendetta" between Secretary of State James Baker and White House counsel C. Boyden Gray

It is difficult to document the books' influence, but it is **not uncommon** for [Japanese] businessmen to express concern over what they see as excessive Jewish influence in American foreign policy.

N. Y. Times article, 2/19/91: A11, on popularity of anti-Semitic books in Japan  
 A number of Mormons who would not discuss the rituals verified that these reports were "pretty factual" or "**not inaccurate**."

N. Y. Times, 5/3/90: A1, on elimination of secret Mormon temple rituals requiring women to wear veils and portraying non-Mormon clergy as hirelings of Satan

Mrs. Thwaite has also written lives of Edmund Gosse and Frances Hodgson Burnett, and you can sometimes hear in her prose the plummy, throat-clearing tones of old-fashioned literary homily. In this book, as in the others, they are **not inappropriate**. Review in New Yorker, 4/8/91: 95, of biography of A. A. Milne

In a radio interview in Budapest on Thursday, Judith Toth, head of the refugee department in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, said that "it would **not be impossible**" for Hungary to grant asylum to East German citizens if, as expected, Parliament adopts a refugee statute under discussion. N. Y. Times, 8/6/89: A3

The incident [in which three Chinese were sentenced to death for storming a government armory to steal guns and ammunition to sell to Tibetan rebels] was a reminder that while the opposition to Chinese rule has been largely peaceful so far—partly because it is backed by Buddhist monks who profess pacifism—it is **not impossible** that protestors will increasingly turn to violence.

N. Y. Times, 5/22/91: A14, "Beijing Marks 40 Years of Tibetan 'Liberation'"

Though it may **not be impossible** for what starts life, so to speak, as a conversational implicature to become conventionalized, to suppose this is so in a given case would require special justification. Grice (1975: 58)

I haven't seen *Pretty Woman*, but I read the script..., and it was a dark, kind of quirky, depressing, **not uninteresting** script. Now, the first thing they do is case a twenty-one-year-old cheerleader in that movie...

Ellen Barkin, interviewed in *Esquire*, April 1991, p. 103

The wimpish or coy avoidance of directness may inspire the innovation of an *not unA* form even in the absence of an *unA* base. Such innovations, however, may be met with some resistance on the part of the recipient:

"You're not enjoying this are you, me stroking you? Your face went all resigned when I started. Are you?"

"I'm **not disenjoying** it."

"Thanks a lot", said Brenda, stopping stroking.

Kingsley Amis, *Jake's Thing* (1979), 57

The eyes [of the 7-Eleven cashier] focused on me more sharply. "Honey, you don't need the Personals. I mean, you're **not uncute**"...

I slid behind the wheel. "Did you realize I'm **not uncute**?"

"You're not what?"

"Uncute. According to the cashier."

She gave me a look of disgust. "Sometimes I despair for the future of the English language." Dorothy Sucher, *Dead Mean Don't Marry* (1989), 210-11

Overlapping with these categories or overlaid upon them is the pursuit of an ironic style. Nash (1986: 91) cites DN and its relatives, as they appear in *They are not unskilled* or *The plan is hardly assured of success*, as signposts of typical upper crust Book Style: "In British usage, ironic modality, negation, and understatement may often be interpreted as marks of class—symptoms of 'talking posh'." Depending on the common ground assumptions of speaker/writer and hearer/reader, an indefinitely large proportion of the DNs cited here (or found in e.g. Henry James) might be taken as ironically intended.

In (14d), the double negator violates Brevity precisely to AVOID brevity, to achieve a lofty, impressive, or expressive style.<sup>11</sup> Into this category falls the deployment of DN as the defense mechanism of the bureaucrat and the stentor, Orwell's *not unblack dog* and Tesnière's *nec non dixit*. The goal here is Aristotle's *ὄγκος*, a word whose literal meaning of 'bulk, weight' metaphorically extends into stylistic dignity, impressiveness, majesty, or (especially under Scriblerian or Orwellian evaluation) more negatively into self-importance, pretension, OVERweight, and stylistic bloat. The line between pomp and pomposity is not always easy to discern.

A less frequently remarked-upon motivation for DN cited in (14e) involves the use of *not unA* prompted by the absence of any corresponding positive form A:

"If you're from Washington Heights you probably think of Inwood as just a section of the neighborhood", said Sgt. Robert Parente of the 34th Precinct, which takes in the entire area north of 155th Street. "But if you're from Inwood you're more likely to think of it as separate. That's mainly because people don't want to be associated with Washington Heights' reputation as the crack capital of the world." But he added that the image is **not undeserved**. On several blocks south of 181st Street and east of Broadway a multi-million dollar drug market has long flourished.

N. Y. Times, 8/20/89: 34

"By becoming pregnant women do not waive the constitutional protections afforded to other citizens", the judge said. "To carry the law guardian's argument to its logical extension, the state would be able to supersede a mother's custody right to her child if she smoked cigarettes during her pregnancy or ate junk food, or did too much physical labor or did not exercise enough." Women's rights lawyers say such concerns are **not unfounded**, and point to the case of Pamela Rae Stewart...

N. Y. Times article, 1/9/89: A11, on judge's dismissal of state move to indict a pregnant drug user for child neglect against fetus

Student-Athletes? **Not Unthinkable**.

Editorial Headline, N. Y. Times, March 1991

Another class is governed by the parallelism factor in (14f), where primed negative structures are characteristically more natural than their "simpler" affirmative counterparts would be in the same context:

unexpected but **not unwelcome**  
unlikely if **not impossible**

non-Catholic but not **non-Christian**  
improbable, maybe, but **not inconceivable**

As bad as the increase in murders was, it was **not unexpected**.

N. Y. Times report, "New York City Reports Killings At Peak in 1990", 4/23/91, B4

Though Giamatti has power, it is not totally arbitrary, not unbridled, and **not**, as they say in legal circles, **unreviewable** by the courts.

N. Y. Times column, 5/8/89: C4, on the Pete Rose case; note the (e)-type DN **not unbridled**

These DNs<sup>12</sup> serve to minimize speaker and/or hearer processing, a factor also involved in the double negation of direct rebuttal noted in (14g), where *not unA* is triggered by a prior instance of *unA*. Both contrary and contradictory *unA* attributions can be denied in this context with nothing at all implicated concerning informative strength; thus in the citations below there is no suggestion here that a hypothetical solution to a mystery might be neither possible nor impossible, or chamber music audiences neither limited nor unlimited.

"You say you think he's in trouble, but the evidence points to a runaway with Marjorie. What's so impossible about that?"

He smiled slightly. "It's **not impossible**. Middle-aged man...but it just doesn't seem like him." Shelley Singer, *Full House* (1986), 48

For years, the Chamber Music Society's horizons seemed unlimited. Concerts sold out to the walls. Performing units were dispatched to other cities and festivals, enhancing the group's national reputation and increasing musician income. But an additional Monday evening series did not do well and it became apparent that the audience for chamber music in New York was **not unlimited** after all.

N. Y. Times article, 12/4/88: H27



It is perhaps the tendency for rhetoricians to examine DNs out of context or to limit their purview to monologic texts that explains the traditional neglect of these last two categories. For one more illustration of the importance of context for (14g)-type DNs, consider Rich Janda's promise to his audience at this conference, "We shall feed you what I hope is a not unappetizing diet of black beetles", which might well have been taken as a type **b** or **c** coy or ironic DN—if it hadn't been directly primed by Janda's prior citation of the Russellian description of hedgehogs "enjoying this unappetizing diet" of black beetles (Janda & Varela-García 1991).

Given that direct rebuttal requires wide scope negation, it is not surprising to find that this trigger fails to license the doubly negated pre-nominal adjectives mentioned above (cf. (2c,d)). Thus the distribution of negated contradictories is sharply constrained in NP-internal contexts, where a constituent particle negation applies to a constituent affixal negation, but perfectly acceptable in the (14g) context where predicate denial or "sentential" negation is used to rebut a prior overt or covert negative attribution. The non-occurrence of (15a), attributed to J. R. Ross by Langendoen & Bever (1973), is matched by the impossibility of *a not intransitive verb*, *a not non-toxic solution*, and so on.

- (15)a. \*Sheila wants to marry a not unmarried man.  
 b. a **not irrational** suggestion vs. #a **not irrational** number  
 a **not illegitimate** maneuver vs. #a **not illegitimate** daughter  
 a **not unfaithful** depiction vs. #a **not unfaithful** husband

Similarly, we get the contrasts in (15b)—assuming that each of the prefixed negations is indeed taken as the contradictory of its adjectival base. As Julia Hirschberg points out (p.c.), the last of these examples will be acceptable to the extent that *(un)faithful* can be understood as a non-binary, gradable feature: a not unfaithful husband might be one who strays only occasionally, covers it up well (or is totally open about it, depending on one's sexual politics), and so on. Similarly, in the most celebrated NP-internal DN of English metaphysical verse,

Whoe'er she be,  
 That **not impossible** she  
 That shall command my heart and me...

(Crashaw, "Wishes to his Supposed Mistress," 1648)

the poet's not impossible ideal would appear to be more elusive than her *possible* counterpart would have been: an ordinary contradictory is turned into an acting contrary. But no such restriction, no such forcing of an unexcluded middle, is required in the (14g)-type wide scope DNs:<sup>13</sup>

- (15') Unhappy? I'm not unhappy—in fact I'm delighted!  
 Roger Bannister proved that the 4-minute-mile WASN'T impossible.  
*Hit* is not unergative OR unaccusative, you dolt—it's not (even) intransitive!  
 Oops, I guess the solution WASN'T non-toxic after all.

As is clear from Langendoen & Bever (1973) (henceforth L&B), as well as from Orwell (1946), the Det-not-Adj-N construction of (2c,d) and (15) is subject to a range of constraints beyond the requirement that the Adj be scalar or gradable and that its negative prefix be interpreted (or reinterpreted) as a contrary rather than contradictory negation. The contrasts in (16)

- (16)a. He sent me a **not {unfriendly/\*friendly}** letter. (Zimmer 1964)  
 b. A **not {unhappy/\*happy/\*sad}** person entered the room. (Klima 1964, L&B)

motivated L&B to conclude that no simple, unprefixad adjective may be negated within this frame, and that the most explanatory account of this paradigm within a lexicalist framework is to constrain the grammar from generating ANY of the sentences in (16). L&B block a *not sad person* and a *not happy person* by also blocking a *not unhappy person* and then admitting the latter through the back door as an ungrammatical but acceptable formation, perceptually misanalyzed as if *un-* were an intensifying adjective like *too* or *very*. This misanalysis-analysis was subsequently abandoned (in Langendoen 1982) after being attacked on both conceptual and empirical grounds by Aitchison & Bailey (1979) and by Bolinger (1980)<sup>14</sup>, the latter of whom invokes such impeccable NPs as *a not erroneous assumption*, *a not revolutionary idea*, and *a not, shall we say, saaad turn of events* to argue that the starred examples in (16) are ruled out in part by their semantics and in part by the rhythmic structure of the post-negative adjective. Thus a *not happy person* and a *not sad person* have two strikes against them, since the adjectives both denote temporary states and receive initial stress.

One bone of noncontention between L&B and their critics is the observation noted above, viz. that the vast majority of attested doubly-negated attributive adjectives are well-behaved negations-of-gradable-contraries—

*A not unusual* occurrence may happen 10 to 50 percent of the time,  
 but for a *usual* one the frequency is certainly above .50. *A not unlikely* story is fairly believable but less so than a *likely* one.

(Hook 1990: 173)

—thus corresponding to the DNs of the (14a) type:<sup>15</sup>

Leaving Sfuzzi, we talked briefly with Marjorie, a **not unattractive** diamond dealer... "There's no possibility in my life I'd ever pass up a man", she said. "I've had three husbands and a million men."

Column in N. Y. Times, 3/22/89, B1, on survival of single bars in the age of AIDS  
 ...gave little thought to the **not disproved** dangers of eating cycad-seed products  
*New Yorker* article on epidemic of neurological diseases in Guam, 10/29/90, p. 101  
 May I remind you of the **not inconsiderable** pressure we're under from the media

A. H. Garnet, *Maze* (1982), 57

Another subclass is licensed, in good Division of Pragmatic Labor fashion, by the absence of a corresponding positive, as in *a not unprecedented result*, which is NOT a scalar or gradable construction, as the impossibility of inserting *too* or *very* indicates. In the statement that baseball commissioner Bart Giamatti "made a not uncommon deal with Peters to get information" on Pete Rose (N. Y. Times column, 5/8/89, C4), the alternative version with *common* would have resulted in an entirely different (and not just an informationally stronger) allegation. Similarly, despite L&B's contention that a *not unA N* is possible only when *A* can exist on its own, we get a *not unheard-of development*, a *not unfounded rumor*, and such litotic constructions as

She was three thousand miles away, cultivating a **not-impooverished** uncle.

Amanda Cross, *A Trap for Fools* (1989), 40.

where the predication of *rich*, though accurate, is consciously avoided by narrator and inveterate ironist Kate Fansler.

While Bolinger's stress factor does seem to be implicated in the contrasts in (17),

- (17) a **not unmerciful** decision vs. ?\*a **not merciless** decision  
 their **not unmerciful** treatment vs. ?\*their **not merciless** treatment  
 a **not \*(entirely) careless** gesture  
 a **not \*(entirely) hopeless** situation

it is not difficult to counterexemplify the ban on initial stress and, *a fortiori*, L&B's constraint against positive adjectives, demonstrating that neither of these restrictions need hold when there is sufficient discourse motivation for the negative attribution:

Much of "Ghost Dad" is a demonstration of **not-dazzling** special effects by which Mr. Cosby is made to fly through the air, sink through the carpet, sit on top of lampshades and walk through doors.

Film review by Vincent Canby, N. Y. Times 6/29/90: C6

Now I go back with the **not-easy** job of telling my wife and children.

Richard Stern, *Other Men's Daughters* (1973), 119

...most of the 350,000 workers on the 1990 census took pride in their work and looked upon it as a patriotic endeavor. We all had to pass a **not-easy** test (I have a master's degree and am an educator)...

Letter to the editor of the *New York Times Magazine* by Faith Corrigan, Willoughby, Ohio

But the questioners persisted: surely *some* restaurants make it ahead of time and reheat it the next day? "Maybe", said Mr. Narin with a tiny smile. "Some **not-expensive** restaurant, maybe."

N. Y. Times, 8/23/89: C4

Judd Nelson stars as a deranged young man who turns to murder when the Los Angeles Police Department rejects his application to become one of the city's finest. The **not-great** screenplay explains the fellow's psychosis by the fact that his father was a policeman who taught the boy that there was no other life for him.

Review of film "Relentless" by Vincent Canby, N. Y. Times

She finds a two- or three-day old kitten sticking out of the Total box on top of the garbage can. She runs to Merriwether with the almost inert pile of fun in her **not-large** palm.

Richard Stern, *Other Men's Daughters* (1973), 241

Nearly everyone succeeded in training himself out of resentment at friends' triumphs. Max, however, remained particularly alert to Merriwether's **not-lengthy** list of honors.

ibid., 143

[U.S.C. anthropologist Barbara] Myerhoff recognizes that "most **not-young** men are unwilling to make the personal sacrifices on a day-to-day basis that feminism implies."

Frances Lear, "Love Between Grown-Ups", *Ms.*, December 1983, p. 81

The frequent appearance of the hyphen in these forms<sup>16</sup> (and its occasional, although now rare, appearance in their *not-unA* counterparts) signals the quasi-lexical status of particle-negated attributives, a status that correlates with the fact that—as seen, for example, in the contrast between (15) and (15')—prenominal DNs must be more strongly motivated by the Division of Labor considerations than the corresponding sentential DNs. As is well known, the principle of linguistic economy operates especially stringently within the structure of the lexicon, where each lexical item must earn its keep. The productive

coinage of prenominal negated adjectives, in a discourse context where *not-Adj* contributes something that would not be conveyed by the lexical contrary of *Adj*, operates on the fringes of the lexicon, in the good company of the deictic compound (Downing 1977) and the ad hoc denominal verb (Clark & Clark 1979).

We have thus far largely avoided those constructions in which two negatives do not, in Jespersen's terms, "refer to the same idea or word" but nevertheless result in conveying some affirmative, e.g. the logical dual of an operator sandwiched between the two negations (cf. Horn 1978: §3.1 and Horn 1989: Chapter 4 for discussion). The interdefinability of the logical operators is exploited by natural languages to provide alternative means of expression, such as the fossilized DN quantifiers of Latin, *nonnulli* 'not none', i.e. 'some' (or litotically 'quite a few'; cf. Hoffmann 1987: 141), *nulli non* 'none not', i.e. 'all'.

These periphrases of course do not in general conform to Jespersen's rule for the weakening effect of tautofocal double negation: if *X* is a weak scalar operator, *not...X...not* will convey a STRONGER affirmative than *X*. But given that it is not *X* that such a Duplex Negatio affirms but the DUAL of *X*, it is significant that an analogous perceived tentativeness of the periphrastic DN is often attested. Thus Yau (1980: 83), discussing the affective value of Cantonese sentences with two non-consecutive negations, finds that this construction "permet d'exprimer l'affirmative d'une manière tactique et prudente."

In particular, the interdefinability of the modals allows either the elimination of one of them from the lexicon. Thus, a sequence of the form *not...can...not* will represent the standard (or unique) way to express necessity (= *must*) in a declarative sentence. Indeed, we find in a wide variety of doubly negated periphrastic expressions, cushioning the iron fist of necessity or obligation in the velvet glove of possibility-flanking double negation. Thus in Yoruba (cf. (18)), Cantonese, Malagasy, and Basque (cf. 19), obligation and necessity are expressed by 'can't not', 'not able not':

- |      |                     |                      |  |
|------|---------------------|----------------------|--|
| (18) | Ade lè korin.       | 'Ade may/can sing'   | [ $\diamond p$ ]                             |
|      | Ade kò lè korin.    | 'Ade cannot sing'    | [ $\sim \diamond p$ ]                        |
|      | Ade lè mà korin.    | 'Ade may [not sing]' | [ $\diamond \sim p$ ] = [ $\sim \square p$ ] |
|      | Ade kò lé má korin. | 'Ade can't not sing' | [ $\sim \diamond \sim p$ ] = [ $\square p$ ] |

- |      |                    |             |        |                          |
|------|--------------------|-------------|--------|--------------------------|
| (19) | <u>Cantonese</u> : | m hoji m    | 'must' | (lit., 'not able not')   |
|      | <u>Malagasy</u> :  | tsy maintsy | 'must' | (lit., 'not able-not')   |
|      | <u>Basque</u> :    | ezin bertze | 'must' | (lit., 'impossible not') |

In other languages, 'can't not' is available as an optional but not unusual realization of the meaning of 'must', as in the examples in (20) from Harries (1973):

- |      |                    |  |                             |
|------|--------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| (20) | <u>German</u> :    | Hans kann nicht den Mann nicht hassen. | 'H. can't not hate the man' |
|      | <u>Hungarian</u> : | John nem tudta nem szeretni őt.        | 'J. couldn't not love her'  |
|      | <u>Latin</u> :     | Non possum non amare.                  | 'I can't not love'          |
|      | <u>Russian</u> :   | Ja ne mog ne dat' emu nagrǎdu.         | 'I couldn't not reward him' |

While in principle we might anticipate the analogous move of expressing possibility through twin negations flanking a necessity or obligation operator, such processes (*needn't* not for 'can') are rarely if ever found, given that there is no functional motivation for avoiding the direct expression of permission or ability.

If Duplex Negatio Affirmat, we would predict that **Triplex Negatio Negat**. And indeed we do find instances in which three semantically autonomous negatives yield the force of one attenuated negative, motivated by the same rhetorical and social pressures whose operations we have already witnessed:

We sincerely hope and insist that peaceful means should be used to solve the Taiwan issue...China has **never** committed to **not** taking **nonpeaceful** means to solve the Taiwan issue simply because such a commitment would make peaceful reunification impossible.

Chen Defu, Chinese Embassy Press Counselor, letter to editor of N. Y. Times, 7/18/89, A20

But, given the conceptual markedness of even simple negation and its concomitant difficulty for the language processor, as verified in extensive empirical studies by Clark, Wason, and others (cf. Horn 1989: Chapter 3), the geometric effect of the three negations is to motivate all too often the more appropriate slogan **Triplex Negatio Confundit**. The tendency to use a triple negation to convey a positive is especially prevalent when at least one of the negatives is incorporated into the adverb *too* or as an inherently negative predicate like *surprised*, *avoid*, *deny*, or *doubt*, as seen in the examples below. In these cases, we have the effect of a REINFORCING ("illogical") double negation canceling out an ordinary negation, yielding a positive.

There was **none too** poor or too remote **not** to feel an interest.<sup>17</sup>

Jane Austen, cited in Jespersen (1917: 78-9)

No detail was **too** small to **overlook**.

*New Yorker* 12/14/81, Words of One Syllable Department

People knew **too** little about him **not** to vote **against** him.

Bill Moyers on why voters in 1984 primaries voted for Gary Hart

**Nothing** is **too** small or too mean to be **disregarded** by our scientific economy.

R. H. Patterson, *Economy of Capital* (1865), cited in Hodgson (1885: 219)

No one is **too** poor **not** to own an automobile.

Review by Vincent Canby (N. Y. Times 1/22/84) of "El Norte", characterizing the naive belief of two young illegal Guatemalan immigrants about riches of America

There was **no** character created by him into which life and reality were **not** thrown with such vividness, that the thing written did **not** seem to his readers the thing actually done.

J. Forster, *Life of Charles Dickens* (1873), cited in Hodgson (1885: 219)

I **can't** remember when you weren't there,

When I **didn't** care

For **anyone but** you...

Opening lines of Kenny Rogers pop song "Through the Years"

I **can't** say I **don't** blame him.

Radio disk jockey; meaning in context = 'I don't blame him'

I have but one comfort in thinking of the poor, and that is, that we get somehow adjusted to the condition in which we grow up, and we do not **miss** the **absence** of what we have **never** enjoyed.

Froude, *Nemesis of Faith*, cited in Hodgson (1885: 218)

It **never** occurred to me to **doubt** that your work...would **not** advance our common object.

Darwin, cited in Jespersen (1917)

One senior White House official said **no one** ever **doubted** that Mr. Reagan would allow Mr. Meese's move to the Justice Department to **deprive** him of a trusted adviser who had served him in his 1980 campaign and later as counselor to the President.

N. Y. Times article "Politics and the Attorney General", 4/21/85

There is **no doubt** that the commissioner will **not** give Pete an impartial hearing.

Pete Rose's lawyer Reuven Katz in radio interview, 8/24/89, expressing his (perhaps premature) confidence in Commissioner Bart Giamatti's fairness

I would **not** be **surprised** if his doctoral dissertation committee is **not** composed of members from several departments within a university.

Letter of recommendation for applicant to Yale Graduate School

**Don't** be **surprised** if it **doesn't** rain.

Indeed, as Hodgson (1885: 218) muttered gloomily a century ago, "Piled-up negatives prove easy stumbling-blocks."<sup>18</sup>

And what of four negations? Here the language mechanism is completely overwhelmed, resulting in a range of extremely unfortunate examples:

No one **denies** that a baby with a neural tube defect **isn't** a **catastrophe**, but...

Dr. Philip LaMastra, quoted in the New Haven Advocate, 8/19/81

I have **never** known another reciter of a speech who could **avoid** **weakening** the sentences in his mouth by **not** thinking of the one that was to come.

H. Cockburn, *Memorials* (1874), cited in Hodgson (1885: 219)

"Bernie produced what Bernie is supposed to produce", Smith said, "but I **don't** think, either, that you can single out Bernie as **not** a guy who is **not** part of the **disappointment**."

New York Rangers' general manager Neil Smith, declining (I think) to absolve star forward Bernie Nicholls for his play in the team's first-round playoff series loss, N. Y. Times, 4/15/91, C3

The generalizing principle here can be given as **Quadruplex negatio fer'blondiat**.<sup>19</sup>

As we have seen, the use of "logical" double negation may appear to be more or less logical, depending typically on extralogical considerations of rhetorical goals and discourse context. But what is the logic of double negation? Geach (1970: 80), acknowledging that a double negation, *not (not (P))*, "looks like an added piece of meaning" and so might well be thought to involve a different sense from that of the basic element *P*, asks how—given the Law of Double Negation (LDN)—this different sense can be expressed. Citing Frege (to whom we shall return), Geach concludes that "the right rejoinder is just to deny that the doubly negated predicate has got a different sense." But then we are left with no explanation for the perceptible weakening or attenuation associated with double negation by Jespersen and others, including Geach himself.

Hintikka (1968: 42-47) begins from the same point as Geach, with the observation that "in ordinary language a doubly negated expression very seldom, if ever, has the same logical powers as the original unnegated statement", and follows likewise with a semi-rhetorical question and an unequivocal reply:

Does not our propositional logic therefore distort grossly the logic of ordinary language? The answer is...that if the basic meaning is assumed to be tantamount to that of the original unnegated expression we can explain the residual meanings which a doubly negated expression has on different occasions...But no one of these residual meanings helps to understand the others, which makes a paradigmatic analysis of the meanings of a double negative completely useless. (Hintikka 1968: 47)

Hintikka's "residual meanings" include the indication of hesitancy or uncertainty, the signalling of diffidence, and the expression of irony. Our other contextual requirements for double negation from the taxonomy in (14)—not all of them really meanings at all, as in the DNs of pattern symmetry and direct rebuttal—would serve only to strengthen the point that no special of "paradigmatic" meaning of double negation can be established, but only a semantico-pragmatico-rhetorical inventory of motives. Hintikka shares with Geach the presumption that doubly negated propositions or predicates are logically indiscriminable from the simple affirmation into which they cancel out. But this proves to be, shall we say, a not unimpeachable assumption.

Given the criterion of intensional isomorphism (Carnap 1947: 56-64), as Lewis (1972: 182-83) and Cresswell (1973: 44-47) observe, there can be no true synonymy (identity of meaning) between  $\sim(\sim\alpha)$  and  $\alpha$ , since the former, with its more complex logical form, must have a correspondingly more complex meaning. Given LDN, the two logical forms are intensionally and propositionally equivalent, denoting the same function from possible worlds to extensions (i.e. truth values in the case of propositions), but they are not fully synonymous.

The classic cases motivating the distinction between propositional identity and synonymy are those involving belief contexts: it is precisely because expressions like *bachelor* and *unmarried man*, or like 5 and *the sum of 3 and 2* behave differently when embedded under *believe* that synonymy must be chiseled with a finer tool than intension. So too with a proposition and its double contradictory: just as the truth of (21a) is compatible with the falsity of (21b), even though a bachelor is necessarily an unmarried man, so too the intensional identity between *possible* and *not impossible* fails to license the inference of the sentences (22b) on the basis of the corresponding examples in (22a).

- (21) a. Chris maintains that bachelors are not unmarried men.  
       b. Chris maintains that bachelors are not bachelors.  
 (22) a. Lee claims that it is not {impossible/inconceivable/untrue} that Kim is lying.  
       b. Lee claims that it is {possible/conceivable/true} that Kim is lying.

If implicatures are read off logical form, double negation might well carry an implicature which is absent from its intensionally equivalent but non-isomorphic simple counterpart.

Of course, LDN enters the picture only when the two negations in question can be reduced to propositional operators, with wide scope and contradictory rather than contrary semantics. Yet this is precisely the kind of Duplex Negatio that is rarely if ever attested in natural language. While the proto-Fregean propositional logic of the Stoics explicitly allows for the equivalence expressed by LDN ("*Not: not: it is day* differs from *it is day* only in manner of speech"—Alexander of Aphrodisias, quoted in Mates 1953: 126), no such law figures within Aristotelian term logic.

I have elsewhere (Horn 1989: Chapter 7) defended a neo-Aristotelian model for natural language that allows for two varieties of descriptive negation which can occur singly or

together. In this model, all root sentences are of categorical, subject/predicate form, a predicate term being either affirmed or denied of its subject. This can be seen below:

- (23)a. Socrates is a white man. [affirms *white man* of S; entails that S exists]  
       b. Socrates is not a white man. [denies *white man* of S; true if S does not exist]  
       c. Socrates is a not-white man. [affirms *not-white man* of S; entails that S exists]  
       d. Socrates is not a not-white man. [denies *not-white man* of S;  $\neq$  (23a)]  
 (24)a. The King of France is bald. a'. The King of France [is not] non-bald.  
       b. The Queen of England is transitive. b'. The Queen of England [is not] intransitive.

In (23a), *white man* is affirmed of *Socrates*; this yields a true proposition only if there is a Socrates and he is a white man. (23b) is the corresponding predicate denial: the predicate term is denied of *Socrates*, resulting in a true proposition if Socrates doesn't exist, isn't white, or isn't a man. (23c) is not a negative proposition at all: rather, a negative term is affirmed of the subject. As in (23a), this comes out false if Socrates doesn't exist. Finally, a negative term can be denied of the subject, as in (23d), but this does not cancel out to the simple affirmative (23a), since it does not entail the existence of the subject. And similarly with category mistakes: just as (24a') can be true while (24a) is vacuous and thus automatically false, so too the double negation of (24b') is true and its simple affirmative counterpart (24b) false. The King of France is neither bald nor non-bald if he doesn't exist, the Queen of England neither transitive nor intransitive if she's not a verb.

Under the analysis of predicate denial as a mode of predication, a negative way of combining subject with predicate to form a proposition (very much à la Montague 1970: cf. Horn 1989: §7.2 on the treatment of Aristotle as a Montague grammarian), wide-scope negation is not a one-place iterating propositional connective, and no law of double negation can be defined on it. Indeed, as the discussion of (23) and (24) reveals, there is no true double contradictory negation within this system.

Besides predicting why the *It is not the case that it is not the case that  $\phi$*  type of DN, along with the Stoic-Fregean external negation connective itself, is conspicuous by its absence from ordinary non-philosophical discourse, the Aristotelian model is congenial with Huddleston's observation (1983: 423) that while a Duplex Negatio may logically affirm, it remains a syntactic negation. As he remarks of e.g. *He doesn't know nothing about it*,

From the point of view of logic, the two negatives cancel each other other: they are logically equivalent to the positive *He knows something about it...* But from a syntactic point of view the negatives do not cancel each other: the clauses are negative, not positive. This is because the first negative is clausal, the second subclausal.

Huddleston's point, and Aristotle's before him, carries over equally to the *not un-* variety of tautofocal double negations that have occupied us here.

As we have seen, DN has been recognized for millenia as a prototype instance of circumlocution or periphrasis, its distribution subject to what Hintikka calls "the pragmatic pressure not to use circumlocutions without some specific purpose" (1968: 42). While there are, as we have also seen, several such purposes that can act separately or in concert to motivate periphrastic double negation, let us return once more to the modesty factor. In the *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Campbell (1801: 247) remarks of circumlocution that "We choose it

for the sake of decency, to serve as a sort of veil to what ought not to be nakedly exposed." And so it is with double negation.

Classical Fregean propositional logic allows for but one negative operator, the contradictory-forming propositional operator. Not unexpectedly, Frege (1919: 130) proclaims the logical superfluity of double negation: "Wrapping up a thought in double negation does not alter its truth value." Within this metaphor,  $(\sim\sim\phi)$  and  $\sim(\sim\phi)$  are simply different ways of wrapping up the thought or proposition  $\phi$ . But, we may observe, there are times and places where a man cannot go naked, when wrapping him up in clothes serves an ecological and/or social function while leaving the "inner man" unaltered. So too with naked thoughts—especially those unappealing ones which profit most from the modesty provided by the protective layers of double negation.

We are now prepared to go forth, to acknowledge and turn around our negaholism, to focus our positive energy by detoxifying ourselves from the negative demons within. And perhaps to solve another puzzle into the bargain. Until now, I never knew why Grice employed an apparently redundant formulation of Brevity, enjoining the speaker to avoid UNNECESSARY prolixity. After working on double negation, I suspect I no longer don't know.

<sup>1</sup>Working in a related research paradigm, Marlene Carpenter (1991) "analyzes cursing as a manifestation of negative thinking, feeling and attitudes, and then provides arguments to demonstrate that a happy and healthy consciousness is correct, connected to positive speech, and vice versa." (I have been unable to consult Carpenter's work; this elegant description is taken from the publisher's blurb.)

<sup>2</sup>Whereas two affirmatives never reduce to a single negative. ("Yeah, yeah", in the immortal riposte of Sidney Morganbesser.) Seriously, though, this asymmetry in the cancellation properties of negation and affirmation has often been taken as a diagnostic for notional negativity in predicates and propositions: one who is bad at being bad is good, but one who is good at being good is not bad. Cf. Givón 1970 and Cruse 1980 for additional examples and discussion.

<sup>3</sup>Even during the golden age of prescriptivism, while the standard line is that of Lowth (whose grammar appeared in 49 editions), parroted by (among dozens of others) Ussher (1793: 48: "Two negatives instead of one are very improper; Ex. *I can not eat none*, ought to be, *I can eat none*, or *I can not eat any*"), it would occasionally be acknowledged that "in very animated speeches, where a man were delivering himself with vehemence and heat", certain double negations, by virtue of their "more forcible sound", "might perhaps be used not with an ill grace[!]" (Baker 1779: 59). Martin (1748: 93) provides a cogent mathematical gloss on the two varieties of double negation:

The two negatives as used by the Saxons and French must be understood by way of apposition...which way of speaking is still in use among us; and in this case the two negatives answer to the addition of two negative quantities in Algebra, the sum of which is negative. But our ordinary use of two negatives (in which the force of the first is much more than merely destroyed by the latter) corresponds to the multiplication of two negative quantities..., the product of which is always affirmative.

For more on double negation in the eighteenth century grammatical tradition, cf. Tiekens-Boom von Ostade (1982) and Austin (1984).

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Haiman (1985) on iconicity in similar domains and Horn (1978: 181) on the inverse correlation between the force of negation and the distance between a negative and its focus. The scalar diagnostic frames in (8) are discussed and exemplified more fully in Horn (1972) and Horn (1989: Chapter 4).

<sup>5</sup>In some systems, the more general effect of understatement is assigned to the figure of *meiosis*. Depending on the rhetorical system, the domain of litotes may be subsumed under, or may overlap with, that of *meiosis*; we return to this point below. Cf. Lausberg (1960: 304-5) for an annotated survey of the figure of litotes within classical rhetoric.

<sup>6</sup>It is no accident that the instances cited here involve evaluation rather than objective assessment. One particularly striking result from Hoffmann's detailed survey of the functions of litotes or *Negatio Contrarii* in Latin is that fully 88.8% of her 311 relevant exemplars are evaluative in character (Hoffmann 1987: 158).

<sup>7</sup>Quintilian ultimately refines his conception of *brevitas* until it resembles the two-sided coin of Gricean Quantity: "Personally, when I use the term brevity, I mean not saying less, but not saying more than the context requires" (*non ut minus, sed ne plus dicatur quam oporteat*: *Inst. Orat.* IV.ii.43).

<sup>8</sup>This is noted by Bracher (1937) and, a half century earlier, by Tolman (1887: 32): "I think that the rhetorical device of 'denying the opposite' is more frequent in A.-S. than in later English poetry, though it is of course very common in both."

<sup>9</sup>For example, Grice's "first shot" at the maxim (1961: 132: "One should not make a weaker statement rather than a stronger one unless there is a good reason for so doing"), Fogelin's Rule of Strength (1967: 20: "Make the strongest possible claim that you can legitimately defend!"), and variants of the same principle suggested by Mill, Strawson, O'Hair, and Harnish. (Cf. Horn 1990a for references and discussion.)

<sup>10</sup>This view set forth here is a variation on a theme from Horn (1984, 1989, 1990b). Recent neo-Gricean accounts of litotes are offered by Leech (1983), Hübner (1983), Hoffmann (1987) and Caffi (1989).

<sup>11</sup>In his trichotomous version of the division of labor, Henri Frei distinguishes not two but three interacting functional principles: *le besoin de brièveté* (cf. my R), that of *clarté* or *différenciation* (cf. my Q), and that of *expressivité*. In at least some cases of DN, Frei's first two forces operating in tandem are evidently overridden by the non-informatively grounded *besoin d'expressivité*.

<sup>12</sup>A related DN of a different syntactic type is contributed by Bill Bogle of Fort Worth in "Yankees Just Don't Understand Barbecue", a letter to the editor of the New York Times (5/29/91, A22):

If it ain't greasy, it ain't barbecue. If it ain't pit smoked, it ain't barbecue. If it ain't black on the outside, it ain't barbecue. If it ain't served without ketchup, it ain't barbecue.

<sup>13</sup>Similar patterns hold for single negations of binary, non-gradable predicates. Thus *6 is not odd* may be peculiar out of context, given the fact that it fails to communicate anything not communicated by the briefer *6 is even*. Of course, *not odd* will be a natural enough predication for the gradable (=peculiar) sense of the adjective, just as the Latin DN formation *non impar* could be used for 'not dissimilar' but not for 'not odd' (Hoffmann 1987: 114). But even such an apparently pointless utterance as *6 is not odd* or *6 is not an odd number* may occur felicitously in a (14g)-type discourse context, one that contains or evokes either the false proposition that 6 is odd or the open proposition that *x* is odd (cf. Wason 1965, Horn 1989: 176). On the other hand, while—as we shall see below—GRADABLE simplex adjectives are readily *not*-prefixed, the non-gradability of *odd* renders *6 is a not-odd number* inconceivable in any context.

<sup>14</sup>Bolinger takes the stipulation of a putative class of ungrammatical-but-acceptable sentences to be an act of desperation for the grammarian *in extremis*. On the contrary, he argues (1980: 54), "a *not unhappy person* is either grammatical or we had better close out our business."

<sup>15</sup>All the instances of Det-not-Adj-N in the tagged Brown corpus of 1988 conform to this description, e.g. *a not unlikely conclusion*, *a not inapt description*, but it should be noted that the corpus contains far more examples of the form *a not Adv Adj N*, where the *Adv* slot is an intensifier of the class of *too*, *very*, *so*, *particularly*, *totally*,...

<sup>16</sup>The same hyphen shows up in duplicate (or n-plicate) within the related class of prenominal *not-Adv-Adj* attributives mentioned in the previous note. This construction, signalling a negative scalar value weaker than that denoted by its more fully lexicalized *unA* counterpart, frequently involves a variation on some stereotyped adjective + noun collocation. Some sample citations, mostly from the New York Times:

the not-altogether-false guise  
Storyteller of Not-Always-Pretty Tales  
Early Favorite in Not-Just-Hockey Country  
not-particularly-religious persons of  
Muslim background  
more than a few not-so-bad films  
A Not-So-New World Order  
the not-so-romantic medical world

not-so-senior executives  
Not-So-Simple Title for Graf  
A Not-Very-Divided City  
that not-very-small comfort  
this not-too-shabby-for-an-old-duffer album  
a not-very-quiet watchfulness  
salient in a not-yet-organized-domain  
Help for the Not-Yet-Affluent



<sup>17</sup>On the level of performance, Jespersen's analysis of these constructions as involving a blend or fusion (here, of *none so Adj as to VP* with *none too Adj to VP*) would appear quite plausible.

<sup>18</sup>These stumbling blocks occasionally trip up the legal system. Bryant (1930: 264) cites a case from the Alabama state court in 1912 in which Aletha Allen, a 80-year-old deaf woman, was killed by a train after having been warned not to go onto the track, prompting her estate to sue the Central of Georgia Railway Company. The original verdict was for the defendant, the jury finding the late Ms. Allen guilty of contributory negligence, but a new trial was granted because of an errant Triplex Negatio:

The charge to the jury had been that unless the jurors believed from the evidence that the engineer did not discover the peril of the woman in time to avoid injury [emphasis mine—LH], they must decide in favor of the defendant. The higher court held that *unless* meant "if not", the use of the double negative having the effect of making the charge predicate the defendant's right to an acquaintance based upon the fact that its engineer did see the dangerous position of Aletha Allen in time to prevent the injury. The jury overlooked the grammatical inaccuracy, as the court did, and interpreted the charge as a correct proposition of the law. Thus the court ordered that the original verdict be adhered to.

The decision was based on the interpretation of the intent. The court did not intend to use a double negative; the jury, not realizing that a double negative was used, gave their verdict accordingly.

Thus the principle that Triplex Negatio Confundit is enshrined in the halls of justice, at least in Alabama.

<sup>19</sup>For readers not familiar with the somewhat obscure Late Latin verb employed here, the standard pronunciation of this loanword is *farblondzhet*.

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