

Why it's not wrong to be doubly negative

A TEACHER was addressing a class and said, "Two negatives might make a positive, but we can be sure that two positives don't make a negative". From the back of the class came a voice, "Yeah, right".

Even if "yes" is a positive and "right" is a positive, anyone who believes that the laws of logic drive the laws of language use will have great difficulty with Tui billboards if they try to understand "Yeah, right" as an emphatic positive. (Notice that you can gain the same effect by saying "Yeah yeah", as long as the intonation is right.) The clear corollary is that language use does not follow the same rules as mathematical logic.

Yet the reason frequently given for judging double negatives like "I didn't see no cat" to be "bad English" is precisely that they break the rules of mathematical logic: two negatives make a positive. If such rules do not necessarily apply to language use, this argument falls flat on its face.

Despite that, the argument has had a great effect. Because of this argument, it has become the case that double negatives are avoided in the press and in serious scientific or academic writing, and people who use them are judged not to be very well educated.

That's quite an achievement for a rule that was invented so recently. In the 15th century, Chaucer was perfectly happy to describe the knight in *The Canterbury Tales* by telling us that

*He never yet no villeynye ne sayde
In al his lyf, un-to no maner
wight*

(Literally: He never yet no rudeness not said in all his life unto no manner of person).

And in *Twelfth Night* (III.i) Shakespeare writes

*I have one heart, one bosom, and
one truth*

*And that no woman has; nor ever
none*

*Shall mistress be of it, save I
alone.*

Nobody objects that French is illogical because the French say "Je ne sais pas" (literally: I not know not). Rather the contrary: the French get criticised when they use only single negation and say "Je sais pas" (literally: I know not). In fact, except in standard English, it seems most speakers of most languages know the more often you say a negative, the more emphatic the negative is. Even in standard English, an expression like "a not unhappy person" is considered



Laurie Bauer

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

relatively respectable, and we can all answer a question by responding "No no" without meaning "yes".

While we consider the oddity of the point that standard French used a double negative but informal French uses one, while standard English uses one and informal English uses a double, we can consider another peculiarity of variation in the history of French.

French is Latin with 1000 years' worth of changes added to it. In Latin, if you wanted to say "I shall love", the future time marking was shown by an ending on the verb "amabo". Then speakers obviously started to feel this wasn't referring to future time clearly enough, so they replaced that construction with a sequence of two words, "amare habeo" (literally: I have to love). With time, that "habeo" got worn away, and modern French for "(I) have" is "ai", and so there is a modern French future form "aimerai", now once more perceived as a single word.

In spoken French, though, this is not felt to indicate future clearly enough, and French speakers tend to say (but not necessarily to write) "je vais aimer" (literally: I am going to love). So French has gone from marking the future as an ending, to marking it with a separate word, to marking it with a separate word in a period of 1000 years.

In the 19th century it was widely believed one of these was superior to the other. The French evidence suggests that they are just different points in a cycle, and that saying things in one word or saying the same thing in two are simply different but equivalent ways of operating — neither is inherently better than the other.

■ Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz

■ Laurie Bauer, a linguist from Victoria University, is the author of a dozen books on linguistics, most recently *The Linguistics Student's Handbook* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007).