

## English negation from an interactional perspective

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THIS PAPER DISCUSSES THE USE OF *NEVER* as a strategy for expressing negation in English. I will argue that it is an important strategy, but that its importance has been overlooked because of the convention in linguistics of analysing forms in isolated sentences rather than in the conversational contexts in which they occur. This practice forces us to rely on our intuitions about the role of a given form in the structure of a language, so that we risk unwittingly describing the prescriptive norms concerning its use rather than the way in which it fits into the syntactic structure of the language. My aim in the paper is partly linguistic, seeking to show that previous accounts of English *never* are inadequate and to explain how *never* functions as part of the syntax of English; I assume, however, that syntactic features can have interactional functions, and a further aim is therefore to document some of the functions that *never* fulfills in interaction. By taking account of the interactional functions of syntactic features we can often gain a better understanding of syntactic questions; this is demonstrated by, for example, Ford's (1993) analysis of adverbial clauses in American English, and it is also the case with *never*. In sections 2 and 3 of the paper I briefly set out the history of English *never* together with the problems that linguists have encountered in its analysis. I then show the insights that can be gained by considering *never* in its conversational contexts.

### 1. A BRIEF HISTORY OF ENGLISH *NEVER*

A common cycle in the history of negation in many languages, including English, is for the negative marker to become weakened, both phonetically and semantically, and then to be reinforced. Thus the Old English negative marker *ne* was reinforced by the addition of *a*, 'ever'

and *wiht*, 'anything': *nawiht*, literally 'not ever anything', was phonetically more substantial than *ne* and also semantically stronger, incorporating as it did the universal temporal quantifier, *a*. Old English *nawiht* has developed into the present-day negative marker *not*. *Not* is a weak negative in present-day English, having lost the sense of universal quantification and occurring widely in a reduced phonetic form as the clitic [nt]. The cycle has continued, with speakers turning once again to the universal quantifier, *never*, in order to reinforce the negative. In present-day English, therefore, *never* occurs both as the universal temporal negator and as a simple negative. Its role as the universal temporal negator is illustrated in 1, which can be paraphrased as 'there is no occasion when the boys from Shinfield ever come here' (unless otherwise stated, the examples in this paper are taken from recordings made during participant-observation of adolescent conversations in adventure playgrounds in Reading, England). Two examples of *never* as a simple negative are given in 2 and 3, both taken from the Oxford English Dictionary. These examples show that *never* has been used as a simple negative for centuries. A present-day example of *never* as a simple negative is given as 4:

1. Shinfield never come down here.
2. A mervuelous swaine, at I was in a Wildernesse wuste I neuer where. (1362, Langland, W. The Vision of William concerning Piers Plowman)
3. He asked what that was and his wiff said that she wost nuer. (1450, The book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry)
4. I never went to school today.

Under normal circumstances we might have expected the cycle to continue, with *never* becoming phonetically and semantically weakened, and a substitute form being introduced in order to reinforce the now weakened negative. The spelling in the examples above suggest that the intervocalic consonant in *never* (originally from Old English *ne aefre*, 'not ever') may already have been lost by the 14th century; and the spelling *ne'er* in the representation of speech in novels dating from the nineteenth century indicate how *never* was pronounced at that time. This pronunciation was unpopular with prescriptivists, however: Jespersen (1982 [1905]:219) reports that short forms such as *howe'er*, *e'er* - and presumably also *ne'er* - were branded as vulgar by schoolmasters during the nineteenth century, with such success that they disappeared from ordinary conversation. As a result, *ne'er* survives today only in poetry and in some rural dialects of English.

Prescriptivists objected, as we might expect, not only to the reduced form of *never*, but also to the restriction of its meaning from universal temporal negation to simple negation. Although there is no record until the mid-eighteenth century of a prescription involving *never* (see Sundby, Bjørge and Haugland 1991), guides to good usage published during the twentieth century virtually always comment on the use of a single form, *never*, with two meanings that are apparently incompatible (to refer to universal time, on the one hand, and to one specific occasion, on the other hand). The comments range from the severely prescriptive, as in Wood (1981), to the merely precautionary, as in Fowler (1965) :

*Never* means 'not ever, on no occasion'. It is common to hear sentences such as *I never saw you at the party*. It is, however, incorrect to use *never* when referring to one occasion. (Wood, op. cit.)

This use of *never*, however illogical, is idiomatic, at least colloquially. (Fowler, op. cit.)

The cycle has been interrupted, then, by the processes of prescription and codification that accompany standardization. Phonetic reduction has been reversed and semantic restriction tends to be frowned on. Nevertheless, *never* still occurs with restricted time reference in what is usually considered to be standard English - in other words, in written prose and the speech of people who consider themselves to be educated (Trudgill 1984). Example 4, above, is from a speaker who uses many nonstandard grammatical features, but 5 and 6 are from discourse that conforms to the norms of standard English.

5. He got ready to spring down from on high right among the spears of the goblins... But he never leaped. (Tolkein, J. 1978. *The Hobbit*. Allen and Unwin. 4th edition, page 95)

6. Kay never went to Delft on Tuesday.. she stayed with our friends in Rotterdam. (American university professor)

Prescriptivists tend not to comment on features that are in frequent use by the favoured classes, so the relative lack of prescriptive comments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries presumably indicates that these groups used *never* more frequently in this way than they do now. However, the use of *never* with restricted time reference remains frequent in nonstandard varieties of English : it is reported in all the British urban centres surveyed by Cheshire, Edwards and Whittle (1989), and is used in many English-based creoles as a

negator referring to past time (Holm 1988 :172). In nonstandard English *never* also occurs alone, as an apparent preterite form, as in 7 :

7. you never... you you hit him with a stick then booted him and then I had to do the rest. (Nobby)

Thus although the strategy of expressing negation with the universal temporal quantifier appears to have been slowed down in standard English, speakers of both standard and nonstandard English – particularly the latter – nevertheless continue to use *never* in this way. This strategy for expressing negation has not been given proper recognition by linguists, however, as we will see in the following section.

## 2. LINGUISTIC DESCRIPTIONS OF THE *NEVER* STRATEGY

One reason why the *never* strategy has not been acknowledged is that linguists of all theoretical persuasions appear to have been influenced by Klima's (1964) account of English negation. Using an early transformational-generative model of syntax, Klima analysed *never* alongside other negative words such as *no*, *nothing* or *nowhere*, classing them all as indeterminates and seeing them as members of three-term sets which behave in a parallel way in negative and interrogative sentences. Thus the first members of the sets are replaced by the second members in interrogative sentences and in negative sentences formed with *not*; alternatively, in negative sentences the negative can be expressed by the third member of the set. As examples, consider *some*, *any*, *no* and *sometimes*, *ever*, *never* in the invented examples 8 and 9 below :

8.

- a. I'd like some apples.
- b. Would you like any apples ? I don't want any apples.
- c. I want no apples.

9.

- a. We sometimes eat apples.
- b. Do you ever eat apples ? We don't ever eat apples.

c. We never eat apples.

Descriptive grammars, such as the *Grammar of Contemporary English* (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik 1985) do not use the term “indeterminate” (*some* and *sometimes* are labelled “non-assertive” items instead) but they still see *never* as the negative member of a three term series, parallel in its behaviour to *nowhere*, *nothing* and other negative words.

There are many uses of *never*, however, that cannot be accounted for by assuming that it belongs to a three-term series. For example, indeterminates do not co-occur with the other members of their series; but *never* co-occurs with *ever* :

10. In Johannesburg I never ever thought the secret police were stupid.  
(British doctor)

cf. \* I want anything nothing.

\* Sally eats no any meat.

*Never* can be repeated, as in 11, and combined with an intensifying phrase such as *in all my life* , as in 12 :

11. I'll never, never go there again.

12. I've never in all my life seen such a crowd. (Quirk et al 1985 : 786)

The *Grammar of Contemporary English* mentions some of these uses, but only gives them passing mention, and in different places scattered throughout the Grammar. The main treatment of *never* is in the chapter of the Grammar that deals with the Simple Sentence, where *never* is listed in its three term series along with *nothing*, *nowhere* and the other negative words. This, then, is *never* in its indeterminate function. The repetition of *never* and its occurrence with an intensifying phrases is included in the same chapter, under the heading “Negative Intensification”. It is also noted here that *never* « may serve for some as an emphatic informal negative », as in the example *I never stayed there last night*, paraphrased as ‘I certainly didn't stay there last night’ (op. cit. : 786). These are the determinate or simple negative uses of *never*. A different chapter of the Grammar, on Adverbials, describes *never* as a “negative minimizer” : the example given is *you will never catch the train tonight* where, it is explained the presence of the adverbial *tonight*, referring to a specific future time, “rules out” the temporal meaning of *never*. We are told that the meaning of the example can thus be paraphrased as « you will not under any circumstances catch the train tonight » (op. cit. : 601). The *Grammar of*

*Contemporary English*, then, treats what are essentially the same uses of *never* as if they were separate – why should *never* with reference to future time be classed in a different category from *never* with reference to past time, and labelled as a negative minimizer in the first case, but not in the second case ? It also treats the determinate uses of *never* as if they are separate and insignificant uses of the word.

There are sound linguistic reasons, as we will see, for considering all the uses of *never*, both indeterminate and determinate, as reflexes of the same strategy for expressing negation. But on grounds of sheer frequency, too, we must recognise that *never* has an important function for speakers of English - more so than *nothing*, *nowhere* and the other words with which it is usually classed. Tottie (1991), in her analysis of negation in spoken and written English, notes that she originally intended to analyse negative words such as *never*, *none*, *nobody* and *nowhere* together, as a single category, but that there were so many tokens of *never* in her corpus that she was obliged to remove them to a separate data sample in order to avoid skewing the analysis. Her separate analysis of variation between *never* and *not ever* (which included only the clearly indeterminate uses) revealed virtually no variation between *never* and *not ever* : in her spoken sample *not ever* occurred only once, whereas *never* occurred 78 times. She was left with two unsolved questions which she hoped future research might address : why does *never* occur so frequently, and why does the *not ever* variant occur so rarely ?

We will see later in this paper that *never* has both local semantic and syntactic functions and more global interactional functions. Its multifunctionality means that speakers are likely to find it an extremely useful strategy for expressing negation, and this, presumably, explains why it occurs so frequently. We have seen that on grounds of frequency and of syntactic distribution it is misleading to consider *never* as a simple negative word, alongside words such as *nothing* or *nowhere*. It makes better sense, therefore, to recognise it as a negative strategy in its own right - as an alternative strategy to the use of *not*. Klima's approach does not allow us to do this : neither does the descriptive approach of the *Grammar of Contemporary English* which, as we have seen, closely follows Klima in its treatment of negation. The influence of the early transformational-generative analysis of negation, then, is one reason why the function of *never* has been overlooked.

A further reason is that linguists have been puzzled by the shift in meaning that is involved when *never* refers not to all possible

occasions, as in 1 above, but to one specific occasion or point of time, as in 4 – 7 above. Klima paid little attention to the meaning of indeterminates, but others who have used his framework have assumed that *never* can be glossed as 'not' plus 'ever', reflecting its etymological origins and referring, therefore, to all possible occasions. Labov assumed this in his analysis of *never* in Hawaiian Creole English, and was then perplexed to find that in this Creole *never* does not refer to all possible occasions, but to one specific occasion in the past (just as in examples 4 – 7 above, of course). Examples 13 and 14 are taken from Labov's (1973) paper. In Hawaiian Creole English, as in many other Creoles, tense is not marked formally, so there is no inflection on the verb.

13. He never like throw first ('he didn't like to throw first').

14. And that thing was coming and something black on top the horse never have head ('...something black on top of the horse didn't have a head').

Labov discusses at some length what seems to him an insoluble semantic problem, that of identifying the kind of cognitive process that could connect *never* as an indeterminate, with universal indefinite reference, to *never* as a determinate, with reference to a specific past event. He was equally perplexed by what he terms "a crucial structural question". From a syntactic point of view *never* is a negative preterite marker in examples such as 13 and 14 : but if *never* acts as a negative preterite in Hawaiian Creole English, how do speakers of this Creole express the idea of standard English *never*, or universal temporal negation ? Since he was unable to offer a solution to these questions, Labov concluded that although the limitation of *never* to a particular point in the past may be a possibility, albeit an "extraordinary" one, he would be reluctant to include it in a general grammar of English (op. cit. : 59).

This is obviously an unfortunate conclusion, given that *never* is used this way not only in many English-based creoles but also in nonstandard English, colloquial spoken English and even in written English, as the examples given earlier illustrate. Perhaps Labov was unconsciously influenced by the prescriptive norms against using *never* with limited time reference. These prescriptions appear to have left their mark on the thinking of other sociolinguists, too, for we talk glibly of "nonstandard" *never* (see, for example, Cheshire 1983, Coupland 1988, Hughes and Trudgill 1979), despite the fact that the so-called nonstandard form (in other words, *never* with restricted time reference) occurs in varieties of English which would qualify as "standard" in

terms of the usual working definitions of standard English. Dialectologists similarly consider *never* with restricted time reference to be nonstandard : thus *never* was considered a dialectal alternant to *did not* in the Survey of English Dialects (Orton et al. 1963-69).

To summarise, during standardisation the guardians of the language are typically preoccupied with trying to fix a single, and literal, sense for words. In the case of *never* this has meant seeing it as the universal temporal negator, with the fixed meaning 'not on any occasion'. We have seen, however, that it is not only prescriptivists who assign this meaning to *never*; linguists too have been influenced by this idea. The result is that when *never* occurs in a context in which the universal meaning cannot apply, it is seen as incorrect by prescriptivists, as nonstandard or dialectal by sociolinguists and dialectologists, or as marginal or non-existent by descriptive and theoretical linguists.

Since it does exist, however, and is used by speakers of standard and nonstandard English alike, we need to decide how to analyse it. Do we assume that we are dealing here with polysemy ? This would lead us to propose that there are two *never* forms in present day English : one with the meaning 'not ever' and the syntactic function of an indeterminate; and one with the meaning 'not' and the syntactic function of negation - perhaps expressing emphatic negation. Or do we decide that present-day English has a single form *never*, whose meaning varies from reference to universal time to reference to a single point of time, depending on the context in which it is used ? The question has important implications for variationist analyses, for it crucially affects the forms that are considered to constitute the linguistic variable. For example, when I analysed the nonstandard English of adolescents in Reading I considered only variation between *never* and *didn't*, with reference to a single past occasion in both cases (Cheshire 1982). Tottie (1991), on the other hand, analysed only variation between *never* and *not ever*, disregarding, therefore, those tokens of *never* where it referred to a single occasion. Each of us performed a different analysis, and each of us failed to obtain a full picture of the way in which *never* functions in present-day English. I will attempt to provide a fuller picture in the following sections : my argument will be that we should consider *never* as a single form, whose temporal reference is determined by the context in which it occurs.



### 3. NEVER IN INTERACTION

It makes good sense to consider the function of *never* in conversational contexts rather than on the basis of our intuitions, for negation, in spoken language at least, typically relates to a previous utterance and it should therefore be analysed in relation to this utterance. In the examples that follow we can see how speakers use negation to ensure that addressees have the same orientation to the topic as they have themselves, in terms either of shared background knowledge or of their personal stance. Thus in 15 Jacky corrects my presupposition that she has two parents, explaining in her negative clause why it is her mother who scolds her most.

15.

Jenny :        who is it who tells you off in your family..your mother or your father ?

Jacky :        well my mum 'cos I haven't got a dad now.. so it's my mum worse luck

In 16 Wendy and I were discussing indoor fireworks and, in particular, whether or not an indoor rocket was dangerous. Wendy's negative clause (with the nonstandard verb form *don't*, corresponding to standard *doesn't* ) responds to the meaning that she infers from my *oh yes*, uttered with rising intonation on *oh* and a fall-rise on *yes*. The intonation suggests that I am not convinced by Wendy's previous account of the safety of the firework, as is shown by her response, which aims to reassure me :

16.

Wendy :        but you know you just put it in the bo in the bottle and em..you know it kind of it... only it goes round the room

Jenny :        oh yes

-> Wendy :    it don't hit the ceiling it just goes round and round

Jenny :        good job

Wendy :        you have to mind your head mind you 'cos it goes up and round and round

These two examples show speakers using the *not* strategy to form a negative clause in order to ensure that their common orientation to the topic is in tune. *Never* is used in exactly the same way. In 17 we see example 1 once more, but this time in its wider discourse context : Nobby and his friend had been telling me about three other boys that they 'went around' with sometimes, although they disliked them. I was

trying to obtain details of this 'going around', and asked a question which presupposes that a group of boys from another playground, at Shinfield, sometimes comes to Nobby's part of town. Nobby's negative clause negates this presupposition :

17.

Jenny :            what about when there's a real big fight like with the Shinfield lot or something like that... would you sort of join in on their side ?

-> Nobby :        Shinfield never come down here... they're scared of us

In 18 we see example 4 in its wider context. In the same way as Nobby does in 17, Marie corrects my presupposition - this time my expectation that she had been to school that day :

18.

Marie :            I had to do a lot of banging and my n my hands as you can see took quite a long time...about three or four hours just to do it

Jenny :            was that at school you made that ?

-> Marie :        no I never went to school today

In 17 *never* has the meaning of universal temporal quantification, referring to all possible occasions when I might have expected the 'Shinfield lot' to come down to the playground where we were talking. In 18, on the other hand, *never* has a more restricted time reference, to the day in question : this is the "problematic" use of *never* discussed earlier. I will discuss this use in more detail below; for the time being, it is important simply to observe that negation generally, whether expressed by the *not* strategy or the *never* strategy, can have an interactional role in ensuring the coherence of the emerging discourse. It can link the current turn to the previous one, by negating a presupposition that has just been expressed, and simultaneously ensuring that the interlocutors have a shared orientation to the topic that they are pursuing. This cohesive function is perhaps one reason why negation occurs more frequently in spoken discourse than in written discourse : Tottie (1991) found twice as much negation in her sample of spoken English as in the sample of written English. She also found that negation tended to occur in speaker turns that clearly testified to the co-operative effort that is necessary for conversation to be successful, such as in tag questions seeking corroboration from interlocutors (op. cit. : 43). In her sample negation also showed a correlation with mental state verbs such as *know* or *think* which, as Chafe (1982) has pointed

out, indicate the involvement of speakers in what they are saying and occur more frequently in spoken English than in written English.

The concept of involvement is very relevant to an understanding of why *never* has been a favoured negative strategy throughout the history of English. Different writers use the term “involvement” in somewhat different ways, but it stems, in all cases, from the assumption that spoken discourse is a collaborative production, with speakers and addressees working together to produce meaning as the discourse unfolds. For example, Gumperz (1982) sees involvement as the felicitous result of inference. Those linguists following in his tradition have tended to focus on the non-referential, non-lexical cues that conversationalists use as guides to inferencing and which, if all goes well, help achieve an observable state of co-ordinated interaction (see Tannen 1989 for discussion). Others see involvement as a more psychological phenomenon - as an internal state which is expressed by the use of particular linguistic features, some of which have referential meaning. This is the way that Chafe (1982, 1986) uses the term : he identifies a number of linguistic features that speakers use to show their own involvement in what they are saying (such as mental state verbs, as mentioned above, or frequent reference to themselves, using first person pronouns). Chafe also mentions features that ensure the interpersonal involvement of speakers and their addressees; these include discourse markers such as *well*, *you know* or *I mean*; intensifiers such as *just* or *really* and hedges like *sort of*, which can invite the addressee to determine the precise nature of the item with which the hedge is in construction (Holmes 1989). Quantifiers have an important role in securing interpersonal involvement as well, since they require the addressee to determine their scope and their precise interpretation. In 19, for example, the universal quantifier *all* is in construction with *his hand* in the first clause and *head* in the second; it is unlikely, however, that *all* refers to Nobby's brother's entire hand and still less likely that it refers to his entire head. Instead, addressees determine the extent of the quantification on the basis of their knowledge of the world : by using *all* Nobby alerts his addressees to the need to interpret *bashed up* as referring to the widest possible extent of his brother's hand, given the context :

19. My brother had all his hand bashed up..all his head was bleeding.

*All* therefore functions as a very effective intensifying device (see Cheshire 1989, Labov 1984). We can think of quantifiers in terms of scalar implicatures - as members of an implicational set, such that an utterance containing one item from the scalar set entails the items lower

down on the scale. Just as *excellent* entails *good*, so that *this is an excellent meal* entails *this is a good meal*, so *all* entails *most, many, or some* (Levinson 1983). *Never* can similarly be seen as the high point on a scale containing *never, often, sometimes* and *once*. Thus when speakers use *never*, they invite the addressee to fix as wide a time reference as is possible in that context. Sometimes the time reference will be all possible occasions, as in 17 (*Shinfield never come down here*); here my previous turn had specified the time reference as indefinite, with *what about.*, and the immediate context in which Nobby uses *never* specifies 'all possible occasions' through the use of the 'timeless' present tense. In other utterances the tense of the verb or the presence of a time adverbial specifies the widest possible time reference : thus in 20 the present perfect tense indicates that the period is past time up to and including the present :

20. You've never read Cold Comfort Farm have you ? (Svartvik and Quirk 1980 : 626)

In exactly the same way, the tense of the verb and the adverbial *today* specify the time reference of *never* in example 4, above (*I never went to school today*). In the case of example 7 (now 21), when *never* occurs alone, we need to look beyond the current turn to the previous one, considering its function across speaker turns :

21.

Benny : we all went up there and jumped on him

-> Nobby : you never... you you hit him with a stick then booted him and then I had to do the rest

Nobby's *you never* follows on from - and negates - Benny's (*we all.*) *jumped on him.*, ere the time reference of *never* is specified by the tense of the verbs in Benny's utterance. We see here, then, that syntax can be constructed jointly, across speaker turns (see Jeanneret 1992, this volume); we also see the importance of considering a form in its conversational context, if we are to understand its syntactic function. In example 21 the interlocutors also have to use their knowledge of the world in order to understand that the reference is to one specific past occasion (you jump on someone once only, of course, as the first stage in a fight).

We can now recognize, then, that the different uses of *never* discussed in section 3 are essentially the same : in each case, interlocutors can fix the time to which the utterance refers by scanning the context in which *never* occurs, and by bringing into play their

knowledge of the world. Sometimes the time reference can be to all possible occasions, in which case *never* can be said to be the universal temporal negator, but sometimes the time reference is restricted by other linguistic forms in the utterance, or by the knowledge of the world on which we draw in order to interpret the utterance. It is inappropriate to try to assign a fixed meaning to *never*, for quantifiers are inherently flexible in their reference.

It is worth stressing that the uses that are considered nonstandard are no different from the other uses of *never*. In each of the examples just discussed an alternative clause is possible using the *not* strategy, as can be seen by considering the pairs of sentences below. The difference in the two strategies is simply that the use of *never* invites the addressee to fix the time reference of the quantifier and actively involves them, therefore, in the construction of the meaning of the emerging discourse.

Shinfield *never* come down here.

Shinfield don't come down here.

you've *never* read Cold Comfort Farm have you ?

you haven't read Cold Comfort Farm have you ?

I *never* went to school today.

I didn't go to school today.

you *never*.

you didn't.

If, as I have argued, quantifiers can facilitate the creation of interpersonal involvement, it is hardly surprising that speakers of English have favoured the use of the universal temporal negator as a way of reinforcing a weakened negative. In time, as the sense of quantification becomes lost and as phonetic changes make the form semantically opaque, as has happened with *not* the one-time quantifier becomes a simple non-emphatic negative marker, no longer recognised as a quantifier and no longer, therefore, actively involving the addressee in fixing the time reference of the form. In the case of *never* (and perhaps *all*) the quantification aspect of its meaning may be more or less relevant, depending on the conversational context. In other words, *never* has not yet lost the quantification aspect of its meaning, although in some contexts the quantification aspect certainly appears to be less relevant than the negative aspect. It may well be that prescriptivists have prevented *never* from ever becoming fully semantically opaque (we saw in section 2 that the contracted form *ne'er*

is rarely used today). In present-day English it is often unclear whether speakers interpret *never* as expressing negation more emphatically than the alternative negative form *not*. It is noteworthy, however, that *never* frequently co-occurs with other features that express interpersonal involvement, which suggests that it does function as a way of actively involving the addressee in the creation of the emerging discourse. In the extract below, for example, *never* co-occurs with a cluster of addressee-oriented forms : several occurrences of *see*, the deictic *that*, accompanying a gesture, and the quantifier *all* (the addressee-oriented forms are in italics) :

22. Jacky : The other day... when we was up Ridgeway.... when we was at primary school... she always used to get me in trouble... and I used to hate that... I didn't mind getting in trouble.... but her... she kept on getting me in trouble... and one day I was sitting in class... and a student was reading us a story...I wasn't listening anyway...but she kept on fiddling with my bracelet... and trying to pull it off me... and I went like *that... see....* and she sent me outside the door... but it was her *see...* and when the teacher come... Mr. Mayhews.... he come in and told me off... *see...* and he blamed everything onto me... so I told him what happened and when he asked Wendy.. Wendy said that she *never...* and they *all* agreed with her *see*.

Note that Jacky's use of *never* requires the addressee to refer back to the previous clause in order to fix its time reference, like Nobby's *you never* in example 7 (later 21).

If *never* does function as a way of securing the involvement of the addressee, we would expect it to occur in conversational contexts where addressee-involvement is particularly important. It is no surprise, therefore, to find that the *never* strategy is frequently used in friendly arguments, in a cluster of addressee-oriented features which together can be interpreted as positive politeness devices, allowing the interlocutors to attend to each other's positive face as they disagree with each other. As an example, consider 7 (later 21) once more, this time in a still wider conversational context : the other addressee-oriented items are *all*, the second person pronouns, the address form *mate* and the intensifying overstatement *half killed*.

21.

Benny : I went and grabbed him.. he went and told him and Mike and all our other mates....and we all went up there and jumped on him

-> Nobby : you never... you you hit him with a stick then booted him and then I had to {do the rest

Colin : {I kicked him in the bollocks

Benny : I kicked him

Nobby : I done the most to him mate I half killed him

Similarly, *never* frequently occurs in a cluster of addressee-oriented forms at the beginning of a narrative, when the speaker needs to secure the interest of the interlocutor in order to keep the floor for an extended turn. In 23 we see *never* used in the formulaic introduction of a narrative (*I'll never forget the time when...*) as well as in the orientation section, together with the intensifier *shit* :

23. Jacky : I..I'll *never* forget the time when I went up to bed.. I heard a creaking sound..I was the only one in the house..my sister was with my mum and my brother was out..I went to bed early 'cos I *never* had nothing to do and I had no supper..and I heard a creaking upstairs and I was shit scared..I wouldn't stay..and I had all the lights on I was shit scared

Its use in the formulaic introduction of a narrative suggests that *never* can have a role in the turn-taking system, by engaging the involvement of the interlocutor and therefore allowing the current speaker to take an extended turn. This seems to be confirmed by its occurrence at locations for speaker change, when the current speaker is eliciting talk from others. In 24, for example, I was the fieldworker trying to elicit talk from a group of 13 year-old girls. My rather uninspired questions were not succeeding in eliciting more than very short utterances, but my utterance containing *never*, together with the quantifier *ever* in *whatever*, was at last followed by a longer sequence of talk, jointly constructed by two speakers :

24.

Jenny : what's your favourite food ?

Wendy : favourite food ?

Marie that's easy..chips

Jenny : chips

Wendy : roast

Jenny : roast dinner

Wendy : yes and for pudding gypsy tart

-> Jenny : whatever's that ? I've never heard of that

Marie : oh I can't explain 'cos .it's hard to explain isn't it ?

Wendy : gypsy well it's pastry on the bottom it's sort of

- Jenny : yes
- Marie : coffee
- Wendy : coffee on the top
- Marie : yeah coffee on the top
- Wendy : ough

A similar example occurs in 25, where the monosyllabic Debbie finally launches into a longer turn after my reformulation of a negative clause with *not* into a negative clause with *never* :

25.

- Jenny : are you having fireworks this year ?
- Debbie : yes
- Sharon : we have indoor fireworks as well
- Jenny : yes..I like them..sparklers
- Debbie : yes
- Sharon : not only sparklers..rockets
- Jenny : indoor rockets ?
- Sharon : indoor rockets
- Jenny : oh I didn't know you could get those
- Debbie : yes
- > Jenny : I've never seen those
- Debbie : indoor rockets you know all the fireworks you can have outside you can have inside as well

In 26, a turn containing *never* again has a role in the harmonious co-production of discourse. It occurs in a series of supporting comments (minimal responses and the encouraging *did she* ?) from speaker B, which seem to signal her interest in what A is recounting :

26.

- A : I mean apart from one or two sort of [ :. m] pizzerios or whatever you call them
- B : m
- A : on the very outskirts of the town there's very little development there at all
- B : {m yes it's practically all sandspit between Agde and Sete isn't it



(from Svartvik and Quirk 1980 : 724)

In the conversations that I have analysed it is sometimes possible to observe a serial effect in the use of quantifiers. Although previous research on the serial effect has been quantitative, attempting to determine its statistical significance, it is inappropriate to do this for *never*, since it is not always clear whether *never* is used as a straightforward negative or whether its temporal meaning comes into play. Problems of this kind are common when analysing syntactic variation (see Cheshire 1987 for discussion). However, it is possible instead to analyse stretches of conversation where *never* or *ever* co-occur, and to observe the conversational outcome of the syntactic parallelism. Thus in 27 I introduce a quantifier with the question *Do*

*girls ever have fights with each other* ? It would of course have been possible to construct an interrogative without *ever*, and to ask instead *Do girls have fights with each other* ? The point of interest is that once *ever* has been used, a series of clauses follow in which the quantifier is chosen every time that it is possible to do so. Marie and Wendy co-operate in answering my question, with Wendy emphatically affirming that girls do indeed have fights; my next question again includes a quantifier, and the two girls continue to co-operate, with Marie choosing the *never* strategy for her negative clause, followed by Wendy's *ever* in her response to my small joke :

27.

-> Jenny : do girls ever have fights with each other ?

Marie : yes

Wendy : yes..you're telling me

-> Jenny : have you ever been in a fight with a girl ?

Marie : yes I have I have

Wendy : I have as well

-> Marie : but we've never foughted together

Jenny : not yet

(laughter)

-> Wendy : not yet you know I don't think we ever will

The sequence is unremarkable and the conversation proceeds harmoniously. In just the same way, the *not* strategy, once chosen, is often continued. This is illustrated in 28, where the conversation develops from the previous discussion about gypsy tart :

28.

Jenny : do you have dinner with her then is that where you've had it ?

Wendy : no we has it at school

Jenny : oh do you ?

-> Marie : I has it at school but she don't

-> Wendy : no I go to home to dinner I used to stay to school dinners but I don't now

-> Jenny : why don't you stay then ?

-> Wendy : well they had pig's heart once and I didn't like that and they made me --eat it and I was sick so my mum said I didn't have to stay anymore

Jenny : yes

Syntactic harmony of this kind typically occurs when the conversation is proceeding harmoniously, with speakers co-operating to produce felicitous discourse, as in the two extracts above. When the conversation takes a less harmonious turn, this can be marked by a disruption of the pattern of syntactic parallelism. Consider 29 below, where Nobby and Benny are teasing Ronny, first in a friendly fashion and then in a more hostile way. All three speakers use slang (such as *nick* and *pinch* for 'steal') and much swearing. Nobby's first teasing question rests on his professed presupposition that Ronny had stolen the carpet which was in his bag. Ronny negates the presupposition crossly, swearing and addressing Benny with the insult *you puff*. The other boys laugh, and the teasing then becomes more intense, with Nobby repeating the presupposition, despite Ronny's previous denial. Benny then insults Ronny, using *pretty*, an adjective that is normally used to refer to girls (see Kuiper 1991 for further discussion of male insults using terms referring to females), and presupposing that they have succeeded in making Ronny angry. In this second part of the teasing Benny changes the syntax, choosing the *never* strategy rather than the *not* strategy that Ronny had introduced; Nobby continues the pattern of linguistic changes, using the slang expression *pinch* instead of their previous *nick* (also slang).

29.

Jenny :        what's he got in there ?

Benny :        a fucking carpet what else

Nobby :        where'd you nick it ?

-> Ronny : I fucking didn't nick it you puff  
(laughter)

-> Benny :      you sure you never nicked it

Nobby :      where'd you pinch it mate

Benny :        you don't half look pretty when you're angry

(laughter)

In this case, then, the absence of syntactic parallelism mirrors the absence of conversational harmony, with the heightened teasing of the unfortunate Ronny.

In 30 there is a similar absence of syntactic parallelism. The extract is part of a conversation between a married couple, A and B, and two of their friends. Speaker B had been chastising her husband earlier for not reading enough, and she suggests that he reads the novel *Cold Comfort Farm*. A's reply is incongruous in this context, as is shown by the laughter with which it is received : not only is A male, but there had been no mention of babies in the previous discourse, and there is no obvious reason to anyone other than B why this remark is relevant. The absence of harmony in the content of A's contribution is matched by the absence of harmony in the syntax : B uses the *never* strategy whereas A responds with the *not* strategy (he could have said *I've never had a baby either*). The incongruous remark allows A and B to collaborate in telling the story of A going to visit B in the evenings whilst B was in hospital after the birth of their baby, and A finding that B had laughed so much at the book that she had burst her stitches.

30.

-> B :                why darling why don't you bribe Jo to lend you her *Cold Comfort Farm*...you've never read it have you ?

-> A :                no but I haven't had a baby either

{(laughter)}

B :                    {oh honestly it saved my life in hospital it really did

A :                    actually every evening I used to

D :                    it's all right Arthur

(approximately 6 seconds of intervening talk)

A :                    anyway I used to go into the hospital in the evenings and find her..sort of in real great pain because she'd laughed so much . she's burnt a couple . burst a couple of stitches

(Quirk and Svartvik 1980 :626)

Thus the existence of two strategies for negation allows speakers to generate discourse meanings over and above the local meaning of simple negation, by giving them the choice of following their interlocutor's selection of either *not* or of *ever* and *never*.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

As educated people, linguists are in a double bind. Try as we may, our intuitions will be influenced by norms based on standard, written language. Analytical approaches based on intuitions, such as Klima (1964) will therefore be influenced by these norms. Even those approaches based on language use, that we like to think of as transgressing these norms, are susceptible to the influence of educated norms if they involve setting up predetermined categories within which to carry out an analysis (as in variationist analysis or in dialectology, for example). The case of *never* with reference to a single past event shows how a feature that is seen as "incorrect" by guides to good usage has been incorrectly labelled nonstandard by sociolinguists, and still more incorrectly labelled as non-existent by linguists working within a framework based on isolated sentences. Yet in order to perform a linguistic analysis we have to be educated people.

A way forward is to use the methods of conversation analysis, avoiding predetermined categories and seeing instead how speakers orient to the syntax used by their interlocutors. In the case of *never* this allows us to suggest an answer to the questions posed by Tottie (1991): why do speakers use *never* overwhelmingly more frequently than *not ever*, and why does *never* occur so much more frequently than *nothing*, *none* and other indeterminates? I have argued that the answer to both questions is that *never* is a strategy for negation in its own right, which involves the interlocutor in relating the negative form to the linguistic and non-linguistic context in which it occurs, in order to determine the extent of its temporal reference. It is therefore especially well suited to the demands of face-to-face interaction, and this accounts for the fact that throughout the history of English speakers have used it as their preferred way of reinforcing a negative marker. Both standard and nonstandard uses are alike are reflexes of the same negative strategy, but the so-called standard uses reflect the desires of prescriptivists to fix a stable meaning to a given form as well as their neglect of the processes that are important in spoken interaction.

It is only by observing *never* in its conversational context that it is possible to observe its interactional functions. Thus theoretical and descriptive grammars can learn from analysing syntactic forms and processes within their conversational context; but by the same token, conversation analysis might benefit from adopting a more strictly linguistic perspective for the analysis of speaker turns, thereby

observing the interactional consequences of the syntactic forms that speakers choose to use in their conversations.

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