

Nobody is not anybody: A corpus analysis to English negation

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In the English language negation can be marked in two ways: with a verbal negation or by using individual negative words (Huddleston, Pullum 2005):

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| (1) | I don't have any books. | [verbal negation with NPI] |
| (2) | I have no books. | [neg-word negation] |

The same pattern is applied also in other languages, where the verbal negation (1) is preferred over the neg-word (2) (Johan van der Auwera & Lauren Van Alsenoy, 2018). Both methods seem to be synonymous in the English language, however our corpus analysis showed the opposite results in the preference of the neg-word version. Starting from this observation, our research investigates what triggers the choice between the two forms.

Our research was conducted through the use of the corpus manager and text analysis software Sketch Engine, which enabled us to search large text collections according to specific linguistic queries. With a synchronic approach, we first looked for the overall occurrences of the neg-words *nothing/nobody* and the NPIs *anything/anybody* in the *EnTenTen 2020 Corpus* and proceeded with a manual analysis of the verbs they occur with. The same procedure was applied for the two forms *V+No+N* and *Not+V+Any+N*, including also an analysis of the nouns that are combined to both structures. We then pursued a diachronic approach by observing both versions in the *English Historical Book Collection Corpus*.

A striking preference was observed in the overall frequencies for the neg-word version. However, the synchronic analysis showed that nouns and verbs were not the triggering factors for the choice between the neg-word negation and the verbal negation with NPIs. Moreover, the diachronic approach revealed that the observed preference was found to be even stronger in the past.

References

Van der Auwera, Van Alsenoy (2018) *More ado about nothing: on the typology of negative indefinites*. Brill

Huddleston, Pullum (2005) *A student's introduction to English Grammar*. Cambridge University Press

Corpora available on Sketch Engine: <https://www.sketchengine.eu/>