

Non-standard Negation in Modern English. A Corpus-based Study of Four Salient Features¹

Negative polarity in English has been extensively studied in the last decades. Most grammarians draw our attention to a number of phenomena within this system that do not conform to what is regarded as the general rule. In this paper I will focus on four main features of negation which precisely do not follow the standard but which are becoming more and more frequent in the language of native speakers of English: the negative verbal form *ain't*, the invariable question tag *innit*, negative concord and the use of the negative adverb *never* as a past time negator.

For the discussion of these negative features, I will refer to the accounts provided by the modern descriptive grammars as well as to the analysis of data extracted from several corpora and other sources. Some reflections are made in the final part on the implications that all this may have for the actual teaching of this area at the university level.

Key words: negation, non-standard English, variation, teenagers' language, negative concord, invariant tags, corpus linguistics, English language teaching

El sistema de polaridad negativa en inglés ha sido objeto de amplio estudio en las últimas décadas. La mayoría de los lingüistas han prestado atención a una serie de fenómenos dentro de este sistema que no observan lo que se considera la regla general. En este artículo me centraré en cuatro aspectos de la negación que no siguen las normas estándar y que cada vez son más frecuentes en el lenguaje utilizado por los hablantes nativos de inglés: la forma verbal negativa *ain't*, la coletilla invariable *innit*, la negación múltiple y el uso del adverbio *never* como forma negativa de pasado. Para el análisis de estas formas negativas, me referiré, en primer lugar, a su tratamiento en las principales gramáticas del inglés de referencia y, luego, a los resultados del análisis de datos extraídos de varios corpus y de otras fuentes. En la sección final se hacen una serie de consideraciones sobre las implicaciones de todo lo anterior para la enseñanza de este punto gramatical en el ámbito universitario.

Palabras clave: negación, inglés no estándar, variación, lenguaje juvenil, negación múltiple, coletillas invariables, lingüística de corpus, enseñanza del inglés

1. INTRODUCTION

Negative polarity in English has been studied extensively over recent decades from a wide number of perspectives and approaches (Horn 1989, 2010; Tottie 1991; Haegeman 1995; Palacios Martínez 1995, 2011; Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Tottie and van den Wurff 1999; Anderwald 2002, 2005; Mazzon 2004 and Iyeiri 2005). Specific areas of attention have included, among other, negative types, negative polarity items, negative raising, negative intensification, negation with modal verbs, the scope of negation, and the pragmatics and the expression of negation in different genres and varieties. However, other features of the negative polarity system have received far less attention, particularly a number of common phenomena that do not conform to what might be regarded as general rules of negation. In this paper, I will focus on four main features of negation which tend not to exhibit standard behaviour in many varieties of English, yet which are becoming more and more frequent in the language of native speakers: the negative verbal form *ain't* (e.g. *I ain't got enough room for all that*), the invariable question tag *innit* (e.g. *She love her chocolate, innit?*), the use of the negative adverb *never* as a past time negator (e.g. *He never called me yesterday*), and negative concord or

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double/multiple negation (e.g. *I feel like I ain't eaten nothing*). These also share the characteristic of having a higher frequency in speech than in writing.

As a starting-point for the discussion of these four negatives, I will refer to accounts provided by some of the main modern descriptive and corpus-based reference grammars, and in addition will analyse data extracted from several modern English corpora, namely the BNC (*British National Corpus*), COCA (*Corpus of Contemporary American English*), and COLT (*The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language*). I will also consider examples taken from online editions of British and American newspapers and magazines, including *The Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *The Guardian*, *Time Magazine* and *The New York Times*. My analysis, then, will be based primarily on spoken language data extracted from the corpora and on reported speech taken from newspapers and magazines. Some reflections will then be made on the implications of the findings here for the teaching of English in this area, with particular reference to university level teaching. With the evidence of new data, this paper tries to confirm findings of previous studies (Cheshire 1991, 1997; Krug 1998, Andersen 2001, Stenström, Andersen and Hasund 2002; Anderwald 2002, 2005) as well as provide new insights into the analysis of some salient features of non-standard negation in present-day English.

2. AIN'T

References to this negative form in general grammars are quite scarce and rather marginal. Quirk *et al.* (1985: 129), for instance, devote just a short note, claiming that “it is a non-standard construction commonly used (especially in AmE) in place of *am not*, *is not*, *are not*, *has not* and *have not*”. Huddleston, Pullum *et al.* (2002: 1611) reserve a small section within their macrogrammar to the study of this negative feature. They highlight “the long tradition of its stigmatization by prescriptivists” and point out that in British English it occurs more often in the language of working-class people while in American English it is more widely accepted and used in informal style. Biber *et al.* (1999: 178) simply allude to it in passing as a form that may occur as part of what they call a dependent multiple negation. However, using my own data and other information collected, I contend that the *ain't* form plays an important role in the negative polarity system of modern English speakers in both British and American English and, consequently, deserves further consideration and study (Palacios Martínez 2010).² *Ain't* can stand for both forms of BE (*am not*, *is not*, *are not*) and HAVE (*has not*, *have not*), and thus can be equivalent to forms of BE as both lexical and auxiliary verbs. However, *ain't* for HAVE is essentially limited to cases where the verb functions as an auxiliary, either in combination with *got* or in the expression of perfect aspect. Cases where *ain't* stands for HAVE as the main verb are very rare, and the same applies to *ain't* as the equivalent of *don't/doesn't* or *didn't*, the latter found only in African American Vernacular English.³

To complement this information, I will next present some examples from the COLT corpus, which is part of the BNC. COLT was compiled in 1993 and consists of 431,528 words from a total of 377 spontaneous conversations produced by teenagers from 13 to 17 in the London area. The corpus represents roughly 100 hours of recorded speech.

² Kortmann and Lunkenheimer (2011) provide very interesting information in this respect. According to their data, *ain't* as the negator form of BE occurs in 22 of the 74 varieties of English considered in their study with a pervasiveness index of 0.59 while *ain't* as the negated form of HAVE occurs in 18 varieties with a pervasiveness rate of 0.6. Finally, *ain't* as a generic negator before a main verb (e.g. *something I ain't know about*) appears in only 13 of the dialects studied with a pervasiveness index of 0.69.

³ Some scholars, such as Kortmann and Lunkenheimer (2011), and Wolfram and Thomas (2002), make a distinction in African American Vernacular English (AAE or AAVE) between *urban* and *rural* varieties. According to Kortmann and Lunkenheimer (2011), the urban dialect is spoken by over 30 million working-class African Americans concentrated in metropolitan areas, including Philadelphia, Washington D.C., Detroit, Chicago, Houston and Los Angeles; the rural variety is spoken by several million working-class African Americans living in small communities, mainly in the southern states, although there are also some rural African American groups in the northern part of the country and even in Canada. Additionally, most social classes of African Americans speak AAE to a certain degree, but when and where they use it varies greatly from one individual and group to another.

A total of 291 occurrences of *ain't* were observed from a total of 1261 contexts considered. Thus, the form is favoured almost 23% of the time, although this might be somewhat misleading in that the frequencies do not apply in equal proportions and terms to all speakers. Out of the total 291 occurrences, 281 were negatives of HAVE (1) and BE (2).

- (1) I *ain't* got speakers attached to me, you know what I mean, Sean! (CO/B132617/22)⁴
- (2) He goes⁵ <shouting> I *ain't* scared of no bear. (CO/B132701/171)

Regarding the distribution of *ain't*, BE represented 131 occurrences in the data and HAVE 112; in absolute terms, then, it is more common as a negative for BE than for HAVE. Looking at the findings for BE in more detail, we note that *ain't* is far more frequent as a copula than as an auxiliary, with 91 occurrences versus 40. Furthermore, *ain't* occurs more often when it corresponds to *is + not* (66 cases) than to *am + not* (44 cases) or *are + not* (21 cases). When used for auxiliary BE, *ain't* generally expresses progressive aspect (3), only three occurrences with *-ed* participial adjectives having been found in the data (4).

- (3) Why *ain't* you talking, I *ain't* taping. (CO/B132905/15)
- (4) That *ain't* shaped like a rugby ball. (CO/B136103/23)

As for the use of *ain't* as a negative auxiliary for HAVE, it is found much more frequently together with *got* (5) than in the expression of perfect aspect (6). Only one occurrence is recorded in which this form is used for full verb HAVE (7):⁶

- (5) I *ain't* got a pencil. (CO/B137104/301)
- (6) Tell him I *ain't* finished it yet. (CO/B1344012/324)
- (7) It *ain't* nothing to do with my school. (CO/B132802/132)

My study here bears out the general scale or pattern of use of *ain't* identified by Cheshire (1999) and partially confirmed by Anderwald (2002). This scale can be represented as follows:

aux HAVE > cop BE > aux BE

Thus, *ain't* occurs most commonly as the negative of HAVE, followed by BE as copula and BE as auxiliary; this means that the use of *ain't* could be regarded, at least from a linguistic point of view, as a strategy of reduction or simplification of the grammatical system, since the same form is used for different persons and verbal forms (Anderwald 2002: 125). I also noticed that a series of grammatical and sociological variables condition the presence of this form in the teenagers' speech. As for grammatical variables, the following might be noted: negative concord structures (in more than half of the negative concord structures recorded this negative form occurs), see also Biber *et al.* (1999: 178) for this; existential-*there* constructions (in more than one third of such constructions this negative is present); a diversity of different expressions also tend to take this form, following a similar template (*ain't got a clue*, *ain't got a brain*, *ain't on*, *ain't even bothered*); particular subject pronouns, such as

⁴ Each example will be followed by an identification code indicating the corpus from which it was taken, the text number and the conversation turn reference given. Thus, for instance, in this particular case, the example provided was selected from the COLT corpus (CO), text number B132617 and the corresponding conversation turn was 22. This system clearly facilitates the tracing and retrieving of the original if necessary.

⁵ The verbal form *goes* is here used as a quotative verb having a similar value to *says*, for example. The verb GO as a quotative is typically found in the language of British and American teenagers although it can also be recorded, but in a lesser degree, in the speech of adults. For further information, see Tagliamonte and Hudson (1999) and Van Alphen and Buchstaller (2012).

⁶ This specific example is certainly open to interpretation, since *ain't* here could stand for BE rather than HAVE.

I, you and *it*, appear to favour the occurrence of this negative. As regards the sociolinguistic variables, the results obtained indicate that there exists a correlation between *aint* and the ethnic variable; this may also explain the association of this negative with other non-standard forms which are also characteristic of the speakers of these varieties, mainly Jamaican and East Indies, such as *nuffink*, *nope*, *gotta*, *don't* used for all persons⁷ and *innit*, etc. The latter form will be precisely the focus of attention in the next section.

3. INNIT

Innit is a relatively frequent non-canonical invariant tag in British English, particularly in the area of Wales and London, which can also be heard in varieties of English spoken in Papua New Guinea, Singapore and South Africa.⁸ It has even contended by some linguists that the common use of this tag in present day British English could be explained by the current influence of certain groups of immigrant speakers in London on the rest of the population (Cheshire et al. 2011); however, this has not been fully proved. In parallel to this hypothesis, the OED on line edition (1989) dates its origin back to 1959, as first used by Michael Gilbert (1912-2006) in his work *Blood and Judgment*; the exact instance recorded is 'That's right, innit?'⁹

As was the case with *ain't*, it is very rarely discussed in modern general reference grammars. Thus, Biber et al. (1999: 211) only include four examples of this tag to illustrate that in some cases it is independent of the structure of the main clause. Quirk et al. (1985), and Huddleston, Pullum et al. (2002) do not even mention it in their detailed account of tags. Anderwald (2002), in her interesting study on negation in non-standard British English, does not even deal with it either. This could be explained by the fact that it may be regarded as one of the multiple tags which would fall out of the scope of negation itself.

The BNC contains 1980 matches for *innit* in spoken English (10 million words) compared to 4585 examples of the standard *isn't it*. COCA, however, does not record any example of this form, although the COLT corpus registers a significant number of instances. This indicates that this tag was particularly common in the language of British teenagers in the 1990s and everything seems to suggest that it is still now quite popular among this group of society (Pichler and Torgensen 2009; Preece 2009). We also find plenty of examples in current popular British papers, especially when referring or commenting on different features of the language of teenagers or on issues connected with them. It is also common when journalists want to imitate spoken language and in reports found in the sports sections. *The Daily Mail*, for example, records a total of 120 recent matches in an equal number of articles between the 1998 and 2010 period. *The Daily Mirror* also records 100 similar examples in recent issues between 2006 and 2010 while in *The Guardian* this number amounts to 749 matches in the period that goes from 1997 up to the present. On the contrary, in American papers and journals, the presence of *innit* is merely anecdotic. *The Time Magazine* only records five examples from 1997 to 2006 while the *New York Times* lists three occurrences in the last 30 days, eight in the past 12 months and 13 from 1981 up to now.

From these data, we can conclude that (i) *innit* is a recent development in the language; (ii) it is typical of British English, since we do not find it in other well-established native English varieties, such as American English and Australian English, although, as noted above, it is recorded in varieties of English spoken in Papua New Guinea, Singapore and South Africa; (iii) it is especially common in

⁷ Here are some examples of these forms, all of them taken from COLT: *I dunno nuffink about sex. I'm an innocent child*; A. *You, don't you decide?* B. *Nope*; *We've gotta do all the other ones, tape*; *she don't buy nuffink*.

⁸ In the *Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English (E-WAVE)* (Kortmann and Lunkenheimer 2011), invariant non concord tags, *innit* included, are found in 40 different varieties with a pervasiveness index of 0.77. According to this atlas, these invariant tags are attested in Malaysian English, Hong-Kong English, Indian English, Kenyan English, White South African English and Cameroon English. Columbus (2009) also studies invariant tags in five varieties of English: New Zealand, British, Hong Kong, Singapore and Indian English, using the different components of the *International Corpus of English* to compare occurrences across the five varieties.

⁹ OED entry 96286.

the discourse of British teenagers; and, finally, (iv) it functions as an invariant question tag to check comprehension or to keep the interlocutors' attention, although on many occasions it does not work as a simple question or follow-up tag, instead adopting other discourse values. *Innit* should therefore not be regarded as a mere variant of *isn't it* or of any other question tag, but as a new discourse marker performing different pragmatic functions.

This lexical item has been closely studied in the speech of adolescents (Erman 1998, Andersen 2001, Stenström, Andersen and Hasund 2002, Pichler 2008, Pichler and Torgersen 2009) and in general English (Algeo 1988, 1990, Krug 1998) Such studies have drawn attention to the grammaticalized nature of the form, given that it first emerged as a standard tag and subsequently became invariant with multiple pragmatic functions. Furthermore, grammarians have referred to the influence of linguistic and sociological variables in the use of *innit*. Among the linguistic factors that play a major role in the form's grammatical behaviour are tense, polarity, the verb of the main sentence and subject pronoun and gender. Among the sociological variables that have an influence on the use of this tag, the speaker's gender, age, ethnicity and geographical origin can be mentioned (Pichler and Torgersen 2009)

With the above data as starting points, I used Concappv4 to conduct an analysis of the *innit* tag in the COLT corpus, which resulted in a full list of examples in which *innit* occurred, without further selection criteria. Consequently, this initial search had to be filtered and supplemented with more detailed surveys since, on many occasions, it was necessary to consider contextual factors, especially when analysing the pragmatic variables that could be here at work. A total of 353 examples were recorded, although 48 of these were discarded, some 13.5% of the whole, because the corpus transcription conventions and the spontaneity and interactive nature typical of the spoken language at times made the latter impossible to interpret. Consider the following example:

- (8) A. Glen said he think, he might he thinks you are <mimicking> <unclear>
B. <unclear> say something.
C. [<unclear> all that noise *innit*] (CO/B134902/380)

In the previous extract, we do not actually know whether speaker C is just complaining about the noise, stating that there is a lot of noise, or is simply referring to the quality of the sound of the recording. As the meaning is unclear, it is really impossible to interpret it with complete accuracy.

Once these 48 unclear and ambiguous examples were disregarded, 305 tokens remained for assessment. As regards to function, it seems that in principle *innit* is mainly equivalent to *isn't it*, *isn it* or even *ain't it*, being used as a typical question tag expression, that is, a structure containing an operator followed by a pronoun in co-reference with the subject of the main sentence. This high number of tokens of *innit* as *isn't it*, *isn it* may also be motivated by the fact that in COLT there are far more examples of the third person form than of the first or second person, given that teenagers tend to talk about third parties more often than about themselves or fellow speakers. However, this negative also presents other features, which make it very different from a standard tag.

As explained above, it may be used to represent other operators apart from BE, such as HAVE and DO¹⁰ and even any modal verb, such as WILL, WOULD, SHOULD, CAN, COULD MUST and MIGHT. However, BE is by far the most common (208 cases), followed by DO (49 tokens) and HAVE (19 cases). From all the modal verbs, CAN, WILL and WOULD obtain a similar figure, five examples for each of them. The rest of the modal verbs, such as MIGHT, MUST and SHOULD are rather marginal. If we analyse the data obtained as representing BE, we notice that it stands for *isn't it* on 152 occasions, that is, 73% of the total while it is equivalent to *isn't he?* and *aren't you?* in 10 and 12 cases, respectively. We also record a similar number of examples as representing *doesn't it?* and *don't you?*, nine cases for each of them and we even find occurrences of *innit* as equivalent to tags

¹⁰ Apart from the base categories, inflected forms of these verbs such as *was/were*, *had*, *did* were also included. It may also be the case that these verbs do not function as simple operators but as full lexical verbal forms. This is very common with the verb HAVE, as we find examples of *innit* with HAVE as an auxiliary verb for the perfect and HAVE as a primary verb expressing possession.

with DID, either in the positive form, only two cases, or in the negative, a total of 13. Here are some examples.

- (9) [oh my god] I would just die, *innit?* (wouldn't I?) (CO/B140802/46)
- (10) should be in all day *innit?* (shouldn't it?) (CO/B138301/20)
- (11) you can have it for Friday, *innit?* (can't you?) (CO/B138301/332)
- (12) Oh, she got A levels *innit?* (hasn't she?) (CO/B133203/385)
- (13) they must have the wrong place, *innit?* (mustn't they?) (CO/B135205/15)
- (14) told, you told mum [yesterday *innit?*] (didn't you?) (CO/B139610/9)
- (15) could have got a bigger size *innit* Dawn? (couldn't you?) (CO/B134901/297)
- (16) if as long as her clothes look alright underneath then it's not too bad *innit?* She might wear her shorts thing *innit?* (mightn't she?) (CO/135201/67)

One distinctive feature of *innit* is that it does not necessarily agree with the subject of the main sentence in person, gender or number although it most frequently agrees with the 3rd person singular *it*, and less often with *you* (34 cases) and *he* (20 cases); such a tendency clearly reflects the fact that *innit* originated as a form derived from *isn't it*. Furthermore, *innit* does not necessarily agree with the tense of the verb of the main sentence, but does show a tendency to favour the present tense; only 18 cases out of 260 are recorded with the past. For example,

- (17) You forgot your book, *innit?* (CO/B138102/133)

As regards to polarity, although it does normally follow the ordinary reversal rule of the polarity pattern found in tags, it does not necessarily do so, with seven such cases of non-reversal of polarity. Out of these seven tokens, in three of them the main verb is BE (18), in two other DO (19), in one HAVE as auxiliary (20) and WOULD in the last one (21).

- (18) it's not too bad *innit?* (CO/B135201/67)
- (19) didn't have a hair cut then *innit?* (CO/B134803/141)
- (20) A: No, don't give anyone else the work then.
B: No, that you haven't marked, that you haven't marked *innit*. (CO/B134401/311)
- (21) You wouldn't think so *innit?* (CO/B132707/149)

Finally, *innit* usually occurs at the end of the speaker's turn (22) but it may also appear at the beginning (23) or in the middle (24).

- (22) It's too cold *innit?* (CO/B136903/8)
- (23) A: I've never, I've never hear Jim's voice before. (CO/B132707/16)
B: *Innit?* (CO/B132707/17)
A: Never! Cos (unclear) every time Jim talks. (CO/B132707/18)
- (24) And here's me, I'm looking at him, she's going you're cool you beat your dog, *innit?* <laughing> I don't. (CO/B132708/7)

As regards the pragmatic dimension, *innit* is quite a complex form, and can mark a wide range of pragmatic values: empathiser, softener, peremptory, expressing surprise and agreement (Krug 1998, Andersen 2001, Stenström, Andersen and Hasund 2002).

4. NEVER

This section concentrates on the use of *never* as a full negative form. This item has already been the focus of attention in the literature (Cheshire 1997, 1999; Cheshire *et al.* 2011, Palacios Martínez 2011).

In present-day English, *never* is very frequently used to express universal temporal negation (25); this use of *never* is quite standard, and indeed we find HAVE + *never*. However, it can also convey negation in reference to a specific point in time in the past, the pattern here being a simple past verbal

form followed by *never* (26).¹¹ This might even involve cases when a specific temporal reference is included in the sentence (27).

- (25) I've *never* heard anything so clearly in my whole entire life. (CO/B132616/21)
- (26) I *never* meant it like that. (CO/B137103/100)
- (27) Vernon and <unclear>*never* called for me yesterday. (CO/B136903/164)

Although many standard grammars and guides to good usage recommend avoiding the use of *never* with its second value, that is, as negating something in the past, Cheshire (1997) shows that educated British lecturers and university students tend to accept as perfectly grammatical sentences utterances in which *never* functions as a simple negator of something that took place in the past, including even those cases containing a specific time reference. Although more frequent in non-standard varieties of English, the data I obtained confirm that this use is growing in standard English.

In COLT I found a total of 340 occurrences of *never*; 19 of these were excluded because they were repetitions or for technical reasons. The total number of examples examined, then, was 321, a frequency of 0.65 per thousand words. In the BNC I registered a total of 7252 in the spoken sample, an average of 0.72 per thousand words.

After studying the frequency of this negative item and its variation with *not... ever*, I focused in detail on its uses in the COLT material. In almost two thirds of occurrences, *never* is used as a universal temporal negator. However, I also found that in 16.6% of cases it referred to an event in the past. The number of examples in which that event in the past is specified is quite restricted, with only two cases. In almost 3% of the cases, *never* is used with future reference, that is, reference is not to all time but only to all possible cases in the future. Finally, I also found a significant number of cases (6.2%) where the expression *never mind* was used and several instances of the combination of *never* with *ever* to emphasize or intensify an already negative meaning.

5. NEGATIVE CONCORD

Negative concord involves the presence of two or more negatives in the same clause which do not cancel each other out (Huddleston et al. 2002: 845, Palacios Martínez 2003: 477). Consider the following:

- (28) like when Sharon Stone sits there with her legs open and she *ain't* go *no* knickers on. (CO/B132901/89)
- (29) They are black they *don't* make *no* difference. (CO/B132901/64)
- (30) You *don't* know *nothing*. (CO/B135603/68)

This feature is typical of non-standard varieties of English across the world (Huddleston et al. 2002: 847) and is found in almost all non-standard dialects of British English (Edwards and Weltens 1985: 106; Anderwald 2005: 118). Kortmann and Lunkenheimer (2011) attest this feature typical of non-standard negation in 51 of the varieties studied, with a pervasiveness index of 0.776. According to this electronic source, this feature is obligatory, among others, in Chicano English and Cameroon pidgin while it is neither pervasive nor extremely rare in Black South African English, Jamaican English and Hong Kong English.

Teenage speech shows a high number of cases, where the presence of negative concord is restricted to the co-occurrence of a clause-negative form, such as *not* together with a negative quantifier within the scope of the negative.

In my analysis I followed Huddleston et al. (2002), Biber et al. (1999) and, more particularly, Anderwald (2002). In order to arrive at a percentage of actual versus possible occurrences, a search was made for negative elements in co-occurrence with other negative items that would be equivalent

¹¹ According to Kortmann and Lunkenheimer (2002), *never* as preverbal past tense occurs in 52 of all the varieties considered with a pervasiveness rate of 0.72. Thus, it seems to be obligatory in some Asian (Malaysian English, Hong Kong English) and African (Cameroon Pidgin, Indian South African English) dialects.

to standard negative expressions containing only one negative. Multiple combinations of negative items were therefore retrieved and studied. However, special attention was paid to those examples where I identified negative concord structures which in standard English, generally speaking, would occur with a single negative item.

In COLT the total number of possible examples in which I could find variation was 687, from which 158 were cases of negative concord. That is, in 23 percent of all cases, negative concord constructions were present; in other words, on 23 percent of all occasions where the choice was possible, speakers opted for negative concord structures. Only five negators acted as the first element (*n't/not/dunno, ain't, never, hardly* and *no*), contrasting with a longer list of seven items occupying the second position in similar constructions (*nothing/nuffink, no, none, no more, never, nobody/no one* and *nowhere*).

No cases are recorded, for example, in which *nobody, nothing* or *nowhere* appear in first position followed by any other negator in the clause. This may be explained by the strong negative meaning associated with these items. As for those items occupying first position, *-nt/not* and *ain't* are used in 146 out of 158 cases, representing over 92 percent of the total. In the remaining examples, *no* occurs as the first element in 5.5 percent of cases, and *never* in 2.5.

N't and *no*, then, together account for almost 98 percent of all first elements, while *hardly* and *never* play a rather marginal role as first elements. As for second elements, *nothing* and *no* clearly prevail, occurring in this position in almost 89 percent of all cases, and are followed by *nobody/no one* and *no more* with frequencies of approximately 4.4 percent and 3.7 percent, respectively. *Never* and *nowhere* are far less well represented in this respect, and no examples are registered in which *n't/not* or *ain't* function as the second element.

6. FINAL REMARKS

These findings clearly indicate that non-standard negation in modern English is not dying out; rather the opposite, some of its features (*ain't, innit, never* as expressing simple negation in the past, and negative concord) are quite pervasive and, as Anderwald (2002: 1) claims, they seem to be “quite unstoppable”. This shows that at times the border line between standard and non-standard negatives seems to be more blurred than ever, as speakers of standard varieties of English are taking on board particular aspects of negatives typical of non-standard dialects.

The relevance of these modern tendencies is such that it would be a mistake if students of English, particularly those at the university level, were to be ignorant of them. Students of English at an advanced level should be familiarised with the changes taking place in modern English. As academics, but also as teaching professionals, we should aim at finding ways to reconcile linguistic theory and empirical research, language findings and teaching practice. Corpus-based and grammar awareness activities might be useful in this respect, with students first learning about the existence of these forms, then going on to examine them with real data taken from corpora and other authentic materials, such as newspapers, interviews, radio and TV broadcasts and digital sound archives (Frank and Rinvulucrici 1983, Partington 1998).

CORPORA AND OTHER MATERIALS USED

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