

Too much of nothing? Double negation and the pleonastic non

Too much of nothing
Can make a man feel ill at ease
-Bob Dylan, *The Basement Tapes*

1 Double negatives

There are people who make it their business to enforce the use of Correct English Grammar by the masses.¹ They are horrified when “who” is used instead of “whom”, and write indignant letters to the editor on the subject. Split infinitives, they warn, portend the end of civilization. But nothing provokes more righteous outrage from the Grammar Police than the use of double negatives: “I don’t have no money”; “He didn’t see nothing.” Not only is this ungrammatical, they cry; it is fundamentally illogical. Two negatives make a positive, so “he didn’t see nothing” means that he did see something.

If this is true then more than half the world’s languages are illogical, since (according to [Cheshire]), in more than half the world’s languages the use of such double negatives is not only permissible but obligatory. French, Hungarian and Italian, for example, have versions of double negation. And even in English there is nothing illogical about “he didn’t see nothing”. This misconception is based on a supposed “rule” of mathematical logic which, according to the Police, asserts that two negatives make a positive. But this isn’t true even in mathematics; it depends on the context. The product of two negative numbers is positive, but the sum of two negative numbers is (even more) negative. “Not + nothing” are functioning according to the second rule; they reinforce rather than cancel each other. The ideologically pure will object that the relevant rule of logic is “not (not P)=P”; the negation of a negation returns the original assertion. But this is completely irrelevant, because the function of the symbols “not” and “nothing” isn’t the same as that of the logical symbols. Purists think that “he didn’t see nothing” means “it is not the case that he saw nothing” or “the set of things that he saw was not the empty set”, and therefore he *did* see something. In doing so, however, they are arbitrarily imposing the grammar of one language (mathematical logic) onto another (English dialect).²

Let’s take a look at some examples in Italian (taken from [Alma]). I give a literal and an actual translation.

1. *Non ho visto niente.*

lit: “I didn’t see nothing.”

actual: “I didn’t see anything”, or “I saw nothing”.

2. *A casa nostra non viene mai nessuno.*

literal: Either “No one never not comes to our house” or “No one ever not comes to our house”. (The word “mai” sometimes translates as “never”, sometimes as “ever”.)

¹Left unanswered, indeed unasked, is the question: Who decides what constitutes “correct” grammar?

²Interestingly, “who” versus “whom”, infinitive splitting and other perennial grammatical polemics stem from similar and equally arbitrary attempts to impose Latin grammar on English; see [Bauer] and [Milroy].

actual: “No one ever comes to our house.”

3. *Non è mai contenta di nulla.*

literal: “He’s never happy with nothing.”

actual: “He’s never happy with anything.”

4. *Non ha più né una casa né un lavoro. È rimasto senza niente.*

literal (second sentence): “He’s left without nothing.”

actual: “He’s left without anything.” Or “He’s left with nothing.”

A noteworthy feature of these double negations is that the meaning is perfectly clear, even to English speakers who are new to Italian. An Italian sentence such as *non vado da nessuna parte* is, like Dylan’s refrain “you ain’t a-goin’ nowhere”, entirely unambiguous. Given that so many languages use double negation, this suggests that there is something natural about it, hard-wired into the human brain. In any event, it is perfectly logical.

2 The “pleonastic” non

The so-called “pleonastic non”, on the other hand, is illogical by any standard. According to my English dictionary a *pleonasm* is “the use of more words than are necessary to express an idea; redundancy”, such as a “free gift” or a “true fact”. In Italian grammar it refers to the fact that in certain expressions with the word “non”, the “non” can be deleted without changing the meaning. Clearly, this is worse than mere redundancy; it is like declaring that “gift” and “non-gift” mean the same thing. Worse still, in some cases the pleonastic rule is capriciously retracted, as though the language were playing a little joke on us: Ha ha! Now removing the “non” *does* change the meaning! Fooled you! This latter phenomenon occurs mainly with *finché* and *finché non*, which I’ve put into a separate section.

In contrast to double negation, which hardly ever causes any confusion for English speakers, the pleonastic non takes some getting used to. Often the best bet is to just ignore the “non” and rely on the context determine the meaning. Indeed in some cases there is no other way. But let’s get on to the examples.

2.1 Basic examples

Two common examples correspond to the English “unless” and “until”. It is interesting to note that (cf. [Maiden-Robustelli]), the prefix “un” usually indicates a kind of negation. In Italian “unless” is usually rendered as *a meno che non*. An example from Moravia’s *Gli indifferenti*:

...a meno che non avesse sospettato qualche cosa dall’inspiegabile assenza di lei e dell’uomo...

“...unless she had suspected something from the inexplicable absence of her and the man...”

This construction is confusing at first, because one tends to read it as “unless she had not suspected something”. In fact the *non* is pleonastic; it would mean the same thing to

say *a meno che avesse sospettato*. Fortunately for the Italian learner, however, here the *non* is almost always included. Thus it is best to regard *a meno che non* as a single word, “unless”, in which case no confusion can result (one hopes). One consequence, apparently, is that in Italian one can’t make phrases of the form “unless + (negative statement)”. In English it is not uncommon³, at least in speech, to follow “unless” by a negative; e.g. “she’ll go to Harvard, unless she doesn’t get any financial aid”. But this is really a double negative: “provided that not (not P)”, where P is “gets financial aid”. Even in English it is better reformulated as “provided she gets some financial aid”; in Italian such a reformulation is forced.

One way to say “until” is *fino a quando*, or pleonastically as *fino a quando non* (the more common *finché* and *finché non* are considered in the next section). Two examples:

1. From Moravia’s *Il conformista*:

“*Ci sparerei al bersaglio,*” rispose, “*fino a quando mi sembrasse di avere una mira infallibile.*” “I would shoot at the target,” he replied, “until it seemed to me my aim was infallible.”⁴

2. From *Ragione e sentimento* (translation of Austen’s *Sense and sensibility*):

...*Marian si sarebbe disposta ad aspettare fino a quando la situazione non fosse migliorata.*
“...Marian would be disposed to wait until the situation had improved.”

In example 2 the pleonastic “non” is especially jarring, as it is separated from *fino a quando* and appears to say “until the situation hadn’t improved”. But as the latter wouldn’t make any sense, there is no ambiguity.

Two more typical examples of the pleonastic non:

From *Ragione e sentimento*:

...*per qualche motivo fosse sembrato meno felice a Longstaple di quanto non lo fosse di solito.*

“...for some reason he had seemed less happy at Longstaple than he usually was.” (Literally, “than he usually wasn’t”).

A textbook example: *Non appena l’ho visto l’ho riconosciuto*. “As soon as I saw him I recognized him.” (Literally, “not as soon as I saw him”, which has an analogous English form “no sooner did I see him...”)

In both examples the “non” can be omitted without changing the meaning.

³According to George Orwell (quoted in [Cheshire]), double negatives such as “not uncommon” should be “laughed out of existence”. I disagree. Used sparingly, they allow a nice shading of meaning.

⁴The role of “ci” in this sentence isn’t clear to me, so I left it untranslated. The context is that the young boy Marcello has asked the pedophile ex-priest Lino for a revolver. Lino asks him what he would do with it, and Marcello replies as above (it’s a lie as he really wants to take the revolver to school to impress his classmates).

2.2 Finché versus finché non

Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all examples in this section are from *Vestivamo alla marina* by Susanna Agnelli.

One Italian grammar source I have introduces “finché non” as an example of the pleonastic non, and then goes on to say (in Italian) that in some cases the use or absence of “non” *does* change the meaning of the phrase (!). Not a clue is given, however, as to how one recognizes whether the case at hand is pleonastic or not, and consequently we are left in rather a muddle. But there is a better way to look at it: The key point is not the Yoga of Pleonasticism, but rather the curious tendency of Italian to use the same word with opposite meanings.

In English, the (roughly) opposite meanings in question are “until” and “as long as”, for example: “We kept walking as long as it was dark”; “We kept walking until it was dark”. Note the second statement could be clumsily rendered as “We kept walking as long as it was not dark”. Thus the logic of the first statement is essentially “if X, then Y”, while that of the second is “if not X, then Y”, where X=“it was dark” and Y=“we kept walking”.

In Italian one can use *finché* with either meaning. Here are two typical examples.

1. *...così continuavamo a lavorare cercando di consolare i soldati e rassicurandoli che finché si trovavano in ospedale non correvano alcun pericolo.*

“...so we continued to work, trying to console the soldiers and reassuring them that as long as they were in the hospital they were not in any danger.”

2. *...allora camminavo controllando gambe e braccia in serena compostezza finché arrivavo a un corridoio vuoto che attraversavo di gran corsa.*

“...then I would walk controlling legs and arms with serene decorum, until I reached an empty corridor that I would rush quickly across.”

One can compare these opposite uses with the double conjunctive use of *perché* (see my essay on the subjunctive), which can mean either “because” or “in order to”. When the latter meaning is intended, the following verb is subjunctified, and hence no ambiguity is possible. It would be nice if there were a similar system for *finché*—one can imagine the distinction being signalled by a choice of imperfetto versus passato prossimo/remoto—but this doesn’t seem to be the case. As far as I can tell, whether *finché* means “as long as” or “until” can be determined only by context. In the above examples, the choice is clear, but in general the full context can be essential. For example, consider the following partial sentence:

3. *Dovevamo proseguire finché era buio...*

It seems to me that without further context, there is no way to know whether this means “We had to keep going until it was dark” or “We had to keep going as long as it was dark”. Indeed one’s first guess might be the former, but here is the complete sentence:

4. *Dovevamo proseguire finché era buio, perché di giorno la nostra macchina avrebbe dato nell’occhio e si rischiava che qualcuno ce la requisisse.*

“We had to keep going as long as it was dark, because by day our car would stand out and there was the risk that someone would requisition it.” [This is during the war, in a German-controlled part of Italy.]

Similarly: *Finché c’era luce...* could apparently mean either “As long as there was light” or “until there was light”. Again the context determines the meaning: *Finché c’era luce gli aeroplani mitragliavano senza interruzione*. “As long as it was light the airplanes would strafe [the roads] nonstop.” In fact in this case even the complete sentence might not completely remove the ambiguity; perhaps the airplanes prefer to strafe at night, as they would were they bombing. In that case we need the previous sentence as well to fully clarify the situation: *Abbiamo aspettato che facesse buio prima di avviarci verso il Nord*. “We waited until it got dark before heading north.”

The phrase *finché non*, on the other hand, always means “until”. It is best to think of it as a single word—with *non* corresponding to the “un” in “until”—even though other words can come between the *finché* and the *non*. It can also be read as “as long as not”. Some examples:

5. *Così camminavamo dalle due alle quattro...finché non era l’ora di tornare a casa*.
“So we would walk from two to four...until it was time to go home.”

6. From *Lettere contro la guerra* by Tiziano Terzani:
Ma tutto sarà inutile ...finché noi non accetteremo che la violenza conduce solo ad altra violenza.
“But it will all be pointless...until we accept that violence only leads to more violence.”

Here’s an example where “as long as not” works equally well; note also the use of the subjunctive.

7. *Non l’avrebbero imbarcata su un nave ospedale, finché non fosse diplomata*.
“They wouldn’t let her embark on a hospital ship until she had graduated.” Or “as long as she hadn’t graduated”.

And finally, here’s an example in which both versions of “until” are used in the same sentence. What, if anything, motivates this choice is unclear.

8. *Abbiamo camminato attraverso il bosco finché è apparsa davanti a noi l’alta rete metallica, lì ci siamo accovacciati e abbiamo aspettato finché non abbiamo udito la voce di due uomini che parlavano in tedesco...*
“We walked through the woods until the high metal fence appeared in front of us; we crouched down there and waited until we heard the voices of two men speaking in German, and the voices moved away.”

To sum up: *Finché non* is “until” and *finché* is “as long as”—except that “finché” by itself can also be used, at the whim of the speaker, as “until”. Only the context determines which alternative is intended.

3 References

Bauer and Trudgill (editors), *Language myths*. This delightful volume includes the following essays, cited above:

Laurie Bauer, *Myth 16: You shouldn't say 'it is me' because me is accusative.*

Jenny Chesire, *Myth 14: Double negatives are illogical.*

Lesley Milroy, *Myth 12: Bad grammar is slovenly.*

Grammatica avanzata della lingua italiana, Alma Edizioni.

Maiden-Robustelli, *A reference grammar of modern Italian.*