

Negative Inversion*

Sabina Matyiku

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Negative inversion is a phenomenon in which a declarative sentence begins with a negated auxiliary or modal, such as *can't*, *won't*, *don't*, or *didn't*, and is followed by a subject like *nobody*, *anybody*, *many of them*, or *everybody*. Below are several examples of this phenomenon:

- (1) a. Can't nobody beat 'em.
(African American English; Labov, Cohen, Robins, & Lewis 1968: 285)
- b. I hope that won't anybody hit us. (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 241)
- c. Don't many of them live around here.
(African American English; Labov et al. 1968: 286)
- d. Didn't everybody see the fight. (West Texas English; Matyiku 2016: 356)

Negative inversion is referred to as 'negative auxiliary inversion' in more recent literature (Green 2011, 2014; Matyiku 2016, 2017; Blanchette & Collins 2018) in order to distinguish it from the phenomenon more commonly known as negative inversion, some examples of which are "Never was so much owed by so many to so few," "With no job would Jamie be happy," "Hardly ever do I win something I like," "Not only did I not get a promotion, I got fired." Negative inversion is also referred to as 'Non-canonical Negative Inversion' in White-Sustaíta (2010), 'Verb-initial Negative Inversion' (V1NI) in Horn (2015) and 'Popular Negative Inversion' in Blanchette (2015).

1 Who says this?

Negative inversion is attested in African American English throughout the country (Labov et al. 1968; Labov 1972; Martin 1992; Sells, Rickford, & Wasow 1996; Parrott 2000; Green 2002, 2011, 2014; White-Sustaíta 2010).

For white speakers, negative inversion is attested in Appalachia, some varieties of which are Alabama English in Anniston, Alabama (Feagin 1979), Appalachian English (Wolfram & Christian 1976; Shearer 1998; Zanuttini & Bernstein 2014; Blanchette 2015; Blanchette & Collins 2018), and Smoky Mountain English (Montgomery & Hall 2004).

Negative inversion for white speakers is also attested in the South (Labov et al. 1968; Labov 1972), some varieties of which are Southern White English Vernacular (Martin 1992, 1993; Martin & Wolfram 1998), West Texas English (Foreman 1999a, 1999b; Horn 2015; Matyiku 2016, 2017), and Texas Vernacular English (Salmon 2018).

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On the basis of recently conducted online surveys, the distribution of white speakers appears to be more widespread than attested in the literature. In a survey conducted by the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project (YGDP), participants were asked to rate examples. Respondents from Appalachia and the South were more likely to rate negative inversion examples as good, but respondents from other areas also rated the examples favorably. See recent survey results in section 5 below for a discussion. Blanchette and Collins (2018) also conducted an online survey on negative inversion and found respondents outside of the expected areas to rate negative inversion examples as good. Whether the positive results correlate with presence of the phenomenon in speakers' grammars is available for further investigation.

2 Syntactic properties

Syntactic properties that have been described in the literature for negative inversion across varieties of English are discussed in this section. The properties may or may not hold in all varieties; variation among varieties is made explicit when it is known.

2.1 Only in negative sentences with sentential negation

The presence of sentential negation is obligatory in negative inversion. Sentential negation occurs when the auxiliary or modal is negated such as, for example, when *can* is *can't* and *will* is *won't*, as in (2).

- (2) a. Can't nobody beat 'em. (African American English; Labov et al. 1968: 285)
b. Won't everybody fit in that car. (West Texas English; Matyiku 2017: 37)

In comparison, the examples in (3) and (4) below are unacceptable. The examples in (3) show that negative inversion is restricted to negative sentences and that 'positive inversion' – inversion in affirmative sentences – is not possible.

- (3) a. *Can somebody beat 'em. (African American English; Parrott 2000: 417)
b. *Will everybody fit in that car. (West Texas English; Matyiku 2017: 68)

The examples in (4) have non-negative auxiliaries and negative subjects. Their unacceptability shows that a negative subject is not enough to license the construction. The negation must occur on the auxiliary.

- (4) a. *Can nobody beat 'em. (African American English; Parrott 2000: 417)
b. *Will none of the students go to the party.
(West Texas English; Foreman 1999b: 214)

Sentential negation requires the inflected morpheme *n't*. When negation is in the form of *not*, such as in the examples in (5), the result is unacceptable.

- (5) a. *Can not nobody beat 'em. (African American English; Parrott 2000: 618)
b. *Will not any of the students go to the party. (West Texas English; Matyiku 2017: 69)
c. *Will any of the students not go to the party. (West Texas English; Matyiku 2017: 69)

2.2 Co-occurrence with negative concord

Many of the examples of negative inversion that are attested in the literature have negative subjects, as in the examples in (6). When the subject begins with *no*, there is negative concord between the negative auxiliary and the subject. Even though the words are both negative, they yield only one semantic negation in the sentence's interpretation, as indicated by the approximate translation.

- (6) a. Didn't nobody see it, didn't nobody hear it!
(African American English; Labov et al. 1968: 285)
'Nobody saw it, nobody heard it.'
- b. Don't no game last all night long. (African American English; Green 2002: 78)
'No game lasts all night.'
- c. Won't nobody help her. (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 241)
'Nobody will help her.'
- d. Didn't none of us ever learn that. (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 235)
'None of us ever learnt that.'
- e. Don't nobody live there. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999b: 210)
'Nobody lives there.'
- f. I guess, cain't no man live forever, can he?
(West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 35)
'I guess, no man can live forever, can he?'

Negative inversion co-occurs with negative concord when there are additional negative words in the sentence, as well, as in (7).

- (7) a. Ain't nobody know about no club. (African American English; Labov 1972: 812)
'Nobody knows about any club.'
- b. Didn't nobody get hurt or nothin'.
(Appalachian English; Wolfram & Christian 1976: 113)
'Nobody got hurt or anything.'
- c. Cain't nobody do nothin' right. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999b: 213)
'Nobody can do anything right.'

Examples similar to these which lack negative concord are as in (8) and (9). The subjects in these examples begin with *any*.

- (8) a. Didn't anybody go last year, did they? (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 235)
b. And won't anybody know who you are until I tell 'em.
(Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 235)
c. ... didn't anything happen. (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 348)
- (9) a. Don't anybody live there. (West Texas English; Matyiku 2017: 138)
b. Won't anybody believe what I'm about to say.
(West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 22)
c. Cain't anything jump in this game. (West Texas English; Matyiku 2017: 138)

Examples with subjects that begin with *any* are attested in Appalachian English and West Texas English but not in African American English. Labov et al. captures the similarities between *no* and *any* and other indefinites with the proposal that a rule changes indefinites that are positive (such as *any*) to indefinites that are negative (such as *no*) in varieties of English that exhibit negative concord. In African American English, a variety in which the distribution of *any* is restricted, the rule applies more frequently and there are more *no* indefinites. In varieties in which *any* is attested, the rule applies less frequently so we see both *any* and *no* indefinites.

Negative concord is also discussed in sections 2.6 and 3.2 below, and on the negative concord page.

2.3 Subject restriction

In this section, we consider first the types of subjects that are possible in negative inversion, then turn our attention to the types of subjects that are not possible.

2.3.1 Possible subjects

The types of subjects that are possible can be broadly classified as being of two types: (i) indefinite, non-specific subjects, including *nobody* and *anybody*, and (ii) quantificational subjects, including *many people* and *everybody*.

Some examples of indefinite, non-specific subjects are in (10).

- (10) a. Can't nobody beat 'em. (African American English; Labov et al. 1968: 285)
 b. Didn't anybody go last year, did they? (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 235)
 c. Didn't one red cent make it back to the community.
 (African American English; Green 2014: 118)
 d. Can't a man in this place say he happy bout a damn thing.
 (Southern White English Vernacular, African American English; Martin 1992: 64)
 e. Ain't a damn thing changed. (African American English; Parrott 2000: 417)

Quantificational subjects which begin with *many* are attested in varieties that allow negative inversion, as in (11).

- (11) a. Don't many of them live around here.
 (African American English; Labov et al. 1968: 286)
 b. Didn't many boys in town like to hunt. (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 348)
 c. Don't many people like you. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 21)

Quantifiers *every* and *all* are possible subjects for at least some speakers of African American English (AAE), Appalachian English (AppE), and West Texas English (WTE), as in (12).

- (12) a. Didn't everybody see the fight. (WTE, AAE, AppE; Matyiku 2016: 356)
 b. Can't everybody win the jackpot, can they? (AppE; Matyiku 2017: 164)
 c. Didn't all (the students) show up. (AAE; Green 2014: 130)

- d. Don't all of my friends like you. (WTE; Foreman 1999a: 56)
- e. Cain't all o' ya go at once. (WTE; Foreman 1999a: 14)

Foreman (1999a, 1999b) provides a wider range of quantificational subjects for West Texas English (WTE), as in (13). Whether or not the broader range of quantificational subjects are possible across all varieties is available for further investigation.

- (13) a. Didn't half the students do their homework. (WTE; Foreman 1999b: 212)
- b. Can't more than three people fit in the car. (WTE; Foreman 1999a: 43)
- c. Wudn't no more than ten people allowed in at a time. (WTE; Foreman 1999b: 210)
- d. Didn't nowhere near a thousand people go to that concert. (WTE; Foreman 1999b: 210)

2.3.2 Impossible subjects

We consider next the types of subjects that are not possible in negative inversion. The types of subjects that unacceptable can be broadly classified into two types: (i) definite or specific subjects and (ii) quantifiers that are otherwise restricted in negative contexts.

Definite and specific subjects, such as proper names, pronouns, possessive subjects, and definite descriptions (subjects that start with *the*) are typically attested to not be possible. The following examples are attested in the literature to be unacceptable.

- (14) a. *Wouldn't Sally and Jean help the poor man. (Southern White English Vernacular, African American English; Martin & Wolfram 1998: 26)
- b. *Didn't Jamie see the fight. (West Texas English; Matyiku 2017: 121)
- c. *Won't they catch us. (African American English; Parrott 2000: 418)
- d. *Wouldn't I do that. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999b: 215)
- e. *Couldn't my aunt from Chicago do more than she did. (Southern White English Vernacular, African American English; Martin & Wolfram 1998: 26)
- f. *Cain't their dogs bite me. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 42)
- g. *Ain't the President done nothing. (Southern White English Vernacular, African American English; Martin & Wolfram 1998: 26)
- h. *Didn't the teachers go to the party. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999b: 215)
- i. *Can't those six boys who went to the store buy nothin. (Southern White English Vernacular, African American English; Martin 1992: 66)

Quantifiers that have a restricted distribution with respect to negation more generally are also not possible subjects in negative inversion, as in (15).

- (15) a. *Don't few of them live around here. (African American English; Sells et al. 1996: 610)
- b. *Won't few boys go to the party. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 49)
- c. *Didn't some (of the students) show up. (African American English; Green 2014: 131)

- d. *Didn't some students leave. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 48)
- e. *Cain't several students read that book. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 48)
- f. *Won't most people believe that. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 48)

Quantitative evidence for the subject distribution as described here comes from a survey conducted in Blanchette and Collins (2018). In the results reported, negative subjects, *any*, *many*, and *every* receive higher values than *some*, *few*, proper names, and definite descriptions starting with *the*. Participants whose responses are reported are mostly from Appalachia, there are a couple of African American English speakers, and a few speakers from areas in which negative inversion is not attested in the literature.

However, Salmon (2017, 2018) reports some exceptions to the subject distribution as described for Texas Vernacular English speakers. He observes that certain types of definite subjects *can* appear as subjects of negative inversion when they provide new information in the discourse (pp. 54-58). For example, a definite description is possible in the discourse provided in (16a) and a list of proper names is possible in (16b).

- (16) a. A: Hey baby, y'all have a good time tonight? How was the bar?
B: Not too bad. *Couldn't the usual crowd get in 'cause of the cover charge*, so there was a lot of room. Got the best table in the house.
(Texas Vernacular English; Salmon 2018: 55)
- b. A: Hey man, how was y'all's meetin' last night? Y'all have a good turnout?
B: Yeah, it was pretty good. Bob and Mary, Jenny and Doug, was all there. *Couldn't Tommy, Darin, or little Mikey come out*, but we still had a pretty good time.
(Texas Vernacular English; Salmon 2018: 56)

Salmon (2017) also provides an example in which *some* is a possible subjects of negative inversion in Texas English, as in (17).

- (17) Teacher A: What's wrong? Why you lookin' so glum?
Teacher B: Well, didn't some of the students show back up from the field trip.
(Texas Vernacular English; Salmon 2017: 287)

For a more in-depth discussion of the subject restriction in negative inversion across varieties, see Matyiku (2017); for African American English, see Green (2014); and for Texas varieties, see Foreman (1999a, 1999b) and Salmon (2017, 2018).

2.4 Possible in embedded structures

Negative inversion is possible in embedded structures with an overt complementizer such as *that* or *if*, as in the following examples:

- (18) a. I know a way that can't nobody start a fight.
(African American English; Labov et al. 1968: 286)
- b. She loves the fact that don't nobody like her.
(West Texas English, African American English; Foreman 1999b: 214)
- c. I hope that won't anybody hit us. (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 241)

- d. Let me know if don't nobody wanna ride the bus. (African American English; Green 2014: 135)
- e. I don't care if can't nobody hear me. (African American English; Green 2014: 135)

2.5 Compatibility with expletives

In some white speaker varieties, negative inversion constructions can be preceded by an expletive, as in (19). These types of examples are split subjects and they are discussed in more detail on the split subjects page.

- (19) a. They can't many people say that. (Appalachian English; Shearer 1998)
- b. They won't nobody know you're gone. (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 241)
- c. They can't nobody beat 'em. (Texas Vernacular English; Salmon 2018: 62)
- d. There didn' no girl go to the door with a boy. (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 241)
- e. There can't nobody ride him. (Smoky Mountain English; Montgomery & Hall 2004: 111)
- f. There didn't nobody laugh. (Texas Vernacular English; Salmon 2018: 60)

'They' looks like a pronoun but is in fact an expletive, along with 'there,' in Appalachian English and Southern English (see the Expletive *they* page for more information).

In Texas Vernacular English, Salmon (2018) finds the correlation between split subjects and negative inversion to be age-graded. Through a survey he conducted in the cities of Abilene, Corpus Christi, and Odessa in Texas, he found that while older speakers accept both negative inversion and split subjects, younger speakers only accept negative inversion and are unfamiliar with split subjects.

A similar change likely happened in African American English, a variety in which negative inversion is incompatible with expletives. The examples in (20) begin with expletives *there* or *it* and are attested to be unacceptable for speakers of African American English:

- (20) a. *There didn't nobody laugh. (Southern White English Vernacular, African American English; Martin & Wolfram 1998: 27)
- b. *It can't no man round here get enough money to buy they own farm. (Southern White English Vernacular, African American English; Martin & Wolfram 1998: 27)
- c. *There don't nobody like me. (African American English; Weldon 1994: 11)
- d. *It don't nobody be drinking tea. (African American English; Green 2008: 4)

There are, however, some examples of split subjects in older varieties of African American English, such as the ones given in (21), which come from ex-slave narratives written in the mid-eighteen hundreds:

- (21) a. There couldn't many of them go to school. (African American English; cited in Bailey, Maynor, & Cukor-Avila 1991)
- b. But they'd give me a note so there would' nobody interfere with me. (African American English; cited in Bailey et al. 1991)

To review, expletives are compatible with negative inversion in most white speaker varieties. In Texas Vernacular English, expletives are compatible with negative inversion in the speech of older speakers but not of younger speakers. On a more extended timeline, in African American English, expletives used to be compatible with negative inversion in older varieties but no longer seem to be in contemporary varieties.

2.6 Availability of non-inverted counterparts

Negative inversion constructions typically have a well-formed non-inverted counterpart. Sentences exhibiting negative inversion are given in (22a) and (23a), and their non-inverted counterparts are given in (22b) and (23b):

- (22) a. Ain't nobody know about no club. (African American English; Labov 1972: 812)
b. Nobody ain't know about no club. (African American English; Labov 1972: 812)
- (23) a. Didn't everybody go to the party. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999b)
b. Everybody didn't go to the party. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999b: 215)

This is not the case when the subject starts with indefinite *any*, as in (24a), for the varieties that allow such subjects. The negative inversion sentence in (24a) is acceptable while its non-inverted counterpart in (24b) is not, though the distribution of *any* with respect to negation is otherwise restricted.

- (24) a. Won't anybody believe what I'm about to say.
(West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 21)
b. *Anybody won't believe what I'm about to say.
(West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 21)

The availability of the non-inverted counterpart when the subject is negative is also restricted in some varieties. In West Texas English, in the case in which the only negative markers in a sentence are on the auxiliary and the subject, as in (25), the inverted order in (25a) is strongly preferred to the non-inverted order in (25b).

- (25) a. Didn't nobody like the movie. (West Texas English; Matyiku 2017: 71)
b. #Nobody didn't like the movie. (West Texas English; Matyiku 2017: 65)

The example in (25b) is semantically odd under a negative concord interpretation equivalent to *Nobody liked the movie*. Instead, (25b) is interpreted as a double negative – as having two semantic negatives – as it does in Standard English and as the context in (26) illustrates.

- (26) Speaker A: Who didn't like the movie?
Speaker B: Naw, it was awesome. Nobody didn't like it. Everybody just loved it the whole time.
(West Texas English; William Salmon, personal communication)

When there are additional negative words in the sentence, such as *nothin'* in (27), the non-inverted word order *can* be interpreted under a negative concord reading, as in (27b).

- (27) a. Ain't nobody doin' nothin' wrong. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999b: 206)
 b. Nobody ain't doin' nothin' wrong. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999b: 206)
 'Nobody's doin' anythin' wrong.'

This restriction on the availability of non-inverted counterparts with negative subjects does not hold for all speakers of African American English and Appalachian English. For both varieties, examples like the one in (25b) are attested to have a negative concord reading, as in (28).

- (28) a. No game don't last all night. (African American English; Green 2002: 80)
 'No game lasts all night.'
 b. Nothing don't come to a sleeper but a dream. (African American English; Green 2002: 80)
 'Nothing comes to a sleeper but a dream.'
 c. Nobody couldn't handle him. (Appalachian English; Wolfram & Christian 1976: 112)
 'Nobody could handle him.'
 d. None of em didn't hit the house. (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 229)
 'None of em hit the house.'

While the non-inverted counterpart of negative inversion is often possible, there are differences in how the two types of sentences are interpreted, an issue to which we return in the semantics section.

2.7 Summary of syntactic properties

Negative inversion always occurs in negative sentences with sentential negation. It is possible in embedded structures, it can typically be uninverted, it is compatible with expletives in some varieties, it can co-occur with negative concord, and it has a subject restriction. Some differences between varieties of English that exhibit negative inversion are summarized in the following chart.

Compatible with...	Example	Variety		
		African American English	Appalachian English	Texas English
Negative subjects?	'Didn't nobody...'	✓	✓	✓
Any subjects?	'Didn't anybody...'	✗	✓	✓
Quantificational subjects?	'Didn't many...'	✓	✓	✓
Uninverted negative subject?	'Nobody didn't...'	✓ ^a	✓	✓ ^b
Expletives?	'They didn't nobody...'	✗ ^c	✓	✓ ^d

^aPossible but restricted semantically (Green 2014)

^bPossible but restricted syntactically and semantically (Foreman 1999b; Matyiku 2017)

^cNot possible for contemporary speakers but attested in older varieties (Green 2002; White-Sustaíta 2010)

^dOnly possible for older speakers (Salmon 2018)

3 Semantic properties

The semantic differences between a sentence exhibiting negative inversion and its non-inverted counterpart have been characterized in several different ways in the literature.

3.1 Restricted interpretation

Foreman (1999a, 1999b) observes that when we consider meaning, negative inversion is restricted in a way in which its non-inverted counterpart is not. Consider the negative inversion example in (29a) and its non-inverted counterpart in (29b).

- (29) a. Didn't everybody go to the party. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999b)
b. Everybody didn't go to the party. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999b: 215)

The example in (29b) has two different possible interpretations. The sentence could be used in a scenario in which considering all of the relevant people, none of them went to the party. In this case, the subject is interpreted (or 'scopes') above negation. The sentence could also be used to say that not all of the people went. In this case, negation is interpreted above the subject.

In comparison, the negative inversion example in (29a) is only compatible with the latter scenario, in which negation is interpreted above the subject. This example could be paraphrased using 'Not everybody went to the party,' which is also restricted in its interpretation in the same way.

Let us consider this restriction in a different light using the examples in (30). Both of these examples are compatible with an interpretation in which negation is interpreted above the subject and that can be paraphrased as 'Not many people like you.'

- (30) a. Don't many people like you. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 21)
b. Many people don't like you. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 21)

Consider next the examples in (31), in which the added sentence imposes the interpretation that is missing in negative inversion but is present in its non-inverted counterpart; the one in which the subject is interpreted above negation.

- (31) a. *Don't many people like you, but many do like you, too.
(West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 21)
b. Many people don't like you, but many do like you, too.
(West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 21)

The example in (31a) is ill-formed because negative inversion is incompatible with this interpretation.

3.2 Restricted interpretation with negative concord

In section 2.6, we considered syntactic similarities between negative inversion and its non-inverted counterpart and saw that in the case in which there were multiple negative elements, as in (25), repeated below, negative concord does not always occur.

- (25) a. Didn't nobody like the movie. (West Texas English; Matyiku 2017:71)
 b. #Nobody didn't like the movie. (West Texas English; Matyiku 2017: 65)

Instead, (25b) has a double negation reading, which is made explicit with the added context in (26).

- (26) Speaker A: Who didn't like the movie?
 Speaker B: Naw, it was awesome. Nobody didn't like it. Everybody just loved it the whole time. (West Texas English; William Salmon, personal communication)

There is a further semantic distinction between negative inversion and its non-inverted counterpart. The negative inversion example in (25a) cannot have this double negation reading and can only have a negative concord interpretation. In a context in which this interpretation is imposed, as in (32), negative inversion is semantically odd.

- (32) Speaker A: Who didn't like the movie?
 Speaker B: #Didn't nobody like it. We all loved it. (West Texas English; William Salmon, personal communication)

That negative inversion is incompatible with a double negation reading in these types of examples is mentioned in Matyiku (2017) for West Texas English and explicitly discussed in Blanchette and Collins (2018) for Appalachian English and African American English speakers.

Another semantic difference between negative inversion and its non-inverted counterpart when the subject is negative is reported for African American English in Green (2014). Green reports negation to have two flavors: a strong, absolute negation and a weaker negation that allows for exceptions. The non-inverted counterpart is compatible with the weaker negation reading, so the example in (33a) is possible.

- (33) a. Nobody don't ride Bus #201 – just the three people who live in the country. Most of the students in this class ride Bus #99. (African American English; Green 2014: 127)
 b. #Don't nobody ride bus number 201 – just the three people who live in the country. (African American English; Green 2014: 127)

However, negative inversion is only compatible with a strong negation that does not allow for exceptions, so the example in (33b) is not possible with the added exception.

This restriction has not been observed in the Southern and Appalachian varieties of English. Examples with exceptions are attested in Appalachian English, as in (34), and in Texas English in (35), including Green's example from (33b), which Salmon (2017) reports as being acceptable, as in (35c).

- (34) a. Didn't anybody live there except the Bentons, and us, and the Ponders. (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 241)
 b. And Ann said, dudn't anybody know except somebody who's been there. (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 347)
 c. And can't anybody but the immediate family go in. (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 349)

- d. And couldn't anybody do it but Charlotte. (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 242)
- (35) a. Cain't no dog but Ol' Blue do that trick. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999b: 210)
- b. Ain't nobody but Mary read your book yet.
(West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 10)
- c. Don't nobody ride bus number 201 – just the three people who live in the country.
(Texas English Vernacular; Salmon 2017: 261)

There is even an example with an exception that is attributed to an African American English speaker in the literature, as in (36).

- (36) Ain't nobody complainin' but you, man. (African American English; Labov et al. 1968: 284)

This particular example could indicate variation among African American English speakers or it could be a negative existential (see section 7.1).

3.3 Emphasis

Negative inversion in African American English is proposed to be more emphatic than its non-inverted counterpart in Labov et al. (1968), Parrott (2000), and Green (2002, 2011).

3.4 Existential interpretation

White-Sustaíta (2010) suggests that clauses exhibiting negative inversion are associated with an existential interpretation in African American English. In contrast, non-inverted constructions are associated with a generic interpretation.

3.5 Pragmatic constraints on definite subjects

As briefly mentioned in the 'subject restriction' above, Salmon (2017, 2018) shows that certain types of definite subjects are possible subjects of negative inversion in Texas Vernacular English. Their acceptability relies on them introducing new information in the discourse.

4 Negative inversion in the literature

See data points from the literature on the map or browse them in spreadsheet format.



The data can be filtered using different criteria. Some relevant criteria for negative inversion are the following:

- Negative inversion without negative concord (e.g. Didn't many...)
 - For African American English only
 - For white speaker varieties only
- Negative inversion with negative concord (e.g. Didn't nobody...)
 - For African American English only
 - For white speaker varieties only

Please note that the example in these above documents do not always distinguish between negative inversion and negative existentials, so it is possible for examples with auxiliary *be* and its forms, *ain't*, *wasn't*, *weren't*, *isn't* and their variants to be negative inversion, negative existentials, or ambiguous between the two readings. See a discussion of negative existentials below in section 7.1.

5 Recent Survey Results

The following map shows the results from a recent survey conducted by the YGDP.



361 participants were asked to rate a set of sentences, one of which was the negative inversion sentence “He won’t go, and can’t nobody make him.” The red pins represent respondents who accepted the sentence while the white pins represent respondents who rejected the sentence. The outlined sections on the map represent dialectal regions from the Atlas of North American English and the sections’ colors show the average judgment in each region. As shown in the legend, the colors range from red, which represents the highest values, to blue, which represents the lowest values. This map shows that negative inversion is widely accepted, but more so in the South than anywhere else. More information on the survey’s methodology can be found in Wood, Horn, Zanuttini, and Lindermann (2015).

6 Negative inversion in popular culture

6.1 In books

Examples of negative inversion can be found in many types of media. In Ralph Ellison’s (1952) novel *Invisible Man*, Mary says “Won’t nothing surprise me” and Mr. Norton says “But don’ nothin’ happen and I knows then that somethin’ worse than anything I ever heard ’bout is in store for me.” Also in literature written by an African American author in the 1950’s, Mr. Semple says “Then who will walk your dog for you? Don’t none of your other roomers do it” in Langston Hughes’ story “What Can a Man Say?” In Toni Morrison’s 1977 novel *Song of Solomon*, a character says “Got to where won’t nobody sell her a raffle ticket.”

The line “Anyway, don’t none of us got that slick veneer you actual rich guys got” is said by Duffy, a US Marshal based in St. Louis, in John Sandford’s (2017) novel *Golden Prey*. Sandford is a white author born in Iowa.

Negative inversion even makes an appearance in the first Harry Potter book by J.K. Rowling, a white British author. In her book *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (1997), the character Rubeus Hagrid says “Can’t nothing interfere with a broomstick except powerful Dark magic.”

6.2 In music

There are many examples of negative inversion in songs performed by black artists. A popular church song has the lines “Can’t nobody do me like Jesus, can’t nobody do me like the Lord.” In a traditional southern song *Trouble so hard*, performed by Dock Reed, Henry Reed, and Vera Hall in 1937, there is the line “Don’t nobody know my troubles but God.” Vera Hall’s (1959) solo version of the song is sampled in *Natural Blues* by Moby, a white electronic musician, in the year 2000. The lines “Can’t nobody love you like I’m loving you baby,” “can’t nobody kiss you like I’m kissing you little girl,” and “can’t nobody talk to you like I’m talking to you right now” appear in Solomon Burke’s (1963) song *Can’t nobody love you*. This song was covered by three white British musicians in 1965, The Zombies, The Moody Blues, and David Essex. Some more recent examples of negative concord in songs performed by black artists are “Can’t nobody take my pride, can’t nobody hold me down” in Puff Daddy’s song *Can’t nobody hold me down* from 1997, “Can’t nobody do it like me, can’t nobody love you like me” in Kelly Rowland’s song *Can’t nobody* from 2002, and “Don’t nobody want it,” “don’t nobody want none” in Tech N9ne’s song *Don’t nobody want none* from 2018.

Negative inversion also appears in songs by white artists, particularly in country and folk songs. “Can’t nobody love you like I do,” “can’t nobody hold you quite this close” are lines from Wynonna Judd’s (2000) song *Can’t nobody love you like I do*. In Red Molly’s (2008) song *Beaumont Rest Stop*, there are multiple examples of negative inversion: “Well, I’ve heard it said, won’t nothing bring you down like your hometown. But won’t nothing bring you up like getting down.” The line “Can’t nobody bring me down” appears in Thomas Rhett’s (2015) song *I Feel Good*.

Negative inversion even appears in K-pop band 2NE1’s song *Can’t nobody*, which has the line “Can’t nobody hold us down.”

6.3 In TV shows

Negative inversion appears in television shows. An example comes from the show *The Wire*. The character Major Howard “Bunny” Colvin says the line “You’re free to make your drops, collect what need collectin’, won’t nobody bother you. You got my word on it.” The character is played by Robert Wisdom and the line appears in episode 5 of season 3, which originally aired on October 17th, 2004.

“You didn’t do it. He didn’t do it. I guess don’t nobody do shit, huh?” is a line said by Nasir’s “friend” in prison in the 4th episode of the show *The Night Of*, which aired on July 31st, 2016.

In the TV show *Insecure*, Ahmal Dee says “And can’t none of your friends use my shower” to Issa in the 8th episode of season 2. The character is played by Jean Elie and the episode aired on

September 10th, 2017.

A white character from Kentucky, Ronnie, played by Dale Dickey on the show *Shameless*, says the line “And... he thought that I grabbed you and I thought that he grabbed you and the car was full of kids and didn’t none of us know till we drove ten hours into the next state.” This line occurs in episode 4 of season 8, which aired on November 26th, 2017.

In his controversial monologue on Saturday Night Live, Kevin Hart says “You never heard a kid say, ‘I can’t wait to get home and play with my mom.’ You ain’t never heard that. ‘I can’t wait for mommy and me time.’ That don’t exist. Don’t no kids say that.” This excerpt is from his host appearance on December 16th, 2017.

Negative inversion also appears in sketches on the show. “The first rule is, cain’t nobody jump in this game” is said by Octavia Spencer in the sketch “Youngblood” on March 4th, 2017.

6.4 On sports shows

Negative inversion appears in discussions that occur on sports shows. Cris Carter, a ESPN NFL analyst and NFL Hall of Fame receiver, said of his recovery from alcoholism, “When I quit drinking everybody’s buying. When I was drinking, wasn’t NOBODY buying,” on the Mike & Mike show on October 7th, 2014.

During a discussion on the state of some sports in the U.S. on the ESPN show “Pardon the Interruption,” Bomani Jones, an African-American sports journalist and adjunct professor says “If you believe that black people are more athletic, then why aren’t there more black people playing lacrosse, for example? ’Cause don’t nobody want to go out there and get them to PLAY lacrosse.”

6.5 On social media

Negative inversion also appears on social media. Notable football player James Harrison tweeted “If I cant play then can’t nobody play... Lights out!” on December 19th, 2011. Actress and comedian Jackée Harry tweeted “Wasn’t nobody talking to you” on August 28, 2018.

7 Related Phenomena

7.1 Negative existentials

Negative inversion is distinguished from negative existentials in most of the recent literature on the topic. Some examples of negative existentials are given in (37).

- (37) a. Ain’t nothin’ you can do for ’em. (African American English; Labov et al. 1968: 284)
b. Wasn’t nobody home. (African American English; Labov et al. 1968: 286)
c. Wadn’t anything down there but the old Boozer Buildin’.
(Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 235)
d. Idn’t anybody gon’ pay that much attention. (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 240)
e. Ain’t many people you like. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 22)

- f. Wudn't no more than ten people allowed in at a time.
(West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 6)

Negative existentials look superficially similar to negative inversion because they also have a sentence-initial negated auxiliary. The auxiliary is a form of the verb *be*, such as *ain't*, *wasn't* (also *wadn't*), *weren't* (also *wudn't*), and *isn't* (also *idn't*).

Although negative existentials only occur with auxiliary *be*, it can be difficult to tell the two constructions apart because *ain't* can have several meanings. It can be the negative auxiliary *be + n't*, as it is in the examples above. *Ain't* can also be the negative perfect auxiliary corresponding to *have + n't* in Standard English, as in (38), or the negative past tense auxiliary *do + n't*, as in (39).

- (38) a. Ain't nobody ever thought about pickin' up nothin'.
(African American English; Labov 1972: 785)
b. Hain't nobody never set [the trap] for any bears since.
(Smoky Mountain English; Montgomery & Hall 2004: lv)
c. Ain't very many people read your book. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999b: 209)
- (39) Ain't nobody know about no club. (African American English; Labov 1972: 812)

As evidence for distinguishing negative existentials from negative inversion, Labov et al. (1968) point out that a sentence that begins with *ain't* can be ambiguous between the two interpretations. The sentence in (40a) can be interpreted as a negative existential whose subject is modified by a clause, as in (40b). Paraphrased, this sentence would be 'There's nobody who knows about any club.'

- (40) a. Ain't nobody know about no club. (African American English; Labov 1972: 812)
b. (It) ain't nobody (that) know about no club.
(African American English; Labov 1972: 812)
c. Nobody ain't know about no club. (African American English; Labov 1972: 812)

The other possible interpretation of (40a) is as a non-inverted counterpart of negative inversion, as in (40c), which can be paraphrased as 'Nobody knows about any club.'

While negative inversion constructions typically have a non-inverted counterpart, as discussed in section 2.6, this is not always the case for negative existentials. Examples of negative existentials which do not have non-inverted counterparts are given in (41) and (42). The negative existentials are given in the (a) examples and their unacceptable non-inverted counterparts are given in the (b) examples.

- (41) a. Ain't no trouble to make another trip.
(Southern White English Vernacular, African American English; Martin 1993: 50)
b. *No trouble ain't to make another trip.
(Southern White English Vernacular, African American English; Martin 1993: 52)
- (42) a. Ain't nothin' you can do about it. (African American English; Labov 1972: 812)
b. *Nothin' ain't that you can do about it. (African American English; Labov 1972: 812)

Furthermore, recall that negative inversion is incompatible with expletives for contemporary speakers of African American English, as was shown in (20), repeated below.

- (20) a. *There didn't nobody laugh. (Southern White English Vernacular, African American English; Martin & Wolfram 1998: 27)
b. *It can't no man round here get enough money to buy they own farm. (Southern White English Vernacular, African American English; Martin & Wolfram 1998: 27)
c. *There don't nobody like me. (African American English; Weldon 1994: 11)
d. *It don't nobody be drinking tea. (African American English; Green 2008: 4)

In contrast, expletives can always occur in negative existentials in this variety. Negative existentials are given in (43a) and (44a), and their minimally different counterparts in (43b) and (44b) contain the expletive *it*.

- (43) a. Ain't no trouble to make another trip.
(Southern White English Vernacular, African American English; Martin 1993: 50)
b. It ain't no trouble to make another trip.
(Southern White English Vernacular, African American English; Martin 1993: 51)
(44) a. Ain't nothin' you can do about it. (African American English; Labov 1972: 812)
b. It ain't nothin' you can do about it. (African American English; Labov 1972: 812)

Green (2001) suggests that unlike negative inversion, existentials are not restricted to negative sentences. An example of a non-negative existential construction is given in (45a) while its minimally different counterpart containing an expletive is given in (45b).

- (45) a. Should be some candy in the dish. (African American English; Green 2001: 29)
b. It should be some candy in the dish. (African American English; Green 2001: 29)

In African American English, the habitual marker can help us distinguish between the two constructions. *Be* is a marker that indicates when actions happen habitually. Habitual *be* precedes the subject in negative existentials, as in (46a), but it follows the subject in negative inversion, as in (46b).

- (46) a. Don't be nothing happening. (African American English; Green 2014: 121)
'Usually, there is nothing happening.'
b. Don't nothing be happening. (African American English; Green 2014: 122)
'Usually, not a single thing is happening.'

Further evidence that the examples in (46) have different structures comes from the expletive test. When habitual *be* precedes the subject, a sentence-initial expletive is possible in (47a), as expected with negative existentials. When *be* follows the subject, an expletive is not possible in (47b), as expected with negative inversion in African American English.

- (47) a. It don't be nothing happening. (African American English; Green 2014: 121)
b. *It don't nothing be happening. (African American English; Green 2014: 122)

Note that in these examples, *don't* appears as a negated auxiliary in existentials in African American English. Up until this point, the auxiliaries in negative existentials have been *ain't* and other forms of *be*.

The last difference we consider here between the negative inversion and negative existentials is a difference that arises when an additional question is appended to the examples, also known as a tag-question.

When the example is a negative existential, as in (48a), the subject in the appended question is expletive *there*. The subject cannot be pronoun *it*, which refers to 'no problem,' as in (48b).

- (48) a. Ain't nothin' you can do for 'em, is there? (West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 19)
b. *Ain't nothin' you can do for 'em, is it? (West Texas English; Matyiku 2017: 170)

In comparison, for negative inversion, the opposite is true. The subject in the appended question cannot be expletive *there*, as in (49a). Instead, the subject is pronoun *he*, which refers to 'no man,' as in (49b).

- (49) a. *I guess, cain't no man live forever, can there?
(West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 35)
b. I guess, cain't no man live forever, can he?
(West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 35)

Note, however, that this expletive question test is not always reliable because *they* can be either an expletive or a pronoun in all varieties that allow negative inversion, *they* can be a singular, gender-neutral pronoun, and *it* can be an expletive in some varieties. Furthermore, Salmon (2018: 64-65) citing Siemund (2013) points out that tag-questions are also not always a reliable diagnostic for vernacular English.

7.2 Split subjects

As mentioned in section 2.5 above, a negative inversion construction with a sentence-initial expletive is a split subject construction. Some examples of split subjects are repeated here.

- (19) a. They can't many people say that. (Appalachian English; Shearer 1998)
b. They won't nobody know you're gone. (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 241)
c. They can't nobody beat 'em. (Texas Vernacular English; Salmon 2018: 62)
d. There didn' no girl go to the door with a boy. (Alabama English; Feagin 1979: 241)
e. There can't nobody ride him.
(Smoky Mountain English; Montgomery & Hall 2004: 111)
f. There didn't nobody laugh. (Texas Vernacular English; Salmon 2018: 60)

Negative inversion and split subjects receive a parallel analysis in the literature in Foreman (1999a); Zanuttini and Bernstein (2014); Blanchette (2015); Matyiku (2017); Bernstein (2018); Salmon (2018). Split subjects are a type of transitive expletive (Zanuttini & Bernstein 2014). They are also referred to as 'modal existentials' in Salmon (2018) and works cited therein.

Recall that split subjects are not attested in all varieties that allow negative inversion. They are attested in Appalachian English, they are attested only in the speech of older individuals in Texas English, and they are attested only in historical documents in African American English. More information on split subjects is available on the split subject page.

7.3 Sentences that begin with *Not*

The sentences in (50) begin with *not*. These types of examples receive similar analyses to negative inversion in the literature in Foreman (1999a, 1999b); Horn (2015); Matyiku (2017); Blanchette and Collins (2018) and are referred to as ‘*Not*-initial DPs’ (Foreman 1999a, 1999b), ‘*Not*-initial subjects,’ ‘*not*-introducing subject’ (Horn 2014, 2015), and ‘*Not*-initial constructions’ (Matyiku 2017).

- (50) a. Not a single teacher has spoken to me all day. (Standard English; Foreman 1999a: 41)
 b. Not one red cent made it back to the community. (Standard English)
 c. Not many people went to the party. (Standard English; Foreman 1999b: 215)
 d. Not everybody finished their homework. (Standard English; Foreman 1999b: 215)

Negative inversion and sentences that begin with *not* have a similar distribution of subjects. Indefinite and non-specific subjects are possible, as in (50a)-(50b), as are quantificational subjects, as in (50c)-(50d). These are the same types of subjects that are possible in negative inversion, as in (51).

- (51) a. Ain’t a single teacher spoken to me all day. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 41)
 b. Didn’t one red cent make it back to the community. (African American English; Green 2014: 118)
 c. Didn’t many people go to the party. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999b: 215)
 d. Didn’t everybody finish their homework. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999b: 215)

Definite and specific subjects are not possible, as in (52a)-(52b), and neither are quantifiers that are restricted with respect to negation, as in (52c)-(52d).

- (52) a. *Not Jack has seen the baby yet. (Standard English; Foreman 1999b: 216)
 b. *Not their dogs can do that. (Standard English; Foreman 1999b: 216)
 c. *Not few boys will go to the party. (Standard English)
 d. *Not several students can read that book. (Standard English)

These types of subjects are also not possible in negative inversion, as in (53).

- (53) a. *Ain’t Jack seen the baby yet. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999b: 216)
 b. *Cain’t their dogs do that. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999b: 216)
 c. *Won’t few boys go to the party. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 49)

- d. *Cain't several students read that book. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 48)

Sentences that begin with *not* can be embedded under overt complementizers *that* and *if*, as in (54), as is negative inversion in (55).

- (54) a. She loves the fact that not many people like her. (Standard English)
b. I don't care if not everybody can hear me. (Standard English)
- (55) a. She loves the fact that don't nobody like her.
(West Texas English, African American English; Foreman 1999b: 214)
b. I don't care if can't nobody hear me. (African American English; Green 2014: 135)

The tag-questions that follow sentences that begin with *not* (56) are similar to the tags that follow negative inversion (57). The appended questions have pronominal subjects rather than expletives in both cases.

- (56) a. Not everybody saw the fight, did they? (Standard English)
b. Not all of you can win the jackpot, though, can you? (Standard English)
- (57) a. Didn't everybody see the fight, did they? (West Texas English; Matyiku 2017: 206)
b. Cain't all of y'all win the jackpot, though, can you?
(West Texas English; Matyiku 2017: 37)

Recall that in negative inversion, negation is interpreted above the subject and the subject is not interpreted above negation. The same is true in sentences that begin with *not*. Consider the example in (58a) and the similar negative inversion example in (58b).

- (58) a. Not many people like you. (Standard English)
b. Don't many people like you. (West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 21)

When a context imposes the unavailable interpretation, as in (59), the results are unacceptable for both constructions.

- (59) a. *Not many people like you, but many do like you, too. (Standard English)
b. *Don't many people like you, but many do like you, too.
(West Texas English; Foreman 1999a: 21)

In comparison, when the subject precedes negation, as in (60), the subject can be interpreted above negation and is compatible with the given context.

- (60) Many people don't like you, but many do like you, too.
(West Texas English, Standard English; Foreman 1999a: 21)

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