Multiple negation in English today

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1   INTRODUCTION

When we listen to a song, watch a movie or read a book, we often encounter sentences such as *We don't want nothing, not a thing from you*.[1] This grammatical construction – multiple negation (a special case of which is double negation) – may infuriate us but sounds familiar to all of us. Although we find ambivalent opinions concerning multiple negation, we can claim that since 18th century prescriptivism it has been banished from textbooks, from language teaching, and from the standard language as well. Some linguists say, however, that the prescriptivists only gave the coup de grâce, as this construction had already started to fade away centuries earlier. Nevertheless, it could hold its position in all non-standard varieties and regional dialects. How could the popular opinion survive that the majority of native speakers use their language illogically? Is there a rational and acceptable justification for this opinion, or has the so-called educated upper-middle class found just another reason to form a negative opinion of the language use of 'common people'?

In the first half of this paper, I overview the social and geographical aspects of multiple negation. In the second half, I present a pilot study of the current state of this construction based on a survey, in which I asked eight native English speakers to evaluate thirteen plus one specifically selected sentences. Furthermore, I present two possible scenarios concerning the future of multiple negation in English based on the results of the study: one based on the theory of diglossia and another based on the theory of global English grammar. Examples taken from contemporary literature, movies and songs have assisted me throughout this paper.

2   SOCIAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL ASPECTS OF MULTIPLE NEGATION

2.1   Social aspects

We may come to appreciate the unique state of multiple negation in Present Day English by taking a look at the number of those who use this construction and those who understand it. It is clear that every native English

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[1] From a popular song.

speaker understands the majority of sentences with multiple negation since they are passively aware of the meaning of this sentence construction. Moreover, if we look at Trudgill's study (1975: 30), which says that in Detroit 2% of the upper-middle class and 70% of the working class use multiple negation, we may ask why it is not part of the standard if everyone understands it and a lot of people use it. The answer might be disappointing: it is not part of the standard because it is regarded as ungrammatical and unacceptable in society. This can be concluded not only from academic papers but also from literature and modern popular culture (i.e. movies, songs, blogs). Take, for example, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Some people might reject the book because Jim's speech can be labeled as 'Black English', which – according to some linguists (Dillard 1992: 69) – is not a variety of English, but a creole language.[2] However, the conversation between the two con artists seems to support the view that multiple negation is the best way to describe the lower layers of society in films or in literature: *I don't know nothing about play-actn'* (Twain 1999/1884: 118), *We hain't done nothing* (ibid. 112). We find further evidence for this in movies and television series as well (*We don't know nothing about them letters*; *East Enders*). In some of them, it is just a way to picture less educated people, but in many it is connected to prejudices against minorities – if these sentence constructions are heard in a film, for instance, it is almost certain that an illiterate or unintelligent lower class person will appear on the screen. This attitude condemns not only the different social classes but multiple negation as well, because in people's minds this 'ungrammatical construction' will be associated with uneducated people from lower social classes.

Let us look at the social attitude towards multiple negation. In America, Labov's *The Logic of Non-Standard English* (1969) was written when minority children, who used sentences such as *I don't know nothing*, had to face negative discrimination in schools. From the teachers' point of view it wasn't only proof of their ignorance, but also of their incapability to acquire the standard language, due to their race-specific 'cognitive deficit'. There are several books and studies in which American non-standard language is seen as the disgrace of the English language ('[s]yntactically, perhaps the chief characteristic of "Vulgar American" is its sturdy fidelity to the double negative' Mencken 1948: 468-469). Labov proved that multiple negation is not an ungrammatical and illogical phenomenon but a sensible system with consistent rules (Mazzon 2004: 126).

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[2]A creole is a language that has developed historically from a pidgin. In theory, accordingly, a pidgin develops from trade or other contacts; it has no native speakers, its range of use is limited, and its structure is simplified. Later it becomes the only form of speech that is common to a community; it is learned by new speakers and used for all purposes. (Matthews 2007)

The style of African Americans became immensely popular in the last two or three decades. Their way of speaking is now a symbol of 'coolness' and toughness. Labov (1972) showed that those boys who played a peripheral role in a group used less multiple negative constructions (i.e. their way of speaking was closer to the standard) than those in central positions. In another study, Cheshire pointed out that 'non-standard forms prevailed in speech outside the school sociolinguistic domain, and in speech of boys rather than of girls, in accordance with the general principle that females tend to conform more to the social pressures and thus show more frequent use of standard or standard-like forms' (Mazzon 2004: 120). In Labov (1972), which contains an interview with a 15-year-old African-American boy, we can discover certain characteristics of African American Vernacular English (hereafter referred to as AAVE), which shows that non-standard varieties have their own set of consistent rules. Therefore, these varieties, with their multiple negation (*you ain't goin' to no heaven* and *it ain't no heaven*) or negative inversion (*don't nobody know*), cannot be considered ungrammatical. Everything that is systematic and predictable is rule-governed from a linguistic point of view. And these systematically applied rules are part of the language speakers' competence. Therefore, we cannot treat ways of speaking that differ from the standard as inferior forms of the language.

To further challenge the belief that multiple negation is self-contradictory, let us consider languages where the use of multiple negation is natural and compulsory (e.g. Hungarian, Russian, and Spanish). Negative sentences in these languages cannot be constructed otherwise.

(1)   Nem láttam   semmit.
       not   saw.1Sg nothing.Acc
       'I haven't seen anything.' (Hungarian)

(2)   Я ничего   не видела.
       I nothing.Gen not saw
       'I haven't seen anything.' (Russian)

(3)   No he   visto nada.
       not have.1Sg seen nothing
       'I haven't seen anything.' (Spanish)

Another argument against multiple negative constructions being illogical comes from the facts of first language acquisition. Children all go through a period when they use multiple negation:[3]

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[3]However, it must be noted that, according to some linguists, this phenomenon appears because children are usually unsure which sentential construction to use, and so they use a

(4)   You don't want it no more.

(5)   You bettern't not do that or mummy won't give you none.

<div align="right">(Crystal 1984: 45-46)</div>

This way of speaking can remain until school, where the standard language is required. Still, if the dialectal language used in the family is strong or the child finishes school too soon, the dialectal forms will stay natural for that speaker. Similarly to the case of other dialectal characteristics, what this means is that multiple negation is just another form of negation in English, which, though not part of the standard language at the moment, is definitely not an incorrect or illogical way of speaking. In formal and neutral styles the standard is required and expected. Nevertheless, from the point of view of the message that has to be understood and perceived, the formal, neutral and colloquial styles are equal.

2.2 Geographical aspects

Although when discussing the social features of multiple negation, we inevitably touched upon its geographical aspects, it is the latter to which we shall now turn in more detail. As we saw in Section 2.1, multiple negation is generally considered an American trait, even though standard American English does not use it and its use is restricted to non-standard forms and AAVE. However, multiple negation exists in the United Kingdom as well.

British dialects are not very different form each other regarding multiple negation – they basically have the same structure, only the number of negators and their placement within the sentence show some difference.

- Suffolk dialect (Claxton 1954: 11)

    (6)   He never said nawthen [nothing] t'nobody.

    (7)   Oi heen't got no apples, no pears, no plums, no bullies,[4] no nawthen at all.

'blend' of two different constructions. (Aitchison 1981: 178-179). For example, the sentence *Nobody don't like me* is probably the result of blending the following two sentences: *Nobody likes me* and *They don't like me*. Aitchison bases this statement on the commonly observed phenomenon of 'overmarking' by children, as in *Mummy didn't washed it* (Mazzon 2004: 147).

[4]A small, wild or half-domesticated European plum (Gove 1961: 293).

- Celtic varieties, including Scottish, Welsh, Irish, and Hiberno-English.[5]

  Multiple negation is common in Scottish English; however, in some cases the two negatives cancel each other out.

  (8) He couldnæ have been no working. [= 'He must have been working']   (Mazzon 2004: 123)

  Irish English also has frequent appearances of multiple negation. We may find examples like (9).

  (9) She never lost no furniture nor nothing.   (Harris 1993: 169)

- In the constituency of Farnworth (a little north of Manchester) an interview was carried out in the 1970s which shed light upon treble and quadruple negatives as well.

  (10) I am not never going to do nowt ('nothing') no more for thee.

  (11) Well I've not neither.

  (12) There were no chairs ready nor nowt.   (Crystal 2006: 326)

3 THE STRUCTURE AND RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

3.1 The questionnaire

The purpose of my study was to find out what native English speakers think of multiple negative constructions. The survey is not representative since I couldn't find informants from all social classes and the questionnaires were filled out by only eight people. I have chosen fourteen sentences, twelve of which are special regarding the form of negation they contain. Eight of them have double negatives, two multiple negatives, two standard negation; the remaining two are the odd ones out in the sense that they are not closely attached to the topic of multiple negation but the unique way they contain negators is worth mentioning. In sentence (13d-i) another use of *never* can be discovered: 'in some cases "never" loses its temporal value and acquires a very specific value of negative preterite, with the function of denying the taking place of an action on a single occassion in the past, not over a lifespan'

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[5]Irish English refers to the variety of English spoken in Northern Ireland and Hiberno-English refers to the variety used in Ireland.

(Mazzon 2004: 121). In sentence (13d-ii), similarily to (13b-viii), the negative elements cancel each other out, despite the fact that there are three such elements which would otherwise lead to a negative meaning. Thus, (13d-ii) means 'your name's Willie, isn't it?'. Part of my examples comes from contemporary films and songs; the rest has been borrowed from Mazzon (2004):

(13) a. *standard negation*
        (i)   I have never seen anything like that.
        (ii)   Don't ever tell anybody anything.
      b. *double negation*
        (i)   I wouldn't give no man a foot massage.
        (ii)   I ain't got no money.
        (iii) I cannot go no further.
        (iv)   I never eat no dinner.
        (v)   I can't get no satisfaction.
        (vi)   Nobody didn't come.
        (vii) Can't nobody do it.
        (viii) (He couldnæ have been no working.)[6]
      c. *multiple negation*
        (i)   I am not never going to do nowt no more for thee.
        (ii)   We ain't never had no trouble about none of us pullin'
               out no knife.
      d. *miscellaneous*
        (i)   I never went to school today.
        (ii)   Your name's no Willie, isn't it no?

The questions in the questionnaire are:

(14) #1 Where are you from?
      #2 Where do you think you can hear a sentence like this?
          • Formal situation
          • Informal situation
            – Family
            – Friends
          • Nowhere
      #3 Would you use this sentence (construction)?
          • Yes
          • No, but I understand it
   • No, and I don't understand it

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[6]This sentence appears only in Question #8.

#4 If you hear this sentence can you make guesses as to which social class the speaker belongs to?
- Yes
  - Upper class
  - Middle class
  - Working class
- No

#5 Can you decide which geographical area the speaker is from?

#6 Can this sentence occur in spoken or written English?
- Spoken
- Written

#7 Do you think people who often use multiple negation are uneducated?
- Yes
- No

#8 What does this sentence mean: 'He couldnæ have been no working?'
- I don't know
- 'He must have been working.'
- 'He couldn't have been working.'

I formulated these questions according to four factors:

(15)
   a. in what kind of conditions these sentences appear (questions #2 and #6)

   b. whether the subject would use these sentence constructions (question #3)

   c. the social status of those who apply these sentence constructions (questions #4 and #7)

   d. in which geographical areas these sentences could appear (question #5)

In question #2, I treated talk in the family and talk with friends as separate informal situations, because slang and (trendy) non-standard forms tend to appear among friends rather than in the family. In question #3, I used three social classes, that is upper class, middle class, and working class. I was also interested in where the informants lived, in order to see how easily they could determine where the example sentences were from (question #1). Thus, the subjects were from the following places: Isle of Man, Dundee
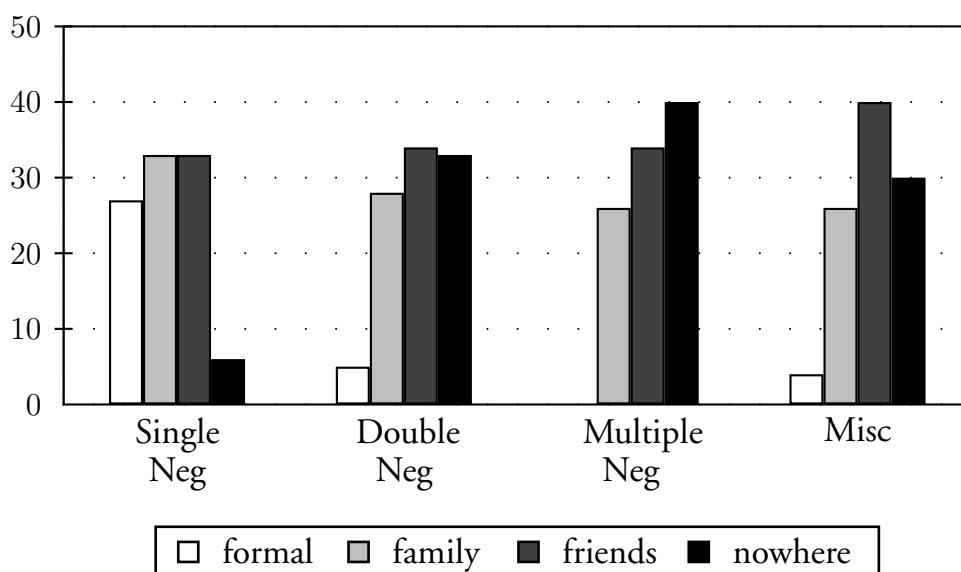
Figure 1: *Answers to Question #2 (in percentages)*

(Scotland), Norwich (England), Swansea (Wales), Portsmouth (England), Belfast (Northern Ireland), York (England). No American informants were involved. An extra question (#8) was aimed at finding out whether the informants were familiar with the existence of the negative particle *-næ*, which, instead of reinforcing the negative meaning, cancels it out. In the case of some of the questions, the participants were allowed to give more than one answer. The questions where the participants had this option are the following: #2, #4 and #6.

3.2   Evaluation of the received results

Question #2 (Where do you think you can hear a sentence like this?)

According to the answers I received to this question, the sentences with non-standard negation are not heard in formal situations; they are heard either in informal situations or nowhere.

Question #3 (Would you use this sentence (construction)?)

Excepting three instances, all sentences were marked as understandable, regardless of whether they would be uttered or not by the informants. The three problematic sentences were (13b-vi), (13c-ii) and (13d-ii), repeated in (16) below:

(16)   a.   Nobody didn't come.
       b.   We ain't never had no trouble about none of us pullin' out no knife.
       c.   Your name's no Willie, isn't it no?

(16a) is characteristic of AAVE. The rule of Neg-Attraction, whereby the negative morpheme is required to attach itself to the first constituent capable of incorporating it in the sentence, is obligatory in all dialects without exception. The failure of Neg-Attraction would lead to misunderstanding. 'The main difference between AAVE and other varieties of English is that while in the latter the application of Neg-Attraction involves a "movement" of the negative particle, in AAVE it involves a "copying" or reduplication process.' (Mazzon 2004: 126-127)

(17)   a.   Nobody came. (< 'Anybody NOT came')
       b.   Nobody didn't come.

<div align="right">(Mazzon 2004: 126-127)</div>

Sentence (17a) is formed by applying the rules of the standard variety, where the negative particle *not* is attached to the first possible constituent that is capable of incorporating it (in this case, the subject). By contrast, (17b) is formed by applying the rules of AAVE: the negative morpheme appears on the subject and on the auxiliary verb as well.

   (16b) is also characteristic of AAVE. It is harder to comprehend, since 'AAVE is bringing the general rule of multiple negation to the extreme because it obligatorily inserts a copy of the negative morpheme on every word which can take it.' (Wolfram & Fasold 1974: 162-167)

   (16c) is from the area of Glasgow, where the appearance of multiple negation is relatively frequent. However, in the case of question tags the negative elements cancel each other out.

Question #4 (If you hear this sentence, can you make guesses as to which social class the speaker belongs to?)

According to (Mazzon 2004: 125), the correlation between social class and frequency of multiple negation has been the subject of several studies. One of these is Trudgill's survey already mentioned in Section 2.1, which reveals a wide gap between upper middle class speakers and lower working class speakers (Trudgill 1975: 30).

   Let us now consider the answers to Question #4. It is clear that there are very few sentences that were thought to be appropriate to be uttered by upper-class speakers. These sentences were, not surprisingly, the ones
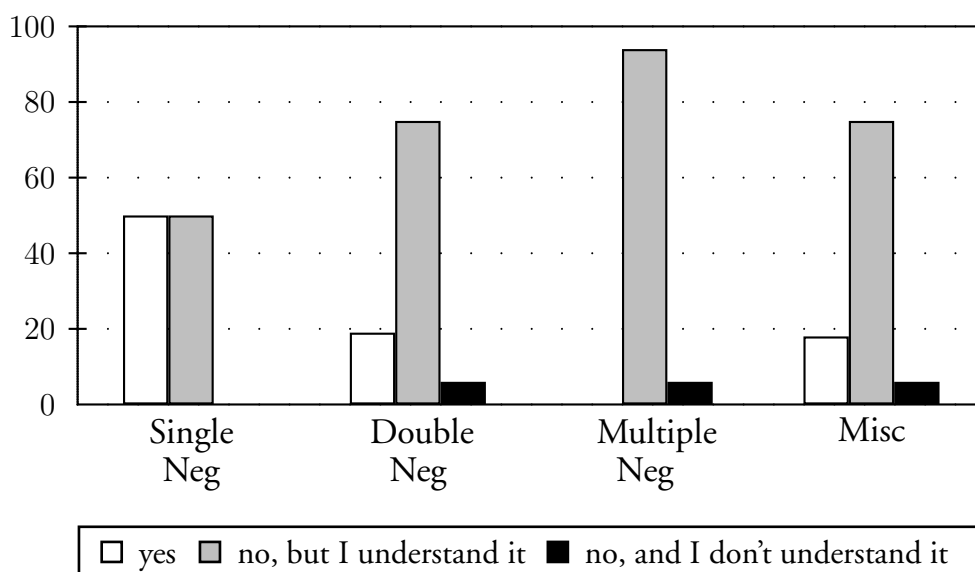
Figure 2: *Answers to Question #3 (in percentages)*

with standard negation. Two other sentences ((13b-vii) and (13d-i)) were considered as appropriate in upper-class speech by one informant:

(18) a.   I never went to school today.
      b.   Can't nobody do it.

With the exception of two sentences, all were thought to be fit for middle-class everyday speech. The two sentences that were definitely thought fit only for working-class speakers were (13b-vi) and (13c-ii). Sentence (13b-iv) was also considered to be carrying a strong working-class character with only one vote for middle-class use. These are repeated below.

(19) a.   Nobody didn't come.
      b.   We ain't never had no trouble about none of us pullin' out no knife.
      c.   I never eat no dinner.

We can see from the answers that multiple negation is judged negatively and carries a social stigma (cf. Mazzon 2004: 118).

Question #5 (Can you decide which geographical area the speaker is from?)

The majority of the sentences did not carry any characteristic features that would connect them to specific regions in English speaking countries. Nevertheless, there were four sentences whose place of origin could be easily
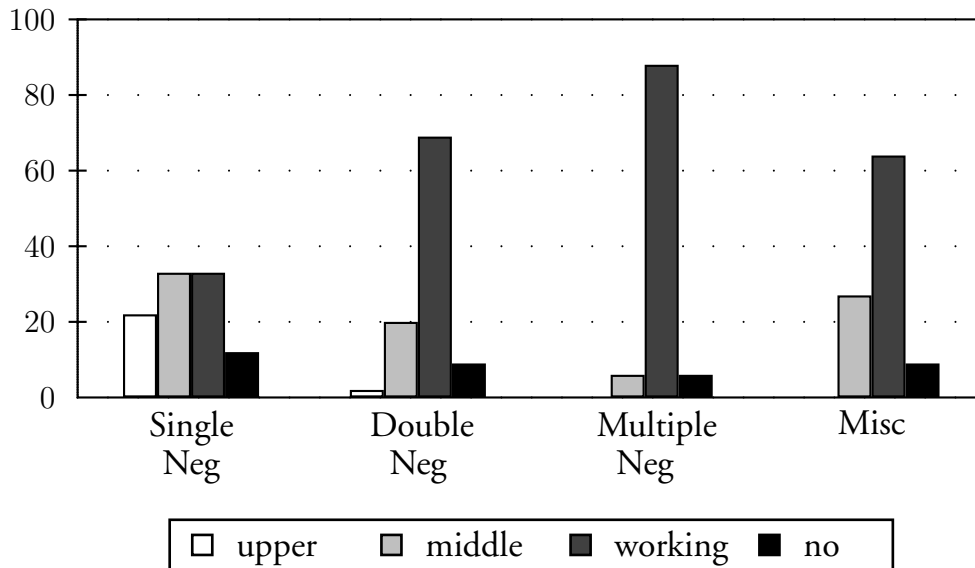
Figure 3: *Answers to Question #4 (in percentages)*

recognized due to their special lexical or syntactic features: (13b-i), (13c-i), (13c-ii) and (13d-ii).

(13ci) was thought northern by 75% of the participants, which is a high proportion. The informants noted, however, that they were led by specific northern vocabulary items in the form of *nowt* and *thee*, and not by the special form of negation.

In determining the correct geographical position of sentence (13c-ii) (which was North- America), the excessive use of negators led my informants to the correct answer.

(13d-ii) was considered Scottish-like by four participants because of the double question tag at the end. The informant from the Isle of Man would have deleted the last *no* because they thought it gave an American character to the sentence. The informant from Dundee would have changed *isn't it* to *is it*. Therefore, although the double question tag made them think it was a Scottish sentence, the informants were not quite convinced about the origin of the sentence.

Question #6 (Can this sentence occur in spoken or written English?)

The two sentences with standard negation (sentences (13a-i) and (13a-ii) were, of course, thought to be acceptable in written English. However, the Scottish participants judged three other sentences also acceptable in written English: (13b-vi), (13b-vii) and (13d-i).
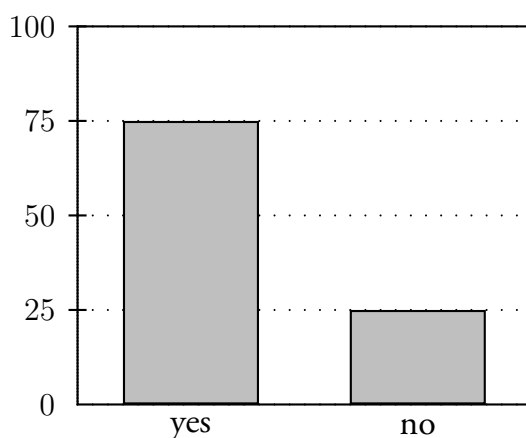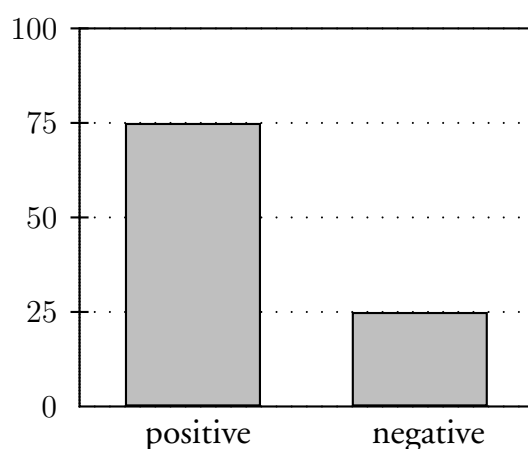
Figure 4: *Answers to Question #7 (in percentages)*

Question #7 (Do you think people who often use multiple negation are uneducated?)

The answers to this question support the claim that those who utter these sentences are creating a negative impression. As it was mentioned already in the case of question #4, multiple negation and its users are stigmatized in society. What is considered standard or non-standard, grammatically correct or incorrect, socially acceptable or unacceptable depends on those who 'have the social power to impose the variety of English they happen to use on speakers of other varieties. [... T]he possession of the prestigious variety is the possession of social power.' (Kövecses 2000: 81). Therefore, considerable change in the public opinion towards multiple negation is not likely to happen in the near future.

Question #8 (What does this sentence mean: He couldnæ have been no working?)

Multiple negation is quite common in the area of Glasgow (Macafee 1983: 47). However, there is a negative particle (*-næ* ⟨-na/-ne⟩) in some varieties of Scottish English which can be attached to several auxiliaries (*be, do, have, can/could, will/would, should*; cf. Romaine 1984: 59, 61, 73). Using this particle in a sentence which contains another negator will result in a positive sentence, which is not unlike the behaviour of double negation in formal logic. This is shown below:

Figure 5: *Answers to Question #8 (in percentages)*

(20)   He couldnæ have been no working = He must have been working
(13b-viii)

The informants' interpretation of (13b-viii) is represented in Figure 5.

4   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We can conclude from the results of the questionnaire that multiple negation certainly carries a social stigma, although it is not an unknown and long forgotten linguistic feature, and is still understood by all native speakers of English.

The question of the coming decades is whether multiple negation will receive greater appreciation or not. With globalization, a tendency of convergence of social varieties may be observed, since, owing to social mobility, no one is bound to the soil of one's homeland; dialects and accents are mixing and are changing their own characteristics as they adjust to different environments.

At the same time, one would not like to think of one's dialect as something that will merge into other dialects and disappear. The two tendencies can eventually lead to diglossia. Dialects can be used in informal, the standard in formal situations (Crystal 1988: 275). This possibility is exemplified by one of the participants. He is a speaker of English, of English and Scottish extraction. He is more likely to use multiple negation when he is in Castleford, Yorkshire, because it is the natural way of speaking there. But when he is talking to people from different parts of Great Britain or from

different parts of the world, he avoids these constructions and sticks to the rules of the standard.

On the basis of the tendencies mentioned, three scenarios can be outlined. In the first, due to social mobility, multiple negation as a dialectal feature gains a foothold if the mixing of language varieties evens out the frequency of its use in all social classes. In the second, due to the formerly mentioned reason and to the prestige of the standard variety, it slowly disappears. In the third scenario, according to the tendency of diglossia, the gap between standard and non-standard varieties does not disappear or even becomes wider; both types of negation varieties survive.

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