

## NEGATIVE INTENSIFICATION IN MODERN ENGLISH

### 1. - INTRODUCTION

Broadly speaking, manifestations of intensification in the English grammatical system have been traditionally associated with the adjective and adverb categories, not so commonly with other word-classes. This may be justified on two main accounts: i) most of these are functionally susceptible of being easily modified by other elements and, secondly, (ii) they can be considered, in semantic terms, as open lexical items which can have a strengthening or weakening effect.

In spite of this, it is necessary to point out that intensification as “the linguistic expression of exaggeration and depreciation” (Bolinger 1972: 20) does not restrict itself to this; words other than adjectives and adverbs may express and receive intensification, and this linguistic process may have under its scope not only a single constituent of the clause, but also the whole of it. Thus, certain *wh*-words, *what* and *how*, can function as intensifying determiners and adverbs in exclamations (Eg. *What nice music is she playing!*; *How well he managed!*), and *what*, at least, can also be used as intensifier of the NP in the same clause type (Eg. *What a sad story!*); furthermore, these *wh*-words also combine with *-ever* and with certain locutions such as *on earth*, *in heaven's name*, *the hell*, which act as intensifiers to express surprise or disbelief on the speaker's part (Eg. *Wherever did you hear that?*; *Whoever told you that?*; *What on earth is he saying?*). In addition to the above, the determinative *own* can emphasize the meaning of a possessive (Eg. *They are my own*), a tag also acts as an intensifier after an imperative, either attenuating or reinforcing the insistence of the directive (Eg. *Do it or leave it, will you?*), and some prepositions as well as the so-called *split* infinitives may also have intensification (Eg. *She was standing closer to me*; *You have to really try*).

With regard to the system of polarity, the expression of intensification has been primarily studied in the framework of positive clauses in cases such as *I DID say so*, where the auxiliary *do* plus the base form of the corresponding verb are combined to emphasize the speaker's statement; however, very little has been said about the strengthening of negatives, that is, the mechanisms and resources speakers of English resort to when they want to accentuate and heighten meanings which are already negative.

### 2. - PURPOSE AND METHOD

The aim of this paper, which forms part of a wider project still in progress on the contrastive analysis of negation in written and spoken English and Spanish, is to identify, firstly,

the different methods used in English to convey the intensification of negatives and, secondly, to conduct a closer analysis of the former according to syntactic, semantic and pragmatic criteria. For the collection of data two main instruments were used: the British component of the International Corpus of English (*ICE-GB*), compiled and processed by the Survey of English Usage of the London University College, and information derived from a questionnaire administered to a sample of English speakers.

The corpus of this study contains one million words used by educated adults of Britain during the period 1990-3 and is formed by samples of English taken from a great variety of written and spoken text types. Spoken texts include dialogues and monologues, both scripted and unscripted, while written material comprise printed and non-printed samples; these cover a broad range of genres: non-professional writing, correspondence, novels, stories, informational, both learned and popular, press editorials, news reports and instructional.

The first analysis of the data provided by the corpus clearly showed that the information could not be taken as conclusive or definitive for a survey of this nature; this led us to design, following the general guidelines in the literature (Quirk & Svartvik, 1966; Greenbaum and Quirk, 1970; Greenbaum, 1984; Tottie, 1985), a questionnaire in the form of an open elicitation test as complement to the corpus material; this was later passed on to a group of twenty-five speakers of English who had to respond to it in a written form.

The questionnaire was organized in three main sections. In the first part, the purpose of the project and the instructions for its completion were explained. In the second section, biographical details in connection with age and sex were asked; it was thought that they could be considered as possible research variables in the future. The third and final part presented three clear instances of intensified negatives as models; the informants were then encouraged to produce similar examples.

In general terms, the elicitation tests provided a greater amount of data than the corpus itself. However, this does not mean that one type of research instrument is superior to the other. Both have several drawbacks and it all depends on the type of linguistic study being conducted. The responses from elicitation tests may not reflect the real speakers's usage due to the lack of spontaneity of the testing situation, but corpora data by themselves may not give a full picture of the whole question (Tottie, 1985).

Therefore, with the purpose of overcoming some of the deficiencies, all the material collected from both the corpus and the questionnaires was eventually contrasted and complemented with other bibliographical sources, such as general and specialized dictionaries (Murray *et al.*, 1933; Partridge, 1937; MacDonald, 1972; Procter, 1978; Sinclair, 1987; Hornby, 1989), several grammars published in the last ten years or so (Quirk *et al.*, 1985; Downing and Locke, 1992; Givón, 1993), and the few other relevant and specific references available on this issue (Jespersen, 1917: 14-19; Bolinger, 1972: 115-125; Horn, 1989: 353-356, 359-360; Tottie, 1991: 177-186).

### 3. - RESULTS

For reasons of time and space, only the main findings will be reported.

The overall results indicate that it is possible to speak of negative intensification at both the clause and the subclause levels. This means that it can semantically affect either the whole clause or only a constituent of it. If the following two examples are considered,

- (1) *The last few years it's got worse and because I can't breathe through my nose at all during the summer uhm that brings on the asthma.* (S1A-051-107)<sup>1</sup>  
(2) She described herself as '*completely hopeless with my hands.*' (CCD)

It is clear that in the first case the prepositional phrase *at all* serves in terms of meaning to strengthen the fact that it is not possible for the speaker "to breathe through his nose". Moreover, syntactically speaking, the clause meets all the requirements to be interpreted as negative (cf. Klima, 1964; Huddleston, 1984; Quirk *et al.*, 1985; Payne, 1985). In contrast, the second clause is not negative but positive. On this occasion, intensification is achieved by means of the amplifier *completely*; this heightens only a single component of the clause, the adjective *hopeless*, which is functioning as predicative complement of the subject (PCs).

Negative intensification at subclause level always follows a similar pattern. It is found mostly with adjectives with a negative orientation which have been formed by morphological or affixal negation, that is, by means of a negative prefix (*a-*, *un-*, *dis-*, *non-*, *in-* with its allomorphic realizations *im-*, *il-*, *ir-*) or the suffix (*-less*). These words are, in their turn, modified by other intensifying adjectives or adverbs; it can then be concluded that negative intensification at the subclause level does not differ to a high extent from general instances of adjective and adverb intensification (cf. Bolinger, 1972; Quirk *et al.*, 1985).

In contrast, negative intensification at the clause level manifests itself as a more attractive area of language due to the occurrence of a series of specific features which deserve close attention.

The strengthening of negatives in English can be achieved in five main ways: a) The use of a series of expressions with negative import; b) The repetition of the adverb *never* or the combination *never ever*; c) *not (even) a / one* as heightening alternatives to the simple determiner *no*; d) The occurrence of particular lexical items in combination with a limited group of verbs and finally, e) The use of a series of negative idiomatic expressions. Each of these methods will be dealt with separately.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations and extracts from both the spoken and written material in the ICE-GB are identified by means of corpus reference codes. *S* and *W* stand for both spoken and written texts respectively. The two figures of three digits each, which immediately follow these letters, denote text and unit numbers. *Q* indicates that the example has been taken from data provided by the questionnaires. Moreover, the following abbreviations stand for the different dictionaries consulted: *CCD* (*Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*), *CH* (*Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*), *LO* (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*), *SL* (*A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*), *OED* (*Oxford English Dictionary*), *WE* (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*), *IE* (*Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English*) and, finally, *OA* (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*).

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A) EXPRESSIONS WITH NEGATIVE IMPORT

The following can be grouped under this label: *at all*, *a bit*, *in the least*, *in the slightest*, and *in any way*.

All these expressions are characterized by the following features: (i) They are mainly restricted to the negative or, at least, to non-assertive contexts; by non-assertive is meant interrogatives (direct and indirect), conditional and comparative clauses, words that are morphologically negative or with a negative orientation, imperatives with non-specific meaning, infinitive constructions with *too*, etc. (cf. Quirk *et al.*, 1985: 784-785, and Downing and Locke, 1992: 177-179); (ii) they do not collocate with any definite lexical item; (iii) they mainly function as adverbials, mostly subjuncts according to Quirk *et al.* (1985); (iv) they can stand on their own in a sentence as a reply to a previous utterance and finally, (v) they usually have mid or end position in the clause, although the latter generally prevails over the former.

Of all these, instances with *at all* were the most frequently reported in the corpus. A total of twenty-eight different mentions were found; twenty of them were related to the spoken language and, therefore, the remaining eight occurred in written texts. This locution may be used in all types of environments from highly formal to familiar ones. The clause containing *at all* quite often acts as a reinforcement of the negative meaning of the previous clause which is also negative. This seems to be quite common in the spoken discourse.

- (3) B> *No she's she's not really a dancer she uh she's sort of uh*  
B> *I think she'd rather just sing and not bother to move at all ...* (S1A-083-93)
- (4) B> *But the hospital had told me that the child wouldn't live*  
B> *So I'd not prepared myself*  
B> *I'd not got anything at all* (S1B-049-65)

This prepositional phrase can also appear on its own either as a polite reply to a statement of thanks, mainly a mere convention nowadays, or as an answer to a negative question. In these two cases, it acts as a sort of pro-form and it loses part of its intensifying negative meaning.

- (5) "*Thanks*". "*Not at all*". (CCD)
- (6) "*The place itself doesn't encourage you?*" "*Not at all*". (LO)

Although in modern English it occurs mainly in negative contexts, it was in the past, according to the *OED*, quite widely used in the affirmative with a heightening meaning and, even more, it still lives on in the Irish dialect and in the colloquial speech of certain parts of USA, especially after a superlative as in,

- (7) "*We had the best time at all*". (OED)

The next expression in the list *a bit* also serves to make a strong negative statement in combination with a negative. It is found only once in the corpus as an answer to a question. It

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functions then as a sort of pro-form having the message conveyed in the preceding sentence as reference-point.

(8) A> What's your normal handwriting like

A> *Is it anything like <. > y </> <. > t </> > tell you what*

B> *Not a bit*

A> *Show show us here just just sign your sign your name there* (S1B-026-151)

However, this is not the general rule. The same as *at all*, it can also function as an adverbial subjunct within the clause. In this case it is more common to find *not* cliticized or, at least, subordinated to the verb rather than forming a unit with *a bit*.

(9) *You haven't changed a bit.* (CCD)

(10) *It didn't hurt a bit when my tooth was pulled out.* (LO)

This expression is mainly restricted to colloquial and informal registers. It can be modified by *little* and *least*; the numeral *one* may occupy the place of the article *a*.

(11) *I'm not the least bit tired.* (Q)

(12) *I don't like the idea one little bit.* (OA)

As a variant to *not a bit*, we may have *not a bit of it*, which indicates that something you expect to be in a particular way, is not so.

(13) *You'd think she'd be tired after such a long journey, but not a bit of it.* (OA)

*In the least* can also be used to emphasize a negative. Only four mentions are reported in the corpus. All of them are found in written language although as part of a dialogue. As with *at all* and *a bit*, it can appear on its own as a reply to a question.

(14) "Would you mind if I put the TV on?". "No, not in the least." (LO)

The negative particle *not* is always bound to the verbal form. Sentences such as \* *It matters not in the least* would not be accepted. End position usually alternates with mid position although the latter tends to have a more emphatic value than the former.

(15) *And I didn't in the least mind you talking about Caroline.* (W2F-020-161)

Mid position is also preferable when auxiliaries form part of the verb phrase.

(16) *It was changing me in a way that I had not in the least expected.* (CCD)

*In the slightest* is also used as an adverbial subjunct to intensify a negative statement. As with *the least*, *not* is always linked to the verb. The corpus provides only four instances of its use

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and all of them appear in spoken texts. As all the previous expressions, it can stand on its own as a reply to a question.

(17) "Do you mind?" "Not in the slightest". (CCD)

As a variant to *in the slightest*, we may have the superlative form *slightest* followed by a noun. However, it still preserves its heightening negative meaning.

(18) *She doesn't get on the phone at the slightest provocation.* (S1A-094-92)

(19) *It's not of the slightest importance.* (Q)

It is also quite common to find patterns similar to the former in structures which are subordinated to negative main clauses containing certain verbs of thinking, opinion, perception, intention and volition (*think, know, believe, suppose, want, intend, seem, appear*, etc), that is, instances of what is known in the literature as *transferred, transported negation* (Leech, 1975; Downing and Locke, 1992), *neg-absorption* (Klima, 1964) and even *negative raising* (Lakoff, 1969; Horn, 1978). The negative in fact belongs to the subordinate clause but most of the times it is transferred to the main clause for pragmatic reasons. In spite of this, this movement of the negative does not alter to any great extent the meaning of the whole utterance. Although in the corpus we found examples of this kind only with *slightest*, the same is true for all the expressions of negative import belonging to this first group.

(20) C> *I don't think there's the slightest possibility for one very obvious reason quite apart.* (S1B-035-108)

(21) D> *I was totally unaware of anything of this sort going on and um <.>w<.><.>w<./> first of all I I don't believe that anything to do with um security issues or you know approach to a security scandal had the slightest thing to do with Harold Wilson's resignation.* (S1B-040-63).

*In any way* with its variants *in no way* and *no way* is also used to emphasize that a statement is not true. Twenty-one instances are reported in the corpus. The majority of them, fifteen to be more accurate, correspond to speech whereas the remaining six occur in writing. Most of the dictionaries consulted indicate that this expression is typical of informal and colloquial language. Furthermore, *no way* tends to be more frequent than the other two.

*No way* differs from all the other forms of this set because it can easily be fronted, which brings about an inversion of the subject-verb position. This is usually done to achieve an even higher degree of intensification from that which would be obtained if the normal word-order were preserved. The modal auxiliaries *will* and *would* are usually placed after it expressing an unfulfilled hypothesis.

(22) *No way will I go working for that man.* (OA)

(23) *No way would I do that.* (Q)

It is also very common to have *no way* on its own as an answer to a previous question. This is especially so in certain varieties of English and, particularly, in American English. In fact, it is a short form to express a strong refusal; however, it may sometimes convey incredulity and even amazement on the speaker's part.

(24) Z> So we are seeing Bay City Rollers word

A> *Ah two-or-three words I I saw a picture of myself yesterday in an album with uhm sitting up in bed next to my Bay City Rollers poster*

C> *No way* (W1A-011-120)

The previous expression may also occur in existential *there* constructions followed by a dependent clause. The heightening effect of the *there* clause can be compared to that expressed by the inversion process just mentioned.

(25) *There's no way he'll part with it.* (S1B-080-340)

(26) *Mr. Major was trying to slide away from his responsibility and Mr. Hattersley said: "I offer him this piece of simple advice- there is no way it can be redeemed or reformed: the poll tax has to be abolished."* (W2C-018-67)

To conclude this section, it is necessary to point out that apart from the four lexical constructions just examined, there are some others that can also be categorized under this first heading since they share all or most of the features which are characteristic of them. Among them we can mention the following: *by no means* (with its variants *not by any means* and *by no manner of means*), *under no circumstances*, *absolutely not* and *certainly not*. The first two are usually fronted bringing about inversion subject-verb, while the other two are more commonly used in answer to a question in order to deny something or to express strong disagreement.

(27) *It is by no means certain that this is what he did.* (CCD)

(28) *Under no circumstances whatsoever will I support Mr. Baldwin.* (CCD)

(29) *'Does this affect your attitude to your work, in any way?'*-*'Absolutely not.'* (CCD)

(30) *'Had you forgotten?'*-*'Certainly not.'* (CCD)

b) THE REPETITION OF THE ADVERB *NEVER* OR ITS COMBINATION WITH AN INTENSIFYING PHRASE AS *in (all) my life, in a million years, for a million pounds* also serve to heighten negative statements.<sup>1</sup>

(31) *I'll never never do that again.* (Q)

(32) *I would never go there for a million pounds.* (Q)

(33) *I've never in my life seen anything like this.* (Q)

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<sup>1</sup> According to Partridge (1937), an idiomatic use of *Never Never* spelt with capital letters refers to the sparsely low populated lands in Western Queensland and Central Australia. Having been there, one swears he will never return.

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Jespersen also mentions that this sense is also quite common in the combination *never a*, “which is used to a great extent in some dialects and very frequent in colloquial English, especially in the phrase *never a word*” (1917: 17).

Similarly, *ever* is often linked with *never* to emphasize the negative quality of a speech act. This is especially common in spoken language. Five cases of this are reported in the corpus.

(34) *Never lecture with animals or children and never ever try to do chemistry experiments live.* (S2A-053-63)

(35) *Things will never ever be the same again.* (CCD)

In fact, this intensifying use of *ever* does not restrict itself to its combination with *never*; it may also be placed after other negative words, namely *nothing*, *nobody* and *none* in order to convey a similar emphatic meaning.

(36) *Nobody ever went there.* (Q)

*Ever* also appears in formations such as *whatever* and *whatsoever* with an analogous purpose. So, the adverb *whatever* is generally used after a NP or a clause containing the quantifier *any* in order to make a negative statement more prominent.

(37) *There is no scientific evidence whatever to support such a view.* (CCD)

(38) *You can ask me questions on any topic whatever ...* (CCD)

*Whatsoever* usually occurs after the pronouns *none* and *nothing* with a similar role to the former and it may also be placed after a NP if the determiner *no* forms part of it.

(39) *'You don't think he has any chance of winning?'- 'None whatsoever.'* (CCD)

(40) *There was no money whatsoever.* (Q)

Finally, this adverb can also be used with negative statements which contain *any* or compounds of *any*.

(41) *I don't think there is any evidence of that whatsoever.* (CCD)

c) *NOT (EVEN) A / ONE AND NOT (EVEN) A SINGLE* plus a noun are commonly used as emphatic alternatives to the countable determiner *no*. They generally convey that there is none at all of what is being mentioned. Although, in theory, they can be construed with a wide range of nouns, the fact is that they tend to collocate with certain lexical items such as *scrap*, *hair*,



*word, jot, thing, trace, crumb, ounce, iota,<sup>1</sup> shred, sign, speck*, etc. These words function as if they were partitives of uncount nouns. Bolinger (1972) in his classification of intensifiers refers to these as *minimizers* because they occupy the lower end of the scale.

- (42) *There's no food in the cupboards, not a scrap.* (W1B-001-53)  
(43) *He as almost as short as he was broad and without a single hair on his head.* (W2F-013-48)  
(44) *She didn't say a single word.* (Q)  
(45) *Not a jot of truth in it.* (LO)  
(46) *I couldn't do a single thing about it.* (Q)  
(47) *The submarine surfaced but found no trace of the fishing vessel which had already sunk.* (S2B-011-92)  
(48) *There's not a crumb of food left.* (Q)  
(49) *They don't give an ounce of support.* (Q)  
(50) *I don't feel one iota of guilt.* (CCD)

Furthermore, these minimizers become partially stereotyped replacements for *any*:

- (51) *There was not a shred of truth in his statement.* (LO)  
There was not any truth in his statement.  
(52) *There is not a sign of life anywhere.* (WE)  
There is not any life anywhere.  
(53) *There isn't a speck of dust.* (Q)  
There is not any dust.

Even more, as Bolinger claims (1972: 122), many of these admit litotes. The meaning of the whole sequence will change according to the intonational contrast given by the speaker.

- (54) *There's not a crumb of food left.' There is nothing.'*  
(55) *There's not a crumb of food left.' There is a lot.'*

The litotes interpretation of these minimizers, found in this case in the second example of the previous pair, will be mostly present in responses to real or hypothetical utterances which already contain the item in question. Otherwise, this use would not make much sense. The adverb *even* may also disclose a reinforcing negative meaning in combination either with the article *a* or with some of previous expressions.

- (56) *Anyway um what I'm really getting at was that at that stage I'd only been in Israel for about a day and a half you know not even a full day.* (S2A-050-79)  
(57) *An exactly judged minimum of time spared for comfort; not even a hand free to touch her, while he held a gun and needed the other to brace himself against rough jolts over potholes.* (W2F-015-53)

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<sup>1</sup> This word has its origin in the ninth and smallest letter of the Greek alphabet.

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d) THERE ARE SOME NEGATIVE INTENSIFYING EXPRESSIONS which are formed in combination with specific verbs. They cannot be considered as pure idioms as the sense of the whole unit can often be easily guessed by adding the separate meanings of their constituents (Bolinger, 1975). However, one of the components may not be used with its literal meaning and, consequently, the degree of figurativeness will vary from one to the other. Still, from a syntactic point of view, they permit little variation; this means that they could be taken as *figurative idioms* or even as *restricted collocations* (Cowie, Mackin & McCaig, 1983).

Most of them are especially common in informal and familiar contexts. However, there are so many phrases of this nature that no list could hope to be exhaustive. The main ones are at least included in the following: *not budge an inch* with the meaning of to refuse to change their mind or compromise; *not sleep a wink / to get a wink of sleep*, that is, to sleep very little; *not drink / touch a drop*, referring to the fact that no alcohol has been or is going to be drunk; *not lift or raise a finger* to do something, meaning that you make no attempt to help someone; *not see / know or meet a (living) soul*, when someone goes to a certain place and they do not see or know anybody; *not move a muscle*, that is, to keep absolutely still; *not bat an eye or eyelid*, in other words, not to show any sign of surprise or concern; *not grow an inch*, it is used figuratively to indicate that someone has not developed mentally; *not move a foot in the traffic jam*, this refers to the total impossibility of driving forward in a jam; *not take a blind bit of notice*, it is a colloquial way of saying that one is sometimes completely oblivious of something; *not do a stroke of work*, meaning to be lazy and never do any work; *not give a minute of one's time*; *not cost a penny (GB) / nickel (Canada and USA)*, that is, to cost very little; *not get a sniff of something*, this is an informal way of saying that someone is not going to succeed in their enterprise; *not trust somebody an inch / not trust somebody as far as one could throw an anvil*, in other words, believe that someone is dishonest and completely unreliable and, finally, *not do a hand's turn*, quite similar to *not do a stroke of work*, that is, not do any work, or make an effort.

There are quite a large number of expressions of this kind that collocate with the verb *have*. The following are the most common: *not have a clue / the foggiest / the faintest / an earthly / an inkling / the remotest idea*, meaning to have absolutely no idea what to do; *not have the ghost of a chance*, when someone has very little chance of succeeding in doing something. As a variant to this, *not have a cat in hell's chance* and *not have a snowball's* are also found; the latter indicates that someone has as much chance as a snowball in hell, that is, no chance whatsoever; *not have a shadow of a doubt*, that is, to possess very small doubt or suspicion; *not have a hope in hell*, to say that there is no hope at all; *not have a bean*, it is a metaphorical way of saying that one has no money at all and finally, *not have a bite or morsel to eat*, in other words, not to have anything to eat.

In addition to all this, the verbs *care*, *give* and *be worth* admit a broad range of combinations of this kind. They seem to be quite widely used and they all convey the idea that something matters or is worth a very small amount. The following constructions of this class can be mentioned: *not care less*; *not care / give- a louse, a (brass) farthing* (a coin that is no longer

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used and which was worth a quarter of a penny in old British currency), *a / three damn(s)* (swear word for *some*), *a rap* (a counterfeit halfpenny in circulation in Ireland in the 18th century), *a fig*, *a tinker's curse* (according to the *OED*, it is connected with the reputed addiction of tinkers to profane swearing), *a cuss* (it euphemises *curse* according to the *OED*), *a smidgen / smidge*, *a hoot* or *two hoots* (apart from meaning a loud inarticulate shout or noise, it may also refer to a very small amount), *a button* (obsolete), *a hang*, *a pin* (obsolete), *a snap* (of his fingers), *a tupenny damn*, *a chip*, *a cent* (mostly USA), *two tin fucks* and *a (flying) fuck* (swear words), *a shit* (swear word), *a bugger* (vulgar, only in GB), *a straw*, *a toss* (of unknown origin, probably of Scandinavian origin, akin to Swedish *tossa*, that is, *to spread*), *a dime* (USA), *a blank* (old-fashioned, only found in Jespersen 1917), *a whit* (old-fashioned use), *a monkey's*, *a rat's ass* (vulgar). Most of the previous phrases also collocate with *worth*. The next new ones can be added to the previous inventory: *not worth-* *a band's end*, *a bean*, *a cherry*, *a cobbler's curse*, *a cress*, *a crumpet* (a flat round cake usually toasted and eaten hot with butter), *an egg*, *a flea*, *a fly*, *a haddock*, *a herring*, *an ivy leaf*, *a jugger*, *a leek* or *two leeks*, *a needle*, *a nut*, *an onion*, *a pear*, *a sloe* (a small bluish-back, very bitter wild plum), *a light* and, to finish, *a rotten apple*. About this section, the data collected from the respondents through the elicitation tests were much more helpful and illuminating than the facts provided by the corpus. Here are some samples of the actual use of some of the above expressions:

- (58) *I couldn't care less what the hell we talk about.* (S1A-038-10)  
 (59) *They don't give a hoot about your problems.* (Q)  
 (60) *We didn't do a stroke of work.* (Q)  
 (61) *Not a soul was there.* (Q)  
 (62) *It wasn't worth making a fuss about it, because it didn't really matter a straw.* (WE)  
 (63) *I really hadn't got a clue.* (S1B-049-141)  
 (64) *I never had a shadow of a doubt that he was right.* (CCD)  
 (65) *She won't lift a finger to help you.* (Q)

#### E) NEGATIVE INTENSIFYING IDIOMS

The final group is constituted by fully idiomatic expressions which also emphasize a negative statement. In contrast with the terms of the previous set, they can be considered as genuine idioms or ready-made utterances because they are semantically and syntactically restricted and, therefore, function in the grammatical system as if they were a single unit.

These idioms have been mostly taken from the material provided by the questionnaires as well as from the data gathered from specialized dictionaries, more particularly from Partridge (1937), and Cowie, Mackin and McCaig (1981). Some of these have their origin in rhyming songs or as catch phrases. The following include the most common: *not fit to carry guts to a bear*, that is, to be completely worthless; *not by a long shot* or *chalk*, equivalent to something that by comparison is grossly inferior; *not a dicky bird*, the same as *not a word* and it has its origin in a rhyming song; *not a glimmer*, used in answer to such questions as '*Have (had) you*

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any idea of how to do this, or that this would happen?' to express not at all; *not a heel*, a mainly Cockney catch phrase to say that someone has not seen anybody at all; *not know (someone) from Adam*, that is, not know a person at all or have no idea who somebody is; *Not for a pension*, that is, not for all the money in the world; *not Pygmalion likely*, not at all likely; *not a sausage*, a very colloquial way of saying nothing at all; *not a word to the vicar*, it is a catch phrase to say that one has to keep something quiet, and finally, *Not for all the tea in China!*, refuse to do something no matter how big the reward is.

There is also a series of them which all serve to convey a strong rejection and which are equivalent to the more neutral 'Certainly not!'. Most of them are exclamations: (is) *Not in these boots! / trousers!*; *Not for Joseph* (a bit obsolete now); *Nothing doing!*; *Not on your life! / nelly! / nann(y)(ie)!*; *Not on your natural!*, it is an elaboration of *Not on your life* with a possible allusion to imprisonment for the term of his natural life!; *Not on your tin-type!* (Australia and USA) and, to conclude, *No Fear!*. The following examples may give an idea of the actual use of some of these.

(66) *I wouldn't do it for all the tea in China.* (Q)

(67) *Can't hear you, old man, not a sausage.* (IE)

(68) *'Isn't that your old girl-friend Linda over there?' 'Don't know her from Adam.'* (IE)

(69) *'She is not as intelligent as I am'. - 'Not by a long chalk!'* (Q)

(70) *'Are you going out?' - 'On a night like this? No fear!'* (IE)

With the analysis of these colourful emphatic negative idioms, this preliminary account of the resources used by modern English to intensify and emphasize negative speech acts is completed. Something that appeared to be simple and straightforward at the beginning turned out to be more attractive and interesting than was originally expected. In spite of this, by no means should this be considered as a conclusive study. It is just an introductory survey which will have to be developed in further pieces of research. It is essential that new and larger samples of data be collected as well as more time and attention devoted to each of the five main methods of negative intensification distinguished here. It will also be necessary to investigate the nature of the research methods which may be the most convenient for studies of this kind.

The complexity of negation, its importance in the language system and its connections with disciplines such as Logic, Psychology, Sociology and even Mathematics demand an urgent need for supplementary research in the area. No doubt, this will contribute to clarify new features and aspects of the English polarity system which has been traditionally left aside or examined in purely abstract terms without getting deeper into the actual use of the language.

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