

Rules of negation in british sign language

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



There are many languages in the world from spoken, signed, and written forms. Language is a code made up of a set of rules that include what words or signs mean. Individuals communicating with each other share it, and it allows them to exchange their thoughts and ideas. It can be expressed through writing, signing, or even gestures depending on an individual's communication mode. What is grammar? Grammar is the system of a language that sets out the rules that are followed by the users of the language. It is how words can be formed and put together and how sentences can be structured to convey meaning.

It deals with the syntax and word order of a language and is a useful aid in the learning of a language. Linguist can study any language, analyse it and tell us how it is built and structured. If we were to construct a sentence in a language, we would know if it was grammatically correct from this research from linguist and our prior knowledge of the language. Languages can be compared with each other to see what rules each of them have, to see if they are alike and whether they have the same characteristics. Within this piece, we will look into negation.

We will look at the rules of negation in English and how it is incorporated in the language. How negation is described in sign languages and look into current evidence of this through previous research to see what rules were established and whether they still apply. What methodology was used to create the rules and what effect this had on the research. We will also create three grammatical rules in British Sign Language (BSL) from our findings. What do we understand of negation? Negation is a lexical item that

expresses a negative clause in a sentence, which is a refusal or denial of some other statement used in language.

By using a negative term in a sentence, we can negate it. " Negation is a grammatical construction... people who know a language know if a sentence has negation in it. " Sutton Spence and Woll (1999: 72). All languages have the ability to incorporate negation. In English grammar, negatives are used in many different ways; this can be by adding additional words to a sentence, which can be known as negative verb forms. The word, 'not,' is added after an auxiliary verb to show negation, for example in the sentence, 'I am working,' we would say, 'I am not working,' to show negation.

In addition, 'she is coming,' would become 'she is not coming. ' It can also be shown by adding additional words to a sentence such as, 'not, nothing, never,' these are used to negate the sentence. They are known as negative lexical items, (NLI's) which can be used before or after the verb, to include negation, in a sentence. For example, 'I know nothing,' 'she's not there,' 'I never do homework. ' 'I never go out,' 'she's not going. ' Negation can also be shown in English by using negative pronouns such as, 'nobody, none,' 'nobody likes the cold weather,' 'there are none in the jar. Affixes and suffixes, can be added to the beginning or the end of the word to give them a negative meaning, such as, 'dis, un, less'. 'She was so unhappy,' 'she disapproved of the way things were,' 'they were completely helpless. ' In English grammar, it is not acceptable to use double negatives, which are two negative words in the same sentence. However, it is still used by some individuals who use the language.

It is said that when it is used it makes the sentence positive, for example, 'I didn't do nothing wrong,' would be translated as, 'I did something wrong. Although it is not accepted in English, many other languages use double negatives in their grammar. In French for example, the sentence, 'Je ne mange jamais de viande.' Translated would say, 'I no eat never any meat.' Meaning, 'I am a vegetarian.' This would be quite acceptable in their language and is also used in some other languages. English has grammar rules, which need to be followed to convey meaning in the language. Users of the language need to know these rules so they can understand it and use the language more effectively and in the correct manner without making mistakes.

We have seen how English includes negatives in the language now we can look at these grammar rules and compare them to BSL, to establish if these rules exist in BSL and to find out how negation is incorporated in BSL. We can find some of these negative rules in BSL which are expressed by using signs, head movements, non-manual features hand shape and movements. These negative markers can be incorporated by using any of these negative forms. " BSL has a number of different 'negative markers' which provide the user with a range of options for expressing negation...

At least some of these negative markers appear to have the status of inflectional affixes" Brennan (1992: 111). There is not an actual sign for, 'not,' in BSL, we could finger spell it but it may not make any sense to the language users. We can incorporate this negative word in BSL by other negative markers such as a negative headshake and non-manual features.

For example, when signing the sentence, 'I am not working,' we would sign, 'working' and simultaneously shake our head from side to side to show negation which would interpret, 'not working. ' This shows that the word, 'not,' can be shown in BSL by using other features of the language.

There are signs in BSL for, 'nothing, and never,' these are signed by using the flat hand shape going across the mouth accompanied by the lip pattern, 'poo,' and a negative head shake to the side. This sign would mean, 'nothing. ' The sign for, 'never,' would be one hand in a fist held out in front of you and the other in a flat hand shape, cutting down across the front of the fist to indicate, 'never. ' Therefore, BSL can have the possibility to express NLI's in a sentence to negate it through these signs. There are also negative markers that can be translated as pronouns.

There are signs in BSL for, 'none, and nobody. ' This is done by signing with the index finger and thumb joined known as the 'F' hand shape, circling in front of you and a negative headshake. Translated, it would mean, 'nobody, or nothing. ' This shows that negative pronouns can be shown in BSL signs. Affixes and suffixes can also be shown to exist in BSL. By using a negative headshake while signing, 'happy,' would negate it as, 'unhappy. ' We would also need to do a negative face to indicate unhappy if we did not then it would not be grammatically correct in BSL.

In addition, using a negative headshake while signing, 'allow,' would be negated as 'disallow. ' This shows affixes can be incorporated in the language by using the negative headshake, which can be said to be the affix. In BSL, negation is expressed through a change in the verb form, a change in

movement, a negative headshake and negative non-manual features, therefore it can be said that this would be equal to double negatives and it is quite acceptable to do this. " In BSL it is common to have more than one negation marker in the sentence".

Sutton, Spence and Woll, (1999: 78). It can be said that BSL does incorporate negation. As we have seen, it shows many aspects of English grammar within the language and can incorporate NLI's, pronouns, affixes, and negative words. Therefore, it can be argued that grammatical rules can be made to follow. As negative headshakes, negative facial expressions, movement and lip pattern all express negation in BSL, rules can be created from this information. Researchers such as Brennan (1992), Sutton Spence and Woll (1999) and Deucher (1984) have researched BSL.

Concerning negation, they found similar rules that incorporate negation. Brennan (1992: 111) states it is possible to express negation through denial, rejection, and challenging certain meanings. We can make negative clauses by using these negative expressions. She also notes that these negative markers seem to be added onto verbs in BSL. She lists many negative markers, for example, the negative headshake, the slight head turn to the left or right, signs for, 'not yet, nothing, nobody,' the lip pattern, 'poo,' which is used when signing, 'nothing,' is described.

A description of how to use the signs accompanied by lip pattern and non-manual features for negation is also given, for example, " Neg 4 involves both a manual and a non-manual element. The lips are pressed together and drawn back at the start of the sign. As the B hand moves in front of the

mouth, the mouth opens sharply with the lips rounded..... it may occur either immediately before or after the verb. " Brennan (1992: 111-112). BSL is a language, which changes over time and the grammar rules seem to change as the users of the language changes.

Some of the descriptions for the negative signs may not be in use now and maybe disappearing as the language changes. However, the, 'poo,' sign still seems to be used by many users of BSL to indicate, 'nothing. ' Also the sign for, 'nobody,' can still be found in use. Examples of this can be found in the clips on wolf on the University of Wolverhampton website. Sutton Spence and Woll (1999) note " three main elements of negation, 1) Facial expression 2) Head movement 3) Negation signs, or signs with negation incorporated in them. " Sutton Spence and Woll (1999: 73).

They state negation can be expressed through using the headshake, a negative sign and facial expressions. One element would not incorporate negation without the other. They note that the facial expressions can be extreme or just slight when used with negation, " there are different degrees of general negation facial expressions". Furthermore mouth patterns such as, 'boo','vee','thaw', would need to be included when using a negative sign or it would not be a complete sign. Two negative head movements are described. One would be used with negative signs such as, 'nothing', 'never', 'not yet', and would be a half turn to the side.

The other would be a headshake from side to side this could be used alone to negate a sentence or with other non-manual features such as, " nose wrinkling or drawn down lips". They list many negative signs, which can be

found in the BSL dictionary, there are signs for, 'nothing, nobody, not yet,' and other general negation signs in BSL. They also talk about double negatives, they go on to say that, double negatives are common in BSL, and when they are used in a sentence, it gives it a form of strong negation. " In BSL it is common to have more than one negation marker in a sentence.

She finds a similar group of signs in American Sign Language (ASL) French Sign Language (FSL), and Danish Sign Language that incorporate negation in a similar sort of way, by a change in hand shape and movement. Therefore, it could be said that there are some similarities in the languages and this could mean they could be universals if they have similar rules. Looking at verbs in BSL, there seems to be two groups that behave in different ways to incorporate negation. One group will change its movement or its hand shape therefore has different signed forms.

The other group will add on non-manual features or certain head movements to show negation and so cannot change their verb forms. Some verbs that change verb forms are, 'can, will, agree, possible'. These can change to, 'can't, won't disagree, impossible'. In some of these signs, the movement or hand shape will change. For example the sign, 'possible,' would change its hand shape and location to sign, 'impossible,' the sign, 'will,' changes its lip pattern to say, 'won't,' some will change movement, non manual features and lip pattern and so will change sign form. Some of the verbs will have a head nod from side to side to show negation.

If we talk about verbs and do this at the same time as the verb then it negates it. Non-manual features used to incorporate negation can be,

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wriggling of the nose, furrowed eyebrows and corner of lips turned down. It seems to be that this small group of verbs are known as plain verbs in BSL. Plain verbs are body anchored and so can take on more information in movement and hand shape to incorporate negation. Other verbs would need extra information to express negation through the negative head nod while signing which will negate the verb. As we can see verbs in BSL and other, sign languages can incorporate negation.

They will take on as much information as they can to give us extra information. Some take on information by changing hand shape and movement, some by adding extra information with non-manual features, lip pattern and head movement to give us information about negation. Verbs can give information by adding extra language features with the sign. Negation in BSL is not complex it has some of the rules that English and other sign languages follow and can be seen to incorporate negation by changing verb forms and by adding extra information with negative headshake, non-manual features, hand shape, and movements.

Facial expressions are used to convey more meaning and are compulsory in sign languages. However, in English, it is optional and most people do not use it intentionally as a grammar rule, though it can be used naturally without us knowing that we are actually making faces. It is not just signs that give us meaning in BSL, but a combination of hand shape, movement, and non-manual features.