

Negator vs. copula contractions in the history of American English

This study probes deeply into the two types of contraction i.e. *we/you/they aren't* vs. *we/you/they're not*, *he/she/it isn't* vs. *he/she/it's not*, and *I am not* vs. *I'm not* in the history of American English, using the newly released corpus *The Corpus of Historical American English (COHA)*, which covers the past 200 years in the history of American English, namely, from 1810s to 2000s. The corpus-based survey provides the following results. Firstly, as a whole, the copula contraction to the grammatical subject has become dominant over the counterpart negator contraction to the copula. Secondly, the consequence of one constructional preference over the other gives support for the view that language change is construction-based or construction-specific (cf. Rissanen 1998; see below). Thirdly, this transition implies that the negative meaning may have been specified and emphasized over time by not contracting or cliticizing the forms onto the hosts.

The following give more detailed descriptions of the survey results. In the case of *are* and *not*, all the copula contraction forms i.e. *we/you/they're not* have been used more frequently almost at any synchronic stage than *aren't*. Therefore, regardless of whether grammatical subjects are singular or plural, the copula contraction *'re not* has strongly been preferred over the negator contraction counterpart *aren't*. In the third person singular forms i.e. *he*, *she* and *it*, their preferred contraction patterns changed from *s/he/it isn't* to *s/he/it's not* around 1930s and 1940s. As to the first person singular form, no examples of the negative contraction form i.e. *amn't* are found in the corpus (Hudson 2000; Dixon 2007). On the other hand, the gradual diachronic shift from *I am not* to *I'm not* is consistent with those found in the other person forms. Figure 1 summarizes the transition of *he isn't* and *he's not* in *COHA* with normalized frequencies per million.

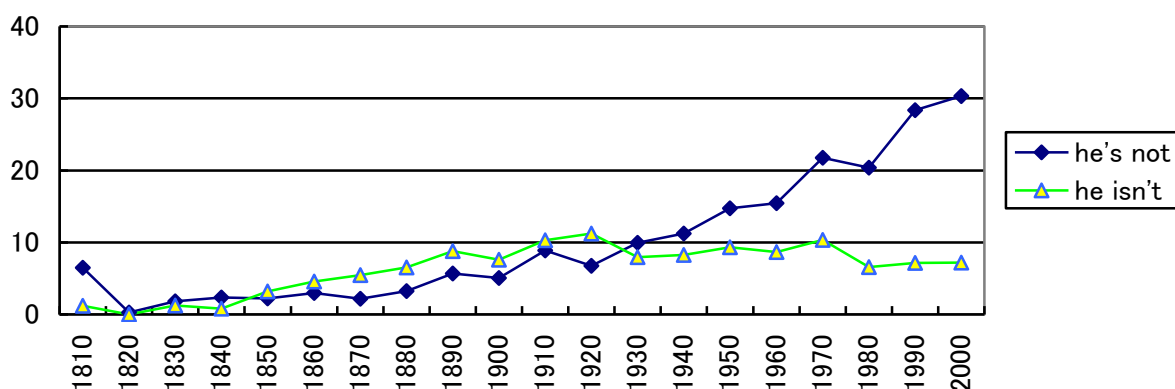


Figure. 1: The transition of *he's not* vs. *he isn't* in *COHA* (Accessed June 27, 2010)

The outcomes of this survey can be interpreted as follows. Discourse-pragmatically, the negative meaning has been strengthened with the gradual preference of the independent form *not* instead of the contracted form *n't*. In earlier English, one can witness a variety of lexical

items that underwent univerbation with negative prefixes such as *nyllan*, *noalde*, *neom*, *nyste*, *næfdon*, etc., none of which have continued to exist across time. In a nutshell, the negative particle or adverb *not* has been actualized for discourse-pragmatic effects, as Dahl (2010) precisely points out from a cross-linguistic perspective that a negator does not normally undergo semantic bleaching. Morphosyntactically, the ways to contract either copulas or negative particles appear to depend on types of construction. Rissanen (1998) demonstrates through the analysis of various ‘interrogative’ constructions including copula contractions that the negator contraction increases over time in the history of English. On the other hand, this study demonstrates that the negator contraction in ‘declarative’ constructions in the history of American English especially with copulas turns out to decrease.

References

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