

The English ample negative construction may be a construction
Joanna Nykiel & Jong-Bok Kim (U. of California, Davis & Kyung Hee U.)

Introduction. We explore the properties of what we dub the ample negative construction in English (after Lawler 1974), indicated in bold in (1)-(2). We call it a ‘construction’ without at this point committing to an analysis of it as a single construction in the sense of Construction Grammar, although we’d like to suggest this analysis may be correct. Its structural ingredients are a negated fragment, *Not XP*, followed by negated Verb Phrase ellipsis (VPE), with, as Lawler (1974:18) claims, no sentence boundary between them. The negated fragment expresses focal information that can be contrastive (Lawler 1974, Michaelis 2025), but this depends on whether the fragment has an overt correlate in the antecedent clause. In (1) the fragment’s overt correlate is *that old long gun*, resulting in contrastive focus on the fragment, but in (2) there is an implicit, but not an overt correlate. We refer to the use of implicit correlates as sprouting, as is common in the ellipsis literature.

Data. We compare a sample of 124 examples of the ample negative construction drawn from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) with a sample of 761 negative fragments extracted by Kim (2024) from the same corpus, and find that the ample negative construction distributes like a subset of negated fragments. Negated fragments are illustrated in (3)-(4). Kim’s (2024) corpus data show that such fragments are responses to polar questions (3) or wh-questions (4) raised by the preceding context as Questions-under-Discussion (QUDs) and none of them are embedded. Like negated fragments, the ample negative construction is never embedded. Unlike them, it only serves as a response to a subset of QUDs they permit, i.e., polar-question QUDs. This may explain why the attached VPE is always what Kertz (2010) and Miller & Pullum (2013) term the Aux Focus kind. That is, the subject of the VPE is always given information (encoded by a pronoun in our sample) while the auxiliary is focused. Tables 1-3 show comparisons between the ample negative construction and negated fragments in terms of the syntactic category of the post-*Not* material, its grammatical function, and the kinds of correlate permitted. In all three cases, the proportions are reversed for the ample negative construction compared to negated fragments, suggesting that it has specialized to serve certain functions, most strikingly to appear in sprouting contexts. It’s worth noting that the ample negative construction doesn’t distribute like pseudogapping (see (5)), which it otherwise appears to resemble in hosting a stranded auxiliary and a following remnant. Pseudogapping, however, rarely appears as a root clause, in contrast to the ample negative construction, and is instead associated with comparative clauses (Hoeksema 2006, Miller 2014, Nykiel 2025). It also favors argument remnants over adjuncts (Nykiel 2025), which is the reverse of what we are seeing in Table 2 for the ample negative construction.

Tentative analysis. Whether the ample negative construction is a single construction rather than two (negated fragments and VPE appearing together) can’t be answered with certainty without an acoustic analysis. Nevertheless, we would like to tentatively propose that, given the similarity between the ample negative construction and negated fragments, a possible theoretical analysis would be in the spirit of construction-based Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (the first to suggest a constructionist analysis is Michaelis 2025), which has previously been defended for and applied to both (negated) fragments (e.g. Nykiel & Kim 2022, Abeillé & Kim 2022, Kim 2024) and VPE (e.g. Ginzburg & Miller 2018, Nykiel & Kim 2021, Kim & Runner 2022). Following Michaelis (2025), we propose that the syntax of the ample negative construction comprises two parts, a negated fragment (*Not XP*) and negated VPE. The negated fragment is analyzed as a stand-alone daughter of S, whose antecedent hosts a polar QUD, via the Head-fragment construction (Ginzburg & Sag 2000, Abeillé & Kim 2022, Nykiel & Kim 2022, Kim 2025), and the VPE is analyzed, via the VPE construction, as including a *pro* expression (one without any syntactic representation) serving as an argument to an auxiliary head daughter (Kim & Runner 2022). The semantics of this construction is a union of the negated propositions expressed by the fragment and by the VPE, with the fragment qualifying the subsequent proposition in what Horn (2010) terms presumptive negation. The ample negative construction would thus be licensed simultaneously by the Head-fragment construction and the VPE construction.

- (1) See, my problem is, Sam, you could use that old long gun as a club. Bash my brains out when I wasn't lookin'. **Not that rifle, I won't.** (COCA 2013 FIC)
- (2) Do we have any more gelato? **Not for you, we don't.** (COCA 2013 TV)
- (3) Is there any sight more inspiring? **Not for me.** (COCA 2008 MAG)
- (4) Who could do such a thing? **Not Ella.** (COCA 2010 FIC)
- (5) Sam uses that rifle more often than **I would a club.**

Table 1: Syntactic category of post-*Not* material in negated fragments and the ample negative construction (3 other categories are available for negated fragments: AdvP, VP, and AP)

Syntactic category	Negated fragment	Ample negative construction
PP	111 (14.6%)	101 (81.5%)
NP	595 (78.2%)	17 (13.7%)
Clause	3 (0.4%)	6 (4.8%)

Table 2: Grammatical function of post-*Not* material in negated fragments and the ample negative construction

Grammatical function	Negated fragment	Ample negative construction
Adjunct	244 (32%)	100 (80.6%)
Argument	517 (68%)	24 (19.4%)

Table 3: Type of correlate for negated fragments and the ample negative construction

Correlate	Negated fragment	Ample negative construction
Overt	651 (85.5%)	6 (4.8%)
Implicit (sprouting)	110 (14.5%)	118 (95.2%)

References

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