

The ample negative construction in English

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This paper presents two theoretical analyses of what we dub the ample negative construction (henceforth, ANC) in English, after Lawler (1974). The construction is indicated in bold in (1)-(5). We explore its properties on the basis of a sample of 125 instances harvested from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The structural ingredients of the ANC are a negated XP, which can be realized as an NP (1), PP (2), AdvP (5), or a clause (4), followed by a clause featuring negated Verb Phrase ellipsis (VPE). Thus, negation appears twice in the ANC. Furthermore, Lawler (1974) notes that VPE is mandatory in the second clause, and we have not seen counter-evidence to his claim in our corpus data. He also claims there is no sentence boundary between the initial Not-XP and the following clause, suggesting that they form a single utterance rather than two separate ones (Lawler 1974:18; see also Michaelis 2025). We leave the prosodic properties of the ANC as an open question here, focusing instead on its syntactic structure and status as one of the exceptions to the non-negative-concord system present in English.

- (1) A: Do you know the secret to happiness, commander? B: **Not yours, I don't.** (COCA 1997 TV)
- (2) A: That clever little dummy's writing his own ending. B: **Not in my book, he's not.** (COCA 2018 TV)
- (3) A: Does it matter? B: **Not to me, it doesn't,** not really. (COCA 2006 MOV)
- (4) A: You can't leave. We need you. B: **Not when I'm like this, you don't.** (COCA 1991 TV)
- (5) A: I play here every week. B: **Not anymore, you don't.** (COCA 2019 TV)

Given the presence of VPE, the ANC has anaphoric properties, and the Not-XP in particular can have properties that are licensed by lexical heads present only in the preceding context. The Not-XP expresses focal information that can be contrastive (Lawler 1974, Michaelis 2025), but this depends on whether the XP has an overt matching phrase in the preceding context. In (1) for instance, the direct object *the secret to happiness* is a matching phrase for the NP *yours*, resulting in contrastive focus on the latter. In other cases, there is no overt matching phrase and the XP is a 'sprouted' argument of a lexical (either verbal or nominal in our data) head. To see this, consider (3): the verbal head *matter* licenses an oblique complement that is left implicit in the preceding context and picked up by the PP *to me* within the Not-XP. In our data, 96 out of 125 XPs (76.8%) are sprouted arguments or adjuncts, and overall 24 out of 125 XPs (19.2%) are arguments rather than adjuncts like those in (2), (4), and (5). In sum, all Not-XPs have a contrastive or noncontrastive focus relationship with antecedent phrases and those of them that are arguments require access to antecedent lexical heads to license their properties. This suggests that analyzing the ANC requires ellipsis-based theoretical machinery.

Another anaphoric property of the ANC is being used as a response to a specific type of Q(uestion) U(nder) D(iscussion). The preceding context (antecedent) sets up a proposition that becomes the maximal QUD in the ordered set of QUDs (Ginzburg & Sag 2000, Ginzburg 2012), making the alternative $p \vee \neg p$ salient. This is done either by means of a polar question, as in (1) and (3), or an assertion, as

in (2), (4), and (5). The ANC always picks out the alternative $\neg p$, which is made apparent through a particular usage of VPE known as Auxiliary Choice (Miller & Pullum 2014). Under Auxiliary Choice VPE, the subject of the clause containing VPE is identical with the subject of the antecedent clause, the stranded auxiliary receives stress, and the entire clause containing VPE either confirms or contradicts a salient proposition supplied by the antecedent. This kind of VPE can take nonlinguistic antecedents so long as the alternative $p \vee \neg p$ is made salient by a situational context (Miller & Pullum 2014). The ANC tracks this pattern, as well. Imagine, for instance, hearing someone use bad language in your house, to which you object by uttering: *Not in my house, you don't!* (see Hankamer & Sag 1974: 409 for another example).

The ANC also shares some properties with certain types of negated fragments, shown in (6)-(7). Like them, it's a root clause phenomenon (we found no examples of embedded ANC in our data). Note that some negated fragments, like (6) but not (7), pick out the alternative $\neg p$ from a set of two salient alternatives made available by an antecedent, the same way the ANC does. Note further that we could easily add a clause with VPE to (6) to produce *Not for me, it doesn't*, turning the negated fragment into the ANC.

(6) A: Does that sound crazy? B: Not to me. (Kim 2024: 567)

(7) A: Who could do such a thing? B: Not Ella. (Kim 2024: 571)

It appears then that the ANC could be construed as a subtype of negated fragments, with an adjunct in the form of a VPE-hosting clause. We pursue this analysis, alongside another, but before we do, we highlight two more properties of the ANC.

First, there are examples where the final clause has a disambiguating function due to the antecedent being a complex clause. Consider (8), where the Not-XP on its own wouldn't make it clear that the intended antecedent is the embedded clause in A's utterance. This suggests that the final clause is optional and at least one reason to add it may be to facilitate processing.

(8) A: But isn't it funny how people tell you fast food is always hiring? B: **Not for me, they aren't.** (COCA 2012 BLOG)

Second, the ANC doesn't fit very well into the English system of negation because English is classified as a non-negative-concord language. Negative concord systems allow multiple negative expressions to be recruited to express a single negation. The occurrence of negation both in the Not-XP and the following clause resembles a negative concord system in the sense that the two negative elements yield a single negation reading. However, the ANC isn't an isolated case in English. There are, for instance, examples of 'resumptive negation', where one negation is reinforced by another and both of them still amount to a single negation reading, as in (9)-(10) (e.g. Jespersen 1917, Dowty 2008, Horn 2009).

(9) I can't go to the party, not with my clothes looking like this. (Dowty 2008: 2)

(10) He cannot sleep, not even after taking an opiate. (Horn 2009: 407)

We don't address these constructions (which appear to have different prosodic properties than the ANC)

here, but only wish to make the point that English does permit exceptions to its non-negative-concord system. We build on this possibility when explaining why negation occurs twice in the ANC.

We now turn to possible analyses of the ANC. We begin with the syntactic structure and then address the unique property of the ANC in English, that is, a single negation expressed by two negative expressions. To our knowledge, the ANC hasn't attracted attention in any constraint-based framework except for Michaelis (2025), who proposes to analyze it as a combination of two constructions, fragments and VPE, without going into further details.

Analysis 1

The key idea here is that we assimilate the ANC to pseudogapping with extraction. This move is motivated by the need to access antecedent lexical heads in the absence of any overt lexical verb in the structure of the VPE-hosting clause. In pseudogapping a stranded auxiliary is followed by an XP, which we refer to as a remnant, as in (11)–(12). A remnant can contrast with an overt matching phrase in its antecedent (11), or it can be sprouted (12).

(11) It [= the wind] blows through me as it would **an abandoned house**. (Miller 2014: 81)

(12) If you are asked about your disability, respond as you would **to any personal question**. (Nykiel 2025: 2)

Because this pattern tracks the behavior of the Not-XP in the ANC, we could analyze the Not-XP as we would a pseudogapping remnant. The clause containing VPE is the mother and the Not-XP functions as an argument or adjunct remnant. Because we're also dealing with VPE, the mother contains a pro expression serving as a complement to the auxiliary (i.e. the auxiliary's COMPS list is empty). To license VPE, we use the constraint proposed in Kim & Runner (2022: 480) and shown in (13). The possibility of realizing an auxiliary without an overt complement follows from the mapping of an auxiliary lexeme onto an auxiliary VPE word in (14) (Kim & Runner 2022: 479).

(13) VPE-cx
 $VP[vpe-cx] \rightarrow H[aux-vpe-wd]$

(14)

$$\left[\begin{array}{c} aux-lxm \\ ARG-ST \langle [1]XP, [2]YP \rangle \end{array} \right] \Rightarrow \left[\begin{array}{c} aux-vpe-wd \\ VAL \left[\begin{array}{c} SUBJ \langle [1]XP \rangle \\ COMPS \langle \rangle \end{array} \right] \\ ARG-ST \langle [1]XP, [2]YP \rangle \end{array} \right]$$

Pseudogapping itself is licensed by the construction in (15) proposed in Kim & Runner (2022: 483). (15) is designed for cases where remnants are arguments and have overt matching phrases. This is clear from the pair of focused phrases, F(ocus) E(stablishing) C(onstituents), on the left side of the arrow. The term FEC is borrowed from analyses of fragments (Ginzburg & Sag 2000), and is equivalent to the term Salient Utterance used there. Fragments must be paired with salient phrases, i.e. FECs, that are supplied by antecedents either overtly or implicitly, with limited morphosyntactic information carried by FECs

and shared with fragments (see below). The left FEC in (15) is supplied by the antecedent and the right one is represented by a fronted remnant. Note that the syntactic categories of the remnant and the FEC are aligned when they are arguments, but don't have to be when they are adjuncts. In the presentation, we extend (15) to cover implicit FECs, also based on analyses of fragments. The additional step in the analysis of the ANC compared to pseudogapping is that the remnant is extracted and thus licensed the same way unbounded dependencies are.

(15)

$$\left[\begin{array}{l} pg-cx \\ \text{FOC} \quad \langle [1] \rangle \\ \text{SEM} \quad E \\ \text{CNXT} \quad \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{PRESUP} \quad \text{contrast-rel}(i,j) \\ \text{FEC} \quad \left\{ \left[\begin{array}{ll} \text{CAT} & [2] \\ \text{INDEX} & i \end{array} \right], \left[\begin{array}{ll} \text{CAT} & [2] \\ \text{INDEX} & j \end{array} \right] \right\} \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \Rightarrow \mathbf{H} \left[\begin{array}{ll} \text{aux-vpe-wd} & \\ \text{VFORM} & \text{fin} \end{array} \right], [1] \mathbf{R} \left[\begin{array}{ll} \text{CAT} & [2] \\ \text{INDEX} & j \end{array} \right]$$

We derive the semantics for the ANC as we would for pseudogapping. The VPE-containing clause supplies the semantics based on a QUD available from the antecedent. Recall that this clause hosts Auxiliary Choice VPE picking out the alternative $\neg p$. The Not-XP is within the scope of the main clause negation and we take its negative marker to instantiate negative concord such that the Not-XP doesn't contribute a different negation than that contributed by the main clause (De Swart & Sag 2002, Richter & Sailer 2006, Espinal 2007, Horn 2010, Delfitto 2020).

Evidence to support the pseudogapping analysis is mixed. On the assumption that the fronted Not-XP is a pseudogapping remnant it should have the properties that are appropriate for a verbal argument to which the remnant corresponds (i.e. an FEC provided by the antecedent). This expectation applies only to those remnants that correspond to argument FECs, which represent 19.2% of the examples in our corpus sample. We can see that this expectation is correct based on Condition C reconstruction effects, even though we posit no actual movement. Example (16) shows Condition C effects under pseudogapping when a pronoun in the second clause c-commands an R-expression, and the same effects arise under the ANC when an XP is an argument, as in (17). No Condition C effects appear to arise when adjuncts are involved, as in (18) (adjuncts don't need to reconstruct even on theories based on movement, see e.g. Lebeaux 1988, Hulsey & Sauerland 2006, Bruening & Al Khalaf 2019).

(16) *Sophie would lie to Harvey more than to Kyle_i he_i would.

(17) *Not to Kyle_i, he_i wouldn't.

(18) Not when Kyle_i is like this, he_i wouldn't.

On the other hand, our pseudogapping analysis faces the problem that the ANC doesn't distribute like pseudogapping, which is rare in independent clauses and instead predominantly appears in comparative clauses (Hoeksema 2006, Miller 2014, Nykiel 2025). Therefore, we also consider an analysis that better fits the ANC's actual distribution.

Analysis 2

This analysis is supported by the ANC being distributionally aligned with negated fragments, as discussed above. We assume that the ANC has a negated fragment as its head daughter, while a VPE-hosting clause is an adjunct. Our analysis is based on existing analyses of (negated) fragments as a construction whose mother is an S and head daughter an XP, with their propositional semantics derived from an antecedent QUD (Ginzburg & Sag 2000, Nykiel & Kim 2022, Abeillé & Kim 2022, Kim 2024). The construction that licenses fragments is schematically shown in (19) (see Nykiel & Kim 2022: 99). Fragments are paired with FECs supplied by antecedents either overtly or implicitly, with limited morphosyntactic information being shared by FECs and fragments. This gives us a way to license certain morphosyntactic properties of the ANC, such as the syntactic category of the Not-XP, whenever paired with an argument FEC. As before, VPE in the adjunct sister is licensed by the VPE construction formulated in Kim and Runner (2022: 480). We formulate the construction that licenses the ANC, as in (20).

(19)

$$\left[\begin{array}{l} \textit{hd-frag-cx} \\ \text{SYN} \quad \text{S} \\ \text{SEM} \quad \text{E} \\ \text{CNXT} \quad \left[\text{FEC} \quad \left\{ \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{SYN} \mid \text{CAT} \mid \text{VAL} \quad \boxed{1} \\ \text{SEM} \quad \text{[INDEX} \quad \boxed{2}] \end{array} \right\} \right] \end{array} \right] \Rightarrow \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{SYN} \mid \text{CAT} \mid \text{VAL} \quad \boxed{1} \\ \text{SEM} \quad \text{[INDEX} \quad \boxed{2}] \end{array} \right]$$

(20)

$$\left[\begin{array}{l} \textit{anc-cx} \\ \text{SYN} \quad \text{S} \\ \text{SEM} \quad \text{E} \\ \text{CNXT} \quad \left[\text{FEC} \quad \left\{ \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{SYN} \mid \text{CAT} \mid \text{VAL} \quad \boxed{1} \\ \text{SEM} \quad \text{[INDEX} \quad \boxed{2}] \end{array} \right\} \right] \end{array} \right] \Rightarrow \boxed{3}\mathbf{H} \left[\begin{array}{l} \text{SYN} \mid \text{CAT} \mid \text{VAL} \quad \boxed{1} \\ \text{SEM} \quad \text{[INDEX} \quad \boxed{2}] \end{array} \right], \left[\begin{array}{l} \textit{vpe-cx} \\ \text{SYN} \mid \text{CAT} \mid \text{MOD} \boxed{3} \end{array} \right]$$

Semantically, the ANC contradicts a proposition made salient by an antecedent. Toward this purpose, the negated fragment, the Not-XP, supplies a propositional semantics despite being nonsentential (we abbreviate the propositional semantics as ‘E’ in both (20) and (19)). The negator *not* combines with an XP and has the option of being interpreted as either sentential or constituent negation, following Kim (2024). This is because *not*, like other quantifiers, is stored and can be retrieved at various points in the structure (Ginzburg & Sag 2000, De Swart & Sag 2002), including at the XP level, if constituent negation is intended, or at the highest S level otherwise. Similar to the pseudogapping analysis, the negative marker in the second clause is interpreted positively, i.e. it expresses the same negation as that expressed by the fragment.

The two analyses differ in whether the initial or the final element of the ANC is taken to be its head daughter and in what grammatical function is assigned to that element. They are aligned in relying on

existing analyses of fragments and VPE to derive the various properties of the ANC. In the presentation we illustrate the details of both the pseudogapping and fragment analyses. We also outline one way of capturing the disconnect between the non-negative-concord system of English and the negative concord characteristics of the ANC by building on Richter & Sailer's (2006) typological approach to negation systems within Lexical Resource Semantics, which allows lexical exceptions to system-wide patterns. This line of analysis can potentially extend to other cases of resumptive negation in English like those depicted in (9)-(10).

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