

NO NO NO (NO, NAY, Never. . . .)

EDWARD R. WOLPOW
Brookline, Massachusetts

We are cautioned in grade school to avoid use of the double negative -- that logically, the 2 negatives cancel out, and if that is not the intention of the writer, confusion rules. But multiple negatives do abound, and not merely for emphasis as is "No, no a thousand times no...."

In medicine, we meet the syndrome of inappropriate secretion of antidiuretic hormone (SIADH). It takes more than moment to parse those 2 negatives, "inappropriate" and "antidiuretic" to conclude that such a patient is holding on to too much fluid, and that the treatment become fluid restriction.

In my own field of neurology, we have the monstrous triple negative, alexia without agraphia, indicating damage to the brain in such a way that there is difficulty with speaking, but not with writing. Why not "pure alexia"? In studying aphasia, it seemed to some of my colleagues and I that the condition was contagious: prolonged contact with aphasic patients and the literature of aphasia leads to nobody being able to understand you.

And then, there are the road signs one encounters on traversing this country - specifically for me, from Massachusetts to my daughter's family in Illinois. As you leave the town of Franklin, Pennsylvania, you encounter a sign: END BRAKE RETARDER PROHIBITION. For those for whom this is relevant, they are, presumably, able to follow the instructions quite quickly, since it is, after all, a road sign. But I still can't figure it. All right, no more brake retarder prohibition -- I get that. End and Prohibition appear to cancel each other, leaving one free to, well, Retard one's Brakes. But braking is retarding, isn't it? So, I guess you are supposed to free up your brakes to do their thing -- which should lead to a screeching halt. Or, does the End of the sign refer to both the Retarder and the Prohibition? -- and the resultant end to the braking would quickly get you into Ohio.

Looking closely at these 4 words, it appears that we have a true 4-word quadruple negative -- maybe unique in the language.

I suggest that, considering the ambiguities of this sign, one might be coaxed into joining (if one were a Franklinite) a counterorganization called DON'T END BRAKE RETARDER PROHIBITION.