DIAL N FOR NEGATIVE

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The negative English morphene, un- and its equivalents, was not born naturally; it was invented, like all language, out of the need to easily reverse word meanings from positive to negative. There is no question as to the early need for the negative, as shown by the Sanskrit an-. In dozens of words since, the un- has proved its utility many times over; for sure, the un- is in.

The purpose of this article is to show, with examples, that the omnipresence of the letter **n** in our collection of negative words could be nothing other than psychological. (It does not explain the "First Cause", the **n** in the Sanskrit na-.) In short, the large number of negative words containing the letter **n** is surely the result of conditioning by psychological factors.

The Oxford English Dictionary credits the Sanskrit speaker specifically with the invention of the negative morphemes an- and a-. So, for some six thousand years, this association of n with negation has been developing. The Anglo-Saxon warrior used un- to negate, and other languages were using their own n negatives. Modern English, being the look-for-another-way-to-say-it language that it is, added **no**, dating from the Greek **ne-**, by the twelfth century, as well as **negate** from the Latin **negare**, "to say no," by 1623. **Nope** was added in 1888 and **nix** by 1909; corruptions such as **nupe** and **nah** were added later. Even the oral /h ŋ- ŋ/ and the ubiquitous **no-no** preserved the pattern.

A second obvious category of negatives are the "nothing" words: **naught** (Old English **na**, "no," plus **wiht**, "creature"), **nothing** (Old English **nan**, "no," plus **thing**, "thing"), **nil** (Latin **ne**, "not," plus **hilum**, "trifle") and **null** (Latin **ne**, "not," plus **ullus**, "any").

Another group includes the "not" words: **not** (Middle English), **non-** (Latin, "not"), **never** (Old English **ne-**, "not," plus **aefre**, "ever"), and the dialectal **nary**, "not one," by 1746. **None** (Old English contraction of **ne-**, "not," plus **an**, "one") rounds out this group.

But by far the most interesting and convincing examples for the association of n with negation are the words that contain the better-hidden negatives, the tiny germs conditionally planted and left, only to germinate many years later for students of the English language. Representative examples are **annihilate** (Latin **ad** plus **nihil**, "nothing") which entered the language in 1525, and **annul** (Latin **ad** plus **nullus**, "not any") entering by the turn of the fifteenth century. **Nepenthe** (Greek **ne**, "not," plus **penthos**, "grief")

entered in 1580, but **neither** (Old English **ne-**, "not," plus **hwaether** "which of two") has existed in English prior to the twelfth century.

Presumably, the first business deal was **negotiated** (Latin **neg**, "not," plus **otium**, "leisure") in 1599. If you **neglected** to keep an appointment, you did **neg**, "not," **legere**, "gather," your thoughts together. If you believed something to be **necessary**, you would **ne**, "not," **cedere**, "withdraw," from doing it, whether in Rome or in fourteenth-century England.

Everyone knows that a **nefarious** crime is ne, "not," plus **fas**, "right." Taking a **neuter** position on an issue is saying you do **ne**, "not," know **uter**, "which of two," sides to take. Only a **nesci-ent** (Latin ne, "not," plus scire, "to know") **nitwit** (German **nicht**, "not," plus **wit**) would go into a supermarket to buy his wife a **negligee** (French **negliger**, "to neglect"). But then again, she might be the **naughty** (Old English **na**, "no," plus **wiht**, "thing") lady of Shady Lane.

Some changes in word meanings are evident, of course, but there is plenty of association left to demonstrate strong evidence of psychological involvement in the association of n with negation in English words. If you don't wish to be such a believer, that's fine and **nice** (Latin ne, "not," plus scire, "to know") with me!