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The negative English morpheme, 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 n-/ 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 1888, which of two Presumably "not," plus appointment, together. If ne, "not," is in fourteenth Everyone "right." Take ne, "not," kent (Latin re, "not," plus negligence (French be the naught of Shady Lain.

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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 nescient (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!