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In praise of negation

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Herausgegeben von Dietrich Benner

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Ray McDermott

In Praise of Negation¹

*What I liked about anthropology was
its inexhaustible faculty for negation,
its relentless definition of man
as though he were no better than God,
in terms of what he is not.
Samuel Beckett, Molloy (1951/1955)²*

The word negation has a bad reputation. Negation suggests a nay-say to every positive, a second to every first, and a derivative to every proposed essence. In the language of teenagers, negation is a downer, something akin to an adult. In the language of adults, negation refers to resistance and recalcitrance, something akin to a teenager. Since Saussure, we have known how often words, as though they were no better than teenagers, tend to hang out with their friends. Try to focus on one word and a full semantic tree comes into view. So it is that negation hangs out with a bad crowd: contradiction, repudiation, denial, refusal, disavowal, rejection, refutation and degradation, a virtual street gang of synonyms for trouble and disruption. Who would want their children hanging out in such a crowd? Run for your lives! Negation is coming!

This paper offers a cultural and sociolinguistic defense of negation as a *sine qua non* of human engagements with the world. Much as ethnographies defend teenage combatants (Whyte 1943; Willis 1977; Goodwin 1990) by pointing to the complexity and duplicity of their circumstances and the often positive and open ended desires that fuel their defiance of what adults call commonsense, this paper portrays negation as a complex move in a multi-layered, actively engaged environment with consequences, positive or not, organized by next activities. Every action, said John Dewey, „is an invasion of the future, of the unknown. Conflict and uncertainty are ultimate truths“ (1922, S.12). Negation is not an occasional event, but a constant ground for every observed object, person, situation, problem, discomfort, and make-shift resolution. Negation is more than a

- 1 Johannes Bellmann kindly arranged for me to attend the Negativity Conference at Humboldt University of Berlin, and his questions contributed greatly to this paper. I thank Dietrich Benner for a formal invitation and Gita Steiner-Khamsi for transforming my rapid English into disciplined German. My older brother, John J. McDermott, introduced me to Eriugena by way of James and Dewey in a breathtaking lecture in 1966. As a student at Queens College, I was lucky to work with John, Eugene Fontinell, Peter Manicas, and Ralph Sleeper. They taught American philosophy directed at social issues, and they taught me a way of thinking that has informed all my work in anthropology and education. My brother, Robert McDermott, another philosopher from Queens College, responded warmly and insightfully to an early version of the paper. So did Zvi Bekerman, Shelley Goldman, Leena Her, Linda Lin, Norma Mendoza-Denton, and D.C. Phillips. Lawrence Lopes shared the videotape and an original analysis of the therapy session.
- 2 Following A.L. Becker (1995), to slow the reader down, I arrange a few quotes in the form of a poem.

nay-say to every positive, but an actively constitutive half – or more than half – of every positive. Negation is not a second to a primal first, nor a derivative to any essence, but an activity that helps to organize environments in which behavior is sequentially arranged and displayed as the facts of life. Sociologist Michael Brown offers conflict – Yes! and No! in each other's face – as the ever shifting background of the hard facts of reality: „‘Objective reality’ consists of all that is appropriate to, noticeable within, and marked by the self-directed, or practical, actions of collectivities in situations of conflict” (1986, S.15). Try running in that crowd without a diet of denial, disavowal, rejection, and refutation. Active negation is an essential first step to challenging received categories, complete with negative consequences, in the direction of new situations more open to growth and possibility. Established categories – the very guts of language and culture – offer a view of the world, and negation – the negation that simultaneously holds the established world together and challenges it – shows, confronts, and laughs at the arbitrariness of it all and, if deliberately used to challenge, can create alternatives.

A cultural account requires attention, says Clifford Geertz, to „the webs of significance” we ourselves weave (1973, S. 5). How we do the weaving suffers from levels of inattention, unconsciousness, and partial interpretation. When in action, we have little access to the what, when, where, how, and why of our behavior, but with a vast store of situated knowledge and the help of others, today's behavior makes recognizable places tomorrow. The collective pacts reached before we come on scene keep us all busy in a constant rain, or is it reign, of judging and juggling Yes!, No!, and Maybe! David Plath (1980, S. 6) calls culture „a parliament of prodigals,” each of us half in and affirming, each of us half out and negating, and each of us both in and out all the time – whether we stay home or leave. If this „ever not quite” is the constant state of life in culture, it is no less so of life with talk in and about culture (James 1897/1956, S. viii³). A sociolinguistic account requires attention to the precise and delicate ways talk is ever tuned to the compromises of circumstance. Kenneth Burke portrays the necessity of a cultural and sociolinguistic account of human behavior in general and negation in particular:

And in this staggering disproportion between man and no-man, there is no place for purely human boasts of grandeur, or for forgetting that men build their cultures by huddling together, nervously loquacious, at the edge of an abyss (1935/1987, S. 272).

- 3 One day before sending this paper to publication, I received the final volume of *The Correspondence of William James with an Afterward* by my brother, John, where he ends decades of work as General Editor of the letters with an obscure, but summative quote on „ever not quite” from James's notes for a course on metaphysics (1903-1904): All neat schematisms with permanent and absolute distinction, classifications with absolute pretensions, systems with pigeon holes etc., have this character. All „classic” clean, cut & dried, „noble,” fixed, „eternal” *Weltanschauungen* seem to me to violate the character with which life concretely comes & the expressions which it bears, of being, or at least of involving, a muddle and a struggle, with an „ever not quite” to all our formulas, and novelty and possibility forever leaking in. (quoted in J. McDermott 2004, S. 579). John McDermott's (1976; 1986) own work is an extended treatise on the implications of the „ever not quite.”

The edge is defined and maintained by negation. Huddling together is no picnic, and being nervously loquacious brings no permanent rewards. Edgy border work gives no certain way to say Yes!, or No!, or even Oh! No! A cultural and sociolinguistic defense of negation looks at the situations people inhabit – their *inhabitus* – and the abyss they, as though they were no better than teachers, both avoid and simultaneously use to batter each other into submission.

I have been working on what people say to each other and about each other, because I am interested in both the plight of children in classrooms and the problems of adults helping them to acquire, and be acquired by, the normal – and statistically normed – distribution of success and failure. James Joyce stated our condition: „and we plunging to our plight” (1939, S. 66). That’s sad enough, but must we drag down our children? I came to the general finding first as a teacher of tough kids in New York City and then as a researcher. Kids know infinitely more than their adults notice and, if they did not have to labor with the contradictions of schools, they would all know much more of what they need to know (McDermott 1988, 1993; Varenne/McDermott 1998; Lave/McDermott 2002). I am mistrustful of what contemporary societies can say about children, of the categories available to describe them and of the methods available to make the categories look scientific.

What I like about children is their relentless complexity and their capacity, as though they were much better than adults, to out-run and out-play the categories of the biographies about to acquire them. Singing in praise of negation should help to release failing children from the static categories schools have developed while serving the demands of social structure over the needs of children. If allowed, if not too carefully beaten into submission, children can make new worlds for themselves and their adults. Rumor has it that jazz great, Dizzy Gillespie, liked to say: If you blow the wrong note, blow it again. In jazz, in life, and maybe in school, mistakes are an opportunity to play new notes that erase mistakes in retrospect, to play new notes that absorb mistakes and make them the beginning of an adventure. New jazz players, like children, as though they were no better than God, do not make mistakes as much as they start new patterns that out-run and out-play mistakes.⁴

After a section on the positive in negation, I present a turn at talk and the environments to which it is both a response and a constitutive next iteration. To show that negation is more than being negative, I offer an example of apparent negative talk, actually a complaint, from a marriage counseling conversation that makes contact with both a gentle therapeutic environment and an uncertain future. The unhappy couple is caught in a Pirandello moment. They try to escape a present by dragging forward a past that makes the future a new ground zero for replicating their troubles. In a next section, I offer three ways of appreciating language and use them to gauge what talk can do for persons in conversations and longer engagements. The section ends with a chart showing

4 Statements of this kind are ubiquitous in the jazz world. Matthew Thibeault has given me a few pages of examples, and Nate Klemp has analyzed a series of examples for me. The phenomenon of saving a mistake in improvisation is discussed in Berliner (1994).

both the complaint (a negation) and a compliment (a confirmation) in the three gauge grid to illustrate the play of social relations in the play of talk. There is a point: it is easy to be negative, or to say negative things, but to invoke negation, to appropriate and reject current biases in favor of growth and possibility, is a complex and delicate act. Teenagers can get it wrong, but at least they try. I conclude with a final section on the negation of success and failure as warp and woof of the significance we weave into school learning.

1. On the Light of Negation

In defending the promise of negation, I offer a few citations from Western speculation on the topic (omitting compatible writings in Buddhism⁵). Lawrence Horn's (2002) compendium on the capacity of the world's languages to indicate, demonstrate, intimate, implicate, mitigate and even hide negation shows that saying No! has weighed heavily on the human mind from the beginning. Kenneth Burke (1966), as though he were Claude Lévi-Strauss, put negation at the origin point of language. Philosophers have noticed the integration of negation in all word work, and there is a dialectical emphasis in religious writings from Augustine, through Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart, to Giordano Bruno and Blaise Pascal, and, in more secular terms, from Hegel and Marx to the present.

In 865, in his *Division of Nature*, Irish philosopher, John Scotus Eriugena, threw down the gauntlet for anyone wanting to define the characteristics of God:

Affirmation is less capable than negation
of signifying the ineffable Essence of God,
seeing that by the former
one among the created attributes
is transferred to the creator,
whereas by the latter
the Creator is conceived in Himself
beyond every creature (865/1987, S. 400).

There is no way, says Eriugena, to use human categories – what he calls „created attributes,” what Deuteronomy could call graven images of the mind – to talk about God without making God less than He is. For example, take the „He” in the last sentence: the graven He for a God that should be so much more than another guy, one of the boys. Human categories are limited, partial, and too easy to apply at the wrong time. No, the only way to talk about God is to talk about what She/He is not. God is neither He nor She, nor any single positive category, and infinitely so or, better, not finitely so.

5 Japanese monk, Shinran (1173-1262), was so taken with the poverty of human categories in the face of the Buddha's virtue, he urged his followers to give up even trying to be good: „If even a good man can be reborn . . . how much more so the wicked man!” (1958, S. 217).

Rhetorical realization that the same is as true of every he and she as it is for any god rushes us into the twentieth century. A contemporary reading can be found in Eriugena's countryman more than a millennium later. Samuel Beckett, like his predecessor, grew up in Ireland and spent his literary career in France worrying about the implications of the absent for the present, of the confined for the refined, of the infirmed for the confirmed.⁶ Beckett assigned to anthropology the modern task of negative theology. That task: to define what is human. For the last century it has been a task equal to the definitional demands of the category God. Diversity is ubiquitous across 500 cultures spoken in 5,000 languages, and the definition of humanity is illusive for all the persons who create, maintain, and cross the many borders that claim their identities. The definition of humanity is only a little easier for anthropologists who seek, often oblivious of their own place in the world, an overview of what holds the whole thing together. Anthropologists, says Beckett, have had to rediscover what theologians have long known. The only hope is in figuring out what people are not. What Beckett „liked about anthropology" was its relentless characterization of the human situation in terms of what we are not – as if we were Gods of some kind (1951/1955, S. 39).

Anthropology is called the science of the anecdotal veto. To any general theory of what all people are about, anthropologists deliver ethnographies of people who, as though they were no better than teenagers or gods, do not fit the theory.⁷ Anthropologists relentlessly celebrate a /mai pipl/ who do something – whether marriage, exchange, display, negation, and so on – differently enough to disrupt any reach for a universal or essence. The only way to hold a steady definition of people, as a species, as a culture, or as an individual, is to resort to a definition of what people are not. Beckett might have had an anthropological veto in mind. A few years before the above quote (although published later), he used a cross-species negation to define people in terms of what they are not and could not possibly be:

For the only way one can speak of nothing
 is to speak of it as though it were something,
 just as the only way one can speak of God
 is to speak of him as though he were a man,
 which to be sure he was, in a sense, for a time,
 and as the only way one can speak of a man,
 even our anthropologists have realized that,
 is to speak of him as though he were a termite (Beckett 1953, S. 79).

6 Emphasis on absence can be found in *Waiting for Godot*, a play in two acts that Vivian Mercier (1977, S. xii) reviewed as „a play in which nothing happens, twice;" the confined and infirmed dominate the lives of Beckett's immobile characters in *Murphy* and *Molloy*.

7 And so the opposite: in response to any effort to divide humanity into kinds of people, anthropologists use the same anecdotes to claim that everyone is the same. Paul Radin's (1927/1957) early example of an anthropological veto applied to people doing philosophy is still wonderful, as is its preface by John Dewey.

God, humanity, cultures, and individuals share a characteristic. They are best defined by what they are not, by what they are infinitely not, or even ridiculously not. None of them are termites. All cultures and individuals say No! to being termites, but by the same power they can say No! to most everything else. „Certain cultural types,” said Lévi-Strauss (1955/1961, S. 26), „occur in all societies, because they result from straightforward antitheses.” Every one can say No! to what others say Yes! to, and every type of person can emerge anywhere. Similarly, each culture exists behind temporary borders maintained by constraint, habit, fetish, and violence, all only sometimes dependable, all always negotiable. No culture maintains a stable enough schedule of targets for its participants to proffer a consistent Yes! or No! to most anything. Change, conflict and contest are central to all cultures.

When James Baldwin was mistakenly arrested and thrown into a Parisian jail (with Beckett and Lévi-Strauss no less down the block from the jail than Dewey and Burke were down the block from Baldwin’s life in Harlem), he spent days waiting for someone to pay attention. He began to long for a jail in New York where he would be beaten by white policemen in ways he could understand and manipulate. The experience gave him a sense of culture as neither friend nor foe, as neither affirmation nor negation, but as simply, and profoundly, the conditions with which one must deal: „Culture was not a community basket weaving project, nor yet an act of God; was something neither desirable nor undesirable in itself, being inevitable, being nothing more or less than the recorded and visible effects on a body of people of the vicissitudes with which they had been forced to deal” (Baldwin 1955, S. 140). Conflict and uncertainty, in seeming polar relation to stability and certainty, are, in the mix of the moment, ultimate settings for culture and language.

These rhetorical claims set a stage for a view of propositions, e.g., affirmations and negations. Dewey’s sentiment on conflict and uncertainty as ultimate truths can be directed to language in action. Utterances never mean what they say independent of context, circumstance, and consequence. Utterances – or mutterances – are, uhhm, never, like, free, ya know, of conflict and uncertainty. Good examples are the American English „*nyem*” and „*mnuh*.” Every spoken language has noises that do not appear in a dictionary, but still have impact on conversations. „*Nyem*” and „*mnuh*” are useful at decision making moments. Mostly they mean No!, but they are not as definite. They mean No!, but a little bit Yes! To the invitation, „Do you want to go to the movies tonight, dear?,” *nyem* gives an answer that is mostly No!, but leaves room for negotiation, suggestion, and eventual complaint. Mostly *nyem* and *mnuh* mean, i.e., they seem to work as if they mean, something more like, you make up my mind. Gail Jefferson gives a nice example:

Jason: You want coffee?

Mike: Mnuh.

Jason: Yes?

Mike: No.

Jason; O(h)h okay (1978, S. 136).

No! and Yes! generally move each other along, each denying the other access to what would not exist without their cooperation. *Nyem* makes the mutual dependency more obvious. It is the Ur form of all language behavior, but not because it is indeterminate, ambiguous, or imprecise. If *nyem* can organize for one person to say No! and to have another person responsible for having said it, then we must bow to its precision. It may be the Ur-form of language in action because it makes clear that precision is not just in the utterance, but in the interaction (Schegloff 1979).

Dewey made this point in a discussion of affirmation and negation in the logic of inquiry. Affirmations do not say just Yes! and negations just No! They are different, but not necessarily as taken and particularly not as taken by logicians from Aristotle to Russell.⁸ The major difference: traditional and often modern logic both take „propositions ready-made and hence as independent and complete in themselves” (Dewey 1938, S. 181). Particularly in traditional logic, affirmative and negative propositions record the world as if in „a cognitive actualization of a fundamental ontological form” (1938, S. 182). A richer, and behaviorally busy, view comes from seeing affirmation and negation in action, working differently but simultaneously, *a la fois*, in an inquiry into the workings of an indeterminate and troublesome situation. A *nyem* can get you to the movies or not depending on what else is getting arranged in the relations among people. By this view, affirmation and negation are not so much statements about the world as statements in the world mutually inhabiting the flow of questions and answers that enable a momentary resolution of a pressing problem:

Should logical theory take its cue for interpretation of affirmative and negative propositions from what happens in the conduct of inquiry, it would be evident that (1) such propositions are functional in resolution of a problematic situation, and are (2) conjugate or functionally correspondent in relation to each other (1938, S. 181).

In active inquiry, affirmation and negation

trod upon each other's heels . . . they are strictly conjugate . . . The relation of affirmation-negation is no more successive than the taking of food by an animal is prior to or after rejection of other materials as non-food. Acts which at one and the same time accept for use and that shut out are not sequential (1938, S. 186).

So tied are they to each other that, for Dewey, affirmation and negation cannot get separate enough to appear in isolation. In traditional logic, affirmation comes first and negation brings about a change or alteration in what was affirmed. As such it suffers an „ontological inferiority” (1938, S.188) that brings havoc to what has been established. In

8 For the contemporary recovery of Dewey's Logic, see Sleeper (1988) and Burke (1994). Johannes Bellmann was right to remind me that my easy adoption of Dewey's easy division between traditional and modern logic, on the one hand, and Dewey's logic, on the other, is unfair to many who contributed along the way.

traditional logic, negation is a drive-by mooting of established categories: first the categories on the corner, then the mooting. In Dewey's logic, affirmation and negation, like any either/or, like any dualism that divides the world too quickly into halves with no intricacies in the excluded middle, should be seen as „necessary, but necessary only because they set the boundaries within which a set of more determinative disjunctive alternatives are sought for. They are functional directives for further, more discriminating, determinations” (1938, S.192).

2. A Complaint?

Although Dewey writes about affirmation and negation in scientific inquiry, he clearly has in mind a wider range of human situations where problems can be found, delimited, confronted, mitigated, ameliorated, or sometimes resolved, all the better for having been approached thoughtfully. The following situation is an example of people, with their therapist, making an inquiry into their own lives. The inquiry seems both sustained (they show up every week) and perhaps against their will (they resist new ways of seeing each other). They conduct their inquiry in social contexts that have been both established by millions of others – contexts regulating employment, schooling, ethnic barriers, marriage expectations, and the discourse of sex, yearning, and loyalty, all bore in on the situation – and more locally shaped by three participants – a husband, wife, and therapist tied to each other in ways complex, hidden, and dependent. We look at only a strip of talk to see what a negative utterance – a complaint – looks like under conditions of actual use. If Dewey is correct, affirmation and negation should not appear as separate propositions, but conjugate activities that take shape – functionally and instrumentally, says Dewey; reflexively and consequentially, says Garfinkel (1967) – from the contexts they help to build and from what happens to them interactively, across persons, over time.

Frank and Mary have been married, says Frank, for „about twelve, fifteen years now, approximately.” They go to a therapist in training. They have been talking for a few minutes about Frank giving up drinking. Mary says she is „even beginning to like him,” that it is like „night and day” since he stopped drinking. She offers a series of compliments, but ends with a complaint about his being irritable enough to say „six negative thing within an hour.” From compliment to complaint spans seven words that follow news he is nice to be around: „if you just take away that bottle.” The last two sentences of are negative and about being negative, but may be much more than that:

He knows alot of things. He's a very well educated. He's gone to school alot.
 He knows alot about literature and he knows more about art than he puts on.
 He is nice to be around, if you just take away that bottle. Once we went out
 for a walk. We went to a park. He does get irritable. One time, I said, I sa, I,
 count 'em, he said six negative things within an hour.

After a brief pause, they move onto another topic.

At first, the transcript seems clear. The opening compliments are compliments, and the closing complaints are complaints. The words say what they mean. Interpretation can be had for a reading. That she is „beginning to like him” gives way to the possibility that no one would like him given how irritable and negative he is. Frank does not resist the complaints and performs a gestural routine that indicates he can live inside her description. I have given no grounds for claiming what his gesture indicates, nor can I (nor anyone else, not for sure, not one gesture at a time), but I can give enough detail to use the reticular relations between Mary’s negative words and Frank’s gesture to suggest negation does not exist inside a sentence between capital and period. Utterances enter conversations at full speed, tacking retrospectively and prospectively in connection with what has just happened and what is to happen next.⁹ Analysts must show how and where an affirmation or negation, a compliment or complaint, is allowed to have its say.

Gestural routine, take 1: Mary’s last line is accompanied by Frank rubbing his eyes like a baby crying, or at least as an adult imitating a baby. He puts his curled fists up with the thumb side of each fist encircling each eye. People often laugh when they see it, and they take delight it follows so closely his wife talking about taking away „that bottle.” Their story: she verbally takes away his bottle, and he cries like a baby. This interpretation gets support when Frank complains only minutes later that to him Mary is really more his mother than a wife. Fitted into the story, the eye-rub give itself away easily. Frank does not pronounce himself a baby; nor does he express how infantilizing he finds giving up his bottle. Instead the eye-rubbing seems to say what he does not, but with the added attraction that he cannot be held accountable for it. Eye-rubs are not easy to quote. „The tell-tale body is all tongues,” said Ralph Waldo Emerson (1860, S. 156), but what is said by bodies must be taken up by bodies. Life is only a little in the words.

So far, the complaint is still a complaint, and Frank lets it sit unchallenged as if it were its own thing, the autonomous complaint, a first to his second, her proposition to his response, her motherhood to his childhood.

Gestural routine, take 2: A closer look invites a more nuanced possibility. Frank starts the move to his eyes right as Mary says, „I, count ‘em.” This is a strange utterance. The tense is off, and there is a hesitation between the „I” and the „count ‘em,” as if „Count ‘em” (which I now capitalize) were an instruction or an imperative. That the „I” is left dangling is not unusual, but in this case it establishes its own normality by being the third in three dangling sentence beginnings. These (beginning 1 of this sentence) . . . , these things, like, dangling (beginning 2 of this sentence) . . . , these dangling beginning things (beginning 3 of this sentence) . . . are rare, in writing, but they’re not un-

9 Ethnomethodology has focused on how people define a present with constant attention to the „retrospective and prospective.” William James (1911/1976) also used the terms. In Japanese, one of the words for context, *zengo*, uses two characters, one for before, the other for after. A temporal understanding of context has a theoretical nuance not available in the Western reliance on spatial imagery.

usual in speech where they can function as a metronome for participants to synchronize themselves in interaction of self- and other-correction (Schegloff 1992). A three stage beginning – „one time I said, I sa, I . . .” – often works to bring conversationalists into a close synchrony. Frank does not move with Mary’s compliments and initial complaints. Her last sentence has three beginnings before she says, „Count him.” At this point Frank begins to move his hands to his eyes:

Seconds:	15.20	15.40	15.60	15.70 sec
Mary:	I	Count	‘em	
Frank:	Raises his hands			Hands reach his eyes

The coincidence might be crucial. She starts three times, as if in wait for a partner. Frank joins her after the completion of her third start, after she shifts from „I sa” to „I.” Frank’s hands begin to move with „Count ‘em.” The „Count” is said strongly, and the impression that „Count ‘em” is an instruction grows when Frank joins in perfect time with its beginning. Remember that the gesture he begins turns into a fist cupped over each eye, which, with movements from the wrists, he rubs like a baby waking from a nap. Now comes the excitement. Frank rubs his eyes *six* times. While Mary says that Frank one time said *six* negative things, Frank rubs his eyes, count ‘em, *six* times. I suspect this is a well rehearsed dance, that she has made this complaint often, and that he has a choreographed response that enables them to keep on going without disruption, without threat of a deeper inquiry. I suspect this is how they have managed to get through „twelve fifteen years now approximately.” These silent unity pacts can appear in the midst of the most troubling conversations between them, and the therapist eventually takes the disruption or articulation of their togetherness to be one of his main tasks (Lopes 1980).

My suspicions and the therapist’s theories are perhaps more new data about the couple’s environment than easy insights into the people. Frank and Mary work with each other in multi-layered, mutually engaged environments. A good account of their situation would demand more detail than can be delivered easily. Even if we have not cracked their complex code, we can still appreciate the play of affirmation and negation in the conduct of their hit-and-run inquiry into their marriage. We have enough description to offer a fit between what we know of Mary’s complaint and Dewey’s text quoted above:

Should cultural and linguistic theory take its cue for interpretation of affirmative and negative propositions from what happens in the conduct of interaction, it would be evident that (1) such propositions are functional in resolution of a problematic situation, and are (2) conjugate or functionally correspondent in relation to each other (Dewey 1938, S. 181; word substitutions are underlined).

That complaints are literally complaints does not mean that positive and negative propositions are independent of their opposites, that they do not perform their respective office in concert with their opposites, or that they cannot play each other's roles. What Mary says may be a complaint as stated or even intended, but where does it exist as a complaint in their relationship? Does her complaint exist in her utterance, in Frank's gesture, in what the therapist says next, in what one of them remembers a day or week later, in what he says about her nagging, in what she says to her relatives when she periodically leaves him? Whether Mary's complaint is taken to be a complaint depends on what else develops between the participants. The distinction between affirmation and negation, however obvious in linguistic form, however precise in nuance and timing, is in no way obvious. The distinction is necessary because it organizes, as per Dewey, „the boundaries within which a set of more determinative disjunctive alternatives are sought for.” Affirmation and negation „are functional directives for further, more discriminating, determinations” (Dewey 1938, S. 192). The words, the tell-tale bodies, the therapeutic situation, and wider cultural agreements about marriage, sex, and loyalty all weigh in with „functional directives,” and more discriminating determinations get made.

3. Three Views of Language in Action

The distinction between language as proposition and language as conduct became central to the social sciences in the late 1950s, this time in three parts rather than Dewey's two: the propositional, illocutionary, and collusional.¹⁰ The first two are tied to established names, Noam Chomsky and John Austin, respectively. The third is my summary term for developments in linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, conversational analysis, and various schools of discourse analysis (Dore/McDermott 1982; McDermott/Tylbor 1995). Table I offers contrasts sets that divide the three schools of thought, and Table II uses them to examine complaints and compliments.

The propositional school has paid attention to the ways speakers transform ideas into linguistic statements. Propositions are the units of analysis and their function is to state ideas. The important act is conception, in the sense that speakers conceive of things to say and usually say them well enough. On occasion, grammatical but confusing sentences are produced that require a sense for context, e.g., „Flying planes can be dangerous,” where context defines who is flying (Chomsky 1957). The role of context is to explain aberrations on canonical readings, and the goal of analysis is to figure out how every canonical sentence says what it says.

10 A year after Dewey's *Logic*, James Joyce joined in spirit with terms like „langwedge“ and „langurge“ (1939, S. 73, S. 141). Soon after, Wittgenstein, as though he were Bakhtin or Vygotsky, realized that words, like commodities, do not go to market on their own (Rossi-Landi 1983).

Table I
Three ways of appreciating language

	Propositional Analysis	Illocutionary Analysis	Collusional Analysis
Units of Analysis	Speaker's propositions	Intentions and hearings	Engagements and social facts
Function of Talk	State ideas	Expression and manipulation	Alignment, linkage, institutional maintenance and social change
Role of Context	An occasionally necessary after-thought to explain divergent interpretations under imagined conditions.	An after-thought often necessary to explain how social conditions can alter canonical meanings to express speaker intentions.	An essential dimension of language analysis. All behavior reflexively organizes its own contexts. Timing and calibration are ultimate realities.
Theoretical Focus	Conception	Reception	Inception and deception
Analytic Achievement	Utterance <i>X</i> means <i>X</i> with variations under strange circumstances.	Utterance <i>X</i> means <i>X</i> _a in context <i>a</i> , <i>X</i> _b in context <i>b</i> , <i>X</i> _c in context <i>c</i> , where contexts are defined by factors beyond the talk--statuses and roles--that transform the talk.	Utterance <i>X</i> helps to preserve and organize the conditions of its own interpretation as a constitutive part of a social scene. Institutional treachery and possibility are constant themes around which interpretations are achieved.

(adapted from McDermott and Tylbor 1995)

Enter Austin (1962; Felman 1980/2002) and the rise of speech act theory. The unit of analysis is refocused on the speaker and the effect of the speaker on the hearer. Reception, not conception, is key. A sentence like, „It is cold in here,“ means in a propositional analysis that it is cold in here, but in an illocutionary analysis, while interpretation still relies on propositional meaning, analytic attention is given to what speaker intends and what hearer hears, namely, that someone should close the window or put up the heat. Context is crucial to an illocutionary analysis as the conditions that can abduct a reasonable proposition and direct it to another purpose. The analytic achievement results in explaining how a single sentence can consistently be made to mean different things under specifiably different conditions.

A collusional analysis is less obvious and more difficult. The unit of analysis must capture what is said, and seemingly heard, and the conditions that brought speaker and

hearer together. This is a significant shift, for it treats the function of talk as alignment and linkage within a full cultural order. Language does more than record conceptions and invite receptions. Rather, what people say to each other constitutes the next moment of the wider social order. Life begins with each new utterance as it connects to the past and the future it is about to (re)make. Inception and, to the extent most hopes for a better world face difficult odds, deception are the theoretical focus. Language carries the agreements and disagreements of the past into the future with which we must deal. Context is integral and reflexively tied to every sound spoken, groaned, moaned, laughed, sighed or cried. The analytic goal is not to decide what anyone of them means, but to identify how the utterance makes contact – in retrospect and prospect – with a next moment of the social scene. Maurice Merleau-Ponty urges that „We should consider speech before it has been pronounced, against the ground of silence which precedes it, which never ceases to accompany it, and without which it would say nothing . . . One does not know what one is saying, one knows after one has said it” (1969/1973, S. 45-6).

Complaints: Back to Mary’s complaint, a propositional analysis – not an analysis really, just a reading – leaves it simply as a complaint, and an illocutionary analysis – a reading plus a guess – adds a glance at Frank to see if he understands her intention. A collusional analysis asks how Mary, Frank, and the therapist set up a context for her words to take center stage, and then tracks what the participants do with each other while their talk leads them – like a flag-bearer leads troops: obviously, but with no guarantees – from one moment to the next. There is a story to be told, but not here, about complaints being the one thing Frank and Mary know how to do together; many of her complaints about him or his about her are met with a neat dance – „Count ‘em” and he counts – that moves them forward as a married couple, troubled clients, a phalanx of defenses against forces pulling asunder, and even a learning opportunity for a therapist in training. In a collusional analysis, speakers, hearers, and even therapists organize conditions for the interpretation of their talk to develop in ways that make life happen pretty much as it has except to the extent they can confront the conditions that brought them together.

A second complaint sequence comes from a videotape of a mother working on a math problem with her third grade son. He is doing a one-into-two digit division problem and his mother tracks his progress. Eventually we check his paper and see he is doing the problem correctly, but to the mother’s eye he has made a mistake. When she went to the same neighborhood school 25 years before, they did multiplication differently. At first we thought she said, „oh, ya know, John.” Then we thought she said, „Oh, uh, no, John.” We listened a thousand times. We played it for hundreds of people. We were never able to tell. Neither could John, and we suspect perhaps neither could his mother. She had come up with something as interesting as *nyem*, but with a difference: it was not as recognizable or repeatable as *nyem* or *mnuh*, maybe not even to her. John says, „I can check it.” This means he knows how to check the problem – without her help – to see if it is correct. She interferes a little, and they try a few takes on the situation. Finally, she sees he is doing the problem correctly and apologies for interrupting.

They do his homework together almost every night. It should take fifteen to twenty minutes, but they can make it last hours without ever finishing. Much of the time is spent trying to find each other, to figure out what the other has just said. A complaint in this system, „oh, uh no, John,” can blend into a literal non-complaint, „oh, ya know, John.”

Table II
Three views of complaints and compliments according to:

(1) where they can be found in a relational system and (2) how many people might be involved.

Propositional Analysis	Illocutionary Analysis	Collusional Analysis
Easy to state; 1. exist in the utterance, 2. require only one person.	Easy to state, more difficult to arrange; 1. exist in utterance and uptake, 2. require at least two people.	Difficult to state, arrange, and complete; 1. exist at a complaint or compliment relevant moment, 2. require at least two people in a context arranged by or relevant to a multitude.

The two examples of complaints, one for the therapy session and one from a homework ritual, shift the analytic question to one of context, temporal organization, and relational consequence. When is a complaint? Where does it exist in the system? These are not just good analytic questions, but questions participants ask of themselves. A second shift concerns how many people are involved in the contextual arrangements making complaints literally applicable or erasable for any given moment. For Frank and Mary there are the therapist in training, a teacher who was observing, a cameraman who was recording, family members who were reported to, jobs that were waiting for them, the health care officials who sent them to therapy as a condition of getting medications, the nightlife who catered to Frank's imagined pleasures, and this is only a partial list of the people actually named in their 50 minute session. For John and his mother, there are a big sister who never needs help, a father who left the family the previous year, a grandmother who finishes John's homework herself to relieve the nightly ordeal, school personal who watch and theorize, a secretarial job that makes the mother feel unable, the working class neighborhood that sacrifices half its children to school failure, and, again, this is only half the people mentioned in the video that night (Varenne/McDermott 1998). They are all tied to the social structure in various ways. The number of people involved skyrockets quickly. All of them help to shape the relationship between Frank and Mary and John and his mother. All of them add possibilities and constraints.

Compliments: Perhaps compliments are easy to give, but it is often unclear how to hand them out, to whom, under what circumstances, and with what expectations. Every

year I work with a new student teachers. Most of them are convinced that if they are nice to children, the children will learn. The problem is not that they are wrong. The problem is that it is difficult to arrange circumstances for kids to know who is being nice to them, why, and how. New teachers enter classrooms and say, „Very good,” to nearly everything any child does. „That is so smart!” „Good job!” The kids don’t resist. They take the compliment in, and they wait. As though they were no better than collisional analysts of language behavior, they wait to figure out what the new teachers are talking about; they wait to see how the compliments work out, to see where they and the new teachers can go together. The teachers have a propositional theory of language that says, if you give children compliments, they will feel better about themselves, school, and learning. The problem with schools before the new teachers arrived, they assume, is that there were too few teachers singing the praises of children. True enough, confirmation is in short supply in school, but the new teachers do not know how difficult it is to deliver compliments that ring true and make a difference. At the university, we run workshops telling teachers to resist easy compliments, to save them for when it makes a difference, and to build classrooms in which compliments can make a difference.

By a propositional analysis, compliments are easy to tell. They exist in the utterance, spoken by one person and available to all who can hear. If the world were so simple, student teachers would make an immediate difference. By an illocutionary analysis, compliments not only have to be told, they have to be received. They are easy to state, but difficult to get heard. Add a cultural rule that compliments cannot be taken easily, that a recipient should try to reject or at least deflect a direct compliment. Add a second cultural rule that agreements should precede disagreements. The second rule leads to seeming agreements before the other shoe drops, for example: yeah, but; I understand, but; I see what you mean, but. The two rules spit at each other: a person cannot accept a compliment too easily, but cannot disagree with what another says without first offering an agreement. The two rules together demand circumlocutions – talk going around talk – that offer both agreement with the compliment and a disowning of the object of the compliment, exchanges like this nice one from an excellent discussion by Pomerantz:

R: You’re a good rower, Honey.

J: These are easy to row. Very light (1978, S. 102).

Or we can imagine:

A: Nice tie.

B: Oh, my sister bought it for me.

The middle-school children our new teachers work with do not insist on a complex calculus. Compliment giving and receiving is an adult game, the differential calculus of social life. In school, kids have little experience with such talk, or they do not trust it. The question-answer-evaluation game that runs classroom talk (Mehan 1979) leads usually to a „very good,” no matter how forced. The compliments come and the kids wonder: What are compliments doing here from my teachers? Where are we going with them?

A collusional analysis asks more directly about conditions for giving and taking compliments. What is the possibility kids know the difference between a compliment that counts and one that doesn't? What is the possibility kids know the small chance of getting real compliments in school? Schools are designed to arrange children along bell curves that sort them from first grade to employment decisions into a small successful pile and a cumulatively large failing pile. Suppose kids know for whom the bell curve tolls, and suppose, as evidence shows, kids have been getting instruction from the first grade on what teachers say, can say, and must mean. In such conditions, how is it possible to give compliments? How is it possible to build an environment for children to find enough connection between a compliment and what happens next, between a compliment and what gets institutionally arranged as a result? What classroom order makes it possible to give a compliment, to have it received as a compliment, and to have it institutionally recognized? Can we organize a classroom so well that compliments are unnecessary – a dream shared by Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, and, imagine, B.F. Skinner. The distinction between compliment and complaint, however obvious in linguistic form, however precise in nuance, is in no way inherent.

The distinction is necessary because it organizes, as Dewey said, „the boundaries within which a set of more determinative disjunctive alternatives are sought for.” To see how the boundaries play out, kids learn to wait. To see if new teachers can deliver what older teachers could not, kids learn to wait. Where the compliment exists in the system is up for grabs. In waiting, the kids seem to show, as if they were no better than John Dewey, that neither affirmation nor compliment is an autonomous utterance, but an emergent activity tied to ongoing circumstances. It would not take long to count the millions of people involved: from the teachers to the mass of kids against whom each child is measured. Statistics showing ties between school performance and race, class, language, dialect, and learning speed and style points to the elaborate tentacles of the system showing up in simple exchanges between teachers and children.

4. A Summary So Far

This paper has traveled a complex route. The introduction promised a cultural and sociolinguistic defense of negation: cultural because it invokes the full webs of significance in which people participate, and sociolinguistic because it portrays the situated work people do to arrange the significance of their talk, e.g., statements that affirm or deny. The first section drew on a long tradition of people denying and negating the limited and partial categories of their culture and seeking to open experience to new vocabulary. The next two sections, the first by an extended example and the second by an analytic grid applied to smaller examples, showed that linguistic statements are multivalent and environmentally sensitive enough that even statements opposed when paired in isolation can be rerouted to surprising ends in contexts of use. Together the two sections confirm that affirmation and negation do not stand on their own; nor do they stand only in opposition to each other in eternal duality. Instead affirmation and nega-

tion are activities by which people marshal attentions, interests, productions, resources, and powers. They set boundaries for each other and for those seeking to define, confront, and resolve problematic situations. Without knowing how we do this, or worse, to place our bets, as is our wont, as is our want, with the affirmative alone has invited occasions for madness. Negation is essential to hope. *Established categories – languages, cultures, logics, currencies, governments, roadways, biographies and school systems – give a view of the world, and negation – the negation that both holds the world together and challenges it – plays on the arbitrariness of it all and allows alternatives to appear.* Negation, purposefully engaged, can help to replace a dysfunctional pattern with new opportunities. Dizzy Gillespie never blew wrong notes.

5. Negating Success and Failure

A complaint may be a complaint, or not, and so with a compliment. How then are we to talk about children, particularly from inside school systems where half the students are complaint targets all the time and only a few get to claim compliments for themselves? Hervé Varenne and I ended our book on a difficult note: To improve the fate of children at risk of any labeled failure, we argued that „the first and perhaps only step is to turn away from them” (Varenne/McDermott 1998, S. 217). Counter intuitive, but perhaps respectful! If the only tools available for helping children in trouble are the diagnostic and remedial preoccupations of American education (and the world is adopting this medicalized folly), it is best to forget individual children and focus instead on the contexts that make some children – about half of them – so problematic. American education in the twentieth century may have done more for equality and mobility than any other institution in the history of the world, but the miracle was managed on the back of the largest economic growth of any country in history. This economic spurt and its school were in turn built on the labor of others around the world. So I aware of both the glory of the system and its ties to political and economic treachery. From mid-century, the treachery has grown internally. Schools have become increasingly the rubber stamp that confirms and legitimizes the social structure in cognitive terms. By their seemingly careful and scientific scrutiny of individual children, all in the name of sensitivity to individual differences and under democratic sounding banners, American schools have found ways to strip one child at a time of the conditions of legitimized growth. Enter negation, stage left, onto a most unlevel playing field dominated by the political right.

Eriugena did not trust human categories to talk of God, and we can no longer trust our categories to talk of children. Intelligence, aptitude, ability, disability, self-esteem are all difficult terms. If kids are set against each other in a zero sum game, these terms are lethal to any child doing less well than other children – and most are doing statistically much worse than the few near the top. In the United States, we do not send children to school to learn to read and write, but to read and write better than their neighbors. This is what counts, in the most literal sense: this is what is counted; this is what is recorded in school files. Terms labeling inherent smartness and adaptability tell us more about

the dreams and fears of adults than about children. Even when the labels predict outcomes, they do so weakly and without concern for the thick realities in which kids must ply their basic personalities. We forget what Jules Henry told us over forty years ago:

School metamorphoses the child, giving it the kind of Self the school can manage, and then proceeds to minister to the Self it has made (1963, S. 292).

By adding „not” to Henry’s formulation, we get the equally true other half of the story – the hostile negative half. Together they give an excellent portrait of American schools:

School metamorphoses the child, giving it the kind of Self the school can[not] manage, and then proceeds to minister to the Self it has made.

If schools are for all to flourish, then the individual child can be a unit of concern, but not a unit of analysis or reorganization. Why should kids be the focus of change when it is the rest of us – the culture that is acquiring them – that arranges their troubles? American schools are quite a street gang in their own right. To anyone who wants to build on the wonder of all children, school personnel – teachers, administrators, testers, admission officers, guidance counselors, school board members, etc. – are all ready to contradict, repudiate, deny, refuse, disavow, reject, refute and degrade in defense of the bell curve, in defense of some children – their children – doing much better than others, in defense of the reproduction of a next generation structurally identical to the previous generation.

A focus on negation would deliver kids who are more complex than those described by current diagnostic labels. My child is not covered by any received category. My child is not smart. My child is not stupid. My child is not Learning Disabled. My child is not a problem. My child is not an attention deficit disorder. My child is not a juvenile delinquent. My child is not God. My child is not a termite. My child is neither a complainer, nor a kiss-ass. What this makes my child, in addition to none of the things named, is a person who, much like the words used to describe him or her – words like him or her, smart or dumb, complainer or kiss-ass – much like statements of affirmation and negation, is a set of activities inside other sets of activities, all simultaneously both our immediate creation and our uncontrolled activities about to play out in mostly unwanted ways unless we change the particulars. Negation is a good place to start.

This paper opened with quotes from Beckett and Eriugena and can close with them as well. Beckett did not like endings. His plays simply peter out. Narrative crescendo was abhorrent to him (Mercier 1977). He did not deliver endings, middles, or beginnings. He opened his first novel, *Murphy*, with a stunning erasure: „The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new” (1938, S. 5). He gives only enough to have it taken away. He strips language and forces us to work at making meaning (Iser 1975). He

offers us the alternative of saying No! He offers the alternative of locating what we are not and what we might be beyond the categories embraced by the rest of the culture.

When Eriugena made a similar move, complete with irony and humor,¹¹ against the graven images of his time, it was not failure, but evil that needed to be taken down. If God was all good, how is evil possible? Good could be absent, that's possible, but how could evil exist if God is all good? More important to those around Eriugena, how could Hell exist? What were people positing when they would threaten each other with Hell? Imagine a people lining each other up, as if in a bell curve, with a few chosen for heaven and the rest risking purgatory and the fires of Hell. What American schools do for career lines on earth, the Church was doing with eternal life. Eriugena's solution to the problem, a solution deemed heretical, was to do away with Hell. God is the beginning and the end. God is all good, and everyone will eventually take a place with God. Folk categories – good and evil for Eriugena – can not be taken too literally. Our knowledge is partial, our chosen categories inadequate to the wonders of God. When we say God is infinite, we attribute to God our own puny design; we narrow God according to human possibilities. Better to say God is not finite. Better to say God is not limited to ideas like Hell. Better to say kids are not limited to ideas of smartness. Better to say kids are not limited to school's institutionalized, test oriented distilled version of intelligence. Better to notice what kids in the street gangs are doing, what they are affirming or denying. By defining people in terms of what they are not, we shift focus beyond institutional constraints; we shift focus to all they might be.

Beckett also resisted Hell and Heaven, and even Purgatory. He could not think of one place all vice and viciousness (Hell) and another place all virtue (Heaven). Unmediated certainty was not for him, but Purgatory had more promise:

Hell is the static lifelessness of unrelieved viciousness. Paradise is the static lifelessness of unrelieved immaculation. Purgatory a flood of movement and vitality released by the conjunction of these two elements (1929/1962, S. 22).

He chose a both/and dichotomy over the either/or impossibility of Heaven and Hell, and exactly for its promise Purgatory received his full powered petering out. Either/or dichotomies are a nice convenience, but, when pressed, always false to complexities they ignore – the complexities of their other sides. Both/and dichotomies are not a real alternative. There is no genuine compromise between the lifelessness of Heaven and the lifelessness of Hell, no autonomous place called Purgatory, only an opportunity to say No! to Heaven, to Hell, and to Purgatory as well. Beckett spent the first line of his first publication (1929/1962, S. 1) to say that „The danger is in the neatness of identification.” The only hope is to say No! to the overly neat, to the oppressively neat, and then to work in a constant „purgatorial process” with the fallout, to catch our tails once again, but under

11 Jeuneau locates similar humor in Augustine, Eriugena, and Pascal, particularly on the predicament of Adam at the origin of the human situation. He also recommends irony to philosophical discourse: „l'ironie a sa place en poésie. Mais elle a sa place aussi en philosophie, et meme une place de choix, s'il est vrai . . . que la philosophie est le domaine privilégié de l'ironie” (1987, S. 329).

new conditions. He spent the last line of his first publication taking aim at both Purgatory and the Purgatory that is human culture:

On this earth that is Purgatory, Vice and Virtue – which you may take to mean any pair of large contrary human factors – must in turn be purged down to spirits of rebelliousness. Then the dominant crust of the Vicious or Virtuous sets, resistance is provided, the explosion duly takes place and the machine proceeds. And no more than this; neither prize nor penalty; simply a series of stimulants to enable the kitten to catch the tail. And the partially purgatorial agent? The partiality purged (1929/1962, S. 22).

This paper has urged the same negation and transformation of vices and virtues of contemporary school systems. Partially purged would be a good reform.

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