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Something Will Come of Nothing: An Empirical Model of Negation for Prose Literature[1]

Greg Watson

Summary

One manner in which a writer involves the reader with a text is through the use of negative language. The reader becomes involved on two levels: firstly at a linguistic level, a negative message needs extra time to decode, and secondly, at an emotional level, we must come to terms with the emotional response the negative message has incurred. Therefore, explicitly negative language engages linguistic, psychological and cognitive processes, which force the reader to become involved with the text in question, as he attempts to decipher the underlying propositions.

This study reviews previous research on negative language, both linguistic and psycholinguistic, defines explicit and broad negation and offers a method for measuring these forms of negation. This method is then applied to a representative corpus[2] of the early prose fiction of Mudrooroo, a prominent Australian author. The results obtained show that he has shifted in style across his early prose fiction, with respect to negation. By examining the use of negation in Mudrooroo's novels we will see how integral a part it plays in the interaction between reader and text. Negation can bring to the fore that which may not be and as a result may give "nothing" an actual substance. This article will show how explicit and broad negatives are simple, separable elements that engender complex cognitive effects, and that they provide us with a means for isolating and studying one aspect of how a writer may influence a reader's mind.

Opsomming

Een manier waarop 'n skrywer die leser by 'n teks betrek, is deur die gebruik van negatiewe taal. Die leser raak op twee vlakke betrokke: eerstens, op 'n linguistiese vlak het 'n negatiewe boodskap ekstra tyd nodig om gedekodeer te word, en tweedens, op 'n emosionele vlak moet 'n mens met die emosionele reaksie rekening hou wat die boodskap laat plaasvind het. Daarom betrek eksplisiet negatiewe taal linguistiewe, psigologiese en kognitiewe prosesse wat die leser dwing om by die teks onder bespreking betrokke te raak, in 'n poging om die onderliggende proposisies te ontsyfer.

Hierdie studie gee 'n oorsig van vorige navorsing oor negatiewe taal, sowel linguisties as psigolinguisties, definieer eksplisiete en wye ontkenning ("negation") en bied 'n metode aan waarvolgens hierdie vorme van ontkenning gemeet kan word. Hierdie metode word dan toegepas op 'n verteenwoordigende korpus van die vroeë

fiksionele prosa van Mudrooroo, 'n prominente Australiese skrywer. Die resultate wat verkry is, toon aan dat hy met betrekking tot ontkenning 'n stylverskuiwing gemaak het in sy vroeë fiksionele prosa. Deur die gebruik van ontkenning in Mudrooroo se romans te ondersoek, sal ons sien hoe 'n integrale rol dit speel in die wisselwerking tussen leser en teks. Ontkenning kan dit wat nie mag wees nie na vore bring en kan gevolglik aan "niks" 'n daadwerklike substansie gee. Hierdie artikel sal aantoon hoe eksplisiete en wye negatiewe vorme eenvoudige, skeibare elemente is wat komplekse kognitiewe effekte laat ontstaan en dat hulle ons in staat stel om een aspek van hoe 'n skrywer 'n leser kan beïnvloed te isoleer en te bestudeer.

Keywords: Negation; computational stylistics; involvement; Mudrooroo.

1 Previous Research on Negation

Although there have been various linguistic studies related to negation (Frege 1892; Russell 1905; Jespersen 1924; Brown; Cazden & Bellugi-Klima 1968; Bloom 1970; Brown 1973; Parker 1976; Tottie 1981, 1982, 1983a, 1983b, 1991; Horn 1989; Moore 1992; Leinfellner 1994) there appears to be no published work on any empirical studies on the use of negation in prose literature. Apart from linguistic studies, philosophers, psychologists and cognitive scientists have also been quite interested in the concept of negation, for instance Wason (1959), Heidegger (1971), Heath (1972), Iser (1974), Greimas and Courtes (1976), Clark and Clark (1977) and Bartlett (1987). I shall first examine some of this psycholinguistic/cognitive research before turning my attention to more recent linguistic research. Much of the psycholinguistic/cognitive work is concerned with the manner in which the reader interacts with the text, or the way in which the reader perceives and recreates the image which is, or is not, being conveyed. Iser comments on the interactive process between the reader and text:

> The role of the reader as incorporated in the novel must be seen as something potential and not actual. His actions are not set out for him, but he is simply offered a frame of possible decisions, and when he has made his choice, then he will fill in the picture accordingly ... the reader's role - despite the necessity for making decisions - is meant to open him up to the workings of the text, so that he will leave behind his individual disposition for the duration of his reading.
>
> (Iser 1974: 55-56)

This interaction with the text forces the reader to engage the dual nature of language, the relationship between referent and symbol. To paraphrase Heidegger (1971: 201-203), language calls the world into the word. The understanding of language conveys a message between a perceptible world and its

representation in language. When we add a negative dimension to this verbal representation of the world the cognitive process becomes complicated. This complication causes the reader to be further engaged, that is more involved, as he attempts to understand the negative notion in play. Extract (1) exemplifies this:

> (1) Will I go or not, and if not, where? Back to the milk-bar gang? Pay good cash to see the glorious fakery of blown-up life from the United States of Utopia? Not on your life! I could go to the public library perhaps and pinch a book to take back to my dingy little room. Not bad, the bits I read of it. Not about anything much except a sort of senseless onward dying. Like life.
>
> (Wildcat: 80)

The use of negation in (1) is both subtle and overt. All instances of negation are forms of *not negation* (see definition below), yet there are differences in the usage of this form. The first use of this form depicts a simple negative question and the use of ellipsis: "will he go or (will he) not?", and then repetition through further ellipsis: "if (I will) not (go) where (will I go)?" The third instance is an idiom: "Not on your life!" Put simply, it is a synonymous phrase for a simple "no", an answer to a previously posed question. Curiously, we could replace this idiom with other negative statements which are also idioms, such as: no way, or, no fear. In all these cases the use of such phrases adds greater emphasis to the speaker's conviction than a simple "no" would. The fourth instance, "not bad", could also be regarded as an idiom. In this instance it is, ironically, synonymous with "good". Finally, the fifth case implies that the novel is not about anything much, it is, therefore, by logical deduction, about "nothing". However, is it not illogical that something can be nothing? The issue of how we interpret the notion of nothing will be further discussed below. This brief extract shows us how for just one form of negative language there are many different applications. It highlights how negation, often perceived to be simple and easy to understand, can also be a very subtle and effective involvement technique.

Wason (1959) conducted a series of experiments in an attempt to assess how one processes positive and negative information. He concentrated upon affirmative and negative statements. Wason's informants clearly took longer to process negative statements, be they true or false, than positive statements. On the basis of these findings Wason argues that there is a natural propensity to respond more readily to positive information than negative. He also found that the utilisation of negative information seems to be a "relatively sophisticated and mature activity because it implies a store of positive information which can be used as a standard. It is no good knowing what something is *not* unless that helps to eliminate possibilities about what it is" (Wason 1959: 103; my italics).

Another interesting observation arose from this study. Wason claims that we generally have an unfavourable emotional response to the use of negatives. "Words which imply positive actions or states of affairs have, in general, a more pleasant or creditable connotation than their opposites. *Yes* is permissive; *no* prohibitive. To *agree* is more pleasant than to *disagree*" (1959: 105). This unfavourable emotional response jars on the reader, it causes us to pay additional attention to this unpleasant negative connotation, which in turn creates a sense of involvement. Wason's findings tend to support my earlier statement, that is, with negation a reader becomes involved at two levels: firstly at a linguistic level, the more cognitively challenging negative message needs extra time to be decoded, and secondly, at an emotional level, we must come to terms with the emotional response the negative message has incurred.

Greimas and Courtes (1976) examine various cognitive dimensions of narrative and distinguish between *knowledge of* and *knowledge about* events or states. Knowledge about events or states is regarded as a higher cognitive dimension than knowledge of events or states. This higher level, or second cognitive dimension, requires the reader/listener to reflect upon his knowledge of an event or state. Bartlett (1987: 44) points out that negatives in statements of perception or reflection add "the sheerly symbolic to the referential", that is, in order to comprehend a negative sentence it requires greater cognitive involvement.

Greimas and Courtes's (1976) and Bartlett's (1987) thoughts on this higher cognitive dimension add credence to Wason's (1959) comment that in order to properly comprehend a negative message one first needs to be aware of its positive *opposite*. In other words, it is assumed that there is a habitual (and unnoticed) positive set to the environment which makes the adjustment to negative information "inherently slower" (Wason 1959: 103). Put more simply, the positive information equates to knowledge of a situation and the negative information equates to knowledge about a situation. To comprehend the negative information the reader first needs to reflect upon his positive knowledge and then realise that it is *not* the case. This requires greater cognitive involvement. Extract (2) helps to illustrate this matter further:

> (2) I look him straight in the face with my practised sneer. His eyes are faded like potch opal, but clear and sad. Not judging me, only seeing how I am. I feel the blood flushing up my neck and over my face and I hang my head. No one ever made me feel this way before. No one. Not even the magistrate, or the probation officer, or the brothers with all that thunder about the eye of God. Not even my Mum's suffering face.
>
> (*Wildcat*: 125)

This extract exhibits some very interesting uses of negation. We are told that the old man's eyes do not judge him (the main character has just stolen some money from him): they only see him. Rather than judging him with his direct gaze, as most people would do, the older man seems to be understanding him as he looks upon him. Then the main character speaks of his feeling of shame and that no one has ever made him feel this way before. For us to understand "Not even the magistrate, or (*not even*) the probation officer, or (*not even*) the brother's ..." and "Not even my Mum's ...", we need to be able to relate to these people, we need to have a positive knowledge of what these people represent in society: law, corrective procedures, religion and family. It is only through this positive knowledge that we may move on to the higher cognitive plane that Bartlett (1987) speaks of, to appreciate the character's claim that he has never felt shame equivalent to what he is feeling at this moment. Mudrooroo's stylistic technique in this extract is interesting. He clearly uses repetition and ellipsis to reinforce the negative atmosphere, the sense of depression and shame. In the final four sentences Mudrooroo overtly employs negation four times and on a further two occasions he uses ellipsis, as italicised above. By not ellipting the final negative, by writing "Not even my Mum's ..." in full, Mudrooroo places emphasis upon, and shifts the focus, towards his mother. The mother is the climax in a set of parallel structures. Although the mother had never made the main character feel the shame he is currently feeling, she is obviously held in higher regard than the other authority figures mentioned.

Clark and Clark (1977) are also interested in the concept of negation and discuss the universal of how negatives are marked with respect to positives. They state that the complexity of negatives becomes apparent through the material added to sentences ("George was there" versus "George wasn't there"), verbs ("do" versus "undo"), adjectives ("willing" versus "unwilling"), adverbs ("ever" versus "never") and pronouns ("one" versus "none"). Negation is expressed in a complex way because one needs to be more specific in stating what is not than to say what is. Clark and Clark (1977) claim that there is a symmetry between the semantic concepts of good/bad and positive/negative in that good is always expressed positively and bad negatively. We cannot add negative affixes or suffixes to negative words, for instance we cannot say *un*bad or *un*ugly, but it is possible to do so with some positive words, for instance *un*happy. Clark and Clark raise the interesting question as to why good and bad are often expressed as good and not-good but never unbad and bad? They claim that this is due to the notion of normality. Normal states are thought of as positive and abnormal states, that is, the absence of normal states, as negative:

> Goodness itself is conceived of as a normal state, and badness as an abnormal state. Note that milk in its ordinary state is "good milk", but milk in its abnormal state has "gone bad". Goodness is considered normal because it is what is expected - what should be - and so badness is abnormal.
>
> (Clark & Clark 1974: 539)

This logic does not only apply to "goodness", but to all things that are in a general sense positive for mankind and its actions. In summary, Clark and Clark's normality hypothesis views normality as positive and abnormality as negative, goodness is expressed positively and badness negatively. Therefore, a reader would theoretically react to the use of negation because it is associated with the improper, the unusual, the abnormal. Negation is often associated with prohibition, in that we are often forbidden to do something, it is not allowed. Clark and Clark's hypothesis, like that of Wason's, suggests that the use of negation may bring into play an emotional charge which inextricably involves the reader with the text at hand.

Although we can not usually say "unbad" and "unugly", we are able to say "not bad" and "not ugly". Two negatives are able to produce something positive, though in this instance it is not that simple. One needs to approach this more from a pragmatic perspective. For example, something can be "good", or then it can be "not bad". In colloquial conversation that which is perceived to be "not bad" is not normally equated with that which is regarded as "good". Although "good" and "not bad" are almost synonymous there is a perceived difference, as if there is a cline of goodness with "good" and "bad" being at opposite poles of the cline and "not bad" falling between them, its position varying depending upon the utterance. Its position may vary because "not bad" can be interpreted as either positive or negative. The manner in which a negative statement such as "not bad" is interpreted again raises the issue of cognitive processing. "Good" is the easiest to process, whereas "not bad" requires a subtle understanding of the pragmatics at hand in order to be able to make the correct inference. From a pragmatic perspective this discussion of "not bad" is related to Leech's (1983: 131) Maxim of Politeness ("Did you enjoy your meal?" ... "Oh, it wasn't bad."), but a pragmatic study is not within the boundaries of this work.

Bartlett (1987: 42) examines the "linguistic intricacy, cognitive complexity and basic ambiguity" of negative terms and statements. She identifies four different reasons as to why a study of negatives helps us to focus on the mediating properties of language. Firstly, negatives are referentially transparent elements of language, that is, they are easily recognisable in surface form, for example "no", "not", "in-", "im-" and so on, and they signal a single function: cancellation. Secondly, negatives represent an order of abstraction removed from ex-

periential reference. "They add cognitive density". For example, if I state "I saw a Tasmanian tiger" this would require an act of perception based on experience, however if I state "I did not see a Tasmanian tiger" the listener or reader must add another layer of thought to the original perception. This negative statement "presupposes perception in reporting a reflection upon it" (Bartlett 1987: 44). Thirdly, negative statements can be inherently ambiguous and interrupt the forward movement of narration. For instance, by stating what is not the case, a negative statement leaves unanswered, at least temporarily, exactly what is the case. This creates potential confusion and irony, which again results in involvement, because the reader is forced to interpret what the author is, or is not, implying. Fourthly, negative statements are paradoxical in nature. "In a work of fiction they bring into view what they claim to exclude, suggest what they deny, and may prompt what they forbid" (Bartlett 1987: 44). Extracts (3) and (4) exhibit, in part, these characteristics:

> (3) "You dream it", he says. "It belong your country."
> "I haven't got a country," I say. "I don't belong anywhere."
>
> (*Wildcat*: 126)

> (4) "He's got to go through with it now. Got to get coin and some new threads. Nothing to worry about. Cased the joint yesterday. Should be a pushover."
>
> (*Wildcat*: 81)

We can see in (3) that by denying that the main character has a country, Mudrooroo, through an obvious contradiction of logic, is highlighting the dichotomy of modern aboriginal youth, a youth caught between two cultures, traditional aboriginal lifestyles and modern white society. The denial in (3) compels the reader to interpret the dialogue at a deeper cognitive level, to confront the underlying social comment on aboriginal isolation within mainstream white society. Extract (4) clearly implies that there is, in fact, something to worry about, it prompts the very fear that it claims to exclude. By bringing this "worry" to the reader's attention we naturally take this concept into consideration when assessing the narrative, we are unable to ignore it: it is not, actually, nothing, but an entity that we need to assess in our reading.

In fact, the concept of nothingness is indeed a very interesting anomaly which has confounded philosophers throughout history. How does one describe nothing? How can nothing actually *exist*? How does one speak of what is not? Macbeth claimed "nothing is but what is not", but if that be so, if it is not then how can it be something? Some argue that nothing means not-anything, but this does not help to explain how we can speak of saying, hearing, seeing and doing nothing. Provided one's vision is not impaired, how can one see nothing? By the

simple act of looking it is a contradiction of logic, yet we regularly think in this manner. Simply by speaking of what is not we give substance to that nothing we speak of. Heath (1972) claims that nothing is not a mere grammatical illusion but a genuine, even positive, feature of experience:

> We are all familiar with or have a vocabulary for, holes and gaps, lacks and losses, absences, silences, impalpabilities, insipidities, and the like.... And what are these if not perceived fragments of nothingness, experiential blanks, which command, nonetheless, their share of attention and therefore deserve recognition?
>
> (Heath 1972: 524)

To this point I have concentrated upon various psycholinguistic, cognitive and philosophical perspectives related to negation. From these studies we may infer that the use of negatives signals not only the mental operation of cancellation, as the reader decodes the syntax of the text in question, but also a shift in the cognitive skills required of the reader. This shift in cognitive interpretation of negatives entails involvement.

As previously mentioned, much research has also been conducted on linguistic aspects of negation in language. Parker (1976) discusses the difference between lexical negation and sentential negation. Moeschler (1992) examines various pragmatic perspectives of linguistic negation and discusses the main pragmatic uses of negation, illocutionary, external, lowering and majoring negation, within the framework of relevance theory. Leinfellner (1994) explores the way in which negation contributes to the cohesion of a text and examines negation as a semantic phenomenon, arguing this is appropriate because semantic components recall background schemata and assist in providing a cognitive basis to the analysis of sentence structure. This view supports those arguments put forward by Wason; Greimas and Courtes; Clark and Clark; and Bartlett. Moore (1992) is concerned with the use of double negation. He claims that double negatives tend to overburden the cognitive capacity of the message receiver. He says that part of this burden exists in that the listener needs to determine whether the message is meant to be interpreted as standard or nonstandard register, as frequent use of double negatives is common in colloquial language. He raises the question of how to logically interpret double negatives and suggests that double negation may have originated from an attempt to make clearer or to emphasise the speaker's negative intent, but that often the effect is the opposite. Probably the most comprehensive work published on negation to date stems from Horn (1989) and Tottie (1981, 1982, 1983a, 1983b, 1991).

From a linguistic perspective it is perhaps Tottie's work which is most pertinent to this study because she is predominantly concerned with the use of

negation in written and spoken English. Tottie (1981, 1982, 1983b) attributes the greater numbers of repetitions, denials, rejections, questions, and mental verbs as evidence for a considerably higher level of negation in spoken language as opposed to written language. Tottie (1983a) dwells upon the distinction between synthetic negation and analytic negation. Synthetic negation, ("no", "neither", "nor", excluding "no" as a response), referred to as no-negation in later work, is perceived to be more literary and more integrated, whereas analytic negation ("not" plus contracted forms), referred to as not-negation in later work, is looked upon as more colloquial and more fragmented.

Tottie's monograph (1991) offers a synthesis and extension of her previous work. She examines two types of morphosyntactic variation: firstly, the variation between affixal and nonaffixal forms ("It is impossible" vs "It is not possible") and secondly, the variation between not-negation and no-negation ("He did not see anything" vs "He saw nothing"). Tottie's findings show that the average frequency of negative expressions is more than twice as high in spoken texts as in written texts. She argues that rejections and explicit denials of propositions are more natural in conversation, where the interlocutors are physically present. She also makes the interesting observation that negative forms can often be collocated with verbs like "know" and "think", "which are typically used with negation as face-saving devices, i.e. to render, for example, a rejection more palatable to the hearer, as in "I don't know # I don't know whether I'll drink coffee at this time of the day" (Tottie 1991: 315). In addition to this, negative expressions are used in repetition and questions, and used as support signals in conversation.

In relation to affixal negation, Tottie comes to the conclusion that this form of negation prevails in written English because writers typically have more time to combine and superimpose ideas and are able to mould their thoughts into integrated discourse. In comparison, the typically fragmented discourse found in spoken language does not allow enough time to formulate affixal negation.

Finally, Tottie's findings on the distribution of no-negation and not-negation were significant. In speech there is 66% not-negation and 34% no-negation. This proportion is almost exactly reversed in written material, 37% not-negation and 67% no-negation. In light of the fact that no-negation antedated not-negation[3] Tottie offers a hypothesis for this obvious difference in frequency: "the spoken variety represents a more advanced[4] stage of the language and writing a more conservative type. The present situation is no doubt a stage in a long-term development, where the locus of change is as usual speech, and where innovations slowly trickle into the written variety" (Tottie 1991: 325).

The research examined has shown that there is a definite link between negation and cognition. The more negative a statement is the longer it takes the

listener/reader to decode. This decoding takes longer because it requires more complex cognitive paths. Negative statements are more complex because we tend to more easily associate with positive concepts rather than negative concepts; in order to comprehend a negative statement we usually compare it to its positive opposite. Negation requires more complex cognitive paths to be understood because it usually deals with an abstract concept, that is, something which is not or cannot be. Therefore, negation entails greater involvement.

I agree with Bartlett's (1987) sentiments, that negation can be defined and quantified. However, to date, it appears as if no linguistic stylistic research pertaining to the quantification of negation in prose fiction written in English has been published. The following section offers a method of measurement for just such a study.

2 Methodology

This section offers a definition of explicit and broadly negative language and then proposes a method of measurement for the study of these forms of negation in prose fiction.

2.1 Explicit and Broadly Negative Words

Negative language is that which entails: "(1) the action of denying or making a statement involving the use of "no", "not", "never", etc.; (2) means the absence or opposite of something which is actual, positive or affirmative; or (3) means a negative or unreal thing, a nonentity; a thing whose essence consists in the absence of something positive" (*OED*, Vol. X, 1988: 297).

Explicitly negative words consist of those which are morphologically free and those which require a prefix or suffix. Morphologically free negative words commonly used in the English language are:

neither, nobody, nor, nowhere, never, none, not, no, no one, nothing

The word "not" is the most commonly used negative, particularly so in spoken language (Tottie 1983b). It can be used with a verb group that contains an auxiliary verb, for instance:

They *could not* understand what was required of them.

Or, it can be used with "do", "does", or "did", after the subject followed by

"not", or "n't", such as:

> They *do not* want to participate.
> She *does not* need to know everything.
> I *didn't* realise you were so upset.

It is quite common to use "not" in a contracted form after the verb "be" or "have" or after an auxiliary. The following offers a comprehensive list of contracted forms of "not":

> aren't, isn't, wasn't, weren't, needn't, didn't, doesn't, don't, hadn't, daren't, hasn't, haven't, can't, couldn't, mightn't, mustn't, oughtn't, shan't, shouldn't, won't, wouldn't, ain't

Various prefixes can be added to a word to give the opposite meaning, for instance *un*tidy or *im*possible. The following offers a list of the most common negative prefixes:

> a-, de-, il-, ir-, non-, anti-, dis-, im-, mal-, un-, counter-, ex-, in-, mis-

In addition to prefixes, we can also add the suffix "-less" to a word in order to form a negative adjective. One cannot offer a comprehensive list of this word group but Extracts (1) and (2) clearly exemplify this form of negative:

> (1) They are a pack of morons. *Clueless, mindless* idiots.
> (*Wildcat*: 79; my italics)

> (2) Some *careless* bastard as left the fire burning.
> (*Doin*: 106; my italics)

One may also express negation with the use of broad negatives. These are usually adverbs which are used to make a statement almost totally negative,[5] for instance:

> (3) Memories and nightmares haunted me until I *hardly* knew which was which.
> (*Wildcat*: 8; my italics)

> (4) Alan, gently, with a tenderness he *rarely* shows before others ....
> (*Sand*: 18; my italics)

(5) Before the num spears were *seldom* carried, but now, ...
(*Doctor*: 16; my italics)

In (3), (4) and (5) the broadly negative word can be replaced with "almost never", or "almost did not". However, one needs to be mindful of the context of these adverbs, as they will not always act as broad negatives. Therefore, a computer-generated search would need to be contextually verified. For example, in (8) the use of "seldom" shows it to be an adjective rather than an adverb and one could not argue that this is a negative statement.

(8) An abeng sounded a long blast which stretched far over the ocean, carpeting it with flowers and his mother's *seldom* laughter.
(*Ghost*: 89; my italics)

The most common broad negatives are:

barely, hardly, rarely, scarcely, seldom

2.2 Method of Measurement

On the basis of the above descriptions I have devised the following method of measurement which consists of two stages. Stage one incorporates a computational search for those words which I regard as explicitly or broadly negative. Stage two entails the deselection of any incorrect entries found within this initial search and a contextual search for ellipsis for all explicit negatives.

All morphologically free and affixed explicit and broad negatives were found by running a search command in the text retrieval program TACT.[6] The command for this search was:

(no, not, n.*, un.*, im.*, .*less, dis.*, in.*, non.*, nothing, .*n't, a.*, de.*, il.*, ir.*, anti.*, mal.*, counter.*, ex.*, mis.*, barely, hardly, rarely, scarcely, seldom)

The asterix denotes that the program searches for all words with that configuration, for example un.* found all words starting with "un" and .*less found all words ending in "less". This search provided me with a preliminary list of potential negatives for each of Mudrooroo's novels. Stage two then deselects any incorrect entries, for example the word "under" from the search un.*. Before arriving at a final list, all instances of explicit and broad negatives were contextually checked. All explicit negatives were also checked for any potential

cases of ellipsis. For the purposes of this study one needs to be mindful of ellipsis. Extract (1) helps to emphasise why:

> (1) No one ever made me feel this way before. No one. Not even the magistrate, or *(not even)* the probation officer, or *(not even)* the brothers with all that thunder about the eye of God. Not even my Mum's suffering face.
> (*Wildcat*: 125; my italics)

The stylistic significance of this passage has already been discussed. If we were not to take into account any ellipted forms of negation the raw scores for this study would be skewed. Therefore, with the assistance of the TACT program all listed forms of explicit negatives were contextually checked for ellipsis. In fact, the incidence of ellipted negation proved to be quite minimal.

3 Results

Table 1 indicates the raw and normalised results for this method and points to some interesting observations. A chi-square analysis found the raw data results to be statistically significant ($p = 0.001$). The initial raw frequencies have been normalised (text lengths of 1000 words) to allow comparison between the texts. The figures given express the average frequency of negatives per 1000 words for each novel in question, for example for every 1000 words in *Wildcat* there are 22 explicit/broad negatives, whereas for *Ghost* there are only 12 explicit/broad negatives for every 1000 words.

Table 1 **Total Use of Explicit and Broad Negation**

	Raw results	Normalised results
Wildcat	99	22
Sand	144	19
Doctor	120	14
Doin	82	17
Ghost	67	12

These results are also represented in Fig. 1. The novels are presented, from left

to right, in chronological order of publication. As we examine these results several interesting patterns arise. Firstly, there is a very clear diachronic shift for the first three novels. Mudrooroo has used progressively less negation for each of these novels and *Wildcat* is significantly different to *Doctor* ($p = 0.006$). Notably, each of these novels has a distinctly different plot. This downward pattern is then interrupted by *Doin*, where there is a rise from the score obtained by *Doctor*. *Ghost* then receives the lowest score of all the novels. It is clearly less negative than *Doin*, and it is significantly different to *Wildcat* ($p = 0.004$). However, because of the exception of *Doin* one cannot categorically state that Mudrooroo's use of negation has diachronically shifted in a uniformly downward trend across all the novels.

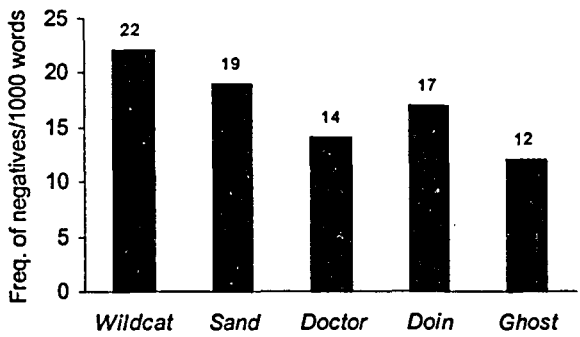

Fig. 1: Use of Explicit and Broadly Negative Language

If we examine these results from a different perspective we notice that those novels which have similar plots[7] also have similar quantities of negation. *Wildcat* and *Doin* are similar in plot, as are *Doctor* and *Ghost*. These similarities are, in part, reflected in the above results. *Wildcat* and *Doin* are marginally similar to one another in the number of negatives being employed by Mudrooroo, and *Doctor* and *Ghost* are even closer to one another. One could interpret *Doin*'s rise as a reflection of its affinity to *Wildcat*. The results for *Sand* seem to counter my interpretation of *Wildcat* and *Doin* belonging to one set. However, upon closer inspection of the use of different forms of negation

within each novel we will see that *Sand* does seem to differ stylistically from *Wildcat* and *Doin*. These results show how linguistic stylistics can be a very useful approach for the extraction of broad patterns or trends in prose literature.

The general inference which can be drawn from these results, according to the earlier theoretical discussion on the cognitive effects of negative language, is that as there is progressively less use of negative language the novel in question requires less involved reading. Readers are not so cognitively challenged, they do not need to work so hard to decode the propositional message in the later novels to the same extent to which it is necessary in the earlier novels. However, it would be naive to categorically assume, on the basis of these results alone, that because there is progressively less negative language the novels are progressively less involved. One cannot gauge involvement *simply* on the basis of the quantity of negative language being employed. Negation is only one element of involvement. In relation to the concept of involvement there are other forces at play, for example, sentence complexity, the number of shifts in viewpoint, expression of abstract ideas and use of figurative language, to name but a few features.

4 Discussion

The following section entails a deeper discussion of the results. We will first examine the main, broad trends which arose from this study of negation before we move on to examine the use of particular forms of negative language within each novel.

Figure 2 shows a pictorial representation of the main negative constituents for each of Mudrooroo's novels. This graph helps to highlight certain patterns not yet fully discussed, for instance, Mudrooroo's use of miscellaneous negatives. In the following discussion any negative which occurred only once was classified under the heading "Miscellaneous", otherwise the statistics for each individual negative word would prove to be insignificant and distracting from the main, overall patterns. However as an overall group, miscellaneous negatives did prove significant. Figure 2 shows us that *Doctor* (20%), *Wildcat* (19.2%), and *Ghost* (17.9%) have similar values for this class of negatives. There is no significant difference between these three novels. *Doctor* and *Ghost* have related plots, are predominantly written in the third person and contain considerably more narrative description than *Wildcat*. Because of these factors one would expect to find greater usage of miscellaneous negatives within *Doctor* and *Ghost*. *Wildcat*, however, which is predominantly written in the first person, has basically the same usage of miscellaneous negative language. Even so, there

is a difference between *Wildcat* and the other two novels, and it seems to lie in the forms of miscellaneous negation being used.

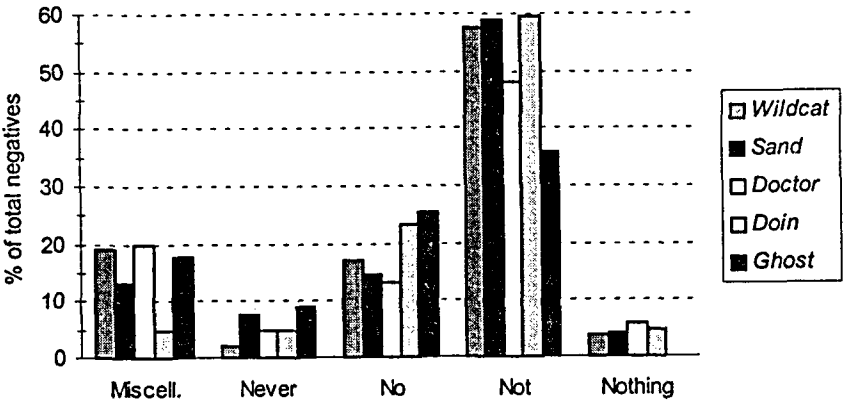

Fig. 2: Negatives: A Selective Cross Section

Extracts 1-4, below, depict a cross section of *Wildcat*'s miscellaneous negatives, Extracts 5-8 that of *Doctor*'s, and 9-12 that of *Ghost*'s. The majority of these negatives are adjectives. The point of interest is that with *Wildcat* all of the given examples are formed by the suffix "-less", whereas with *Doctor* and *Ghost* they are formed with the prefix "un-". In fact, there is no use of "-less" within all the sample texts taken from *Ghost*. "-Less", in the contexts below, can be taken to mean "without", that something is lacking. "Un-" gives negative or opposite force in adjectives and their derivative adverbs and nouns. When used with verbs "un-"expresses a reversal of some action or state.

(1) I don't want to belong to them anymore. They are a pack of morons. *Clueless, mindless* idiots. What about this other mob? No good ever pretending I could ever belong with them, even if I imagined life would be any better if I did.

(*Wildcat*: 79; my italics)

(2) Two long streams of light filter through holes in a hessian sack that covers the *glassless* window.

(*Wildcat*: 8; my italics)

(3) I should be happy I'm getting out, but I'm not. At this moment going out

is *meaningless*. What exactly am I going out for? God knows.

(*Wildcat*: 21; my italics)

(4) Raining and the night is *moonless*, *starless*, bleak. The best kind of night for a bust.

(*Wildcat*: 81; my italics)

Wildcat is a very bleak novel in its outlook upon the future of aboriginal youth and this bleakness is partly reflected in Mudrooroo's use of miscellaneous negatives. In *Wildcat* we see that people are *without* intelligence and that life is *without* meaning. Even nature is depicted in a gloomy manner, a *starless*, *moonless* night being preferable to a clear sky, because it is suitable to the criminal intentions of the main character. But with some of the extracts from *Doctor* and *Ghost* all is not so hopeless.

(5) Wooreddy, an excellent hunter, earned enough to support himself. This proved his *undoing*, or rather because he appeared to be settling down, it was natural that a woman be linked with him.

(*Doctor:* 14; my italics)

(6) The Aborigines, *unencumbered*, travelled in their own fashion, resting when the convicts rested.

(*Doctor*: 68; my italics)

(7) Now that that long-ago past had become the present, the unsettled present filled with events as great as those of that long-ago past, and this made the future hideous with *uncertainty*.

(*Doctor*: 84; my italics)

(8) The women were crying. One was losing a husband, the other a lover, and both a friend. Wooreddy alone remained *unmoved* by the drama. The ending of the world was occurring in his mind.

(*Doctor*: 203; my italics)

(9) The sugarcane juice was his tears. Sweet tears that made a strong bitter drink which turned strong men into *unconscious* infants sheltering in the womb.

(*Ghost*: 88; my italics)

(10) It was as if man and creature were one. Leopard glanced behind and snarled in a teeth-baring display of ferocity which *undazzled* Goanna. Goanna hissed and Leopard snarled.

(*Ghost*: 90; my italics)

(11) The sound seemed to have a form and substance of its own and rose and fell about him as if seeking an entrance into his self. Both Leopard and Goanna became *uneasy*.

(*Ghost*: 90; my italics)

(12) With a plaintive moan the giant white bird sped down to the mission compound. Ludgee followed. The cry turned to joy when she found the bungalow *unharmed*; but she was not satisfied until Ludgee dismounted and checked to see that the infant still slept.

(*Ghost*: 146; my italics)

With *Doctor* and *Ghost* several of the negatives actually infer a positive state, for example "unencumbered" (Extract 6) equates with free, not hindered, and "unharmed" (Extract 12) equates with alright and okay. The word "unconscious" (Extract 9), in this case, does not conjure up negative images, simply a state of not being conscious. It appears that with *Doctor* and *Ghost* Mudrooroo has employed some of his miscellaneous negatives in a different manner to that of *Wildcat*. Although *Wildcat* also has some "un-" negatives, a total of four, they all denote negative meanings, for example "unwashed", "uncertain", "unreachable" and "unknown". In *Doctor* and *Ghost* Mudrooroo uses negatives to make the reader think of the possible negative scenario but the implication of some of this negation is, in fact, positive, for example "unharmed" in (12). Although Mudrooroo still requires the reader to travel more cognitively complex paths, through the use of negative language, to arrive at some of these positive conclusions, we are, it seems, presented with a slightly more positive outlook in *Doctor* and *Ghost* than that presented in *Wildcat*. It is in this manner that the use of miscellaneous negatives in *Wildcat* differs from that in *Doctor* and *Ghost*.

Figure 2 also highlights various differences between the usage of "not"-negation across Mudrooroo's novels. *Doin* (59.7%), *Sand* (59%), and *Wildcat* (57.6%) are the highest scoring novels. There was no significant difference between them for this category. *Ghost*'s score was significantly different from *Wildcat*'s ($p = 0.05$) but there was no significant difference between *Doctor's* and *Ghost's* ($p = 0.75$) This trend agrees with Tottie's (1983a) findings that spoken English tends to use a greater amount of "not"-negation than written English. *Doctor* and *Ghost* are mainly written in the third person with a large amount of narration, there being even more narration and less dialogue in *Ghost* than in *Doctor*. *Doin* is predominantly written in the first person and in a manner which is very colloquial, so is *Wildcat*, and although possessing more third-person narration than first-person narration, *Sand* has a large amount of dialogue. In *Wildcat*, *Sand* and *Doin*, and to a lesser degree in the other two

novels, we see that Mudrooroo attempts to mimic real speech. The success of this mimicry is dependent upon many criteria, for instance a creditable presentation of various idiolects and dialects. The success of this mimicry cannot be solely judged upon his use of "not"-negation: we can only make the observation that in relation to this variable Mudrooroo does, according to Tottie's results, seem to reflect real speech-pattern usage.

We shall now turn our attention to the distribution of "nothing"-negation across Mudrooroo's novels. The fact that there is no use of "nothing" in *Ghost* should be mentioned. Throughout this novel Mudrooroo clearly presents the plight of the Tasmanian aborigines in a different light. They are empowered, they take control of their own fate, in fact they control white men. History, as we have known it, has been rewritten. This is in sharp contrast to the related novel *Doctor*, in which the aborigines are doomed to a dismal future of deprivation. In fact, *Doctor* received the highest score for the explicit negative "nothing", though there was no significant difference between any of the novels which scored for this category. Extract (13) helps to reflect the overall negative ambience of *Doctor*:

> (13) "Ria Warrawah walks the earth and we can do *nothing* to stop him". He radiated the sadness and consternation of one destined to endure the ending of the world. "You can do *nothing*. Soon you will walk where they tell you to walk and live where they tell you to live. *No* longer have you and I a choice, perhaps we *never* had a choice ...."
>
> (*Doctor*: 85; my italics)

Ghost, however, does not have such a negative outlook, it does not have so negative an atmosphere. The more positive outlook of *Ghost* is partly reflected in the total lack of "nothing"-negation. In fact, it is reflected in a notable reduction of the total use of the negative language under study.

To this point we have examined only the overall results and trends of the use of negative language within Mudrooroo's work. We shall now examine each novel in turn, in order to see how Mudrooroo has shifted in his use of negative language throughout his early writing career.

Figure 3 shows a pie-graph breakdown of the explicit negatives for *Wildcat*. Clearly the major category was "not"-negation (57.6%), followed by miscellaneous (19.2%) and "no"-negation (17.2%). It should be remembered that the miscellaneous category represents many different forms of negatives, so, in fact, the two largest categories are "not"- and "no"-negation, followed by nothing-negation (4%) and "never"-negation (2%). Notably there was over three times the use of "not"-negation than "no"-negation, which was the next largest

category. The extracts which follow offer a small cross section[8] of this largest category.

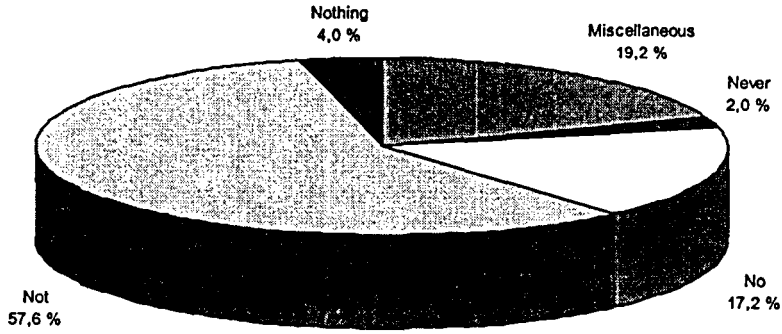

Fig. 3: *Wildcat* Negatives

(21) like potch opal, but clear and sad. Not judging me, only seeing
(212) be happy I'm getting out, but I'm not. At this moment going
(231) "See you in a week" and so on. Not really funny because it
(329) Will I go or not, and if not, where? Back to the
(36) "I don't belong anywhere." " You can't lose it," he says
(139) keep grabbing at me," I whimper. "Can't I sleep with you?"
(236) We fake it when we can't make it.
(27) "You take it, son. I don't have much use for it."
(281) their cushy jobs. For myself I don't give a damn how I dress

One observation that can be made from the above is that all the samples have been taken from the "speech" of the characters and the samples are colloquial in nature. This corresponds with Tottie's (1983a,b, 1991) thoughts on analytic negation ("not"-negation), which she finds to be more colloquial in style.

Figure 4 shows some shift in the usage of negatives. There is a small rise in the amount of "not"-negation (59%), a larger rise in the use of "never"-negation (7.6%) and a marked decrease in the use of miscellaneous negatives (13.2%).

Once again we can see evidence of Mudrooroo's large usage of "not"-negation, indicative of spoken, colloquial speech. This use of not-negation is predominantly found in the very large percentage of representative speech that is employed by Mudrooroo in *Sand*. The following samples taken from *Sand* reflect this usage:

(65) and looks at Captain. "You ain't no Captain, you're that
(442) Ron. "You don't belong here, you aren't welcome here. I pay the
(92) tries to lie his way out of it. "Didn't mean anything by it.
(431) someone back. You're lucky I didn't take it out of your
(590) "We just did, that is if we didn't just get the brush off.
(11) they sit and sip in silence. "Don't like this joint very much,"
(279) "Yeah," he goes on, "they don't even give you the time of day
(495) curt gesture cuts him short. "I don't mind you sowing a few wild

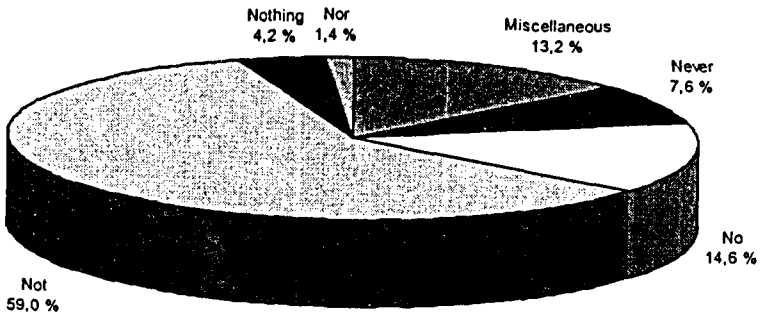

Fig. 4: *Sand* Negatives

Figure 5 also shows a different pattern. With *Doctor* there is a marked decrease of almost ten percent in the use of "not"-negation (49.3%), in comparison to *Sand*, and there are minor decreases in the use of "never"- and "no"-negation. What is notable is that there is a clear increase in the variety of negatives in use, with negative adjectives such as "unknown" and "unlike" being used in this novel. This observation is supported by the greater number of miscellaneous usage (20%). There is also a rise in the use of "nothing"-negation (5.8%).

Although Mudrooroo has used fewer negatives in total in *Doctor*, compared to the earlier novels, he has used a greater variety. The following examples demonstrate some of this variety:

(415) could see that the principle of uncertainty ruled where once
(146) in an effort to explain the unexplainable: "Once in the
(411) past had become the present, the unsettled present filled with
(99) she lurked ready to strike down the unwary or on rare occasions
(553) him as desireless as his companion breathless. Wooreddy
(713) feel sad if they deliberately discarded them, but what would
(247) club on the head of some hapless num. It was expected

In *Doctor* there is less use of "not"-negation because there is less dialogue, there is less represented speech. *Doctor* is primarily a third-person-narrated novel. As a result, we see greater use of synthetic negation, that is, negation which is more typically found in texts that are more literary and integrated, and this again supports the work of Tottie (1983a,b, 1991). The above examples highlight this factor. None of them have been taken from *speech*, they are all to be found with the narration, and none of them are colloquial in nature. However, this is not to say that they are less involved. Perhaps one can say that the above negative language is more formal. By this I do not claim that this form of synthetic negation is more cognitively demanding than analytic negation. What I am stating is that synthetic and analytic negation both require involvement from the reader, but they do so in a different manner by engaging the reader at different levels of formality.

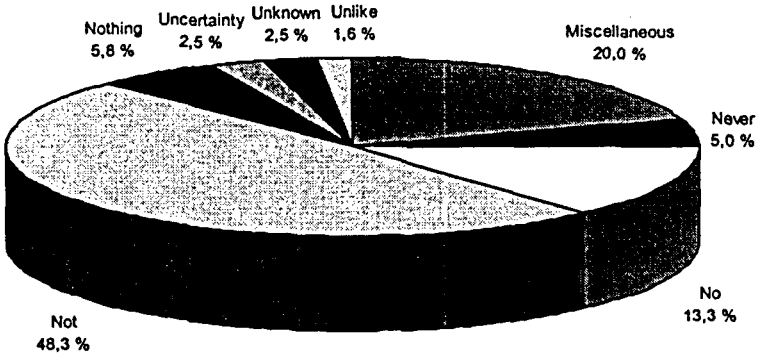

Fig. 5: *Doctor* Negatives

Different levels of formality do not equate to more or less involved texts, they equate to *different forms* of involvement. Colloquial language or slang can be cognitively challenging as the reader attempts to understand the usually metaphoric message within. This creates a sense of involvement as the reader tries to come to terms with the proposition being conveyed. Or, the colloquial language may already be familiar and as a result the reader is more likely to feel an affinity with the language at hand; he will recognise the play of words and easily associate with the proposition. This too creates a sense of involvement. Formal language can operate in a similar manner. If the reader is not familiar with the genre or language in question he will be more cognitively challenged, which will create a sense of involvement, but if the reader is familiar with that language he may also feel a sense of involvement by being easily able to identify with the genre and message of the text.

Figure 6 shows a marked shift in the use of negatives from those used in *Doctor*. In *Doin* we see considerably less variety in the use of negatives, there being only 4.9% miscellaneous usage. There is, however, a large increase in the use of "not"-negation (59.75%) and "no"-negation (23.2%). In fact, *Doin* has the greatest usage of "not"-negation across all the novels. This is a result of the first-person narration and very colloquial language used throughout *Doin* to portray the inner thoughts of a poorly educated, yet intelligent, main character.

The following extracts highlight the colloquial nature and prevalent use of "not"-negation in *Doin*:

(73) in the end of the road, if I adn't some sort of thinkin brain
(178) I'm learnin ain't I? - an on the first
(167) is stack more'n once or twice. I aven't suffered that much in
(33) screws, fuckin cons. God, I couldn't do it again. I'd
(49) shiverin. Couldn't make a choice, didn't know ow to. All those
(71) Yuh learn ow to andle it, an don't let it andle yuh. Well
(14) that. We sit side by side quietly, not saying a word.
(208) say to er back, then to meself "Not is I can elp it."
(241) This is where I'm at in me ead. Not a fit place for

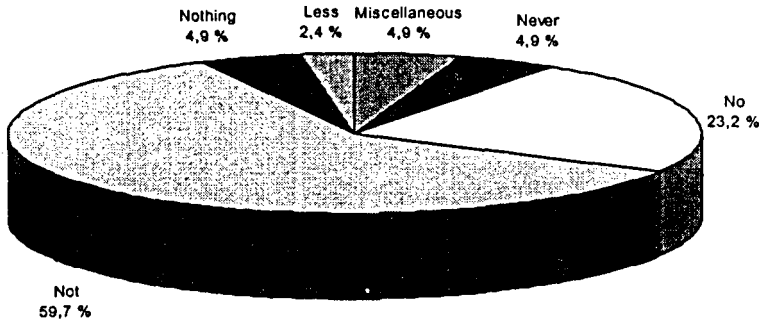

Fig. 6: *Doin* Negatives

Figure 7 shows that *Ghost* is clearly different from all the other novels in its use of negative language. In *Ghost* there is a marked decrease in the use of "not"-negation but a rise in the use of "no"-negation. In fact, *Ghost* has the highest score for this form of negation. This rise in the use of "no"-negation suggests that *Ghost* is a highly narrated novel. Such a suggestion concurs with Tottie's (1983a,b, 1991) claims that synthetic negation is more typical of texts where the writers have had time to combine and superimpose ideas, to mould their thoughts into integrated discourse. It is also significant that there is no use of "nothing"-negation whatsoever, which has already been discussed. Instead, we see a greater variety of negation, with some negative words being used more frequently than in the other novels, for instance "unable" and "unrestraining".

We also see a large amount of miscellaneous use, particularly in comparison to *Doin*. However, it should be remembered that, overall, *Ghost* uses the least number of negatives. Much of this usage is also very repetitious in nature. Tannen (1989) states that repetition is a common technique when relating a story orally. It is interesting that in *Ghost,* sections of the narrative employ a repetitive style, particularly the sections dealing with aboriginal mythology, their Dreaming. Traditionally, such mythology was handed down through past generations by oral story-telling and songs. The songs were, and still are, particularly repetitive in nature. In relation to negation, the following helps to highlight the use of this technique in *Ghost*:

(97) infants in the womb. Unable to feel, unable to think
(98) Unable to feel, unable to feel, unable to walk only to totter
(98) only to totter, to crawl; unable to sing, unable to talk
(153) into the air, feeling the unrestraining hand of his rider
(154) on his neck, feeling the unrestraining hand of his rider running
(155) along his powerful muscles

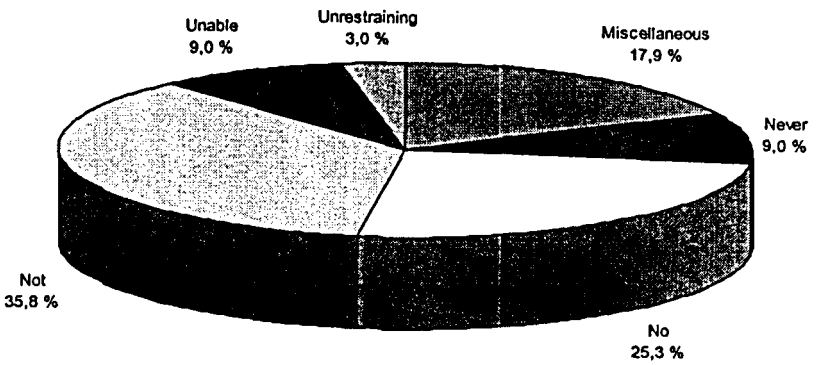

Fig. 7: ***Ghost* Negatives**

5 Conclusions

This paper has shown us that the study of the distribution of negative language can be quite fruitful when examining an author's style. By quantifying this usage we are able to discern various stylistic patterns. Mudrooroo's use of explicit and broadly negative language has clearly shifted throughout his early writing career. On the basis of these results one might argue that the reader is less involved with the later novels than the earlier novels because the reader is less cognitively challenged. If we were to take only negation into account this assumption would be correct. However, I have stated that there are other forces at play with respect to involvement. Involvement is a multifaceted concept.[9] For instance, even within negation itself we have seen different ways of involving a reader. Tottie (1983a,b, 1991) argues that synthetic negation is more typical of literary, highly integrated texts (written language) and analytic negation is more indicative of informal, colloquial language (spoken language). I claim that both these forms of negation entail involvement, but that the nature of this involvement differs according to the level of formality being employed at the time. Colloquial language is neither more nor less involved than more formal language and vice versa.

The method of measuring negation designed for this study is still, obviously, a work in progress. As it stands, it is fast, simple and easy to define and apply to any given literary or nonliterary corpus. Future refinements to this approach should include an expansion of my definition of negative language and the inclusion of other negatives which are not so explicit but still possess negative undertones, for instance inherent negatives, such as "without", "forget", "absent". Clark and Clark (1977: 452-57) discuss these forms of negation in greater detail. It might also be wise to introduce some form of pragmatic interpretation into my model. Along these lines Hildago-Downing (1996) is currently attempting to arrive at a working pragmatic analysis of negation in prose literature. The difficulty with these last two areas is that by including them into this current approach it is very unlikely that it would then be a feasible computational approach. By marrying more qualitative interpretations with the original predominantly quantitative approach its functionality would be reduced. Yet, by not doing so, criticisms can be levelled at this model, as with most quantitative models, that is, that there may be a gap in the analysis owing to a lack of contextual analysis.

Regardless of this dilemma, negation forces the reader to adopt a position, to comprehend the intricate possibilities and subtle paradoxes within a text. We have seen that negation can instigate the mental operation of cancellation, for example "I'm not going". Negatives represent an order of abstraction removed

from experiential reference, for example "I do not see the echidna". Negation brings to the fore that which may not be and as a result gives that "nothing" an actual substance. Negative statements can be inherently ambiguous and interrupt the forward movement of narration. Explicit negatives are simple, separable elements that have complex effects. They provide us with a means for isolating and studying how a writer may influence a reader's mind. The use of negation undoubtedly causes the reader to become involved with the text.

Notes

1. This paper has been influenced by the work of Bartlett (1987), which originally motivated me to investigate the language of negation from a stylistic perspective. I am also very grateful to Dr Lisa Lena Opas, University of Joensuu, Dr Gerard Steen, University of Tilburg, Prof. Mick Short, University of Lancaster, and two anonymous reviewers for their sound advice on earlier drafts of this work.

2. Compiled via a random sampling procedure from the first five novels written by Mudrooroo during the period 1965-1991 (Mudrooroo has changed his name several times. He first published under the name of Colin Johnson, then Mudrooroo Narogah, then Mudrooroo Nyoongah and now he uses simply the name Mudrooroo.). There are a total of 27 samples and the corpus contains between 10 to 14% of each novel. Kenny (1982: 5) regards a 10% sample as statistically adequate to bring out any significant features. The novels under study, in chronological order, and their abbreviated titles are: *Wild Cat Falling* = Wildcat; *Long Live Sandawara* = *Sand*; *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* = *Doctor*; *Doin Wildcat: A Novel Koori Script* = *Doin*; and *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* = *Ghost*.

3. "The precursor of *no* (i.e. *ne*) already occurred in Old English, *not* did not become common as a sentence adverb until the Middle English Period" (Breivik 1992: 108)

4. By "advanced" Tottie means that spoken language was the innovative forefront of language; it was in a greater state of flux than written language.

5. The *Collins Cobuild English Grammar* (Section 4.83) refers to these forms as "broad negatives", and Quirk et al. (1985: 780-82) refer to these forms as "words negative in meaning but not in form".

6. The TACT (Text Analysis Computing Tools) program is a shareware program available from the Centre of Computing in the Humanities (CCH) at the University of Toronto.

7. For greater discussion of these similarities refer to Watson (1997).

8. These samples, and those for the other novels under discussion, have been taken from the overall corpus. The numbers in brackets indicate the line number of the text in question.

9. I agree with the comments of an anonymous reviewer that "the construct of involvement is a problematic one". Due to limitations of space and the exploratory nature of this paper, I have not discussed previous work using Biber's (1988) conception of involvement, but I do attend to his model in Watson (1997) in detail. In fact, it was precisely this work which led me to look for a model which could be more contextually applied. In addition, the idea that "effectiveness encourages processing depth" (De Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981) tends, in my mind, to complement my thoughts on the nature of how negation draws the reader into a text. I would like to thank my reviewer for drawing this last point to my attention.

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