

# Variable Negative Concord in English and the Social Meaning of Syntactic Variation

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Mary Robinson

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Newcastle University

# Sociolinguistic variation

Sociolinguistic variable is 'two ways of saying the same thing' (Labov 1972)

Phonetic variation

- Southern shifted FACE vowel (lower and more centralized)

Morphological variation

- *ing* ~ *-in'* variation: *I was running* ~ *I was runnin'*

Syntactic variation

- Particle verb alternation: *I took **out** the trash* ~ *I took the trash **out***

# Sociolinguistic perception of variation

Listeners make social judgements about speakers based on phonetic and morphological variants used by the speakers

- Southern-shifted FACE vowel rated less educated than non-Southern-shifted vowel by in-group and out-group listeners (Fridland 2008)
- Use of *in-* over *-ing* rated as less professional (Labov et al. 2011)

But what about syntactic variation?

- Understudied– in 845 journal articles (*LVC, Journal of Sociolinguistics*), only 10 morpho-syntactic variables studied in the realm of perception (MacKenzie & Robinson 2019)

# Syntactic variation

Syntactic variation is qualitatively different than phonological or morphological variation.

- Long-held assumption in the sociolinguistic literature (Eckert & Labov 2017, Meyerhoff & Walker 2013, Labov 2001, a.o.)
- Syntactic variation takes place at a more 'abstract' level than phonological or morphological variation

Evidence for assumption

- Syntactic variables are seldom socially stratified (Cheshire 1998, a.o.)
- Cases where syntactic variation appeared to be stratified analyzed as lexical

# Research questions

Can syntactic variation be socially evaluated?

- What do we mean by social evaluation?
- What do we mean by syntactic variation?

How does perception of morphological variables compare with that of syntactic variables?

- Case study of variable Negative Concord in English
- Re-analysis of Negative Concord as an umbrella term that encompasses two distinct type of variation
- Allows us to directly compare morphological variation (*I didn't see anything* ~ *I didn't see nothing*) with syntactic variation (*Nobody couldn't see him* ~ *Couldn't nobody see him*)

Perception experiment finds negative social evaluation of morphological variation and syntactic variation

# What is social evaluation?

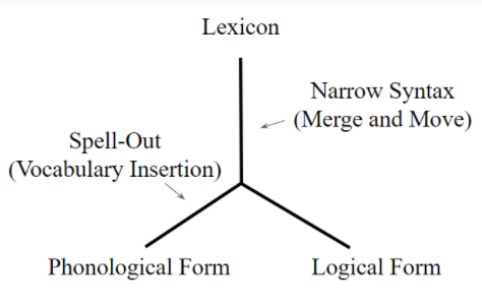
Social abilities comprise: (Campbell-Kibler 2016)

- Speaker production of forms in ways that reflect the speaker's social characteristics
- **Listener perception of a speaker's social attributes through that speaker's choice of form**
- Social ideologies about forms

# What is syntactic variation?

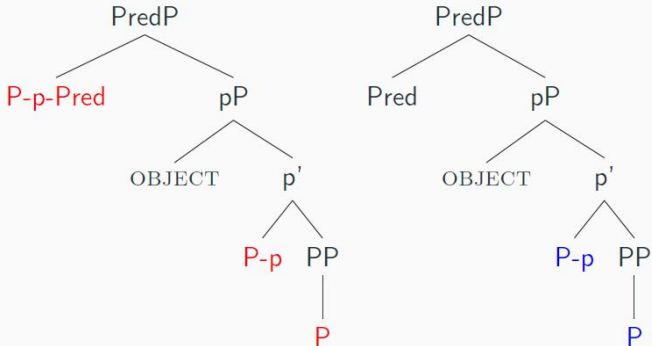
At least two distinct phenomena that can fall under sociolinguists' umbrella of "syntactic variation" (MacKenzie & Robinson 2019):

- Variation in word order/ Variation in Narrow Syntax
- Variation in the pronunciation of morphemes/ Variation in Spell-Out



# Syntactic Variation

Particle verb alternation: *I took out the trash* vs *I took the trash out*

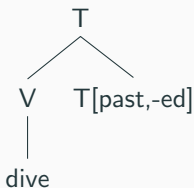


Analysis from Haddican & Johnson (2014)



# Morphosyntactic variation

Variation in the production of morphemes: competing grammars at Spell Out (Kroch 1994; Embick 2008; Fruehwald 2012)



*dove* grammar:

- $T[\text{past}] \leftrightarrow -t / \_ \{ \sqrt{\text{LEAVE}}, \sqrt{\text{BEND}}, \dots \}$
- $T[\text{past}] \leftrightarrow -\emptyset / \_ \{ \sqrt{\text{HIT}}, \sqrt{\text{SING}}, \sqrt{\text{DIVE}}, \dots \}$
- $T[\text{past}] \leftrightarrow -\text{ed}$

*dived* grammar:

- $T[\text{past}] \leftrightarrow -t / \_ \{ \sqrt{\text{LEAVE}}, \sqrt{\text{BEND}}, \dots \}$
- $T[\text{past}] \leftrightarrow -\emptyset / \_ \{ \sqrt{\text{HIT}}, \sqrt{\text{SING}}, \dots \}$
- $T[\text{past}] \leftrightarrow -\text{ed}$

# Morphological or Syntactic variation?

Determining whether a variable is morphological or syntactic is a question of theory

Claiming that a variable is syntactic entails making a claim about the syntax of the variants

Explore these questions and how to go about studying them through case study of negative concord (NC)

Variationist work

- Establishes NC as an umbrella term covering two distinct types of variation
- Informs morpho-syntactic theory of variants/variation

Morpho-syntactic theory

- New account of the morphology and syntax of the NC variants
- Informs design of perception experiment

Perception experiment

- Tested perception of morphological and syntactic variables
- **Evidence of social evaluation of syntactic NC variation**

## **Negative Concord: Defining the variable**

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# What is Negative Concord?

Negative Concord (NC):

- Multiple negative morphemes but only one semantic negation
- Ex: I didn't see **nothing**

Negative Concord Items (NCIs):

- Lexical items with negative morphology. Can contribute a semantic negation or have NC with other negative items
- Ex: Nothing/nobody/nowhere

Negative Polarity Items (NPIs):

- Items licensed under negation
- Anything/anybody/anywhere

# Negative Concord in English

Two distinct ways in which it varies (Robinson 2020):

**Placement** of negative items

- Object NC
- Subject NC
- Negative Auxiliary Inversion
- Long distance NC

**Realization** of negative items

- NCIs
- NPIs

These variations are independent of each other

# Object NC

Concord between sentential negation and post-verbal negative indefinite

- They've **nae** got **nae** choice (Smith 2001:110) [Buckie/Scotland]
- Mi father had no work at all, and **couldn't** get a job **nowhere** (Tubau 2016:147) [N England]
- There **wasn't no lights** on (Cheshire 1982:65) [Reading, England]
- You **didn't** have **nobody** to learn you in they days (Tubau 2016:145) [S England]
- I **don't** want to know **nothin'** (PNC) [Mid-Atlantic US]
- I **don't** know **nothing** about that (Blanchette 2015:15) [AppE]
- I **don't** eat **no biscuit** (Feagin 1979:229) [SWAE]
- He **ain't** got **no car** (Martin & Wolfram 1998:18) [AAL]

Dialects with Object NC: Buckie/Scotland, Northern England, Reading, Southern England, Mid-Atlantic US, Appalachian English, Southern White American English, African American Language

Concord between sentential negation and pre-verbal negative indefinite

- He was seasick all trip and **no one didn't** see after him (Tubau 2016:148) [S England]
- **Nobody didn't** touch that but her (Blanchette 2015:105) [AppE]
- And **neither** of the boys **can't** play a lick of it (Feagin 1979:242) [SWAE]
- **None** of 'em **can't** fight (Labov 1972:786) [AAL]

Dialects with Subject NC: (Some) South England, Appalachian English, Southern White American English, African American Language



# Negative Auxiliary Inversion

Concord between fronted sentential negation and negative indefinite subject

- **Wasn't nothing** much she could say (Blanchette 2015:103) [AppE]
- **Won't nobody** help her (Feagin 1979:347) [SWAE]
- **Didn't nobody** laugh (Martin & Wolfram 1998:26) [AAL]

Dialects with Negative Auxiliary Inversion: Appalachian English, Southern White American English, African American Language

# Long distance NC

NC in English not clause-bound (contra Zeijlstra 2004)

Long distance NC in English not limited to NEG-Raising predicates  
(contra Blanchette 2015)

- I **wasn't** **sure** that **nothin' wasn't** gonna come up a'tall (Wolfram & Christian 1976:113)[AppE]
- I **don't** **know** it's **nothin'** different (Feagin 1979:229) [SWAE]
- I **ain't** **know** he had **no curl** (Weldon 1994:386) [AAL]

Dialects with Long distance NC: Appalachian English, Southern White American English, African American Language

## Summary: Placement of negative items

	Object NC	Subject NC	NAI	LD NC
Standardized English	X	X	X	X
Buckie/Scotland	✓	X	X	X
Reading, England	✓	X	X	X
Mid-Atlantic US	✓	X	X	X
Northern England	✓	✓	X	X
Midlands, England	✓	✓	X	X
Southern England	✓	✓	X	X
AppE	✓	✓	✓	✓
SWAE	✓	✓	✓	✓
AAL	✓	✓	✓	✓

Implicational hierarchy:

Long distance NC / Negative Auxiliary Inversion > Subject NC > Object NC

## Realization of negative items

Realization of negative items distinct from placement of negative items

These can vary independently

Intra-speaker variation between *any* and *no*

- **Couldn't** come up with **nothin'**. **Didn't** see **anythin'**. (“Somebody knows something”) [same speaker, same utterance]
- I **didn't** have **no** lice, and I **didn't** have **any** itch (Blanchette 2015:10) [same speaker, same utterance]
- **Wasn't nothin'** you-all liked? (Julia K., Anniston, AL [Feagin 1979:235])  
**Didn't anybody** go last year, did they? (Julia K., Anniston, AL [Feagin 1979:235])

## Realization of negative items

Intra-speaker mixing of NCIs and NPIs, 'skipping' possible targets of concord

- We **never** had **any** luck there **neither**. (“Somebody knows something”)
- Way back yonder **didn't anybody** have **nothin'** then (Feagin 1979:235)
- I **don't** want **anything no more**. (Speaker DCB-se2-ag4-m-01, CORAAL corpus [Kendall et al. 2018])

## Towards a theoretical account

An analysis of NC in English should be able to account for:

- Different syntactic configurations (Object NC, Subject NC, NAI)  
Not all configurations available in all dialects
- The item based variability in the realization of NC:  
**Couldn't** come up with **nothin'**. **Didn't** see **anythin'**. (“Somebody knows something”) [same speaker, same utterance]  
We **never** had **any** luck there **neither**. (“Somebody knows something”) [Mixed NCI-NPI]
- The influence of extra-linguistic factors on the rate of NC usage  
Age, gender, socioeconomic status, and speaking style

# A morpho-syntactic account of NC in English

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Derive NC dependencies with movement

Adapted version of Movement approach (Collins & Postal 2014; Blanchette 2015)

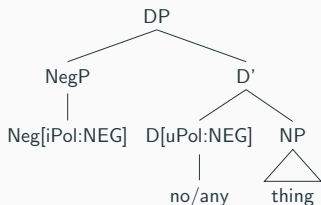
Mover is silent negative operator NEG with interpretable polarity feature [iPol:NEG]

- First Merges in the specifier of the lowest negative element (e.g. an NPI/NCI)
- NEG conditions the form of the head whose specifier it occupies by agreement: head bears a uPol feature which is valued by NEG



# Adapted Movement approach (Robinson & Thoms 2021a,2021b)

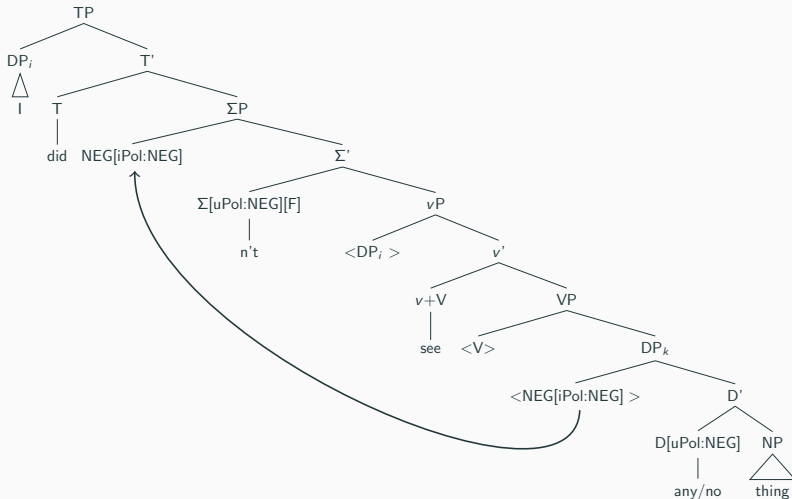
- Agreement results in the relevant NPI or NCI form of the head:  
*any* or *no* if the head is D  
*n't* or  $\emptyset$  if the head is  $\Sigma$



- Don't need to call NC “doubling” or “resumption”, rather a moving operator which conditions a set of different allomorphs locally

# Object NC: Syntax

I didn't see nothing



# Object NC: Morphology

Realization rules for D:

NPI grammar:

$D[\text{uPol:NEG}] \leftrightarrow /eni/ / [\text{DP} \langle \text{NEG} \rangle \dots]$

$D[\text{uPol:NEG}] \leftrightarrow /no/ [\text{DP NEG} \dots]$

NC grammar:

$D[\text{uPol:NEG}] \leftrightarrow /no/$

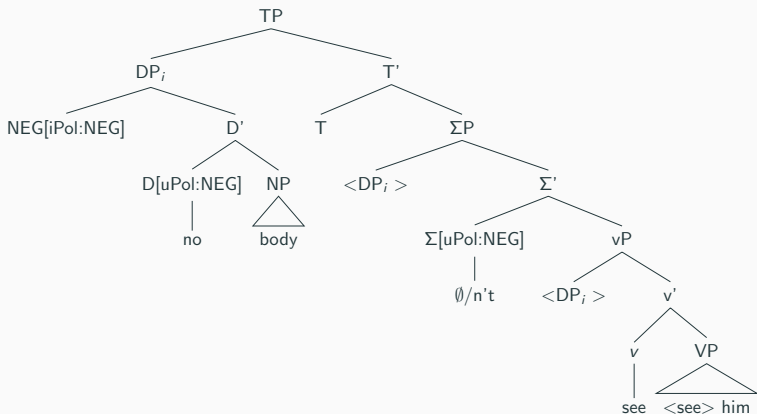
Realization rules for  $\Sigma$ :

$\Sigma[\text{uPol:NEG}][F] \leftrightarrow /nt/$

$\Sigma[\text{uPol:NEG}] \leftrightarrow \emptyset$

# Subject NC: Syntax

Nobody didn't see him



NEG c-commands out of DP specifier (following Kayne 1994 on quantificational possessors)

## Subject NC: Morphology

Realization rules for D:

NPI grammar:

$D[uPol:NEG] \leftrightarrow /eni/ \ / [DP <NEG> \dots]$

$D[uPol:NEG] \leftrightarrow /no/ \ [DP \ NEG \dots]$

NC grammar:

$D[uPol:NEG] \leftrightarrow /no/$

Realization rules for  $\Sigma$ :

NPI grammar:

$\Sigma[uPol:NEG][F] \leftrightarrow /nt/$

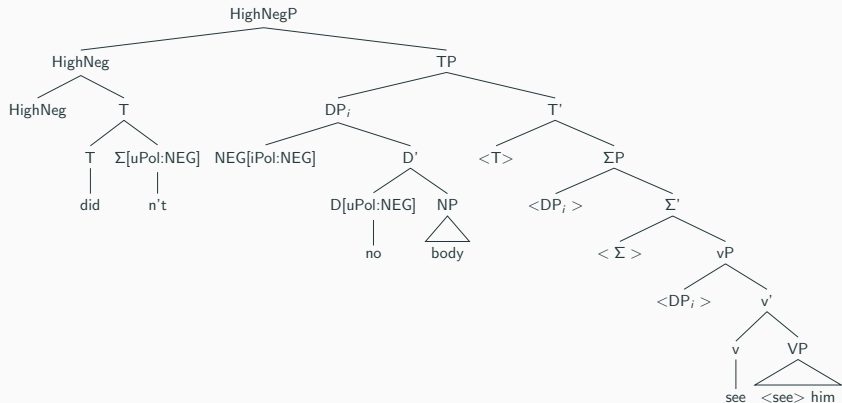
$\Sigma[uPol:NEG] \leftrightarrow \emptyset$

NC grammar:

$\Sigma[uPol:NEG] \leftrightarrow /nt/$

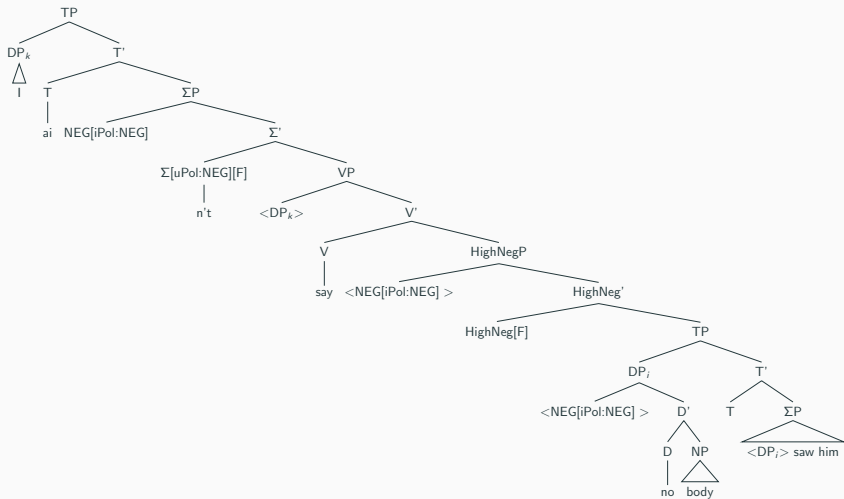
# Negative Auxiliary Inversion

Didn't nobody see him



# Long Distance NC

I ain't say nobody saw him



# Competing Spell Out grammars (Embick 2008; Fruehwald 2012)

NC and NPI grammars compete for usage

What resolves the competition between the Spell Out grammars?

There is a probability  $P$  that NPI grammar will be chosen over NC grammar, which varies based on extra-linguistic factors

- In non-NC speakers,  $P$  of NPI grammar winning competition is 1
- In non-variable NC speakers,  $P$  of NC grammar occurring is 1
- In variable NC speakers,  $P$  of NPI grammar vs NC grammar winning is set during language acquisition and is learned from rates of community-wide usage.  $P$  changes in different social contexts

Advantage: 'Mixed' NCI-NPI chains are not surprising, and in fact predicted under this analysis



# NC as morphological and syntactic variation

NC includes syntactic variation:

- Presence of feature F in Object NC and NAI NC derivations but not Subject NC
- Presence of HighNegP in NAI and LD NC but not Subject NC

NC includes morphological variation:

- Same syntactic structure variably pronounced as *any* and *no*

# Perception Experiment

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# Hypotheses

Research question: Can syntactic variation be socially evaluated?

Experimental hypothesis:

Changing the syntactic configuration in which NC appears will have a significant effect on the ratings of perceived social attributes of the speaker.

Null hypothesis:

Changing the syntactic configuration in which NC appears will have no (significant) effect on the ratings of perceived social attributes of the speaker.

# Experimental design

- 3x2 design
  - 3 syntactic conditions: Object vs Subject vs NAI
  - 2 morphological conditions: NC vs NPI
- 6 test conditions:
  - Object NC: *I didn't see nothing*
  - Subject NC: *Nobody couldn't see him*
  - NAI NC: *Couldn't nobody see him*
  - Object NPI: *I didn't see anything*
  - Subject NPI\* (Subject non-NC): *Nobody could see him*
  - NAI NPI: *Couldn't anybody see him*
- Written survey on Qualtrics
- Participants recruited and paid through Prolific

# Participants

Target participants from 5 dialect groups (n=15/group, 75 total)

## UK participants

- Tyneside (born and lived most of life in Tyneside/North East, monolingual English, all ages)
- York (born and lived most of life in or around city of York, monolingual English, all ages)

## US participants

- Mainstream US English [MUSE] (White, middle class and higher, born and raised outside the South, monolingual English, all ages)
- Southern White American English [SWAE] (White, born and raised in the South, monolingual English, all ages)
- African American Language [AAL] (Black Americans, monolingual English, all ages)

Recruiting by geography and social factors gave best chance that participants are speakers of these dialects

4-sentence written stories about playing games as a child

Participants told stories were excerpts from spoken interviews

Asked to rate on 7-point semantic differential scales: intelligence, class, friendliness, education level

6 target items for each of 6 conditions (36 items) +

2 baseline items for each end of each scale [Friendly, Lower class, etc.]  
(16 items) +

5 fillers for each of 4 distracter linguistic conditions [NSR, 3rd sing -s  
absence, Needs X-ed, Have raising] (20 items) =

72 items total

# Procedure

SPEAKER: I was the opposite of my brother. I was a good kid. I didn't bother nobody. All the neighbors liked me!

How would you rate this speaker?

Unintelligent	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Intelligent
Lower class	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Upper class
Unfriendly	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Friendly
Uneducated	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Educated

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Ran linear mixed effect regressions with random effect of item order and participant

- Models run for each trait
- Models run for each trait by morphological condition
- Bonferroni correction (level of significance used in reporting these results is  $p \leq .00625$ )



# Results: Perceived intelligence

Baseline: MUSE participant rating *Nobody saw him*

- Participant: MUSE
- Syntax: Subject
- Morphology: NPI (non-NC)

Global model:

- NAI syntax (*Didn't anybody see him*) perceived as less intelligent
- NC morphology (*Nobody didn't see him*) perceived as less intelligent
- Interaction of NAI and NC: negative effects mitigated when the two co-occur

## Results: Perceived intelligence

Baseline: MUSE participant

NPI-only model:

- NAI syntax (*Didn't anybody see him*) perceived as less intelligent than Subject syntax (*Nobody saw him*)

NC-only model:

- NAI syntax (*Didn't nobody see him*) perceived as less intelligent than Subject syntax (*Nobody didn't saw him*)

## Results: Perceived social class

Baseline: MUSE participant rating *Nobody saw him*

- Participant: MUSE
- Syntax: Subject
- Morphology: NPI (non-NC)

Global model:

- NAI syntax (*Didn't anybody see him*) perceived as lower class
- NC morphology (*Nobody didn't see him*) perceived as lower class
- Interaction of AAL and NAI: AAL participants rated (*Didn't anybody see him*) higher class than MUSE participants did
- Interaction of SWAE and NAI: SWAE participants rated (*Didn't anybody see him*) higher class than MUSE participants did
- Interaction of NAI and and NC: negative effects mitigated when the two co-occur

## Results: Perceived social class

Baseline: MUSE participant

NPI-only model:

- NAI syntax (*Didn't anybody see him*) perceived as lower class than Subject syntax (*Nobody saw him*)
- Interaction of AAL and NAI: AAL participants rated (*Didn't anybody see him*) higher class than MUSE participants did
- Interaction of SWAE and NAI: SWAE participants rated (*Didn't anybody see him*) higher class than MUSE participants did

NC-only model:

- NAI syntax (*Didn't nobody see him*) perceived as lower class than Subject syntax (*Nobody didn't saw him*)

# Results: Perceived education level

Baseline: MUSE participant rating *Nobody saw him*

- Participant: MUSE
- Syntax: Subject
- Morphology: NPI (non-NC)

Global model:

- NAI syntax (*Didn't anybody see him*) perceived as less educated
- NC morphology (*Nobody didn't see him*) perceived as less educated
- Interaction of NAI and and NC: negative effects mitigated when the two co-occur

## Results: Perceived education level

Baseline: MUSE participant

NPI-only model:

- NAI syntax (*Didn't anybody see him*) perceived as less educated than Subject syntax (*Nobody saw him*)

NC-only model:

- NAI syntax (*Didn't nobody see him*) perceived as less educated than Subject syntax (*Nobody didn't saw him*)

## Results: Perceived friendliness

Baseline: MUSE participant rating *Nobody saw him*

- Participant: MUSE
- Syntax: Subject
- Morphology: NPI (non-NC)

Global model:

- NAI syntax (*Didn't anybody see him*) perceived as less friendly
- NC morphology (*Nobody didn't see him*) perceived as less friendly
- Interaction of NAI and and NC: perceived as more friendly in NAI NC condition (*Didn't nobody see him*)

## Results: Perceived friendliness

Baseline: MUSE participant

NPI-only model:

- NAI syntax (*Didn't anybody see him*) perceived as less friendly than Subject syntax (*Nobody saw him*)

NC-only model:

- Object syntax (*I didn't see nobody*) perceived as less friendly than Subject syntax (*Nobody didn't saw him*)



## Results: Summary

Compared to the baseline, NAI users and NC users perceived as less intelligent, lower class, less educated, and less friendly

Negative effects often mitigated when NAI and NC co-occur (*Didn't nobody see him*)

Clear syntactic effects independent of morphological condition:

- NAI syntax rated less intelligent, lower class, and less educated in all models

Low friendliness ratings: NAI users and NC users rated low on status; participants did not show strong solidarity with NAI users or NC users

*Didn't anybody see him* negatively evaluated as a declarative, but would not be negatively evaluated as an interrogative (*Didn't anybody see him?*)

- Evidence that this is evaluation of the syntax, not the linear string of words

Only interaction with dialect group: AAL and SWAE participants rated NAI NPI (*Didn't anybody see him*) as higher class than MUSE participants did

- NAI NPI as a hyper-correction of NAI NC deployed by and associated with upper class speakers

## Returning to the research questions

Can syntactic variation be socially evaluated?

Yes. We know because we first committed to a syntactic structure for the variants

How does perception of morphological variables compare with that of syntactic variables?

- Both morphological and syntactic variations can be socially evaluated
- Evaluations of morphological and syntactic variables can be independent

Sets up research program to study more variables

# Thank you!

Email: [mary.robinson2@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:mary.robinson2@newcastle.ac.uk)

Twitter: [@maryrobin27](https://twitter.com/maryrobin27)

Website: [tinyurl.com/RobinsonLinguist](http://tinyurl.com/RobinsonLinguist)