

Contemporary Grammar of English

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First Semester

Week 3:

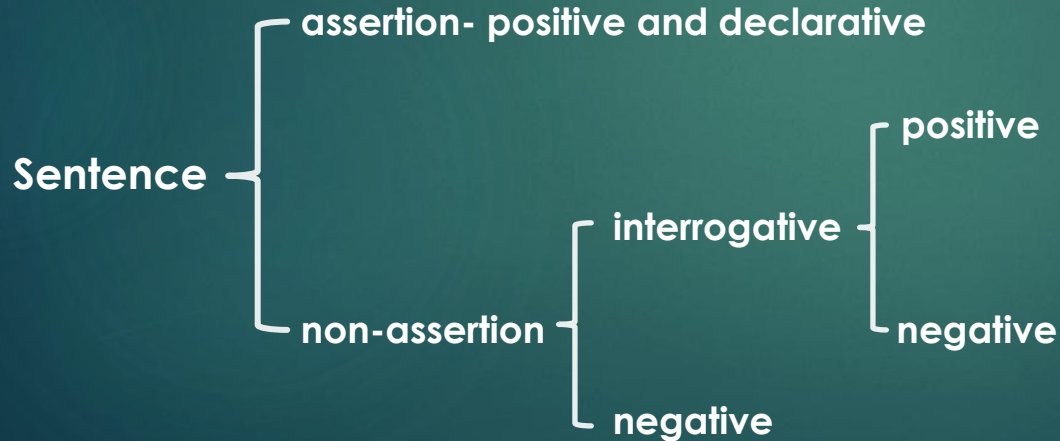
Lecture 6:

- Assertive and Non-assertive Predication



Negation and Non-assertion

While Yes/No questions normally challenge the validity of a predication as a whole, negation rejects it. There is a similarity between Yes/No question sentences and negative ones in that both of them involve an operator. Negative sentences require also the insertion of (not) between the operator and the predication. Questions and negations are also similar to each other in that they both belong to the Non-assertive system. A sentence can be non-assertive in one of two ways: by being negative or by being a question.



Assertive and Non-assertive Predication

We can provide another evidence for the close relationship between Yes-no questions and negation. They both associate with a set of words which we may call **NONASSERTIVE FORMS**: *any, anybody, anywhere, yet, etc.* These in turn contrast with corresponding **ASSERTIVE FORMS** (*some, somebody, somewhere, already, etc*) which are associated with positive statements.

1. a. She hasn't finished her thesis yet.
b. Has she finished her thesis?
2. a. He doesn't want any food.
b. Does he want any food?

A sentence can be non-assertive in one of two ways: by being negative as in (1.a) and (2.a) above or by being a question as in (1.b) and (2.b) above. The predication is non-assertive in all four sentences above; in (1.a) and (2.a) the validity of the predication is rejected, whereas in (1.b) and (2.b) the validity of the predication is challenged.



Assertive and Non-assertive Predication

While most words can be used equally in assertive and non-assertive predications, some determiners, pronouns, and adverbs have specifically assertive or non-assertive use. See the table below:

| Assertive | Non-assertive |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Pam bought some apples. | Pam didn't buy any apples. |
| I was speaking to somebody . | I wasn't speaking to anybody . |
| He is still at school. | He is not at school any longer . |
| His mother is coming too . | His mother isn't coming either . |
| I like her a great deal . | I don't like her much . |
| I saw him somewhere . | I didn't see him anywhere . |
| She helped to some extent . | She didn't help at all . |
| They have arrived already . | They haven't arrived yet . |
| He has been a long way . | He hasn't been far . |



Assertive and Non-assertive Predication

When we negate sentences, not only do we negate the verb, but also we change the assertive forms into their non-assertive counterparts. Try to negate the following sentences and make other changes that then become necessary:



| Assertive | Non-assertive |
|--|---------------|
| This applies to some of the people here already. | |
| Julia is still living at this address. | |
| It helps us in our daily work to some extent. | |
| Macron tests positive for coronavirus, too. | |
| There are a lot of people in the stadium. | |
| Coronavirus has already outbroken in Egypt. | |

Assertive and Non-assertive Predication

Although the main markers of non-assertion are negative and interrogative clauses, it happens sometimes that the *some series* are conversely used in negative and interrogative clauses and that the *any series* are conversely used in the positive declarative clauses. Consider the following examples:

1. X contributed more than anyone to the destruction of Iraqi economy.
2. Did somebody call last night?
3. Would you like some apple juice?

The use of the non-assertive *anyone* in the first sentence is related to the fact that the basic meaning is negative, as appears in the paraphrase:

- Nobody contributed more to the destruction of Iraqi economy than X.

So, it is the basic meaning of the whole sentence which ultimately determines the choice of the *some* or *any series*.

While the use of the assertive *somebody* in the second sentence can be explained in terms of positive presupposition: *somebody* suggests that the speaker expected a call last night, the use of the assertive *some* in the third sentence can be explained as a sincere invitation to lead the addressee to accept it.