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Contractions in Newsweeklies

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Abstract There are two kinds of contractions: verb contraction and negative or *not* contraction. Forms like *he's not*, *they'll not* are called verb contraction because the verbs or auxiliary verbs are contracted, whereas forms like *isn't*, *won't* are called negative or *not* contraction because *not* is contracted. The objective of this article is to find out the extent to which these two kinds of contractions occur in American newsweeklies and which of these two forms is more frequently used in them. Uncontracted forms like *he is not*, *they will not*, are also included for comparison. The material examined here is *Newsweek* and *TIME*.

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Key Words : verb contraction, negative contraction, frequency

1 Introduction

Should one say, "*he is not* studying," or "*he isn't* studying," or "*he's not* studying"? Or which should one select from among the following three: "*she will not* do it," or "*she won't* do it," or "*she'll not* do it"? Which would be the most appropriate form? This type of question or perplexity is exactly what prompted me to write this article.

This article is mainly concerned with contractions. *He's*, *she'll*, *isn't* and *won't* are called contractions. Contractions like *he's* or *she'll* are called verb contraction because the verbs or auxiliary verbs are contracted. Contractions like *isn't* or *won't* are called negative contraction or *not* contraction because *not* is contracted. Verb contraction includes besides *he's* or *she'll* the contractions like the following among others: *I'm*, *you're*, *we've*, *she's*, *it's*, *we'd*, *there's*. Negative contraction or *not* contraction includes besides *isn't* or *won't* the contractions like the following among others: *aren't*, *can't*, *couldn't*, *don't*, *doesn't*, *haven't*, *hasn't*, *hadn't*, *mustn't*, *needn't*, *oughtn't*, *shouldn't*, *wasn't*, *weren't*.

Of the two types of verb or negative contraction *you're not* (*he's not*), and *you aren't* (*he isn't*), which type would be preferred now? There seem to be three different views concerning it. The first is of the opinion that the two forms are commonly used. *Collins COBUILD English Usage* (1992:158) says:

- (1) ...in the case of "be," both types of contraction are equally common." For example, "you're not" and "he's not" are used as commonly as "you aren't" and "he isn't."

Swan (1995:133) is of the same opinion:

- (2) The two negative forms of *be* (e.g. *she isn't* and *she's not*) are both common.

In contrast, Quirk et al. (1985:123) say that it is the form with negative contraction (like *you aren't*, *he isn't*) that is more common:

- (3) Generally speaking, the variant with contracted negation is more common than the variant with contracted verb and full negation.

Leech and Svartvik (1994:307) think the same way: they say, "In general the *n't* form is more likely." However, Leech changes his mind later: Leech et al. (2001:103) say that the type *she isn't hungry* is "less common" than the type *she's not hungry*. Biber et al. (2002:242), based on their own corpus, agree with this view:

- (4) When *be* contraction is possible, it is strongly favored over *not* contraction: e.g. *you're not*, *it's not* is preferred to *you aren't*, *it isn't*.

With regard to the contracted negative forms used with *have*, *will* and *would*, there seems to be no difference of opinions among grammarians. That is, the types with *not* contraction are much preferred. For example, Biber et al. (2002:242) say as follows:

- (5) ...with the verbs *have*, *will*, and *would*, there is a strong preference for negative contraction: e.g. *I haven't*, *she won't*, *they wouldn't* are much preferred to *I've not*, *she'll not*, *they'd not*.

Apart from *I've not*, *she'll not* and *they'd not*, which do not seem to be so favored now, how about *he isn't* (*you aren't*), and *he's not* (*you're not*)? Which type is really preferred now? The unabridged form of *he isn't*

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and *he's not* is *he is not*. Then, of these three forms, *he is not*, *he isn't*, *he's not*, which would be the type most favored now? Moreover, expressions like *he is not* have three negative forms including itself, but there are cases in which only two negative forms are possible: forms that are not contracted like *cannot* and contracted forms like *can't*. In this case, of these two forms, which would be the one preferred now? This article tries to explore these questions.

In this article the following are also dealt with: how the negative forms are actually used in the articles in *Newsweek* and *TIME*, in what newspapers contractions are not allowed to use, and generally, how contractions should be used.

With respect to the negative forms or types that were taken up for comparison in this article, the following two or three forms in each group were compared based on frequency: *he is not*, *he isn't*, *he's not*; *this is not*, *this isn't*; *I am not*, *I'm not*; *the picture (Iraq) is not*, *the picture (Iraq) isn't*; *was not*, *wasn't*, *were not*, *weren't*; *do not*, *don't*, *does not*, *doesn't*, *did not*, *didn't*; *cannot*, *can't*, *could not*, *couldn't*; *will not*, *won't*, *would not*, *wouldn't*; *have not*, *haven't*, *has not*, *hasn't*, *had not*, *hadn't*.

The material made use of in this article comprises *Newsweek* (Nov. 17, 2003, Nov. 24, 2003 and Dec. 1, 2003) and *TIME* (Nov. 17, 2003, Nov. 24, 2003 and Dec. 1, 2003).

2 Contractions in Newsweeklies

2.1 *He is not, he isn't, he's not; I am not, I'm not; this is not, this isn't; the picture (Iraq) is not, the picture (Iraq) isn't*

2.1.1 *He is not, he isn't, he's not*

The negative forms that are included here are as follows: *he (she) is not*, *he (she) isn't*, *he's (she's) not*; *you (we, they) are not*, *you (we, they) aren't*, *you're (we're, they're) not*; *it (that) is not*, *it (that) isn't*, *it's (that's) not*; *who is not*, *who isn't*, *who's not*; *there is not*, *there isn't*, *there's not*.

Each of these groups has three ways of negative expression. In this category, taken altogether, the type that is most favored is the type of verb contraction: *he's not*. In the two weeklies, it occurred in 51 instances (68%). It was followed by the type without contractions: *he is not*. In the two weeklies, it occurred in 15 instances (20%). The type with the fewest number of instances is the type of *not* contraction: *he isn't*. It occurred in nine instances (12%).

Interestingly, each of these three types is used

almost at the same rate in the two weeklies: the type *he's not* occurred in *Newsweek* 26 times and in *TIME* 25 times, the type *he is not* occurred six times in *Newsweek* and in *TIME* nine times, and the type *he isn't* occurred four times in *Newsweek*, and in *TIME* five times.

When the subject is a pronoun, or the existential *there* is used, the number of occurrences of each negative form in this category was as follows. *He's not* and *he is not* were used six times each, but *he isn't* was not used at all. *She's not* and *she is not* occurred twice each, whereas *she isn't* did not occur. *You're not* occurred five times, *you are not* once, and *you aren't* did not occur at all. *We're not* appeared five times, while *we aren't* and *we are not* did not appear at all. *They're not* and *they aren't* appeared four times each and *they are not* twice. *It's not* was used 20 times, *it is not* three times, and *it isn't* once. *That's not* occurred five times, while *that isn't* and *that is not* occurred once each. *There's not* and *there isn't* were used once each, but *there is not* was not used.

He's not, *he isn't*, and *he is not* need further comments. In *Newsweek* and *TIME* *he's not* occurred three times each. *He is not* was used six times in *TIME*, but in *Newsweek* it was not used at all. *He isn't* did not appear at all in the two weeklies.

The numbers of occurrences described above suggest that, overall, with the types *he's not* and *he isn't*, there is a strong preference for the type *he's not*. It also suggests that, although instances are confined to the two American newsmagazines, simply put, *Collins COBUILD English Usage* (1992:158), Swan (1995:133), Quirk et al. (1985:123), and Leech and Svartvik (1994:307) are all wrong, and that Leech et al. (2001:103) and Biber et al. (2002:242) are right.

2.1.2 *I am not, I'm not*

In this case we have a choice between *I am not* and *I'm not*. (*I ain't* was not found in the newsweeklies.) *I'm not* occurred five times, and *I am not* four times in the two weeklies. Consequently, it seems that with these two forms, *I'm not* seems to be used almost as often as *I am not*, but it cannot be said so definitely because the instances are relatively few.

2.1.3 *This is not, this isn't*

Of the two forms *this is not* and *this isn't*, *this is not* is used in almost all cases: it occurred 11 times in both weeklies, and *this isn't* only once.

2.1.4 *The picture (Iraq) is not, the picture (Iraq) isn't*

The types included here are: *the picture (Iraq) is*

not, the picture (Iraq) isn't; his staffers are not, his staffers aren't.

When the subject is a common noun or a proper noun, there are cases where *be* is contracted: *my son's not, Bush's not* or *Mary's not*. However, no such instances were found in the two weeklies, and only two types of negative expression were seen: *the picture (Iraq) is not (his staffers are not)*, and *the picture (Iraq) isn't (his staffers aren't)*. In this case, the situations seem a little different from those referred to in the previous sections. All in all, in the two weeklies the types *the picture (Iraq) is not* and *his staffers are not* are used almost as frequently as the types *the picture isn't (Iraq isn't)* and *his staffers aren't*: the types *the picture (Iraq) is not* and *his staffers are not* were seen in 40 instances (51%), and the types *the picture (Iraq) isn't* and *his staffers aren't* in 38 instances (49%).

To look at each weekly separately, in *Newsweek* there were 24 instances of the types *the picture (Iraq) is not* and *his staffers are not*, and in *TIME* 16 instances of them; in *Newsweek* there were 18 instances of the types *the picture (Iraq) isn't* and *his staffers aren't* and in *TIME* 20 instances of them.

2.2 *Was not, wasn't; were not, weren't*

When the subject is a pronoun or noun, the types *wasn't* and *weren't* are preferred to the types *was not*, and *were not*: in the two weeklies the types *wasn't* and *weren't* were seen in 38 instances (60%), and the types *was not* and *were not* in 25 instances (40%). If we look at the instances in each weekly, in *Newsweek* there were 12 instances of *wasn't* and *weren't*, and in *TIME* 26 instances of them; in *Newsweek* there were seven instances of *was not* and *were not* and in *TIME* 18 instances of them.

2.3 *Do not, don't, does not, doesn't; did not, didn't*

In the types *do (does) not* and *don't (doesn't)*, *don't* and *doesn't* are used far more frequently than *do not* and *does not*: there were 139 instances (85%) of *don't* and *doesn't*, and 25 instances (15%) of *do not* and *does not* in the two weeklies. To look at this more minutely, *don't* and *doesn't* occurred 65 times in *Newsweek* and in *TIME* 73 times; in *Newsweek* *do not* and *does not* occurred 10 times and in *TIME* 15 times.

With respect to *did not* and *didn't*, *didn't* is used about twice as often as *did not*: there were 56 instances (64%) of *didn't* and 31 instances (36%) of *did not*.

2.4 *Cannot, can't; could not, couldn't*

With *cannot* and *can't*, *can't* is used more than twice

as often as *cannot*. There were altogether 39 instances (71%) of *can't*, and 16 instances (29%) of *cannot* in both weeklies. To look at each weekly separately, in *Newsweek* *can't* appeared 15 times and in *TIME* 20 times; in *Newsweek* *cannot* appeared 10 times and in *TIME* six times.

Couldn't is used almost twice as often as *could not* in the two newsmagazines: there were 21 instances (68%) of *couldn't* and 10 instances (32%) of *could not*.

2.5 *Will not, won't; would not, wouldn't*

In the types *will not* and *won't*, *won't* is used almost three times as often as *will not*: *won't* was used 33 times (77%) in both of the weeklies and *will not* 10 times (23%). More precisely, *won't* occurred 14 times in *Newsweek* and in *TIME* 19 times; *will not* occurred five times in each of these weeklies.

With the types *would not* and *wouldn't*, *would not* is used relatively often: it occurred 11 times in the two weeklies as against 17 times of *wouldn't*.

(In this study, there were no such instances of verb contraction as *he'll not, you'll not, they'll not, or he'd not, you'd not, they'd not*.)

2.6 *Have not, haven't, has not, hasn't; had not, hadn't*

In the types *have not, haven't, has not, hasn't*, all of which are used with a past participle in the present perfect, *haven't* and *hasn't* occur more than twice as frequently as *have not* and *has not* in both of the newsweeklies: there were 29 instances (72.5%) of *haven't* and *hasn't*, and 11 instances (27.5%) of *have not* and *has not*.

With *haven't* and *hasn't*, they appeared 16 times in *Newsweek* and in *TIME* 13 times. In *Newsweek* *have not* and *has not* occurred almost as often as in *TIME*: in *Newsweek* and *TIME* they occurred five times each.

Hadn't, which is used with a past participle in the past perfect, occurred more often than *had not* in the two newsweeklies: *hadn't* was used 11 times and *had not* twice.

(In this study no instances of *haven't, hasn't, hadn't*, which are used in the past perfect, were found.)

3 Contractions in Newsweeklies and Newspapers, and Contractions in General

3.1 Contractions in newsweeklies and newspapers

According to Biber et al. (1999:1129), the register in which the largest number of the examples of verb or negative contraction is found is conversation, followed by fiction, news, and academic writing. It means that news has the third largest number of verb or *not* contraction. And as can be clearly seen from what we

have discussed so far, generally in news—this time the two American newsmagazines—a variety of contracted forms are used far more often than the forms that are not contracted. But naturally, it does not mean that, in the weeklies, only the contracted negative expressions are used. Normally, contracted expressions are used along with those without contractions in articles. For example, the author of an article in *TIME* uses five contracted negative expressions in his one-page article with a few lines or dozens of lines separating them—*didn't*, *won't*, *isn't*, *don't*, *shouldn't*, and among them he puts four full negative forms—*are not*, *he is not*, *they are not*, *does not*. As a result, these contracted forms and those that are not contracted occurred in one page in this order: *didn't*, *are not*, *he is not*, *they are not*, *does not*, *won't*, *isn't*, *don't*, *shouldn't*. The following are the excerpts of sentences from his article that have negative forms:

(6) A rock star of politics, he *didn't* disappoint.

But the expectations *are not* simply a function of the fact that *he is not* Chretien.

...to do something *they are not* always comfortable doing

...that *does not* mean that the Bush Administration will get...

Many of the "security first" policies *won't* fly in Canada.

But Canada *isn't* a frigid version of the U.S.

"You *don't* have to come up here and help us out," says Martin.

...there's no reason the President *shouldn't* take a trip to Ottawa.

Michael Elliott, "Wake Up, Canada, Your Leader's Calling" (*TIME*, Nov. 24, 2003)

In this fashion, in most cases, contracted forms and those without contractions commingle in an article. However, there are some who have a predilection for forms that are not contracted and purposefully use only these forms, and seldom use contracted ones. For example, the author of an article in *Newsweek* has a strong liking for negative forms without contractions: he uses eight negative forms without contractions in his one-page article, and would not use contractions. These negative expressions he uses are: *they are not*, *does not*, *it is not*, *is not*, *are not*, *will not*, *who are not*, *would not*. Here are the excerpts of sentences from his article that have negative forms:

(7) "*They are not* ready," administration officials explained...

This *does not* bode well for a democratic Iraq; *it*

is not even likely to solve...

...the resistance in Iraq *is not* the work of a small band of dead-enders.

...the locals *are not* actively informing on them...

A purely military response *will not* address this problem.

These are the people *who are not* helping the Army hunt down the guerrillas.

One certainly *would not* want a Shiite problem in Iraq!

Fareed Zakaria, "Job One: Solve the Sunni Problem" (*Newsweek*, Nov. 24, 2003)

It goes without saying that by using only the forms without contractions, the author is trying to make his article all the more formal.

Thus far I have confined my discussion only to such American weeklies as *Newsweek* and *TIME*. But what about the other weeklies or newspapers? Is the trend same? It seems that it is not necessarily so. For one thing, one can hardly find contracted forms in *The Economist*, the British weekly. It seems to be the policy of this weekly not to use contractions. With respect to newspapers, for example, one can seldom find contractions in *The New York Times*. But it is no wonder. This newspaper makes it a company policy not to use contractions except "in quotations, texts and transcripts." The following are quoted from *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage*:

(8) In straightforward news copy, spell out expressions like *is not*, *has not*, *have not*, *do not*, *are not*, *will not*, etc. Contractions are acceptable in quotations, in text and transcripts, in light or humorous copy and in headlines and subheadings of all kinds.

(Siegal and Connolly, 1999:83)

Furthermore, one can rarely find contractions in *The Washington Post* either. This newspaper also restricts the use of contractions. Here are the quotes from *The Washington Post Deskbook on Style*:

(9) Contractions convey an informal tone more appropriate for feature stories and commentary than for straight news. In any type of story, however, contractions are used in quotations when the speaker actually used them.

(Lippman, 1989:92)

3.2 Contractions in general

Although there are newsweeklies or newspapers that are against using them, today contractions seem to have penetrated deep into the area where formality

was the norm. Randall (1988:88) says that with the disappearance of the distinction between speech and writing, more and more contracted expressions have come to appear in print nowadays:

- (10) True, writers of textbooks and scholarly works have traditionally avoided contractions, and many novelists and short-story writers have preferred not to use them in narrative passages. Yet, with the fading of the once-sharp distinction between speech and writing, more and more shortened forms of words and phrases appear in print nowadays. And not only in newspaper and magazines articles, but also in works of fiction and nonfiction wherever writers choose to address their readers in a relaxed, somewhat informal way.

But, of course, using too many contractions is not praiseworthy. Flesch (1949:97, repr.1967) warns against using contractions "at every single opportunity":

- (11) Don't start using...contractions...at every single opportunity from here on. It's not as simple as that. Contractions have to be used with care. Sometimes they fit, sometimes they don't. It depends on whether you would use the contraction in speaking that particular sentence (e.g. in this sentence I would say *you would* and not *you'd*). It also depends on whether the contraction would help or hinder the rhythm that would suit your sentence for proper emphasis. So don't try to be consistent about this; it doesn't work. You have to go by feel, not by rule.¹

Trimble (1975:78) advises us to occasionally use contractions. He also says that a person who would not use contractions is "a prude":

- (12) Use occasional contractions. They'll keep you from taking yourself too seriously, tell your reader that you're not a prude, and help you achieve a more natural, conversational rhythm in your style.²

Kahn (1985:160) tells us that, if used judiciously, contractions can give "a relaxed and mildly informal tone":

- (13) Judicious use of the contracted forms can give a relaxed and mildly informal tone in all but the most ceremonial contexts.

Garner (1998:165) says that by using contractions we will gain "a relaxed sincerity":

- (14) The common fear is that using contractions can make the writing seem breezy. For most of us, though, that risk is nil. What you gain

should be a relaxed sincerity—not breeziness.

I have seen so far to what extent contractions are used today. I am afraid we Japanese have a predilection for not using contractions even when we have to write informal letters. We tend to write informal letters as if they were formal letters. Most of us do not even know where we should use contractions or how often we should use contractions. Many of us have not been taught how to write English sentences using contractions; many of us have not taught our students how to write English sentences using contractions. In order to gain "a relaxed sincerity," or in order not to be called "a prude," isn't it high time we taught our students how to write English sentences using contractions?

4 Conclusion

In this article, the following were discussed: first, which is the most favored form of the two or three negative expressions in the two American newsweeklies; second, how negative expressions are actually used in one-page articles in the two weeklies and what newspapers are against using contractions; third, how we should use contractions and what effects contractions have upon our style.

In this article, it has become clear that although there are a few exceptions, in the two American newsmagazines there is a strong preference for contracted expressions. To be specific, in the types *he is not*, *he isn't*, *he's not*, the type *he's not* is used most often. In each of the following pairs of negative forms, the first is preferred to the second: *this is not*, *this isn't*; *wasn't* (*weren't*), *was* (*were*) *not*; *don't* (*doesn't*), *do* (*does*) *not*; *didn't*, *did not*; *can't*, *cannot*; *won't*, *will not*; *wouldn't*, *would not*; *haven't* (*hasn't*), *have* (*has*) *not*; *hadn't*, *had not*. The type *the picture (Iraq) isn't* seems to be used almost as often as the type *the picture (Iraq) is not*. With respect to *I've not*, *she'll not*, *they'd not*, there were no instances of them, and it may mean that they are coming to be used less frequently.

Contractions are informal expressions, which means that informality is prevalent at least in the two American newsmagazines. Which expression one chooses in preference to the other would in itself be a matter of personal preference, but it seems that this choice is largely dependent upon which type is easier to pronounce, which form has a more natural rhythm, which expression everyone else is using, and what not.

Notes

1. Rudolph Flesch, *The Art of Readable Writing*. In Bryan A. Garner, *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (1998:165). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
2. John R. Trimble, *Writing with Style*. In Bryan A. Garner, *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (1998:165). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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