

Negation on the Move: The Pragmatics of Negative Preposing in Icelandic *

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Abstract

This paper explores the syntactic and pragmatic constraints on Negative Preposing (NP) in Icelandic, with a focus on the preposing of negation in finite clauses with an overt subject. While negation in Icelandic typically appears post-verbally, we show that in specific contexts, negation can be fronted. Through a comparative analysis with other Germanic V2 languages and data from questionnaires, we investigate the environments in which NP is permissible and highlight its higher prevalence in Icelandic. We argue that NP serves two primary functions: as a stylistic device, particularly in conjunct negation and mitigated questions, and as a marker of epistemic certainty, allowing speakers to convey varying degrees of confidence or skepticism in negated propositions. Our findings reveal that NP is not merely a syntactic variation but plays a crucial role in signaling discourse-related meanings, particularly in expressing the speaker's stance toward the truth of a proposition.

1 Introduction

This paper focuses on the syntactic and pragmatic limitations associated with the preposing of the negation in Icelandic, namely, the fronting of the sentential negation to a preverbal position.

In Icelandic, the negative adverb *ekki* ('not') generally follows the finite verb, as illustrated in the examples below:

- (1) Jón las **ekki** bókina.
Jón read not book-the
'Jón did not read the book'
- (2) Jón hefur **ekki** lesið bókina.
Jón has not read book-the
'Jón has not read the book'

Icelandic exhibits symmetrical V2 word order, meaning that the verb appears in the second position in both main clauses and embedded clauses. This contrasts with the asymmetrical V2

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structures found in Mainland Scandinavian languages, which typically enforce V2 word order only in main clauses (for discussions on various exceptions to this main pattern, see Þráinsson (2010)). In Icelandic, negation thus generally follows the finite verb even in subordinate clauses:

- (3) Hann efast um að hún *(hafi) ekki (*hafi) hitt þennan mann.
he doubts about that she has not has met this man
'He doubts that she has not met this man'

Compare with Norwegian, an asymmetric V2 language:

- (4) Han tvilte på at hun (*hadde) ikke *(hadde) møtt denne mannen.
he doubted on that she had not had met this man
'He doubts that she has not met this man'

While Icelandic negation generally surfaces in a postverbal position, there are some contexts in which this may appear preverbally. Examples of sentences with preverbal negation are illustrated in (5)–(8) below. As can be seen from these examples, fronted negation can be found in questions, declaratives, coordinated clauses, subordinate clauses as well as commands:

- (5) **Ekki** býr Haraldur á Akureyri?
not lives Haraldur in Akureyri
'Does Haraldur really live in Akureyri?'
- (6) **Ekki** höfðum við hugmynd um að þetta væri svona alvarlegt.
not had we idea about that this be so serious
'We really had no idea that this was so serious'
- (7) Hann á enga peninga og **ekki** á hann húsnæði.
He has no money and not has he housing
'He has no money and no housing'
- (8) Þingmaðurinn sagði að **ekki** vildi hann gagnrýna fólk fyrir það sem það hefði gert í fjarlægri fortíð.
had done in fjarlægri fortíð
'The PM said that he did not want to criticize people for what they did in the distant past'
- (9) **Ekki** fara!
not go
'Don't go!'

We will refer to the fronting of the negation to clause-initial position as *negative preposing* (NP). Our discussion will be centered around finite clauses with an overt subject, thus excluding examples like (9).

As detailed in Brandtler and Håkansson (2014), there is considerable variation among the Germanic V2 languages regarding the grammaticality of negative preposing. In German, Dutch, Norwegian and Swedish, *nicht*, *niet*, *ikke* and *inte*, can be preposed in certain very specific contexts only (see Jäger (2008) for German, Zeijlstra (2013) for Dutch and Faarlund et al. (1997) for Norwegian). In Danish, fronting of *ikke* is heavily restricted (see Christensen (2003)). At the opposite end of the spectrum is Icelandic, where, to quote Þráinsson (2007:123), “negation can be preposed rather easily”. This observation is corroborated by Callegari and Angantýsson (2023)’s corpus study, which shows that in 28% of Icelandic V2 clauses containing negation, the negation appears preverbally. In embedded V2 clauses, this pattern occurs at roughly half that rate, with 16% of such clauses featuring preposed negation. These rates significantly exceed those reported for Swedish by Brandtler and Håkansson (2014): the authors show that the peak occurrence of clause-initial negation in Swedish was during the Old Swedish period (circa 1225–1526), where it reached a maximum of about 8% of all instances of negation.

In this article, we focus on identifying and describing the specific pragmatic contexts within Icelandic that allow for the positioning of negation clause-initially. We propose that NP serves two main functions: it acts as a marker of epistemic certainty, signaling varying degrees of speaker confidence or skepticism, and it also functions as a stylistic device in certain contexts, such as conjunct negation and mitigated questions.

This article is structured as follows. In Section 2, we present background findings on NP, including a review of previous mentions of NP in the literature on Icelandic syntax. We also examine NP in other North Germanic languages, focusing on the pragmatic contexts identified by Lindström (2007), and provide examples of NP from Icelandic corpora and online texts. Section 3 introduces the results of a questionnaire study conducted with native Icelandic speakers, which investigates the acceptability of NP across different environments. In Section 4, we analyze the findings from our questionnaire, and argue that NP in Icelandic serves two distinct functions. We posit that NP is not only used as a stylistic device in specific contexts like conjunct negation and mitigated questions but also plays a crucial role in conveying epistemic certainty. Through NP, speakers signal varying degrees of confidence or doubt about the truth of a negated proposition, revealing its significance in expressing the speaker’s stance in discourse. Finally, Section 5 summarizes our conclusions and discusses potential directions for future research on NP in Icelandic.

2 Background

In this section, we first provide an overview of Negative Preposing (NP) in North Germanic languages, focusing on Lindström’s (2007) classification of NP functions, including responsive, additive, and interrogative uses; we discuss examples from Swedish and Norwegian to illustrate these

functions. We then turn to mentions of NP in Icelandic literature, highlighting its use in stylistic and pragmatic contexts. Finally, we present examples of NP from Icelandic corpora, emphasizing its role in conveying irony, understatements, and emphatic negation, as well as its occurrence in lexicalized expressions. By establishing this background, we lay the foundation for discussing the specific pragmatic contexts that license NP in Icelandic, which we explore in the following sections.

2.1 Negative Preposing in North-Germanic

Lindström (2007) offers a comprehensive overview of the various functions NPs can serve across different Northern European languages, with a particular focus on North Germanic languages and Finnish. Due to the relevance of his typology to our study, we will briefly review his classification of NP functions. Lindström (2007) identifies three main functions of sentence-initial negation in Northern European languages: *responsive*, *additive* and *interrogative*. Before exploring such possibilities of NP in Icelandic, let us consider some of his examples from (Finland) Swedish and Norwegian.

According to Lindström (2007), NP in a responsive context comments on a previous action within an interactional sequence, rather than initiating a new sequence of actions. Compare his (constructed) examples (2007:13) in (10) and (11).

(10) Det regnar **inte**.
it rains not
'It does not rain'

(11) **Inte** regnar det.
not rains it
'It does not rain (to be sure).'

Example (10) merely states a fact whereas (11) “implies that the speaker had been informed (by someone or by some circumstance) that it would rain; however, the speaker can very well observe that this is not the case and then, by knowing better, contradicts the prior information/ expectation/ presupposition” (Lindström 2007:13).

Another context in which NP can appear is conjunct negation, where negation is applied to multiple attributes or actions within a single sentence, as exemplified in example (12), from Norwegian:

(12) **Ikkje** veit eg kva ho heiter, og **ikkje** hugsar eg telefonnummeret hennar.
not know I what she is-called, and not remember I phone-number-the her
'I don't know what her name is, and I don't remember her telephone number' (? :814)

Lindström (2007) dubs this type of NP “additive” negation.

The third category of NP is *interrogative negation*, where the negation is fronted in questions. An example is given in (13) (Lindström 2007:11):

- (13) **Inte** har du en vinöppnare att låna ut?
NEG have you a wine.opener to lend out
‘You don’t have a wine opener to lend?’

According to Lindström (2007), although interrogative NP is less frequent overall (as questions tend to occur less often than assertions in everyday conversations), it is used systematically in Finland Swedish, and to some extent in Sweden Swedish as well. Structurally, interrogative negation shares the same word order as declaratives with fronted negation, but the key difference lies in the intonation, which marks the construction as a question.

2.2 Mentions of NP in the Literature on Icelandic Syntax

There are some sporadic mentions of NP in Icelandic in the literature, but no systematic overview or analysis of the phenomenon exists to our knowledge. For instance, in their discussion of non-subject initial constructions in Icelandic, Svavarsdóttir and Jónsdóttir (1993) mention the possibility of adverbial fronting, including NP as in (14).

- (14) **EKKI** leika stelpurnar sér að dúkkum.
not play girls-the REFL to dolls
‘The girls don’t play with dolls’ (Svavarsdóttir and Jónsdóttir 1993:86)

Svavarsdóttir and Jónsdóttir (1993) claim that fronting of this type requires an emphasis on the negation; however, they do not elaborate on its pragmatic function.

Jónsson (1996), who argues that sentential negation is the specifier of Spec-NegP in Icelandic, also mentions that the negation can be topicalized. In particular, Jónsson (1996) provides example (15) to illustrate this:

- (15) **EKKI** hefur María stolið smjörinu.
not has María stolen butter-the
‘Mary has not stolen the butter’

Jónsson states that declaratives like (15) are uncommon but “they clearly exist and they have the same interpretation as declaratives with *ekki* inside NegP” (Jónsson 1996:98).

Práinsson (2007), on the other hand, suggests that NP might be associated with differences in meaning with respect to when the negation is realized post-verbally. For example, Práinsson claims that (16) can mean something like ‘I can’t believe that Haraldur has lived in Akureyri’, “given the right intonation” (Práinsson 2007:343):

- (16) **Ekki** hefur Haraldur búið á Akureyri.
not has Haraldur lived in Akureyri
'It doesn't seem that Haraldur has lived in Akureyri'

He also maintains that the fronting of negation often carries a stylistic value.

Based on these insights into NP in Icelandic, one can say that (i) syntactically, NP is definitely an available construction, (ii) prosodically, its availability is possibly associated with certain intonation and stress patterns, and (iii), stylistically, NP might be more widely used or accepted in certain registers. However, not much has been said about the possible pragmatic effects of NP in Icelandic.

2.3 NP in Icelandic Corpora and Texts

To identify the pragmatic contexts and syntactic structures that license NP in Icelandic, we began by extracting instances of NP from various Icelandic texts and corpora. We utilized the Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus (IcePaHC), a syntactically annotated collection of Icelandic texts ranging from around 1150 to the present day, covering a variety of genres, including sagas, legal documents, and religious writings.

Based on this initial investigation, as well as insights from a colleague (Jóhannes Gísli Jónsson, p.c.), we identified several uses of NP that may be characteristic of Icelandic, especially as observed in older texts.

For instance, NP can be used to convey ironic interpretations, often through the rhetorical device of litotes, which involves deliberate understatement to achieve an effect Van der Wouden (1996). In the Icelandic sagas, this is a common figure of speech (Jóhannes Gísli Jónsson, p.c., pointed this out to us).

- (17) **Ekki** þótti hann dæll maður.
Not seemed he easy man
'He was not considered an easy person'
(*Grettis saga*, chapter 30)

Example (17) can essentially be paraphrased as "he was NOT considered an easy person", indirectly implying that he was, in fact, regarded as quite difficult. Here, NP adds a layer of irony by underplaying the difficulty, thereby implying the opposite of what is literally stated.

In example (18), the author suggests an interpretation that goes beyond the literal phrasing. Rather than directly stating that Hallgerður killed the servants, the sentence implies that she did not allow them to die of old age:

- (18) **Ekki** lætur Hallgerður verða ellidauða húskarla vora.
Not lets Hallgerður become old-dead servants our

‘Hallgerður does not let our servants die of old age’
(*Brennu-Njáls saga*, chapter 38)

The use of NP in this sentence creates an implicit meaning: Hallgerður actively prevented the servants from dying naturally in their old age, suggesting that she had them killed before they could grow old. The stylistic effect here lies in the understatement created by negating the most natural scenario (dying of old age) to imply a more drastic action (killing them). Although a similar interpretation could be achieved with the negation in the typical post-verbal position, NP here intensifies the irony and makes the implied meaning more striking.

A related context in which NP can be found, not discussed in the literature on Icelandic syntax to our knowledge, involves sentences that convey meanings similar to those triggered by Negative Polarity Items (NPIs). An example of this can be seen in (19):

- (19) **Eigi** var gull eða silfur sparað við spjótin.
Not was gold or silver spared at spears-the
‘No gold or silver was spared on the spears’

In this example, the sentence “Eigi var gull eða silfur sparað við spjótin” uses NP to indicate that no gold or silver was spared when making the spears. The fronting of “eigi”, an archaic form of negation in Icelandic, places strong emphasis on the negation, giving the impression of an absolute or exhaustive negation. This suggests that every possible resource of gold or silver was used, leaving none unutilized.

2.4 Lexicalized expressions

Finally, several commonly used verbs may license NP in Icelandic, but this licensing is generally restricted to contexts where the subject is a first-person pronoun. This phenomenon can be compared to Swedish, as discussed by Brandtler and Håkansson (2014:114), who noted that in Swedish, the phrase *Inte vet jag* (‘I don’t know’) “may occur in any situational context without any apparent trigger, but is limited to the verb *vet* ‘know’ with the subject in the first person singular”.

While NP is restricted to the verb ‘know’ in Swedish, there seem to be other verbs in Icelandic that allow for NP. Examples include the following (items are presented with the corresponding Google hits figure):

- *Ekki veit ég* (= ‘I don’t know’): 85,000 hits
- *Ekki ætla ég* (= ‘I don’t plan on’): 70,400 hits
- *Ekki get ég* (= ‘I can’t’): 32,200 hits
- *Ekki held ég* (= ‘I don’t think’): 12,700 hits
- *Ekki er ég viss um* (= ‘I am not sure about’): 12,600 hits

- *Ekki finnst mér* (= ‘I don’t find something to be *x*’): 9,790 hits

These numbers suggest that expressions of this type, especially involving verbs of saying and believing, are fairly common in Icelandic. However, as we will see in Section 4, our questionnaire results indicate that not all speakers accept certain forms like *Ekki held ég*, suggesting variability in usage and acceptability.

2.5 Interim questions

The overview in this section gives rise to several questions that we will discuss in the following sections. First, we would like to know to what extent the different pragmatic uses of NP mentioned in 2.2 are accepted by native speakers of Icelandic. Could it be, for instance, that there is a difference between the availability and optionality of NP in questions vs. declaratives? Second, to what degree is NP related to formal circumstances or stylistic sophistication? Finally, if a common verb of saying or believing is involved, can NP be more easily allowed in pragmatic contexts that otherwise would restrict such fronting?

3 Questionnaire

To explore the variation among Icelandic speakers regarding the acceptability of negation preposing, we created a 21-item questionnaire, which we distributed to 20 native speakers of Icelandic. All of our respondents were in the 20-35 age group. All participants were affiliated with the Faculty of *Icelandic and Comparative Cultural Studies* at the University of Iceland and thus had some background in Linguistics. Our respondents consisted of current BA and MA students in Linguistics, students who had recently graduated from a Linguistics program as well as postdoctoral researchers in Linguistics and Language Technology.

Participants were informed that test items would include either short dialogues or individual sentences representing different ways to express a thought. While some test items involved exchanges between two unspecified individuals referred to as “A” and “B”, others presented alternate ways of conveying the same statement or sentiment. Participants were instructed to mark all options they found natural or appropriate based on ordinary spoken language. This allowed them to select more than one option if they deemed multiple responses acceptable. Participants were given the option to add comments if they had any insights or reasons for why they made, or did not make, a specific selection.

Below is an example of a test item:

(20) **A:** [Syrill í spurningakeppni]: Nú er spurt, hvert var móðurmál Astrid Lindgren?

A: [Quizmaster]: Now the question is, what was Astrid Lindgren’s native language?

B: [Keppandi]: Danska?

B: [Contestant]: *Danish?*

A: Nei, það var ekki danska. A: *No, it was not Danish.*

A: Nei, ekki var það danska. A: *No, not was it Danish.*

A: Nei, danska var það ekki. A: *No, Danish was it not.*

Athugasemd ef við á: *Comment, if applicable:*

Example (20) illustrates a short dialogue between a quizmaster (A) and a contestant (B). The quizmaster asks about Astrid Lindgren's native language, and the contestant guesses "Danish". Three different options are then given as response that the quizmaster could use to indicate that the contestant's answer is incorrect: neutral word order (first option), negative preposing (second option), and topicalization of "Danska" (third option). Participants could select one, two or all three options depending on which structure they deemed acceptable given the specific preceding context presented.

Þráinsson et al. (2013) discuss the possible drawbacks of using relative judgments of this type as opposed to absolute judgments, i.e. where the participants evaluate one variant at a time. For instance, it turned out that the subjects in their study were generally reluctant to select two or more alternatives, even though they would accept such variants in an absolute judgment task. According to Þráinsson et al, this means that "non-selection of a given variant does not in fact present negative information of the sort obtained when speakers explicitly reject an example that they are evaluating in an absolute judgement task" (Þráinsson et al. 2013:66). In our study, we decided to resort to this method despite this possible drawback, since we were interested in the direct comparison of alternatives, with the participation of subjects who are (to a varying degree) aware of linguistic variation in general. In fact, this method and selection of participants yielded some valuable and insightful comments regarding the pragmatics, syntax and prosody of NP in Icelandic.

The 21 items we included in the questionnaire sampled a variety of different contexts in which NP might be possible. These included different types of *yes/no* questions and different types of declarative statements. The full list of test items is provided in the Appendices.

3.1 Overall NP Acceptability and Inter-Participant Variation

For each test item, we looked at the overall percentage of participants that selected the NP option as either a) one of the acceptable options, or b) the only possible option given the specific preceding context. This was meant to show i) the average percentage of participants that accept NP for a given item, ii) the average degree of variation in the acceptability of NP items -i.e. what is the highest and what is the lowest percentage of respondents that accept the NP test option-, and iii) which test items show the highest and lowest degree of acceptability for the NP option.

Concerning (i), we see that on average, participants marked the negative-preposing option as acceptable 46.8% of the time. Within this 46.8%, however, we observe considerable variation. This is illustrated in Figure 1 below. Figure 1 displays the number of examples corresponding to different ranges of participant acceptance percentages for the NP option. The y-axis represents the percentage ranges of participants who accepted the NP option, segmented into 10% increments from 0-10% up to 90-100%. The x-axis indicates the number of examples for each percentage range.

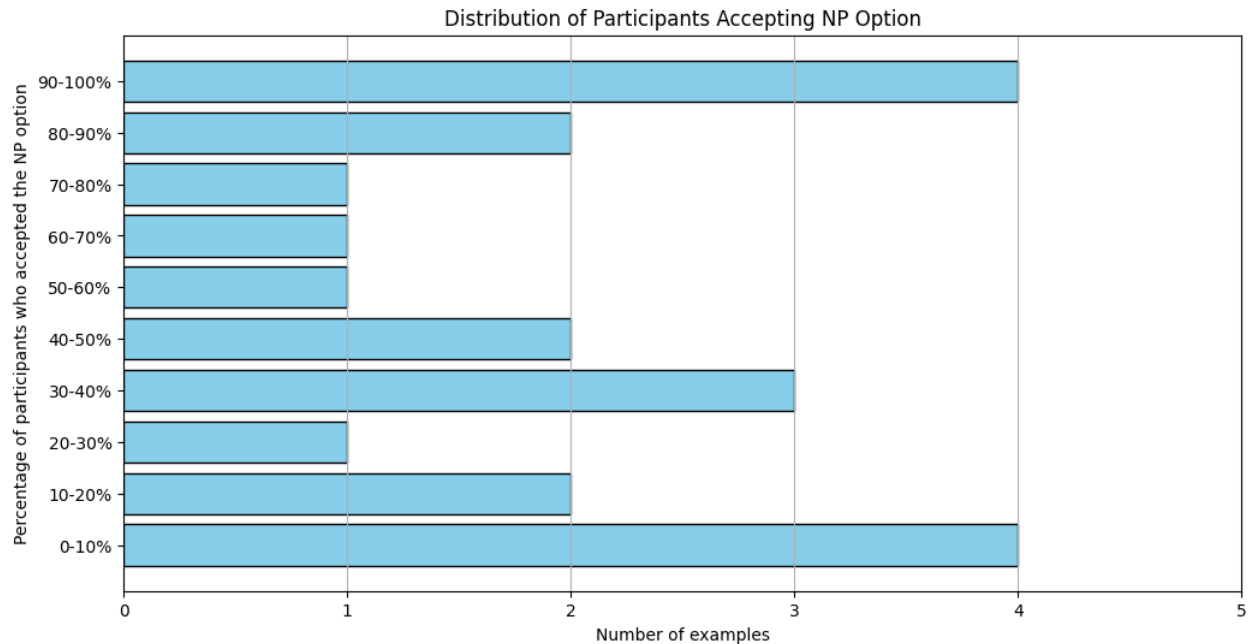


Figure 1: Histogram of Participants Accepting NP Option

As can be seen in Figure 1, there are 4 examples where 0-10% of participants accepted the NP option, indicating a strong consensus that these items were not acceptable. Similarly, there are 4 examples where 90-100% of participants accepted the NP option, suggesting a strong consensus that these items were acceptable. Ranges like 20-30%, 40-50%, 50-60%, 60-70%, 70-80% on the other hand have fewer examples, indicating lower frequency of these specific levels of agreement. Overall, the chart provides a visualization of how often different proportions of participants accepted the NP option across various examples. It highlights that the most frequent levels of agreement are at the extremes (0-10% and 90-100%), with some peaks at intermediate agreement levels. This distribution suggests that participants tended to either strongly agree or strongly disagree on the acceptability of the NP option for some examples, with fewer instances of moderate agreement.

Another measurement we were interested in was the rate of inter-participant agreement, i.e. how often different participants selected the same response or set of responses given an identical test item. Since our participants could select multiple options for each of the 21 test items, we could

not rely on traditional methods for calculating inter-annotator agreement such as Cohen’s Kappa or Fleiss’ Kappa. To calculate agreement, we thus followed Marchal et al. (2022), who specifically deal with linguistic questionnaires where annotators can select multiple options.

To obtain a measure of agreement in our participants’ responses, we calculated the observed agreement by comparing the intersection of labels for each item between all pairs of annotators. Our analysis revealed an *Observed Agreement* of 0.72698. The observed agreement of 0.73 indicates that annotators agreed on their grammaticality judgments about 73% of the time. This level of agreement suggests that while there is substantial consensus among annotators, there is also room for variation.

Figure 2 provides an overview of which options (preverbal negation sentence, postverbal negation sentence, both preverbal and postverbal negation) were marked as acceptable by how many participants for each of the 21 test items. In Figure 2, the different labels represent different types of sentence structures: PreV (preverbal negation), PostV (postverbal negation), and PostV-PreV (both preverbal and postverbal negation). The vertical axis indicates the frequency, i.e., how many participants selected each option for a given test item, while the horizontal axis lists the test items from 1 to 21.

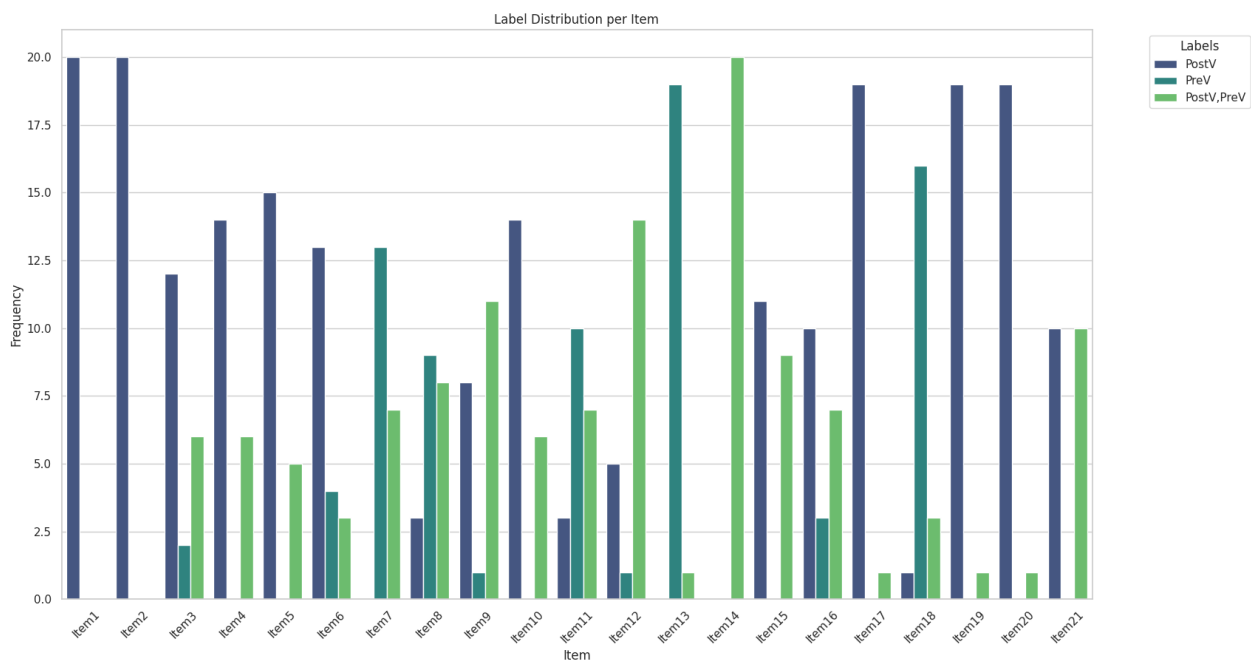


Figure 2: Label Selection Across Different Items

Those test items with the highest number of bars correspond to those items for which we observe higher inter-participant variation. For example, for test item (8), all three possible combinations of labels were selected by at least one participant. In contrast, items like (1) and (2) exhibit no variation, with participants unanimously selecting PostV, reflecting a strong consensus favoring

postverbal negation.

Overall, the figure highlights the varying degrees of agreement among participants, with some items showing clear preferences for a particular negation structure, while others —such as item 8— demonstrate greater diversity in participant judgments.

3.2 Zooming In on Acceptable and Unacceptable Test Items

Let us now zoom in on the specific test items to show which examples exhibit the highest acceptability rate for NP, and which the lowest.

Table 1 illustrates acceptability rates for those test items that displayed the highest acceptability rate for NP, as well as the corresponding rate of inter-participant agreement. The column “Post” (= *Post-Verbal Negation*) presents the percentage of participants who selected the post-verbal negation option as acceptable, while the “Pre” (= *Pre-Verbal Negation*) column shows the percentage of participants who marked the pre-verbal negation option as acceptable. Note that the acceptability rate results reported in Table 1 are aggregated: for test item (21), for instance, the table states that 35% of participants marked the post-verbal negation option as acceptable, and 100% marked the pre-verbal negation option as acceptable. The total amounts to more than 100% because some participants marked as acceptable both the pre-verbal and the post-verbal negation option.

Also note that for easier interpretation of these results, items where participants had to choose from three options (a total of three test items) were aggregated. Specifically, the two post-verbal options were combined into one.

Table 1: Test Items with the Highest Acceptability Rate for NP

Example	Post	Pre	Agreement
	35%	100%	0.7
(21) A: þetta er frábærlega skrifað hjá Laxness! this is excellently written by Laxness 'This is excellently written by Laxness!' B: Ekki hefur hann skrifað þetta? not has he written this 'Has he really written this?' B': Hann hefur ekki skrifað þetta? he has not written this 'He has not written this?'			
	15%	100%	0.91
(22) A: [Þjónn á veitingastað]: Get ég aðstoðað? waiter at restaurant: can I assist '[Waiter at a restaurant]: Can I help you?' B: Ekki áttu meira brauð? not have-you more bread 'Do you have more bread, by any chance?' B': Áttu ekki meira brauð? have-you not more bread 'Don't you have more bread?'			
	20%	90%	0.68
(23) A: Niðurstöðurnar úr rannsókninni virtust results.the from study.the seemed ekki koma læknum á óvart. not come doctors.DAT on surprise 'The results of the research did not seem to surprise the doctors.' B: Ekki vissu þeir að þetta væri svona not knew they that this was so alvarlegt? serious 'Did they really know the situation was this serious?' B': Vissu þeir ekki að þetta væri svona knew they not that this was so alvarlegt? serious 'Didn't they know that this was so serious?'			

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Example	Post	Pre	Agreement
	95%	90%	0.95
(24) A: (Situr við skrifborð þegar B kemur inn) sits by desk when B comes in '(Sits at the desk when B comes in)' B: Hefur þú séð Guðmund í dag? have you seen Guðmundur in day 'Have you seen Guðmundur today?' B': Ekki hefur þú séð Guðmund í not have you seen Guðmundur in dag? day 'Have you seen Guðmundur today by any chance?' B'': Hefur þú ekki séð Guðmund í have you not seen Guðmundur in dag? day 'Haven't you seen Guðmundur today?'			
	55%	85%	0.56
(25) A: Jón er nú ekki mjög myndarlegur og Jón is now not very handsome and hann er ekki skemmtilegur! he is not entertaining 'Jón is not very handsome and he is not entertaining!' A': Jón er nú ekki mjög myndarlegur og Jón is now not very handsome and ekki er hann skemmtilegur! not is he entertaining 'Jón is not very handsome and he is not entertaining!'			

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Example	Post	Pre	Agreement
<p>(26) A: [Horfir út um gluggann]. Það er nú looks out the window. it is now meira hvað þeim gengur illa að grafa more what them goes poorly to dig þennan skurð. this ditch ‘[Looks out the window]. It is really something how poorly they are doing dig- ging this ditch.’</p> <p>B: Og ekki hafa þeir gert mikið í dag. and not have they done much in day ‘And they have not done much today.’</p> <p>B’: Og þeir hafa ekki gert mikið í dag. and they have not done much in day ‘And they have not done much today.’</p>	55%	85%	0.55
<p>(27) A: [Spyrill í spurningakeppni]: Nú er quizmaster in quiz-competition now is spurt, hvert var móðurmál Astrid asked what was mother-tongue Astrid Lindgren? Lindgren ‘[Quizmaster in a quiz competition]: Now the question is, what was Astrid Lindgren’s mother tongue?’</p> <p>B: [Keppandi]: Danska? contestant Danish ‘[Contestant]: Danish?’</p> <p>A: Nei, það var ekki danska. no it was not Danish ‘No, it was not Danish.’</p> <p>A’: Nei, ekki var það danska. no not was it Danish ‘No, it was not Danish.’</p> <p>A’’: Nei, danska var það ekki. no Danish was it not ‘No, Danish it was not.’</p>	95%	70%	0.67

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Example	Post	Pre	Agreement
	95%	60%	0.67
<p>(28) A: Málið rann í gegnum þingið issue-the ran in through parliament-the og ekki heyrðist múkk frá and not heard a-peep from stjórnarandstöðunni. opposition-the ‘The issue passed through the parliament and not a peep was heard from the oppo- sition.’</p> <p>A’: Málið rann í gegnum issue-the ran in through þingið og það heyrðist ekki parliament-the and it heard not múkk frá stjórnarandstöðunni. a-peep from opposition-the ‘The issue passed through parliament and not a peep was heard from the opposi- tion.’</p>			
	90%	40%	0.58
<p>(29) A: Eru Jón og Haraldur tvíburar? are Jón and Haraldur twins ‘Are Jón and Haraldur twins?’</p> <p>B: Já. yes ‘Yes.’</p> <p>A: Ekki eru þeir líkir. not are they alike ‘They do not look similar (at all).’</p> <p>A’: Þeir eru ekki líkir. they are not alike ‘They do not look similar (at all).’</p>			

Continued on next page

Table 1: – continued from previous page

Example	Post	Pre	Agreement
	90%	45%	0.54
(30) A: Ég var að tala við Harald. Honum I was to talk with Haraldur. him virðist líka vel fyrir norðan. seems like well for north 'I was talking to Haraldur. He seems to like it well in the north.'			
B: Ekki býr hann á Akureyri? not lives he in Akureyri 'Doesn't he live in Akureyri?'			
B': Býr hann ekki á Akureyri? lives he not in Akureyri 'Doesn't he live in Akureyri?'			
	100%	50%	0.59
(31) A: Þessi gjöf er ómerkt. Gæti hún verið this gift is unmarked could it be frá Haraldí frænda á Akureyri? from Haraldur uncle in Akureyri 'This gift is unmarked. Could it be from Uncle Haraldur in Akureyri?'			
B: Nei, hún getur ekki verið frá honum. no it can not be from him Hann kann ekki að pakka svona vel he knows not to wrap so well inn. in			
B': Nei, ekki getur hún verið frá honum. no not can it be from him Hann kann ekki að pakka svona vel he knows not to wrap so well inn. in			
B'': Nei, frá honum getur hún ekki verið. no from him can it not be Hann kann ekki að pakka svona vel he knows not to wrap so well inn. in 'No, it can't be from him. He doesn't know how to wrap so well.'			

Let us now look at those test items that displayed the lowest acceptability for the NP option.

Table 2 illustrates acceptability rates for the five items that were rated the lowest, together with the corresponding rate of inter-participant agreement.

Table 2: Examples with the Lowest Acceptability Rate for NP

Example	Post	Pre	Agreement
	100%	0%	1.0
(32) A: Viltu sígarettu? do-you.want cigarette 'Do you want a cigarette?' B: Nei takk, ég reyki ekki. no thanks, I smoke not 'No thanks, I don't smoke.' B': Nei takk, ekki reyki ég. no thanks, not smoke I 'No thanks, I don't smoke.'			
	100%	0%	1.0
(33) A: Á að rigna á morgun? is to rain tomorrow 'Is it going to rain tomorrow?' B: Ekki held ég það. not think I that 'I don't think so.' B': Það held ég ekki. that think I not 'I don't think so.'			
	100%	5%	0.91
(34) A: Hún hefur drepið manninn sinn. she has killed her-husband 'She has killed her husband.' B: Hún gerði það ekki. she did it not 'She did not do it.' B': Ekki gerði hún það. not did she it 'She did not do it.'			

Continued on next page

Table 2: – continued from previous page

Example	Post	Pre	Agreement
(35) [Hundurinn er í yfirvigt og A sakar B um að hafa gefið honum mat þrátt fyrir samkomulag um annað.] [‘The dog is overweight and A accuses B of having fed him food despite a different agreement.’] A: Þú gafst hundinum! you gave the-dog ‘You fed the dog!’ B: Nei, ekki gerði ég það! no, not did I it ‘No, I did not!’ B’: Nei, ég gerði það ekki! no, I did it not ‘No, I did not do it!’	100%	10%	0.91
(36) A: Ég var að tala við Harald. Honum virðist I was to talk with Haraldur. him seems líka vel fyrir sunnan. like well for south ‘I was talking to Haraldur. He seems to like it well in the South.’ B: Býr hann ekki á Akureyri? lives he not in Akureyri ‘Doesn’t he live in Akureyri?’ B’: Ekki býr hann á Akureyri? not lives he in Akureyri ‘Doesn’t he live in Akureyri?’	95%	15%	0.66

Note that we included both test items (32) and (33) in the questionnaire, despite them exhibiting very similar structures—in both items, Speaker A asks a neutral polarity question, and Speaker B responds with a neutral, information-focused answer. The reason for including (33) is the presence of the lexically frequent verb *að halda* (=‘to think’), allowing us to examine whether the lexical frequency of the main verb affects the acceptability of the noun phrase (NP). Both items showed a 0% acceptability rate for the NP and perfect inter-participant agreement (1.0), indicating that the NP is unacceptable in neutral answers to polarity questions, regardless of the frequency of the main verb. Recall that in Section 2, we observed that verbs like *að halda* appear relatively frequently in constructions with NP based on Google hits, suggesting that this usage is not uncommon in Icelandic. One possible explanation for the discrepancy observed in our questionnaire

results could be a generational difference. All of our questionnaire participants were younger than 35, which raises the possibility that the acceptance of NP with verbs like *að halda* may be declining among younger speakers.

It is also interesting to note that test items 36 and 30 are structurally nearly identical, yet the acceptability rates for NP differ significantly. The NP option in 30 was accepted by 40% of participants, while only 15% accepted the NP option in (36). This disparity is due to a subtle but crucial difference in the preceding context: in (36), Speaker A mentions that Haraldur seems to enjoy living in the South of Iceland, whereas in (30), the same Speaker mentions that Haraldur seems to enjoy living in the *North* of Iceland. Speaker B then utters the very same two propositions as possible responses in both test items. The rate of inter-participant agreement is medium for both examples: 0.54 for (30) and 0.66 for (36).

In Section 4, we examine these test items in greater detail and propose an explanation for the varying degrees of acceptability of the NP option.

4 Negative Preposing: A Composite Phenomenon

We have seen that NP is not equally acceptable in all environments. For example, it seems to be completely out in neutral responses to polarity questions, as we have seen in examples (32) and (33).

One possible explanation for the varying acceptability of NP in different environments in Icelandic could be to suggest that NP represents an instance of *polarity focus*, and that only a specified set of pragmatic types of foci are licensed to give rise to NP.

Not all types of polarity foci are identical: even when something as standard as a nominal phrase is in focus, there are several different pragmatic imports such a constituent may be associated with. As a matter of fact, although the semantics of the focalized expression always remains constant (with the introduction in the discourse of a set of alternatives to the focalized constituent, as in standard Roothian focus semantics (Rooth 1985, 1992)), the relation between such a set of alternatives and the asserted focus may vary. We follow Callegari (2018) in taking the specific relation between the focus and such a set of alternatives to be what licenses a specific pragmatic reading on the focus. In the pragmatically most neutral case, the asserted focus alternative (our constituent in focus) will simply be interpreted as the most appropriate, truth-conditionally adequate alternative given a specific world and context. This type of focus is standardly known as *information focus* or *Ifoc* (Kiss 1998). A typical environment that licenses the presence of an Ifoc is the answer to a wh-question (Halliday 1967; Schwarzschild 1999; Krifka 2001; Reich 2002):

(37) A: What did Usman buy?

B: Usman bought *The Financial Times*.

A focalized constituent may also be interpreted as an overt correction to a previously uttered alternative, alternative which the speaker considers to be incorrect. In this case, a corrective focus (Van Leusen 2004; Bianchi et al. 2012) will obtain:

(38) A: Espen married Tom.

B: Espen married **ANTON**, not Tom!

The focalized constituent might also be contrasted to some other (generally explicitly stated) alternative: this is the case in example (39), where *yesterday* is contrasted with *today*. In (39), we then have a *contrastive* focus:

(39) A: When did you see Tom?

B: I saw him *yesterday*, but I only talked to him *today*.

Arguably, all corrective foci are contrastive, but the opposite entailment does not hold. Finally, a constituent can also be miratively focused (Cruschina 2012; Bianchi et al. 2015, 2016). A focus has a mirative import if the asserted focus alternative is deemed surprising, or anyway unexpected given the speaker's knowledge of the world, or given the situation at hand. In (40), the DP "a giraffe" is miratively focused by virtue of giraffes being an extremely unlikely pet one could get:

(40) Annemieke just bought A GIRAFFE! Can you believe it?!

We follow Bianchi et al. (2015, 2016) in assuming that a mirative reading of the constituent in focus is only licensed if there is at least one focus alternative in the focus value which is deemed to be more likely to lead to a true sentence than the actual asserted content. Likelihood is a relative notion: Bianchi et al. (2015, 2016) take this to be calculated with respect to a relevant modal base, and according to a stereotypical ordering source (see in particular Kratzer (2012); see also Grosz (2012) for an alternative proposal). The mirative import of the DP object in (40) is then licensed because there are several other animals that are intuitively more likely for Annemieke to have gotten as pets.

NP appears to be strongly dispreferred in environments involving corrective polarity focus, as evidenced by the low acceptability of the NP option in examples such as (34) and (35), where Speaker B explicitly corrects the polarity of Speaker A's proposition. This could lead one to hypothesize that NP is restricted to polarity-focus environments that are not corrective-focus environments.

At the same time, an explanation of the acceptability of NP that is grounded on different pragmatic readings of polarity focus cannot be the whole story, as it becomes evident if we compare examples like (32) to examples like (31). Both examples are repeated below as (41) and (42):

- (41) A: Viltu sígarettu?
do-you.want cigarette
'Do you want a cigarette?'
- B: Nei takk, ég reyki ekki.
no thanks, I smoke not
'No thanks, I don't smoke.'
- B': Nei takk, ekki reyki ég.
no thanks, not smoke I
'No thanks, I don't smoke.'
- (42) A: Þessi gjöf er ómerkt. Gæti hún verið frá Haraldí frænda á Akureyri?
this gift is unmarked. could it be from Haraldur uncle in Akureyri
'This gift is unmarked. Could it be from Uncle Haraldur in Akureyri?'
- B: Nei, hún getur ekki verið frá honum. Hann kann ekki að pakka svona vel inn.
no, it can not be from him. he knows not to wrap so well in
'No, it can't be from him. He doesn't know how to wrap so well.'
- B': Nei, ekki getur hún verið frá honum. Hann kann ekki að pakka svona vel inn.
no, not can it be from him. he knows not to wrap so well in
'No, it can't be from him. He doesn't know how to wrap so well.'

Both (41) and (42) can be described as information-focus polarity environments: in both examples, A asks a polarity question, and B answers the polarity question with a negative statement. However, while NP is completely out in (41), at least 50% of participants found NP acceptable in (42).

Since we reject the analysis of NP as simply a form of polarity focus, it becomes necessary to explore an alternative explanation. NP appears in a variety of environments, and treating it as a phenomenon with a single trigger fails to capture the diversity of its occurrences. Instead, we propose that NP represents a composite, complex phenomenon in Icelandic, with different instances of NP arising from distinct triggers. Specifically, we distinguish between two main categories of NP triggers: *epistemic certainty triggers* and *stylistic triggers*. The former trigger is still active and compositionally transparent, contributing directly to the speaker's modal or epistemic stance regarding the truth of the proposition. The latter trigger serves primarily stylistic or pragmatic functions, and is often linked to discourse effects like emphasis, politeness, or cohesion. While these stylistic uses may have diachronic roots in earlier stages of Icelandic, they remain synchronically relevant as conventionalized forms for particular discourse strategies.

4.1 Category A: Stylistic Triggers

We identify two primary subcategories within the stylistic-trigger category of fronted negation: *mitigated negative questions* and *conjunct negation*.

Mitigated Negative Questions Example (43) illustrates what we term “mitigated negative questions”. These are questions where the negation is used not to convey a literal negative meaning but to soften the inquiry, introducing a tone of politeness and tentativeness that makes the interaction feel less direct and more respectful (see also Þráinsson (2007) and Fasold (1990)):

- (43) A: (Situr við skrifborð þegar B kemur inn)
sits by desk when B comes in
'(Sits at the desk when B comes in)'
B: Ekki hefur þú séð Guðmund í dag?
not have you seen Guðmundur in day
'Have you seen Guðmundur today by any chance?'

In structures like (43), the negation *ekki* does not act as true negation; instead, it plays a pragmatic role, introducing politeness or modesty. It adds a sense of uncertainty or tentativeness, softening the tone of the question. Rather than directly seeking an answer, the speaker uses negation to signal that they are not assuming the listener’s knowledge of Guðmundur’s whereabouts, making the question less direct and more respectful. In this context, negation functions as a marker of deference rather than as a literal negation. It serves as a conversational strategy to make the interaction more courteous, helping to create a tone of respect and consideration. This use of negation is driven by discourse, reflecting the speaker’s intention to maintain a polite and tentative approach.

In Example (43), the use of negation in Icelandic mirrors similar constructions in English, such as the question “You would not happen to have a pen, would you?” (see also Koike (1994) for a similar use of negation in Spanish). Here, negation functions pragmatically rather than literally, introducing uncertainty and politeness. By framing the request negatively, the speaker softens the imposition, implying they do not expect the listener to have a pen. This indirect approach allows the listener to decline without feeling pressured, making the request less direct and more considerate.

Note that this use of NP is not exclusive to Icelandic: it is also observed in Swedish, as pointed out by Brandtler and Håkansson (2014) (see also the main etymological dictionary of Swedish, Svenska Akademiens Ordbok (SAOB) (Teleman et al. 1999))¹

- (44) a. Inte har du sett Hedlund?
not have you seen Hedlund

¹Johan Brandtler (p.c.) however notes that this use of Negative Preposing is no longer particularly productive in contemporary Swedish.

‘You haven’t seen Hedlund by any chance?’

- b. Mánne har du sett Hedlund?
wonder have you seen Hedlund

‘You haven’t seen Hedlund by any chance?’

According to the SAOB, the fronting of the negation in such cases is used to make modest or humble requests. The negation in these sentences can be paraphrased with expressions like *mánne* ‘wonder’, as in (b) (Teleman et al. 1999). This suggests that, in both Icelandic and Swedish, NP can be used to convey a polite, tentative tone rather than a literal denial. The following examples illustrate this further.

- (45) a. Har du bröd?
have you bread
‘Do you have bread?’

- b. Har du inte bröd?
have you not bread
‘Don’t you have bread?’

- c. Inte har du bröd?
not have you bread
‘Do you have some bread by any chance?’

Our Swedish consultant, (Martin Ringmar, p.c.), tells us that (45a) is relatively neutral in terms of politeness while (45b) is impolite under most circumstances and (45c) is the most polite way of asking a question of this type.

In a broader linguistic context, this use of negation reflects the difference between *polarity-based* languages like Icelandic and *agree/disagree* systems found in other languages (see Holmberg (2016)). For example, in Icelandic, a regular *yes/no*-question with postverbal negation conveys an expectation that the negative alternative is true (*Drekkur Jón ekki kaffi?* ‘Does John not drink coffee?’) and a corresponding question with NP has the same semantic interpretation (*Ekki drekkur Jón kaffi?* ‘Does John not drink coffee?’). In a conversation in Icelandic, the negative answer particle *nei* ‘no’ would be used to confirm that the negative alternative is true (*Nei = hann drekkur ekki kaffi* ‘No = he does not drink coffee’). This means that Icelandic belongs to so-called polarity-based or positive/negative system of languages as opposed to the agree/disagree system in which the positive answer particle would be used (Yes = he does not drink coffee) (Holmberg 2016: 5). According to Holmberg (2016), this difference depends on the scope of the negation. In Icelandic and most European languages, the negation has a wide scope (sentential scope) while in languages like Cantonese and most East-Asian languages the negation has a narrow scope, maybe only over the predicate. Furthermore, Icelandic behaves like Swedish, for instance, in that if the speaker wants

to disconfirm the negative alternative posed by a negative question, the positive answer particle *já* ‘yes’ cannot be used. Instead, a particular polarity reversing affirmative particle *jú* ‘yes-REV’ (*Jú = hann drekkur kaffi* ‘Yes-REV = he drinks coffee’) is used to contradict the expectation conveyed in the negative yes/no-question that the negative alternative is true (see also Holmberg (2016)). The important issue for our purposes here is that the negation presumably has a wide scope in Icelandic, whether it appears clause-initially or in its (usual) clause-medial position.

Conjunct Negation Example (25), repeated below as (46) illustrates an instance of conjunct negation:

(46)

- A: Jón er nú ekki mjög myndarlegur og ekki er hann skemmtilegur!
Jón is now not very handsome and not is he entertaining
‘Jón is not very handsome and he is not entertaining!’

We propose that the fronting of negation here carries primarily a stylistic function, without changing the propositional meaning. The sentence conveys the same content as a structure where the negation remains post-verbal. The use of NP in this conjunct negation creates a rhythmic or emphatic effect, linking the negative properties associated with Jón stylistically rather than adding any new semantic dimension.

Conjunct negation in Icelandic shows some parallels to Negative Inversion (NI) in English. In NI constructions, negative phrases are fronted to the beginning of a clause, triggering subject-auxiliary inversion, as seen in examples like:

(47) Not until the next day did he realize he had lost his wallet.

(48) Nowhere does he mention my article.

In such cases, the inversion occurs only with negative expressions. Phrases that are not negative, such as *somewhere*, do not trigger inversion, as demonstrated by Buring (2005):

- (49) a. Nowhere does he mention my book.
b. *Somewhere does he mention my book.
c. Somewhere, he mentions my book.

In Sobin (2003), the author posits that Negative Inversion (NI) serves a discourse-related function by introducing new or emphasized information. The marked nature of NI makes it a stylistic device typically used in formal or rhetorical contexts, where the inversion foregrounds the negative assertion for greater impact. NI contributes to the rhetorical flow of the sentence, providing emphasis without altering the core meaning.

Similarly, the Icelandic NP seen in conjunct negation shares this stylistic purpose. Much like in English, the fronted negation in Icelandic emphasizes the negative evaluation across both propositions, enhancing the sentence's cohesiveness and rhythm, but without introducing any new semantic content. This suggests that, in these cases, the fronting of the negation in both languages operates more on a stylistic level than as a reflection of deeper semantic distinctions.

While direct historical evidence for conjunct negation and mitigated negative questions in earlier stages of Icelandic is lacking, we hypothesize that these constructions have evolved through processes similar to those observed in related languages. Comparative evidence from modern Scandinavian languages like Swedish, where fronted negation also serves pragmatic functions such as politeness, suggests that NP in Icelandic may have developed as part of a broader North Germanic pattern. Similarly, the parallels to English Negative Inversion, where negation fronting is primarily a stylistic device, indicate that these fronting operations may have originally served syntactic or semantic purposes but have now become stylistic markers. We tentatively speculate that their persistence in modern Icelandic is due to their presence in earlier stages of the language, where they likely fulfilled more central grammatical roles.

4.2 Category B: Expression of Degrees of Certainty

In both conjunct negation and mitigated negative questions, NP primarily serves a stylistic function rather than altering the core meaning or adding new semantic content. Its purpose lies in creating a discourse effect, such as emphasizing and enhancing the cohesion between two separate negative attributes. In these cases, the fronting of negation contributes to the rhythm or emphasis of the sentence, without changing its propositional meaning.

In other instances, on the other hand, we argue that NP in Icelandic is tied directly to the expression of epistemic certainty. In such cases, the use of NP transcends a mere discourse-pragmatic choice, as it is used to convey the speaker's degree of confidence in the negated proposition, resulting in a shift in meaning compared to sentences where the negation remains post-verbal.

Epistemic certainty relates to the degree of confidence a speaker has regarding the truth of a proposition. Epistemic modality refers to the use of linguistic expressions to indicate a speaker's assessment of the truth or likelihood of a proposition Palmer (2001). This modality is typically expressed through modal verbs, which signal different degrees of epistemic certainty. Beyond modal verbs, epistemic certainty is also conveyed through adverbs such as “possibly”, “probably”, “certainly”, and “definitely”. These expressions modify the degree of certainty attributed to the proposition (Lyons 1977). Epistemic certainty is often represented on a scale, categorizing expressions based on the strength of certainty they convey (Lyons 1977; Nuyts 2001). For example:

- Possibility: indicates a low level of certainty (e.g., “possibly”, “might”).

- Likelihood: indicates a moderate level of certainty (e.g., “likely”, “may”).
- Probability: a higher level of certainty (e.g., “probably”, “should”).
- Certainty: a very high level of certainty (e.g., “certainly”, “must”).
- Definiteness: absolute certainty (e.g., “definitely”, “will”).

The expression of epistemic certainty varies across languages. Some languages may rely heavily on modal verbs, while others might use adverbs, particles, or specific syntactic constructions to convey different degrees of certainty (Palmer 2001). We speculate in particular that Icelandic and other Scandinavian languages make use of NP as a tool to express the degree of epistemic certainty in the truth of a negated proposition.

This hypothesis is partially supported by the translations of different NP examples in various Nordic languages that are found in the literature. Consider for instance the following example by Holmer (2006:76–77), which illustrates NP in Swedish. As also noted by Lindström (2007), Holmer chooses to provide a translation of the preposed negation ‘inte’ example by using the epistemic adverb ‘certainly’ in English:

- (50) Inte köpte Josefin några böcker.
 not bought Josefin some books
 ‘Josefin certainly didn’t buy any books’

This translation choice suggest a link between NP and the expression of epistemic certainty.

How does epistemic certainty factor in NP structures? Let us assume a scale of epistemic certainty values such as (51):

- (51) Possibly < Likely < Probably < Most Likely < Certainly < Definitely

When a sentence like (50) is uttered, the interpretation follows the epistemic certainty scale:

- (52) not, Possibly < Likely < Probably < Certainly < Definitely

In (50), the speaker asserts the highest degree of the scale, which is “definitely” or something equally strong. This use of NP indicates that the speaker has a high degree of confidence in the negated proposition, thus reinforcing the certainty and making it salient in the discourse. The preposing of *ekki* thus signals that the speaker is not merely negating the proposition but is also expressing a strong epistemic stance regarding its truth value.

This analysis helps account for the environments in which NP is possible and for the patterns of acceptability judgments observed. Consider for instance example (17), repeated below as (53). This example was first introduced in Section 2 to illustrate how NP may be used to convey an ironic interpretation. Example (17) can essentially be paraphrased as “he was NOT considered an easy person”, indirectly implying that he was, in fact, regarded as quite difficult.

- (53) Ekki þótti hann dæll maður.
not seemed he easy person
'He didn't seem an easy person.'

This sentence can be interpreted along the scale of epistemic certainty as follows:

- (54) Possibly not an easy person < Likely not an easy person < Probably not an easy person < Definitely not an easy person

In this instance, the preposing of *ekki* indicates that the speaker is asserting a high degree of certainty that the person in question is not easy to deal with. The speaker uses a strong negation (“definitely not an easy person”) to imply the opposite quality (“very difficult person”). The irony is detected because the assertion of high certainty (definitely not easy) contrasts sharply with the speaker’s actual intent (to emphasize the difficulty of the person).

We can identify different structures within the epistemic certainty NP category, which vary depending on the illocutionary force of the NP construction and the preceding context, specifically Speaker A’s triggering statement.

Yes/No Questions Incorporating Epistemic Modality NP can be used in polarity questions. When this is the case, the question is interpreted as involving an additional layer of inquiry into the certainty, truth, or authenticity of the proposition being questioned. The fronted negation in such structures indicates the speaker’s doubt, surprise, or need for verification regarding an assertion made by Speaker A that they find difficult to believe. This use of negation is equivalent to the use of “really” in English, adding a sense of skepticism or incredulity to the question. For example:

- (55) Ekki hefur hann skrifað þetta?
not has he written this
'Has he really written this?'
- (56) Ekki vissu þeir að þetta væri svona alvarlegt?
not knew they that this was so serious
'Did they really know things were this serious?'

As evidenced by the translations in these examples, although the Icelandic originals contain a negation, a more appropriate English translation would render these as ‘Has he really written this?’ and ‘Did they really know things were this serious?’, where the negation is entirely omitted and instead replaced by the epistemic adverb *really*. This suggests that, in such cases, the function of negation in Icelandic may align more closely with conveying degrees of epistemic certainty rather than expressing a literal negative meaning.

In these examples, the fronted negation ‘ekki’ thus emphasizes the speaker’s doubt about the proposition being uttered. The speaker is not merely seeking information but is questioning the truthfulness or likelihood of what has been asserted by their interlocutor. This construction can introduce a subtle challenge to the prior statement, implying that the speaker finds it improbable or surprising.

Note that our analysis of NP as being tied to epistemic certainty also captures the difference in acceptability of NP between items (36) and (30), repeated below as examples (57) and (58). Only 15% of our participants accepted the NP option in 57, contra 45% in 58:

(57) A: Ég var að tala við Harald. Honum virðist líka vel fyrir sunnan.
I was to talk with Haraldur. him seems like well for south
‘I was talking to Haraldur. He seems to like it well in the South.’

B: Býr hann ekki á Akureyri?
lives he not in Akureyri
‘Doesn’t he live in Akureyri?’

B’: Ekki býr hann á Akureyri?
not lives he in Akureyri
‘Doesn’t he live in Akureyri?’

(58) A: Ég var að tala við Harald. Honum virðist líka vel fyrir norðan.
I was to talk with Haraldur. him seems like well for north
‘I was talking to Haraldur. He seems to like it well in the north.’

B: Ekki býr hann á Akureyri?
not lives he in Akureyri
‘Doesn’t he live in Akureyri?’

B’: Býr hann ekki á Akureyri?
lives he not in Akureyri
‘Doesn’t he live in Akureyri?’

The difference in acceptability of NP between these two examples can be explained by the contextual compatibility between the speaker’s statement and the implied proposition in the NP question.

In (57), Speaker A states that Haraldur seems to like the South. However, this information is incompatible with the implied assumption that Haraldur might live in Akureyri, which is located in the North. For the NP question, “Ekki býr hann á Akureyri?” (Does he really live in Akureyri?), to make sense, Speaker A’s statement would need to be compatible with the possibility that Haraldur lives in Akureyri. Since liking the South does not align with the assumption that Haraldur lives in the North, the NP construction seems pragmatically odd in this context, resulting in low acceptability.

In contrast, in (58), Speaker A mentions that Haraldur seems to like the North, which is compatible with the possibility that Haraldur lives in Akureyri, a northern city. Here, the NP question “Ekki býr hann á Akureyri?” expresses doubt or surprise in a context that aligns with the speaker’s knowledge. This creates the right conditions for NP, making the construction pragmatically appropriate and leading to much higher acceptability.

Thus, the acceptability of NP depends on the epistemic alignment between the interlocutor’s statement and the proposition implied by the NP question. If the interlocutor’s statement sets up a context compatible with the implied proposition, NP is acceptable because it serves to express doubt or surprise. If the context is incompatible, NP feels out of place, as it introduces unwarranted epistemic force.

Assertions in Response to Yes/No Questions NP can also feature in statements that are uttered in response to polarity questions. In these cases, NP is used as if the sentence contains an implicit epistemic modal element, expressing the speaker’s high degree of certainty or confidence about the truth of the negated proposition. Here, the negation does more than simply negate the action or state; it conveys a strong assertion of certainty. For instance:

- (59) Ekki getur hún verið frá honum. Hann kann ekki að pakka svona vel inn.
not can it be from him. he knows not to wrap so well in
‘It’s definitely not from him. He cannot wrap gifts so well.’

In this example, the fronted negation indicates a high level of epistemic certainty. The speaker is not merely stating that the proposition is false but is asserting with confidence that it cannot be true. The use of fronted negation in this context signals a definitive stance, strengthening the assertion.

Assertions in Response to Assertions These also involve the use of fronted negation to express the speaker’s certainty in their assertion. In such cases, the speaker again uses NP to emphasize the strength of their negation, as seen in:

- (60) Ekki eru þeir líkir.
not are they alike
‘They definitely do not look alike.’

In this instance, “definitely not similar” effectively conveys the meaning of “not similar at all”. The fronted negation here does not just negate the assertion but adds a layer of emphasis to indicate a strong degree of certainty or contrast with what might have been expected. The relevant scale here pertains to degrees of similarity rather than degrees of certainty, yet the function of fronted negation remains consistent in conveying a high degree of emphasis or contrast.

This use of NP can also express meanings akin to negative polarity items (NPIs), such as “not at all”. For example:

- (61) Eigi var gull eða silfur sparað við spjótin.
not was gold or silver spared with spears
‘Gold and silver were definitely not spared’ → ‘No gold and silver (at all) was spared / Not a single bit of gold or silver was spared.’

In this context, NP signals an emphatic negation that conveys totality, indicating that no gold or silver was spared at all. It serves to reinforce the negation by expressing an extreme or exhaustive denial, aligning with meanings typically associated with NPIs.

Through these structures, we see that NP in Icelandic can be a powerful tool for conveying epistemic certainty, allowing speakers to express varying degrees of doubt, confidence, or emphasis in their assertions and inquiries.

Not Possible: Assertions Directly Contradicting Existing Assertions (Corrective Focus) Fronted negation is notably absent in direct contradictions/ corrective polarity focus statements in Icelandic. We suggest that this absence might be attributed to the primary function of corrective polarity statements, which is to challenge and directly contradict an existing proposition by proposing an alternative polarity value. The emphasis in such statements is placed on the act of correction itself, rather than on expressing a degree of epistemic certainty.

In corrective focus, the speaker’s goal is to reject a previously stated proposition outright, typically using “NOT” to emphasize the negation of that assertion. For instance, consider the following type of corrective response:

- (62) Eigi var gull eða silfur sparað við spjótin.
not was gold or silver spared with spears
‘Gold and silver were definitely not spared’ → ‘No gold and silver (at all) was spared / Not a single bit of gold or silver was spared.’

In this example, the focus is on correcting the previous statement by asserting the opposite. The negation ‘ekki’ directly challenges the validity of the prior claim, but fronted negation would be inappropriate here because the primary goal is to refute rather than to express the speaker’s degree of certainty.

By contrast, in yes/no questions and assertions that incorporate epistemic modality, the focus is on providing information or conveying the speaker’s belief. In these contexts, degrees of certainty are highly relevant, and the use of fronted negation can enhance the salience of the speaker’s confidence or doubt. The speaker employs fronted negation to express nuances in their stance, indicating how certain or skeptical they are about the proposition in question.

However, in corrective contexts, the pragmatic objective shifts. The speaker's main concern is to directly negate a specific claim made by the interlocutor. Here, the emphasis is on challenging the proposition's validity, leaving little room for the expression of epistemic certainty. The act of correction is about rejecting the previous statement outright, and fronted negation, which typically adds a layer of epistemic meaning, does not serve this immediate corrective purpose.

Therefore, the absence of fronted negation in corrective statements highlights its primary role in expressing degrees of certainty rather than in directly contradicting assertions. The structure of NP is thus more aligned with contexts where the speaker aims to express or question certainty, rather than to correct or refute a proposition.

Note that our analysis explains the contrast between the examples below. While for example (63), the acceptability of NP is 100%, for example (64), only 35% of participants found the NP option to be acceptable:

(63) A: A [Les upp mjög enskuskotinn texta]: Þetta er frábærlega skrifað hjá Laxness!
A [Reads out very English-influenced text]: This is excellently written by Laxness!

'This is excellently written by Laxness!'

B1: Ekki hefur hann skrifað þetta?
not has he written this
'Has he really written this?'

B2: Hann hefur ekki skrifað þetta?
he has not written this
'Has he not written this?'

(64) A: A [Les upp mjög enskuskotinn texta]: Þetta er frábærlega skrifað hjá Laxness!
A [Reads out very English-influenced text]: This is excellently written by Laxness!

'This is excellently written by Laxness!'

B1: Ekki hefur hann skrifað þetta!
not has he written this
'He didn't write this!'

B2: Hann hefur ekki skrifað þetta!
he has not written this
'He didn't write this!'

In example (63), Speaker A makes an assertion about the quality of a text, attributing it to Laxness. Speaker B's response in both variants, especially with fronted negation in "Ekki hefur hann

skrifað þetta?” (Has he really written this?), implies doubt or surprise regarding the authorship. The use of fronted negation in this context introduces an epistemic layer, expressing skepticism about the proposition. This usage aligns with our analysis of fronted negation in questions incorporating epistemic modality, where it reflects the speaker’s doubt or need for confirmation. This subtle challenge to the proposition makes the use of fronted negation highly acceptable, as it effectively communicates the speaker’s uncertainty or disbelief.

In contrast, example (64) features a different context and response type. Here, Speaker B’s responses are assertive statements rather than questions. The fronted negation in "Ekki hefur hann skrifað þetta!" (He didn’t write this!) is now being used in a context where a direct correction or refutation is being made. However, according to our analysis, fronted negation is less suitable in corrective focus contexts, as the primary goal is to negate the previous statement outright, focusing on correction rather than expressing degrees of certainty. In these cases, a straightforward negation without fronting (“Hann hefur ekki skrifað þetta!”) is more pragmatically appropriate and thus more acceptable to speakers.

In order to prevent misunderstanding, it should be emphasized that we are not claiming that there is a direct mapping between the different degrees of epistemic certainty proposed here and the relative order or hierarchy of adverbial functional projections discussed in Cinque (1999). Thus, we are not arguing that the negation or adverbs like *örugglega* ‘definitely’ are necessarily base-generated above adverbs like *sennilega* ‘probably’ that would in turn be base-generated above adverbs like *hugsanlega* ‘possibly’, for instance. Actually, there is independent evidence for assuming that epistemic adverbs like *probably* generally and cross-linguistically precede adverbs like *possibly* (Cinque 1999:106), but the residency and potential movements of the sentential negation in languages like Icelandic is a much more complicated and controversial issue. Thus, the details of where exactly in a Cinquean hierarchy of functional projections *ekki* ‘not’ should be located is beyond the scope of this paper.

5 Conclusion

This study has examined the phenomenon of Negative Preposing (NP) in Icelandic, arguing it is a complex, multi-faceted construction with varying functions depending on the context. We have identified two primary categories in which NP operates: stylistic triggers and expressions of epistemic certainty.

In the first category, stylistic triggers, NP serves a role that is more rhetorical or conventional rather than compositional. Instances such as polite questions and conjunct negation employ fronted negation for stylistic or pragmatic effects, allowing for less forceful inquiries or creating cohesive negative constructions. This usage aligns with patterns observed cross-linguistically, where nega-

tion can be employed to add nuance or politeness to discourse.

The second category, the expression of epistemic certainty, is where NP showcases its more intricate function in Icelandic. Here, fronted negation serves to convey varying degrees of the speaker's certainty about the negated proposition. In yes/no questions incorporating epistemic modality, NP allows speakers to express doubt or surprise about a previously stated proposition. In assertions, it introduces an implicit modal element that underscores the speaker's high confidence or strong stance. This use of negation is indicative of Icelandic's ability to encode subtle epistemic distinctions through syntactic means.

Furthermore, we have outlined the contexts where NP is not applicable, particularly in direct contradictions or corrective focus statements. We have suggested that the absence of fronted negation in these instances underscores the specific function of NP in expressing degrees of certainty rather than in performing direct refutation or correction. Corrective statements are primarily concerned with challenging an existing proposition, leaving less room for the expression of epistemic stances that NP typically conveys.

Further research could delve into the cross-linguistic patterns of NP and similar negation strategies, examining how different languages leverage these structures to encode pragmatic and modal subtleties. A diachronic study of NP in Icelandic would also provide valuable insights into how its expressive functions have evolved, offering a window into the broader relationship between negation, modality, and language change.

6 Appendices

Full list of test items below.

- (I) A: Viltu sígarettu?
do-you.want cigarette
'Do you want a cigarette?'
- B: Nei takk, ég reyki ekki.
no thanks, I smoke not
'No thanks, I don't smoke.'
- B': Nei takk, ekki reyki ég.
no thanks, not smoke I
'No thanks, I don't smoke.'
- (II) A: Á að rigna á morgun?
is to rain tomorrow
'Is it going to rain tomorrow?'
- B: Ekki held ég það.
not think I that

‘I don’t think so.’

B’: Það held ég ekki.
that think I not
‘I don’t think so.’

(III) A: Eru Jón og Haraldur tvíburar?
are Jón and Haraldur twins
‘Are Jón and Haraldur twins?’

B: Já.
yes
‘Yes.’

A: Ekki eru þeir líkir.
not are they alike
‘They do not look similar (at all).’

A’: Þeir eru ekki líkir.
they are not alike
‘They do not look similar (at all).’

(IV) A: Það er verið að auglýsa djasstónleika í kvöld.
it is being to advertise jazz-concert in night
‘A jazz concert is being advertised for tonight.’

B: Ég ætla ekki að fara.
I intend not to go
‘I am not going to go.’

B’: Ekki ætla ég að fara.
not intend I to go
‘I am not going to go.’

(V) A: Þetta er frábærlega skrifað hjá Laxness!
This is excellently written by Laxness
‘This is excellently written by Laxness!’

B: Ekki hefur hann skrifað þetta!
not has he written this
‘He has not written this!’

B’: Hann hefur ekki skrifað þetta!
he has not written this
‘He has not written this!’

(VI) [Athugið að hér á svar B að vera spurning þótt viðkomandi finnist ólíklegt að Laxness sé höfundurinn]. [Note that here B’s response should be a question, even if the person finds it unlikely that Laxness is the author].

- A: Þetta er frábærlega skrifað hjá Laxness!
this is excellently written by Laxness
'This is excellently written by Laxness!'
- B: Ekki hefur hann skrifað þetta?
not has he written this
'Has he not written this?'
- B': Hann hefur ekki skrifað þetta?
he has not written this
'Has he not written this?'
- (VII) A: Jón er nú ekki mjög myndarlegur og hann er ekki skemmtilegur!
Jón is now not very handsome and he is not entertaining
'Jón is not very handsome and he is not entertaining!'
- A': Jón er nú ekki mjög myndarlegur og ekki er hann skemmtilegur!
Jón is now not very handsome and not is he entertaining
'Jón is not very handsome and he is not entertaining!'
- (VIII) A: Málið rann í gegnum þingið og ekki heyrðist múkk frá stjórnarandstöðunni.
the-issue ran in through parliament and not heard a-peep from the-opposition
'The issue passed through parliament and not a peep was heard from the opposition.'
- A': Málið rann í gegnum þingið og það heyrðist ekki múkk frá stjórnarandstöðunni.
the-issue ran in through parliament and it heard not a-peep from the-opposition
'The issue passed through parliament and not a peep was heard from the opposition.'
- (IX) A: Sjúkdómurinn er víst ólæknandi.
the-disease is apparently incurable
'The disease is apparently incurable.'
- B: Ég vissi ekki að þetta væri svona alvarlegt.
I knew not that this was so serious
'I did not know that this was so serious.'
- B': Ekki vissi ég að þetta væri svona alvarlegt.
not knew I that this was so serious
'I did not know that this was so serious.'
- (X) A: [Horfir út um gluggann]. Það er nú meira hvað þeim gengur illa að grafa þennan skurð.
looks out the window. it is now more what them goes poorly to dig this ditch
'[Looks out the window]. It is really something how poorly they are doing digging this ditch.'
- B: Og ekki hafa þeir gert mikið í dag.
and not have they done much in day
'And they have not done much today.'
- B': Og þeir hafa ekki gert mikið í dag.
and they have not done much in day
'And they have not done much today.'

- (XI) A: [Spyrill í spurningakeppni]: Nú er spurt, hvert var móðurmál Astrid Lindgren?
 quizmaster in quiz-competition: now is asked, what was mother-tongue Astrid Lindgren
 ‘[Quizmaster in a quiz competition]: Now the question is, what was Astrid Lindgren’s mother tongue?’
- B: [Keppandi]: Danska?
 contestant: Danish
 ‘[Contestant]: Danish?’
- A: Nei, það var ekki danska.
 no, it was not Danish
 ‘No, it was not Danish.’
- A’: Nei, ekki var það danska.
 no, not was it Danish
 ‘No, it was not Danish.’
- A’’: Nei, danska var það ekki.
 no, Danish was it not
 ‘No, Danish it was not.’
- (XII) A: [Þjónn á veitingastað]: Get ég aðstoðað?
 Waiter at restaurant: can I assist
 ‘[Waiter at a restaurant]: Can I help you?’
- B: Ekki áttu meira brauð?
 not have-you more bread
 ‘Don’t you have more bread?’
- B’: Áttu ekki meira brauð?
 have-you not more bread
 ‘Don’t you have more bread?’
- (XIII) A: *(Situr við skrifborð þegar B kemur inn)*
 ‘*(Sits at the desk when B comes in)*’
- B: Hefur þú séð Guðmund í dag?
 have you seen Guðmundur in day
 ‘Have you seen Guðmundur today?’
- B’: Ekki hefur þú séð Guðmund í dag?
 not have you seen Guðmundur in day
 ‘Haven’t you seen Guðmundur today?’
- B’’: Hefur þú ekki séð Guðmund í dag?
 have you not seen Guðmundur in day
 ‘Have you not seen Guðmundur today?’
- (XIV) A: Ég var að tala við Harald. Honum virðist líka vel fyrir sunnan.
 I was to talk with Haraldur. him seems like well for south
 ‘I was talking to Haraldur. He seems to like it well in the South.’

- B: Býr hann ekki á Akureyri?
lives he not in Akureyri
'Doesn't he live in Akureyri?'
- B': Ekki býr hann á Akureyri?
not lives he in Akureyri
'Doesn't he live in Akureyri?'
- (XV) A: Ég var að tala við Harald. Honum virðist líka vel fyrir norðan.
I was to talk with Haraldur. him seems like well for north
'I was talking to Haraldur. He seems to like it well in the north.'
- B: Ekki býr hann á Akureyri?
not lives he in Akureyri
'Doesn't he live in Akureyri?'
- B': Býr hann ekki á Akureyri?
lives he not in Akureyri
'Doesn't he live in Akureyri?'
- (XVI) A: Niðurstöðurnar úr rannsókninni komu læknum mjög á óvart.
results.the from study.the came doctors.DAT very on surprise
'The results of the research surprised the doctors very much.'
- B: Vissu þeir ekki að þetta væri svona alvarlegt?
knew they not that this was so serious
'Didn't they know that this was so serious?'
- B': Ekki vissu þeir að þetta væri svona alvarlegt?
not knew they that this was so serious
'Didn't they know that this was so serious?'
- (XVII) A: Niðurstöðurnar úr rannsókninni virtust ekki koma læknum á óvart.
results.the from study.the seemed not come doctors.DAT on surprise
'The results of the research did not seem to surprise the doctors.'
- B: Ekki vissu þeir að þetta væri svona alvarlegt?
not knew they that this was so serious
'Didn't they know that this was so serious?'
- B': Vissu þeir ekki að þetta væri svona alvarlegt?
knew they not that this was so serious
'Didn't they know that this was so serious?'
- (XVIII) [Hundurinn er í yfirvigt og A sakar B um að hafa gefið honum mat þrátt fyrir samkomulag um annað] ["The dog is overweight, and A accuses B of having given him food despite an agreement to the contrary."]
- A: Þú gafst hundinum!
you gave the-dog
'You fed the dog!'

- B: Nei, ekki gerði ég það!
no, not did I it
'No, I did not!'
- B': Nei, ég gerði það ekki!
no, I did it not
'No, I did not do it!'
- (XIX) A: Hún hefur drepið manninn sinn.
she has killed her-husband
'She has killed her husband.'
- B: Hún gerði það ekki.
she did it not
'She did not do it.'
- B': Ekki gerði hún það.
not did she it
'She did not do it.'
- (XX) A: Þessi gjöf er ómerkt. Gæti hún verið frá Haraldi frænda á Akureyri?
this gift is unmarked. could it be from Harald uncle in Akureyri
'This gift is unmarked. Could it be from Uncle Harald in Akureyri?'
- B: Nei, hún getur ekki verið frá honum. Hann kann ekki að pakka svona vel inn.
no, it can not be from him. he knows not to wrap so well in
'No, it can't be from him. He doesn't know how to wrap so well.'
- B': Nei, ekki getur hún verið frá honum. Hann kann ekki að pakka svona vel inn.
no, not can it be from him. he knows not to wrap so well in
'No, it can't be from him. He doesn't know how to wrap so well.'
- B'': Nei, frá honum getur hún ekki verið. Hann kann ekki að pakka svona vel inn.
no, from him can it not be. he knows not to wrap so well in
'No, it can't be from him. He doesn't know how to wrap so well.'

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