

ELT Concourse: assertive and non-assertive forms

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Assertion and non-assertion

Out here on the web there is a good deal of confusion concerning assertion and non-assertion in English. The following is a brief attempt to get the terms clear.

Sentences come in four sorts in English. They can be:

1. Statements:

He saw a unicorn (positive)

He didn't see a unicorn (negative)

2. Questions:

Did he see a unicorn? (positive)

Didn't he see a unicorn? (negative)

3. Commands:

Look at the unicorn (positive)

Don't look at the unicorn (negative)

4. Exclamations:

What a beautiful unicorn! (only positive allowed)

Wrong rules

As far as it goes, this is true but among many teachers, and on many websites, there is a further assumption that sentences in English, whatever they do, are either positive, negative or interrogative. This leads to a second assumption that sentences come in opposed pairs, like this:

1. Either positive or negative. For example:

I have some money

vs.

I don't have any money

2. Either declarative or interrogative. For example:

He has some time

vs.

Does he have any time?

This results in all kinds of error, not least providing learners with 'rules' that don't work properly. From this analysis, it follows that we can tell learners that we use certain forms of adverbs, determiners and pronouns with these distinct sorts of sentences and then we get quasi-rules such as:

- Use *some, someone, something, somebody* etc. in positive sentences. For example:

I have some bread

not

I have any bread

Use *any, anyone, anything, anybody* in negative and interrogative sentences. For example:

I don't have any bread

Do you have any bread?

not

I don't have some bread

Do you have some bread?

So,

Did you want something?

and

I'm not seeing someone else

are both wrong.

- Use *a long way* in positive, negative and interrogative sentences. For example:

It is a long way

It isn't a long way

Is it a long way?

Use *far* only negative and interrogative sentences. For example:

Is it far?

It isn't far

not

It is far

So,

It's far enough for me to take a taxi

is wrong.

- Use *a lot of* or *many* in positive, negative and interrogative sentences. For example:

He has a lot of money

He doesn't have a lot of money

Does he have a lot of money?

He has many friends

He doesn't have many friends

Does he have many friends?

Use *much* in negative and interrogative sentences. For example:

He doesn't have much money

How much money does he have?

not

He has much money

So,

I have much enjoyed talking to you

is wrong.

- Use *already* in positive sentences and *yet* in negative and interrogative sentences

He has already finished

He hasn't finished yet

Has he finished yet?

not

He has yet finished

He hasn't already finished

Has he already finished?

So,

She has yet to decide

and

Have you finished already?!

are both wrong.

From rules like that, it follows that all these sentences are wrong:

- *Anybody can come in*
- *Anything you can do would help*
- *I don't know some of these people*
- *Do you know something about this?*
- *What if someone calls?*
- *She denied stealing any money*
- *That is far from the truth*
- *It is far away from here*
- *Why don't you do something about it?*
- *Goats will eat anything*
- *We have given it much thought*
- *I have yet to see him*
- *Have you done that already?*

but they aren't wrong, are they?

We need a better way to analyse the language.

(Purely as a matter of fact, you may be interested to know that corpus research has shown that the word *any* occurs more frequently in positive sentences than in negative and interrogative ones added together. (Willis 1990:67))

A clearer way to see things

The issue here is that we should view the functions of sentences rather differently, not simply in terms of positive, negative and interrogative, and a way to do that is to consider assertive and non-assertive function so we get:

1. Assertive forms:

1. Statement:

I have brought some bread

It's a long way

2. Interrogative:

Is there some bread in the cupboard?

Is there someone you want to talk to?

3. Negative:

Wasn't there something you needed to ask me? (also interrogative)

She wasn't somebody I wanted to talk to

Somebody hasn't been honest

2. Non-assertive forms:

1. Statement:

Any help would be welcome

It is far away, beyond the mountains

Anyone who drinks and drives is irresponsible

2. Interrogatives:

How far is it?

Do you have anything to add?

3. Negative:

It isn't far

I don't have any

The usual division into assertive and non-assertive determiners, adverbs and pronouns is as follows:

Assertive forms	Non-assertive forms
<i>some- series</i>	<i>any- / no- series</i>
<i>already</i>	<i>yet</i>
<i>still</i>	<i>any / no longer / more</i>
<i>somewhat</i>	<i>no / none</i>
<i>as well too</i>	<i>either</i>
<i>a long way</i>	<i>far</i>
<i>a lot of</i>	<i>much / many</i>
<i>a few / a little</i>	<i>few / little</i>
<i>a lot</i>	<i>at all</i>

Some of these cause few problems because the sense of them is negative rather than that they require interrogative or negative sentence forms. The ones that do cause the

problems are those that are the subject of the quasi-rules discussed above and it is to these that our attention needs to turn.

What all this boils down to is the fact that we have to look below the surface of a clause and decide what the deep meaning is.

The scope of negation revealed

It is certainly the case that real questions (rather than offers or invitations to say *yes*) and negative sentences usually take the non-assertive forms but that is not invariably the case as the sets of sentences above go to show. There is, however, a distinct difference in meaning between:

*I don't know **any** of the people at this party* (non-assertive form of the determiner)
and

*I don't know **some** of the people at this party* (assertive form of the determiner)

The difference in meaning is to do with the scope of negation. In the first sentence above, the whole clause, including the prepositional phrase adverbial, *at this party*, is being negated. In the second sentence only the verb phrase, *don't know*, is in the negative and the implication is that I do know some of the people.

Here are some more examples in which the scope of negation is progressively decreased (shown by underlining):

*I didn't see **anybody** doing **anything** wrong*
in which the both clauses are negated and nobody did wrong
vs.

*I didn't see **anybody** doing **something** wrong*
in which it may be accepted that something wrong was done but I saw nobody doing that
vs.

*I didn't see **somebody** doing **something** wrong*
in which I am prepared to accept that some wrong was done by someone but I deny that I saw it.

The rule is:

If a non-assertive form is used, it will lie outside the scope of the negation

The scope of interrogation



Ostensibly interrogative sentences can hide requests or offers so, for example, in both:

Can I get you something to eat?

and

Will somebody turn the heating up?

we have a natural use of assertive terms (*something* and *somebody*) occurring in what look like interrogatives where we would expect non-assertive terms (*anything* and *anybody*). If we look a little deeper, we can see that these are not real questions at all: the first is an offer and the second is a request.

There is a little more to it than that because in sentences such as:

Has she arrived yet?

They haven't started yet

and

She has already arrived

we have the expected non-assertive *yet* in the question and negative and the assertive *already* in the positive sentence. No problem so far.

However, in:

Do you think she has arrived yet?

and

Do you think she has already arrived?

we can see that in the first example, the question concerns the whole sentence (so we use *yet*, conventionally) but in the second example, the use of *already* signals that the interrogation stops at the verb *think* and the predicate is a positive proposition.

That's quite subtle and, for learners, not particularly intuitive.

Markedness



When we use a form out of place, so to speak, we are often implying something which the more usual form would not. In other words, we are marking the item. For example:

Did anyone come in?

is a simple unmarked question which requires a yes/no answer but

Did someone come in?

implies that the questioner is fairly sure the answer will be yes and state who came in.

By the same token,

Haven't you already bought some vegetables?

strongly implies that the questioner suspects a positive answer but

Haven't you bought any vegetables, yet?

does not.

Frequently a superficially interrogative sentence disguises a request so if we compare, for example:

Will somebody help with this?

with

Will anybody help with this?

we can see that the first is marked as a request because it can naturally be followed by *please* whereas the second sentence would be unnatural if we include *please*.

This phenomenon occurs in conditional clauses, too, so, for example:

If somebody wants to come in my car, that's OK with me

implies that the speaker is laying particular emphasis (i.e., marking) the pronoun and may have a person in mind or be restricting the offer to a single individual. The normal, unmarked, sentence would be:

If anybody wants to come in my car, that's OK with me

In negative clauses this is also apparent. For example, in:

I don't need somebody's help

the restriction probably applies only to the hearer but in:

I don't need anybody's help

the sense is unrestricted.

Condition and contingency



If it snows any more ...

By their nature, conditional and contingent clauses express some doubt and doubt implies a possible negative outcome. It is no surprise, then, that in conditional sentences, non-assertive forms are normally used unless, of course, the speaker / writer chooses to mark the clause.

So, for example, we get:

If you want any help, just ask

which implies that there is a strong possibility that the hearer / reader will not need any help or we can have:

If you want some help, please ask

which implies that the speaker / writer strongly suspects that the hearer / reader will take the offer up.

Other conditional forms imply even greater doubt so we are more likely to encounter, e.g.:

If she wanted any help, she would ask

as the unmarked form but:

If she wanted some help, she would ask

which implies some surprise that she did not ask for help.

The alternative understanding of the second example is that it is the equivalent of:

Whenever she wanted some help, she would ask

which is not a conditional meaning.

Past forms, because they lack the sense of doubt, can work both ways but the assertive forms do not carry particular marking so we get, e.g.:

If she had needed any help she would have asked

or

If she had needed some help she would have asked

which are functionally synonymous because in neither case was help required.

The use of assertive forms in ostensibly conditional constructions actually undermines the sense of condition altogether so, for example:

If you have some questions, please wait till the end

implies that the speaker is sure that the audience has questions and is not conditional at all. It is the equivalent of:

Please ask your questions at the end.

Other conditional conjunctions work in a similar way so we get, e.g.:

Unless we have any more snow, the trains should be running OK

which implies that the speaker does not think the snow will interfere with transport but

Unless we have some more snow, the trains should be running OK

which implies that the speaker believes there is a better chance of more snow.

We can also have:

Providing any problems are reported immediately, there is no objection

which makes it clear that the speaker / writer does not believe there is much chance of problems arising and we do not normally encounter assertive forms as in:

*?*Providing some problems are reported immediately, there is no objection*

which would imply strongly that problems have already been identified.

So what?



So rather a lot. The focus on assertive vs. non-assertive forms allows us to explain a number of issues in English use:



The *any-* vs. *some-* series of words and other assertive / non-assertive pairs

*Would you like
some tea?*

We now have an explanation for the use of *any* and *some* which does not depend on a crude distinction between statement, interrogative and negative. What we have is a simpler distinction between assertive forms (the *some-* series) and non-assertive forms (the *any-* series). Like this:

1. Assertive forms:

1. Statements:

I have some new email

I'd like something to drink

I want to speak to someone about this

2. Interrogatives:

Would you like some tea?

Is there somebody there?

Is there something I can do for you?

3. Negatives:

He isn't someone I want to spend my time with

If you can't say something nice, don't speak at all

Couldn't you see that somebody was waiting for you?

2. Non-assertive forms:

1. Statements

Any news would be welcome

Anyone can see it's nonsense

Anything that old is likely to give trouble

2. Interrogatives:

Would you like any tea?

Is there anybody there?

Is there anything I can do for you?

3. Negatives:

There isn't anyone I want to talk to here

If you can't say anything nice, don't speak at all

Couldn't you see anybody? (also interrogative)

- The assertive forms used in questions often imply that the intention is to communicate an offer or to make it clear that a positive answer is expected. The non-assertive forms are more truly open questions. Compare:
Is there somebody at the door? (I heard knocking)
with
Is there anybody at the door? (I have no idea whether there is or not)
- Assertive forms used in negative statements often imply an identifiable thing or person. The non-assertive form implies an absence of something (i.e., refers to quantity not identity). Compare:
I couldn't find somebody who knew the answer (a particular knowledgeable person)
with
I couldn't find anybody who knew the answer (= nobody knew the answer)
- Some verbs which imply non-assertive use by their nature also require non-assertive forms of the pronoun / determiner. We saw an instance of the verb *deny* above. Compare, e.g.:
I doubt we'll have any rain vs. *I expect we'll have some rain*
I hate any rudeness vs. *I can accept some rudeness*
etc. For a list of verbs which imply negation and require non-assertive forms, see the list at the end.

This also clears up much of the confusion with other forms:

1. Assertive forms:

1. Statements:

He has already arrived

It's a very long way away

We have a lot of friends

2. Interrogatives:

Have you already finished?

Is it a very long way?

Has she got a lot of money?

3. Negatives:

If he hasn't already finished, I'll help out

It isn't a long way

She doesn't have a lot of money

2. Non-assertive forms:

1. Statements

I have yet to start

It is far from here

We have many friends in America

2. Interrogatives:

Have you finished it yet?

Is it far?

Has she got much money?

3. Negatives:

I haven't yet read it

It isn't far away

She hasn't got much money

As you can see, both assertive and non-assertive forms can be used in all three types of sentence but there are shades of meaning to consider.

The assertive forms, *already*, *a long way* and *a lot of*, can be used in interrogative and negative sentences quite naturally but there are presuppositions inherent in their use:

- If we use *already* in an interrogative, it implies some surprise.

Has she already graduated? That was quick!

vs.:

Has she graduated yet?

- If we use *already* in a negative statement, it implies that we would be mildly surprised to discover that we were wrong.

If she hasn't already arrived, I'll be surprised

vs.:

If she hasn't arrived yet, that's no surprise

- If we use *a long way* in an interrogative, we are starting from the presumption that something is not near.

Is the house far from the shops?

No, not really

vs.:

Is the house a long way from the shops?

Yes, I'm afraid it is

- If we use *a long way* in a negative statement, we are implying that, although the distance may be considerable, it is manageable.

The house isn't a long way from the shops but you need to take a bus

vs.:

The house isn't far from the shops so you can walk easily

The non-assertive forms, *yet*, *far*, *many* and *much* can also be used in positive sentences but again there is a shift in meaning.

- If we use *yet* in a positive sentence, we imply that something has not happened (so the sense is actually negative, hence the form).

I have yet to start but I will soon

vs.:

I have already started and will finish soon

- If we use *far* in a positive sentence, we are stating that something is a considerable distance away.

It is too far to walk so take the bus

vs.:

It is a long way away

- If we use *much* and *many* instead of *a lot of* in a positive sentence, we are implying that the quantity is higher than expected.

I have given the matter much consideration, more than you might expect

vs.:

I have given the matter a lot of consideration, as you know

and

We have asked many times but never received an answer

vs.:

We have asked a lot of times and always get the same answer

Modality



Dare I get any closer?

The use of some semi- and marginal modal auxiliary verbs can be explained with reference to assertive and non-assertive uses. Some of these verbs can **only** be used non-assertively. For example:

1. The semi-modal auxiliary verb *need* is used non-assertively so we allow, e.g.:

I needn't do that

and

Need we go now?

but not the assertive

**I need go*

Assertively, we prefer the lexical form of the verb:

I need to go

2. The semi-modal auxiliary verb *dare* is similar in that we allow, e.g.:

Dare I ask?

He daren't jump

but not the assertive

**I dared ask*

Assertively, we prefer the lexical form of the verb:

I dared to ask

3. The marginal modal *care to* also works this way:

I don't care to eat at restaurants

Would you care to go to the cinema?

but not

**I care to go to the cinema*

4. The modal auxiliary *can + bear + infinitive* works this way, too:

I can't bear to hear any more

Could you bear to explain it again?

but not

**I can bear to do it*

5. The modal auxiliary verb *can + help + -ing* form and *stand + -ing* form is similar but only affects the negative form:

I couldn't help laughing

I can't stand waiting in queues

but not

**I can help crying*

**I can stand waiting*

nor

**Can you help laughing?*

**Can you stand waiting?*

6. The verb *mind* is normally used non-assertively:

Do you mind waiting?

I don't mind at all

but not

?I mind waiting

Other negators



Never give me any lip

There is a small group of negators in English which require non-assertive forms. There are six common ones:

barely, hardly, scarcely, rarely, seldom and the true negator *never*. For example:

- *I barely have any food at home*
- *He has scarcely started yet*
- *I have hardly heard much noise*
- *He rarely has much to do*
- *I seldom hear anything good about her*
- *You never have far to go*

In addition, some other signals of negation need to be considered.

Negative conjunctions

The obvious one is *neither ... nor* which usually requires the use of non-assertive forms so we get:

Neither John nor Mary spoke to anyone

The conjunctions *but* and *although* also have a negative sense in, e.g.:

I expected nothing but anything was possible

He said little although anything he said was worth hearing

Negative prepositions

There is a small number of these. For example:

We have finished bar anything you want to add

Your luggage will be checked in except anything you can carry on board

Excluding any other people was the aim of the policy

He arrived without anyone showing him the way

I am against anything that makes it more expensive

Negative adverbs

A few indefinite frequency adverbs imply a negative sense. For example:

He seldom does any work

They rarely invite anyone

She infrequently tells me anything

They hardly ever expect anything good to happen

She scarcely spoke to anyone

We have hardly had any time yet

The adverb *nearly* also often requires a non-assertive form, e.g.:

Nearly anything you can do will help

Negative adjectives

There are plenty of these and they almost always demand a non-assertive form in the clause in which they occur.

It was difficult to see anything

It was hard to meet anyone interesting

It was tough to go far

She is reluctant to start yet

I find it exhausting to do anything in the heat

It was impossible to help anybody

etc.

Negative determiners

These have been discussed above, of course, but it is noted here that some require other non-assertive forms in the clauses in which they appear. For example:

There was little opportunity to go anywhere

We had few chances of winning anything

Negative verbs

There is a recognisable group of these which includes:

I reject any accusations

I deny taking it far

I lacked anything waterproof to wear

I refuse to start yet

I forbid you to go anywhere

I prevented him from doing anything stupid

You are prohibited from starting it yet

Other verbs that may call for non-assertive forms in the syntax include:

abhor, annul, avert, avoid, deny, deter, detest, disavow, discard, dislike, disprove, disregard, disrupt, distrust, dodge, doom, doubt, duck, elude, escape, eschew, evade, excuse, exterminate, fail, fear, foil, forbid, forestall, forswear, frown on, frustrate, harm, hate, hinder, impair, invalidate, jeopardise, lack, loathe, mangle, mar, negate, neglect, obliterate, obscure, obstruct, omit, ostracise, paralyse, penalise, persecute, poison, prevent, punish, refrain, regret, reject, renounce, repudiate, scrap, shirk, shun, stop, suffocate, threaten, thwart, undermine etc.

Negative nouns

Some nouns are obviously negative and require non-assertive forms in the clause. For example:

There is a lack of any sensible ideas

There is a shortage of any clean water

Her avoidance of anything controversial made it a bit dull

There was a scarcity of anyone willing to help

In the absence of anything better, we chose the steak

Negative conditional clauses

Some conditional sentences carry a negative connotation so we find, e.g.:

If you do anything wrong, you will be told about it

She will get arrested if she does anything so stupid

I'll close the meeting now unless anyone has anything to add

One other expression also requires non-assertive forms: *at all*. We can have, e.g.:

Did you get any money at all?

She didn't enjoy it at all

but not

**I liked the food at all*

Summary

Where it is applicable, counter examples are provided to show that the normally cited rules for using some items are not rules at all.

Assertive forms	Non-assertive forms	Examples following the 'rules'	Counter examples of breaking the 'rules'
<i>some-</i> series	<i>any- / no-</i> series	Someone is knocking at the door Is anyone there? No one is there	Is someone going to help? It wasn't something I wanted to do Any money would be welcome
<i>already</i>	<i>yet</i>	I have already finished Have you finished yet? I haven't finished yet	Have you finished the work already? She has yet to give me an answer
<i>still</i>	<i>any / no longer / more</i>	I'm still at university I'm not at university any longer I'm no longer at university	Is she still complaining? He's not still here, is he?
<i>somewhat</i>	<i>no / none</i>	I am somewhat better informed I'm none the wiser now I'm no better informed	Not applicable
<i>as well too</i>	<i>either</i>	She is coming as well / too She isn't coming either	Is she coming as well? She isn't bringing her mother, too
<i>a long way</i>	<i>far</i>	It's a long way off Is it far? It isn't far	It isn't a long way It is too far to cycle Can you go a long way on the battery?

<i>a lot of</i>	<i>much / many</i>	He has a lot of time He doesn't have much time He doesn't have many friends	I have much to do We have many ideas We didn't have a lot of time
<i>a few / a little</i>	<i>few / little</i>	We have a few bottles We want a little more time We have few ideas We have little time	Not applicable
<i>a lot</i>	<i>at all</i>	I enjoyed it a lot I didn't enjoy it at all	Not applicable
lexical forms of semi-modal auxiliary verbs	modal forms of semi-modal auxiliary verbs	I need to take a break I needn't take a break	Not applicable

Try a test on some of this.

Related guides

<u>negation</u>	for other ways to look at non-assertive forms
<u>interrogatives</u>	for the guide to forming questions in English
<u>semi-modal auxiliary verbs</u>	for more on the use of lexical and modal forms of these verbs and how assertive and non-assertive forms apply

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