

You don't have no need to worry about double negatives

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When people are suffering from linguistic pain, they sometimes seek solace by writing to this newspaper in the hope of easing their distress.

Since the EDP are kind enough to let me write a column on language, I feel I ought to try to help.

We've had letter writers bemoaning too many 'likes' and 'wells' in the speech of others. Now we have a complaint about 'double negatives' which, a correspondent suggests, indicate a need for more education.

Perhaps he might find this soothing. William Shakespeare was a very educated man. His grammar school education gave him a great knowledge of the grammar of Ancient Greek and Latin – much more than the majority of EDP readers have, including me – and he was very familiar with the works of Ovid, Virgil, Seneca, Plutarch, Cicero, Horace...

He also wrote the following lines: "You know my father hath no child but I, nor none is like to have" (As You Like It); "Nor go neither; but you'll lie like dogs and yet say nothing neither" (The Tempest); and "No woman has, nor never none shall be, mistress of it" (Twelfth Night).

Sufferers often argue that two negatives



■ Mark Rylance as Olivia, right, and Stephen Fry as Malvolio, during a performance of William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.
Picture: AP/BONEAU/BRYAN-BROWN/GERAINT LEWIS

make a positive. But that's maths, not language. If you ask for something in a shop and get the reply "We in't got none", you don't hang around waiting for it, you leave the shop.

The label 'double negative' is wrong, too, because there can be more than two negatives – "nor never none shall be" – and if we really were dealing with maths, three negatives would actually make a negative, though complainants don't seem to find this any less painful.

Linguists call grammatical constructions with more than one negative 'multiple negation' or 'negative concord'. Most languages in the world have multiple

negation. Just think of French: *je ne sais pas* = I not know not.

All varieties of English used to have it, as the Shakespeare examples show. But over the last few centuries, Standard English has gradually lost it, while most other English dialects around the world have kept it.

As it's not Standard English, we don't normally use it in writing. But there's nothing wrong or bad about multiple negation as such.

You don't have to use it yourself if you don't want to. But if you feel the pain coming on again when others use it, try relaxing and thinking of the Bard.