

# Between you and I: Non-standard grammar in *The Catcher in the Rye*<sup>1</sup>

Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Oostade

In the opening lines of his preface to his *Dissertations on the English Language* (1789), Noah Webster (1758–1843) describes the predicament of university graduates who, upon their entry into the world, are confronted with the way people really speak:

YOUNG gentlemen who have gone through a course of academical studies, and received the usual honors of a University, are apt to contract a singular stiffness in their conversation. They read Lowth's Introduction, or some other grammatical treatise, believe what they read, without examining the grounds of the writer's opinion, and attempt to shape their language by his rules. Thus they enter the world with such phrases as, *a mean*, *averse from*, *if he have*, *he has gotten*, and others which they deem *correct*; they pride themselves, for some time, in their superior learning and peculiarities; till further information, or the ridicule of the public, brings them to use the language of other people (1789: vii).<sup>2</sup>

It is unlikely that Holden Caulfield, the narrator and protagonist of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), would ever come to suffer from a similar predicament. For one thing, he probably never would be granted entry to a university in view of his record of behaviour at the various prep schools he attended. And for another, the language he utters shows him to be completely ignorant of any of the grammatical rules that would in the normal course of events have been inflicted on him during his English classes. Costello (1959), in his analysis of the language of the novel, lists seven instances of Holden's violations of the rules of grammar:

His most common rule violation is the misuse of *lie* and *lay*, but he also is careless about relative pronouns (“about a traffic cop that falls in love”), the double negative (“I hardly didn't even know I was doing it”), the perfect tenses (“I'd woke him up”), extra words (“like as if all you ever did at Pency was play polo all the time”), pronoun

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in C.C. Barfoot and E.M. Knottenbelt (eds.), *A Plain Sense of Things. A Tribute to Professor Sarah Betsky-Zweig by Members of the English Department on her Retirement from the Chair of American Literature at the University of Leiden*. Leiden: Universiteit Leiden. 113–119. The text of the original article has been slightly adapted here.

<sup>2</sup> Among eighteenth-century grammarians, opinions were divided between these constructions (taken from Leonard 1929) and *a means*, *averse to*, *if he has* and *he has got*, respectively (see Leonard 1929: 276, 294, 272 and 280).

number (“it’s pretty disgusting to watch somebody picking their nose”), and pronoun position (“I and this friend of mine, Mal Brossard”) (Costello 1959: 180).

However, a careful analysis of the language of the novel shows that this list could be extended almost *ad infinitum*. What is more, many of the rules broken by Holden have a history of criticism that can be traced back all the way to the eighteenth century (see Appendix below), the period when most of the rules that today make up the grammar of standard English were first formulated (see Leonard’s “Topical Glossary of Dicta by Eighteenth-Century Writers on English Usage”, 1929: 251–307).

Double negation is one such construction. It was condemned by eighteenth-century grammarians on the grounds that, as in algebra, the product of two negatives is affirmative. “As mathematicians very well know,” Benjamin Martin (1704–1782) added in his grammar published in 1748 (1748: 93). Martin appears to have been the first grammarian – besides being a mathematician as well – to express the principle behind the rule paraphrased here (Tieken-Boon van Oostade 1982a and 1982b). But not all writers on grammar condemned the use of double negation (see Leonard 1929: 286). Robert Baker (fl. 1760–1779), for instance, considered the construction acceptable in “very animated Speeches”, in which two negatives “might perhaps be used not with an ill Grace” (1770: 112–113), and it is in the spoken language that double negation has survived until the present day, not only in dialects but also in the standard language.<sup>3</sup> Examples are the following instances of what must be regarded as a double negative construction: *They don’t. Not when you talk about women’s greatness* (Marilyn French, *The Women’s Room*, 1977: 84) and “*Mr Vine’s a pretty big operation.*” “*Not for me he isn’t.*” (J.P. Donleavy, *A Fairy Tale of New York*, 1973: 64). For a description of this type of negation, see Osselton (1973) (see also Tieken-Boon van Oostade 1995: 15–28). Webster (1807), as quoted by Baron 1982: 139), already anticipated the failure of the eighteenth-century grammarians to rid the language of this illogical construction:

The learned, with a view to philosophical correctness, have rejected the use of *two* negatives for *one* negation; but the expedience of the innovation may be questioned, for the change has not reached the great mass of the people, and probably never will reach them (1807: 192).

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<sup>3</sup> Double negation is still proscribed today, as in Gowers (1954: 175) who wrote “Still, the grammarians’ rule should be observed today”, but even in much more recent usage guides (Tieken-Boon van Oostade forthc.).

Double negation occurs fairly frequently in *The Catcher in the Rye*, mostly in two forms, viz. one type of sentence in which the negation is effected by negative words proper, such as *the fish don't go no place* (1951: 87); and another type in which one of the words negating the sentence is *hardly*, which is, according to Quirk et al. (1972: 380), “negative in meaning, but not in appearance” (see also Mencken 1936: 568). An example of the second type is *and he won't hardly even talk to you* (1951: 85). The distribution in the novel of these two types of double negation present an interesting pattern, not noticed by Costello (1959), who only mentions the latter construction: the instances of the *hardly* type occur only in the language of Holden, whereas those belonging to the first type of double negation are used by such characters as the cab driver (1951: 87, 88) and the pimpy elevator guy (1951: 107). Thus, the distribution of these types of construction reflects the social class of the speaker: it is only the language of the lower-class speakers in the novel that is characterised by what might be referred to as double negation proper.<sup>4</sup>

The use of the subject pronoun in object position, regularly found in Holden's language, was likewise frequently commented on in the eighteenth century. Examples from the novel are: *She'd give Allie or I a push* (1951: 73) and *I think I probably woke he and his wife up* (1951: 181). Leonard quotes Archibald Campbell (ca. 1724–1780) on the subject (1929: 187–188):

In the first Edition of this work [i.e. *Lexiphanes*, 1767], I had used the phrase *between you and I*, which tho' it must be confessed to be ungrammatical, is yet almost universally used in familiar conversation, and sometimes by our best comick writers: see Wycherley's *Plain Dealer*. This very trivial slip, if it be one, has not escaped the diligence and sagacity of the learned and candid Reviewers (1767: 123).

Leonard assumes that Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), who “objects strongly to ‘told my lord and I’” (1929: 54),<sup>5</sup> and other eighteenth-century grammarians may well have brought about

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. the following instances, likewise of the *hardly* type, the first from the language of Honey, a woman of middle-class background portrayed in Alson Lurie's *Only Children* (1979): *He doesn't hardly take any excercise any more* (1979: 79). The second instance derives from another novel by Lurie, *Foreign Affairs* (1985): *those tinny little cars they have that you can't hardly see coming at you* (1985: 145); the speaker is Chuck Mumpson, a middle-class engineer from Oklahoma. Another cab-driver, the one in J.P. Donleavy's *Fairy Tale of New York* (1973), also uses double negation with two negatives proper: *You don't sound like a guy got no friends, don't look it neither* (1973: 7) and *Just ain't got no friends* (1973: 8).

<sup>5</sup> Priestley's *Rudiments of English Grammar* was first published in 1761. Leonard, however, used the 1769 edition. It should be noted that at the time Leonard did his research linguists like him largely had to make do with what happened to be available to them. The situation changed considerably when Alston's microfiche collection of grammars and other primary sources published before 1800 came out in 1974. This provided easy

a change in usage (1929: 262), though as in the case of double negation the construction has survived the censure of the grammarians, continuing even today in the spoken language. An example, though not from the actual spoken language but from a genre of writing allegedly not very far removed from it, was found in Sue Townsend's *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13½* (1982): *Mr Scruton complemented Pandora and I on our leadership qualities* (1982: 124). Another instance is from an installment of the Cockney ITV series *Minder*, very popular during the 1980s: “‘That’s the difference between you and me, Arthur.’ ‘You and I, Terry, you and I’” (broadcast 4 December 1985). Arthur, patronising Terry who acts as his minder, tells him off on what he, wrongly, considers to be incorrect usage; the joke would of course be lost if the construction wasn’t common usage today. According to Gowers (1954: 194), the prevalence of *between you and I* may be explained by the “excess of zeal in correcting the opposite error”. As I demonstrated in Tieken-Boon van Oostade (1994), the construction was also found in the eighteenth century and was even criticised as being a grammatical mistake. Thus it is simply not true, as Simon (1980: 18) claims, that “after centuries of *between you and me*, [we have] switched to *between you and I*”, but it is not unnatural for pedants like John Simon – Bolinger (1980: 1–2) refers to them as “shamans” – to be historically incorrect in matters of language regulation; this is true for the eighteenth century as well (see Tucker 1967: 88). In *The Catcher in the Rye* the use of the construction is likewise at issue. When Holden is taken to task by his former teacher, Mr Antolini, he is told that he “may pick up just enough education to hate people who say, ‘it’s a secret between he and I’” (1951: 193–194), which is the kind of sentence Holden frequently uses himself. In other words, Mr Antolini warns Holden against rising about his own station in like. All this implies that there are two kinds of speakers, those who “know their grammar”, such as Simon and his “half-way self-respecting high-school students [who] would sooner have bitten off and swallowed the tip of [their] pencils than have committed that error”, i.e. of writing *between you and I* (1980: 18), and the Holdens of this world, who do not. As in the case of double negation, the use or non-use of the construction has a clear social relevance in the novel.

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access to first editions of eighteenth-century grammars. Now, of course, we have ECCO (Eighteenth Century Collections Online), which includes different editions of grammars such as Priestley’s. By comparing these different editions, Straaijer (2011: 89) found that the 1769 edition appears to be a reprint of the grammar’s second edition published in 1768, which is substantially different from the first.

There is yet another construction which is socially significant in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden mentions a friend's inferiority complex, which he suggests is largely due to the language of the boy's parents: "You could tell he was very ashamed of his parents and all, because they said 'he don't' and 'she don't' and stuff like that, and they weren't wealthy" (1951: 142) (see also Costello 1959: 179). Holden himself does not use a single instance of the construction. Again, usage may be traced back to the eighteenth century. As Uhrström (1907) writes, in his study of the language of Samuel Richardson (1689–1761):

The construction *Don't* for *Does not* was very common in Richardson's time. In somewhat careless colloquial language it is still very often used though among educated people *Doesn't* is preferred (1907: 21).

(See on the use of *don't* for *doesn't* also Dykema 1947 and Malone 1950.)

From the above discussion two things become clear. In the first place, it appears that for all the past and present censure of the use of double negation, of subject pronominals in object position and of *don't* for *doesn't*, the constructions are all still part of present-day English, albeit in the spoken language only and perhaps mostly in that of less educated speakers. In fact, there is a direct link between the spoken language of today and eighteenth-century usage, when the constructions were all in fairly general use (see Uhrström 1907 and, on double negation, Austen 1984) and were even tolerated by some of the normative grammarians as well as by other writers. It is clear that the prescriptive attitudes of the grammarians with regard to these constructions did little to rid the language of them, a phenomenon that has likewise been noted by Bodine (1975) for the use of *they* and *their* with singular antecedents (an example of Holden's use of this construction is *It's pretty disgusting to watch somebody pick their nose*, 1951: 131): "despite almost two centuries of vigorous attempts to analyze and regulate it out of existence, singular 'they' is alive and well" (1975: 131). The case of "singular *they*" is slightly different from the constructions discussed above in that it has become an issue in the struggle for male and female equality, and as such has its fervent adherents and its equally fervent opponents. One opponent is Simon (1980), whose defense of sex-indefinite *he* is blatantly sexist:

Just because some people are too thickheaded to grasp, for example, that 'anyone' is singular, as the 'one' in it plainly denotes, does not mean that the rest of us must put up with 'anyone can do as they please.' The correct form is, of course, 'anyone may do as he pleases.' ... but we cannot and must not let 'one' become plural. That way madness lies. And don't let fanatical feminists convince you that it must be 'as he or she pleases', which is clumsy and usually serves no other purpose than that of placating the kind of extremist who does not deserve to be placated (1980: 40–41).

But the history of these four constructions, and of others like them (see the Appendix below), brings us to essentially the same conclusion: pre and prescriptive writing since the eighteenth century has mainly served to identify the standard language as a variety distinct from that of “very animated Speeches” or “familiar conversation” as Baker (1770) put it. This variety would be fit for use in writing, and, even at times – as Webster (1789) observed in the quotation at the beginning of this paper – in the spoken language of educated people. The result is that speech and writing have each come to be characterised by their own set of rules and constraints that determines what constitutes good and what bad usage.

The second conclusion that may be drawn regconcerningarding the language of *The Catcher in the Rye* is that in the novel various levels of non-standardness are represented, various degrees in which a particular social-class dialect is made to deviate from the standard language as identified and described since the eighteenth century. There is Holden, who finds himself in a midway position, using double negation of the *hardly* type and phrases like *between you and I*; but unlike the cab driver and the pimpy elevator guy he does not use double negation with two negatives proper, nor does he say *he don't* like the parents of the boy with the inferiority complex. All these people might in fact speak the same dialect, although there is not enough evidence in the novel to confirm that we might have to do with a sociolinguistic continuum here. The cab driver, moreover, also uses *you was* (*if you was a fish ...*, 1951: 88), another construction censured by the eighteenth-century grammarians (Leonard 1929: 275; Baron 1982:137; Tieken-Boon van Oostade 2011: 225–226). On the other hand, there are the people who would realise the ungrammaticality of *between you and I* – Simon’s “half-way self-respecting high-school students” that Holden is warned not to identify with – and who, one suspects, would also refrain from using double negation, even with words like *hardly*. In any case, they would certainly claim not to use it because of the negative prestige attached to it. Each of these three, possibly four groups of people's varieties in the novel is characterised by its own set of rules and constraints. Thus, for Holden it would be wrong to say *he don't*, in the same way in which it would incorrect for the cab driver – as well as for Holden – to produce the grammatically correct *between you and me*.

Not only are characters from different social classes made to speak different sociolects in *The Catcher in the Rye*, and in a convincingly realistic way, we also find in the novel a representation of some of the different registers available to a speaker, most clearly of course in the language of Holden. The following quotation illustrates this:

The Egyptians were an ancient race of Caucasians residing in one of the northern sections of Africa. The latter as we all know is the largest continent in the eastern hemisphere ... The Egyptians are extremely interesting to us today for various reasons. Modern science would still like to know what the secret ingredients were that the Egyptians used when they wrapped up dead people so that their faces would not rot for centuries. This interesting riddle is still quite a challenge to modern science in the twentieth century (1951: 15–16).

This passage, which makes up the entire essay Holden produced for his History class, clearly shows the extent to which he is capable of differentiating between spoken and written usage.<sup>6</sup> And if he himself admits that the essay is “crap”, it is not because of its language but because of its contents. In fact, English is the only subject Holden did not fail during his few months at Pencey Prep (1951: 14), and Stradlater, his roommate even asks him to write an essay for him, much to Holden’s surprise: “*I’m* the one that’s flunking out of the goddam place, and *you’re* asking me to write you a goddam composition” (1951: 32). When Holden says he has “a lousy vocabulary” (1951: 13), it should be clear from the quotation above that it is not his written language he is referring to, for in his essay he knows after all how to use words like *ancient*, *residing*, *the latter*, *hemisphere* and *innumerable* (though he obviously failed to produce *decay*, using the rather more colloquial *rot* instead). Earlier, he remarked: “I’m quite illiterate, but I read a lot” (1951: 22). This should be interpreted as being illiterate insofar as his spoken vocabulary is concerned, which compares unfavourably with that of a former schoolmate, who “was strictly a pain in the ass, but he certainly had a good vocabulary” (1951: 155). In the course of their chat in the Wicker Bar the boy had produced sentences like “He’s helped me to *adjust* myself to a certain extent, but an extensive analysis hadn’t been necessary” (1951: 154).

By means of the above analysis of some instances of non-standard grammar as they occur in *The Catcher in the Rye* I have tried to show that Salinger achieved far more than what Costello calls “an authentic artistic rendering of a type of informal, colloquial, teenage American spoken speech” (1959: 181). Even if the resemblance between fictional dialogue and everyday speech tends to be exaggerated as Page (1973: 4) claims, Salinger has consistently distinguished in his novel between various social-class dialects, one of them being the language of Holden. In doing so, Salinger provided the reader with a naturalistic impression of some of the many varieties of English available to individual speakers, thus

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<sup>6</sup> The language of the essay is not the only type of written prose produced by Holden in the novel; he is capable of writing letters as well (see 1951: 16).

giving a convincing representation of an urban community in full linguistic action. I have also shown that the instances in which Salinger's social-class dialects differ from what has been referred to as standard English may be traced all the way back to the eighteenth century, the period which is responsible for their being branded as non-standard ever since.

*Appendix. Violation of grammatical rules in *The Catcher in the Rye**

A. The following constructions are all discussed by Leonard (1929). The figures in brackets refer to the sections in his Topical Glossary.

adjectives used as adverbs (1.11)	<i>and I damn near fell down</i> (1951: 9)
comparatives and superlatives (4)	<i>which was the stupidest of the three of them</i> (1951: 77)
double negation (12)	<i>the fish don't go no place</i> (1951: 87)
genitival construction (3.2)	<i>he won't hardly even talk to you</i> (1951: 85)
<i>in</i> for <i>into</i> , <i>out</i> for <i>out of</i> (1929: 112)	<i>The blonde I'd been dancing with's name</i> (1951: 77)
lack of subject/verb concord (e.g. 6.3)	<i>he never came in the room</i> (1951: 23)
<i>lie</i> for <i>lay</i> (1.4)	<i>Where the hell's my cigarettes?</i> (1951: 37)
non-restrictive relative clauses with <i>that</i> (2)	<i>how peaceful he looked laying there</i> (1951: 161)
omission of <i>as</i> (9.4)	<i>anybody that knew me</i> (1951: 128)
omission of prepositions (9.3)	<i>He's drunk as a bastard</i> (1951: 33)
preposition stranding (11.24)	<i>she sat down next to me, instead of an empty seat</i> (1951: 57–58)
preterite for participial form (5.11)	<i>that you see nuns ... collecting dough with</i> (1951: 115)
subject for object pronoun (3.12)	<i>if I'd woke her up</i> (1951: 63)
singular <i>they</i> (6.4)	<i>She'd give Allie or I a push</i> (1951: 73)
<i>who</i> for <i>whom</i> (3.16)	<i>to watch somebody pick their nose</i> (1951: 14)
<i>you was</i> (6.16)	<i>You're a friend of who?</i> (1951: 68)
	<i>If you was a fish</i> (1951: 88)

B. The following constructions used by Holden are not discussed by Leonard (1929):

free adjunct with finite verb	<i>On account of it was Sunday, there were ...</i> (1951: 122–123)
inversion of subject and verb in exclamations <sup>7</sup>	<i>Boy, did he look worried</i> (1951: 49)
lack of concord within noun phrase <i>like</i> for <i>as/as though</i> <sup>8</sup>	<i>sitting around on our ass all night</i> (1951: 39) <i>I act like I'm about fourteen</i> (1951: 13)

<sup>7</sup> In their use of periphrastic *do*, exclamations of this type fully resemble yes/no questions. In eighteenth-century English, periphrastic *do* in what I have termed “exclamatory how/wat sentences” were fairly common. I found only three instances of the type listed here, all of them in representations of spoken usage (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 1987: 121).

double nominalising *-er* suffix  
omission of finite verb  
absence of clause link  
omission of subject and finite  
pronoun position in coordination  
*that's for whose*

*some little cheerer upper* (1951: 202)  
*He over his gripple yet?* 1951:10)  
*so all we did, we just had* (1951: 40)  
*know what I mean?* (1951: 60)  
*so I and this friend of mine* (1951: 39)  
*this guy that's grandfather's got a ranch in*  
*Colorado* (1951: 172)

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<sup>8</sup> Leonard (1929: 260) notes that the use of *like* for *as* is not commented on in any grammar prior to the nineteenth century.

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