

GRAMMAR BITE

c Negation

8.7 Verbs as operators

To explain negative as well as other kinds of clauses in English, it is useful to recognize the special syntactic role of the **operator**. The operator is the verb used for clause negation or for forming questions (interrogative clauses). To form a negative clause, the negative particle *not* is inserted after the operator. For interrogative clauses, the operator is placed in front of the subject noun phrase (**subject–operator inversion**). There are three major categories of operators:

A The first auxiliary verb in the verb phrase

Clause negation (the main verb is underlined below):

*They **are** not forgotten.* (FICT)

*They **have** not been very helpful.* (NEWS)

*I **won't** fail.* (FICT)

Question formation:

***Are** you kidding?* (CONV)

***Have** you tried that?* (CONV)

*Where **have** you been?* (FICT)

*What **could** I do?* (FICT)

B The copula *be*

Clause negation:

You're not pretty. (CONV)

Question formation:

***Are** you serious?* (CONV)

C The dummy auxiliary verb *do*

Clause negation:

*Well he **doesn't** live down there now.* (CONV)

Question formation:

*Where **does** she live?* (CONV)

When no operator exists (i.e. for simple present and past tenses), the dummy operator *do* is inserted to form negative and interrogative clauses:

positive

negative

I looked.

*I **didn't** look.*

declarative

interrogative

It makes sense.

***Does** it make sense?*

(The main verb *have* and the quasi-modals *need* and *dare* are sometimes used as operators; see 8.8.6 and 8.11.7 below.)

8.7.1 Operators alone

Apart from their role in forming negation and questions, operators have another function. It is often useful to omit everything in a clause after the operator, where it would simply repeat what has already been said. This is a popular type of final ellipsis (8.5.1):

- 1 A: *You've lost some weight since I've seen you.*
B: *I **have** ^, yes. (CONV)*
- 2 A: *You don't know Murphy's Law?*
B: *Yeah, <...> if anything can go wrong, it **will** ^. (CONV)*
- 3 A: *Didn't you have an aunt like that?*
B: *A great aunt.*
A: *You **did** ^? (CONV)*

In 1–3, the ellipsis is marked by ^, the operator is in bold, and the piece of text which is semantically repeated through the ellipsis is underlined. The operator is typically an auxiliary verb, so this is the exceptional case where an auxiliary verb occurs 'stranded', without the main verb which normally follows it. Note, in 3, that the dummy auxiliary *do* occurs here for simple present and past tenses, just as it does in forming negation and questions.

8.8 Negation

Negation is largely a feature of clauses: a clause is either positive or negative. The most common way of making a clause negative is to insert the negative particle *not*, or its contraction *-n't*, after the operator:

- negative: *I **cannot** believe it. (NEWS†) <compare positive: I can believe it.>*
negative: *I **haven't** eaten. (CONV) <compare positive: I have eaten.>*

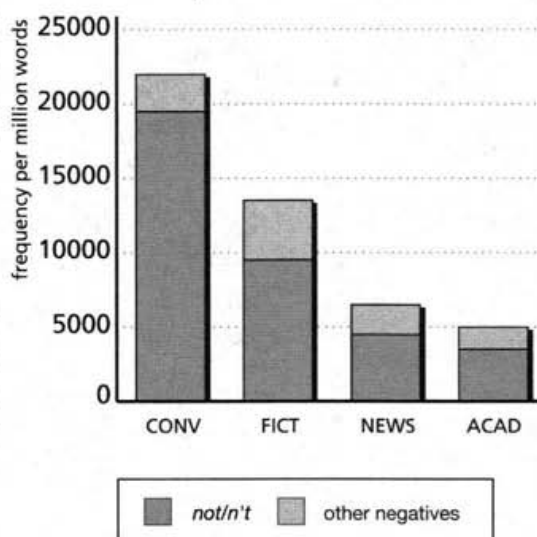
(Note that *can + not* is usually written as a single word.)

There are actually two main kinds of clause negation: **not-negation** and **no-negation**. Whereas *not-negation* is formed with *not* or *-n't*, *no-negation* is formed with other negative words such as *no*, *nothing*, *none*:

*There's **nothing** you can do about it. (CONV)*

As Figure 8.6 shows, *not-negation* is far more common than *no-negation*. More interestingly, negation is more than twice as common in conversation as it is in the written registers.

Figure 8.6
Distribution of negative types



8.8.1 Not-negation

The negator *not/n't* is added after the operator. If there is no auxiliary verb and the main verb is not the copula *be*, the auxiliary verb *do* has to be inserted as dummy operator. Compare:

You can do this but you can't do that. (CONV)

I remembered it but I didn't remember where it burned her specifically.
(CONV)

The negative of an interrogative or imperative clause is formed in the same way as the negative of a declarative clause (by adding *not/n't* after the operator):

Don't you have a key? (CONV) <positive: *Do you have a key?*>

Why aren't you working? (CONV) <positive: *Why are you working?*>

Don't talk to me. (CONV) <positive: *Talk to me.*>

Most interrogative clauses have subject–operator inversion. If *not* is contracted to *-n't*, it is attached to the operator and comes before the subject:

Couldn't she get a job like teaching? (CONV†)

Hey why isn't it ready? (CONV)

But if *not* is a full form, it has to be placed after the subject:

Could she not get a job like teaching?

Hey why is it not ready?

This option is rare, and in general speakers choose the contracted form.

Negative imperatives with the copula *be* are exceptional because the *be* does not serve as the operator for negation; rather, *do not* or *don't* is inserted before the verb *be*:

Don't be silly. (CONV)

Don't be so hard on yourself. (FICT)

In conversation, it is usual for a negative clause to contain a contracted form attached to the immediately preceding word. This can be either a contraction of the operator (e.g. 's, 're, 'll, 'd) or the contraction of the negative (*n't*). The following sections discuss the choice between these alternatives.



8.8.2 Verb contraction

Verb contraction occurs with the primary verbs *be* and *have* as well as with the modal verbs *will* and *would* (see Table 8.2). The contractions 's and 'd are ambiguous, with 's representing either *is* or *has*, and 'd representing either *had* or

Table 8.2 Contracted forms of *be*, *have*, *will* and *would*

	present tense			past tense
	1st person sing.	2nd person sing. + plurals	3rd person sing.	
<i>be</i>	<i>am</i> → 'm	<i>are</i> → 're	<i>is</i> → 's	
<i>have</i>	<i>have</i> → 've	<i>have</i> → 've	<i>has</i> → 's	<i>had</i> → 'd
modals	<i>will</i> → 'll	<i>would</i> → 'd		

would (or sometimes *did*). However, the intended meaning of these contractions is generally clear in context. Here are some examples with a following *not*:

That's not true. (CONV) <= *That is*>

It's not been a normal week. (CONV) <= *It has*>

They'd not even washed. (CONV) <= *They had*>

We'd not want your shade to plague us. (FICT) <= *We would*>

Verb contraction needs a preceding 'host' in the clause. Usually the host is a pronoun (e.g. *I'm*, *you'd*, *she'll*, *that's*). But many other forms preceding a verb can serve as host, including full nouns, *wh*-words, and *there*:

Gerry'll phone you during the show. (FICT)

Where'd you get that haircut? (FICT)

How's it going? (CONV)

There's no doubt that's going to lead to dumping. (NEWS)

Now's the time to go on a seed hunting expedition in your garden. (NEWS).

If there is no preceding host, e.g. with *yes/no* questions, then there is no possibility of verb contraction:

Is that on the sea? (FICT) <but not: **'s that on the sea?*>

Similarly, verbs in clause-final position cannot be contracted. For example:

I don't know what it is. (FICT†) <but not: **I don't know what it's.*>

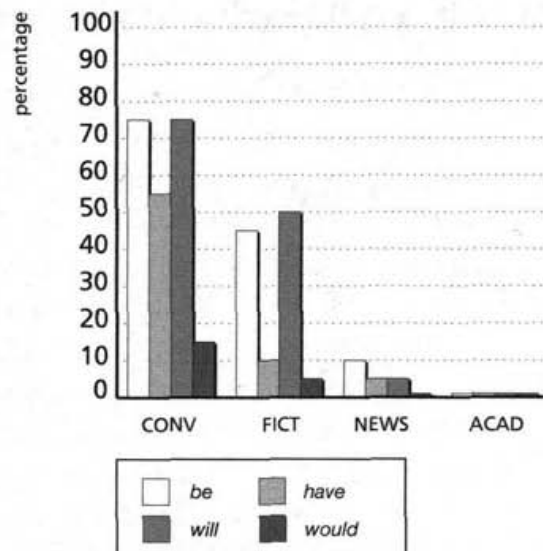
In addition, when the noun phrase preceding the verb is complex (e.g. where it contains a postmodifier) it rarely serves as a host to a verb contraction.

Figure 8.7 shows that the registers make steeply decreasing use of contractions, in the following order: conversation > fiction > news > academic writing. In addition, contraction is favored by specific linguistic factors. For example, individual verbs are contracted with differing degrees of frequency: *be* and *will* are usually contracted in conversation, while *would* is rarely contracted. With *be*, the contraction of *am* ('*m*) is more common than *is* or *are* ('*s*, '*re*).

Have is much more likely to be contracted as an auxiliary verb (in the perfect aspect, as in *We've arrived*) than as a main verb (e.g. *I've no idea*). Further, the contraction of *have* is more common than *has* or *had*.

Finally, the possibility of contraction is influenced by the host: verb contraction is much more likely with a pronoun subject than with a full noun phrase.

Figure 8.7
Proportional use of verbs as contractions



8.8.3 Negative contraction

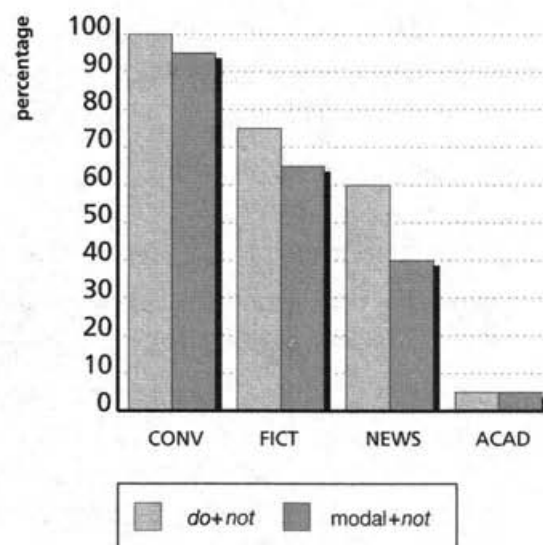
Negative contraction occurs when *not* is reduced and attached to a preceding primary verb (as operator) or modal auxiliary verb. The resulting negative auxiliary verb is spelled with a final *-n't*, as in:

<i>be</i>	<i>isn't, aren't, wasn't, weren't</i>
<i>have</i>	<i>haven't, hasn't, hadn't</i>
<i>do</i>	<i>don't, doesn't, didn't</i>
modals	<i>won't (= will not), wouldn't, can't (= cannot), couldn't, shan't (= shall not), shouldn't, mustn't</i>

There is no contraction for *am not* (**amn't*), and although there are contractions for *may not* and *might not*, these very rarely occur.

Figure 8.8 shows a similar pattern for negative contractions as for verb contractions: the preference for contracted forms declines sharply from nearly 100 per cent in conversation to roughly 5 per cent in academic writing.

Figure 8.8
Proportional use of *not* as a contraction



8.8.4 Negative contraction compared with verb contraction

It is impossible for negative contraction and verb contraction to co-exist in the same clause (e.g. we cannot say **It'sn't, *We'ven't*), so they compete with each other where both are possible. These are the main trends:

- When *be* contraction is possible, it is strongly favored over *not* contraction: e.g. *you're not, it's not* is preferred to *you aren't, it isn't*.
- This preference is particularly strong with first- and second-person pronouns. In fact, in the case of *I'm not*, there is no alternative except for the marginally acceptable *I ain't* or *aren't I* (see 8.8.5 below).
- In contrast, with the verbs *have*, *will*, and *would*, there is a very strong preference for negative contraction: e.g. *I haven't, she won't, they wouldn't* are much preferred to *I've not, she'll not, they'd not*.

8.8.5 *Aren't I* and *ain't*: two rogue contractions

A *Aren't I*

Negative contraction is not a possibility with *am not* (**I amn't*), and this causes a difficulty in questions (where inversion does not allow verb contraction). In

colloquial English, *aren't I* is sometimes substituted for the non-existent **amn't I*. (The full form *am I not* is generally avoided.)

I'm naughty aren't I? (CONV)

'Aren't I supposed to understand?' (FICT)

B **Ain't**

This is a very versatile negative contraction, capable of substituting for all negative contractions of *be* or the auxiliary *have*:

'There ain't nothing we can do.' (FICT) <= *isn't*>

'I'm whispering now, ain't I?' (FICT) <= *aren't*>

I ain't done nothing. (CONV) <= *haven't*>

Ain't is common in the conversation of some dialects, and it occurs in representations of speech in writing. However, *ain't* is widely felt to be non-standard, and so it is generally avoided in written language, as well as in careful speech.

8.8.6 Use and non-use of dummy *do* in negation

Six verbs have variation between (1) acting as a lexical verb with dummy *do*, and (2) acting as operator themselves. For the most part, this choice exists only for British English.

A **Have as a lexical verb**

1 *do*-construction: *She doesn't have a dime.* (FICT)

2 *have* as operator: *I haven't a clue what her name was!* (BrE CONV)

Option 2 is a conservative (or even old-fashioned) choice. It occurs rarely in British English conversation and almost never in American English. (*Have got*, though, is often used as an alternative to main verb *have* in British English conversation.)

B **The semi-modal *have to***

For *have to*, the same choices occur, and under similar conditions. Option 1 is again by far the most common:

1 *do*-construction: *You don't have to have a conscience.* (CONV)

2 *have* as operator: *Oh I wish I hadn't to go out tonight.* (BrE CONV)

C **Need and dare**

1 *do*-construction: *They do not need to belong to the same phase.* (ACAD)

I didn't dare to mention Hella. (FICT)

2 auxiliary construction: *The details need not concern us here.* (ACAD†)

No, I daren't tell her. (CONV)

Need and *dare* are dual-function verbs: they can behave like modal auxiliaries or like main verbs. In the auxiliary use, these verbs function as the operator for negation, as in 2. However, this construction is restricted to British English, and even there it is relatively rare.

D Used to and ought to

Used to and *ought to* are two other verbs on the boundary of modal auxiliary status. They have (rare) negative contractions *usedn't* and *oughtn't*, but they also have the infinitive *to*, which aligns them with lexical verbs:

- 1 *do*-construction: *We **didn't** used to see much of it.* (CONV)
 *He **didn't** ought to be doing that sort of job.*
 (CONV†)
- 2 auxiliary construction: *Gentlemen **used not** to have any traffic with him.*
 (FICT†) <traffic = dealings>
 *So I think I **oughtn't** to spend more.* (CONV†)

Negation is generally rare with these verbs.

8.8.7 No-negation

Negation involving quantifiers can be expressed by negative words like *no*, or by a **non-assertive** word like *any* (see 8.8.10) following *not/n't*:

negative words	non-assertive words
determiners: <i>no, neither</i>	determiners: <i>any, either</i>
adverbs: <i>neither, nowhere, never, nor</i>	adverbs: <i>either, anywhere, ever</i>
pronouns: <i>none, neither, nobody, no one, nothing</i>	pronouns: <i>any, either, anybody, anyone, anything</i>

Non-assertive words can occur after *not*, where they often provide a way of expressing the same meaning as *no*-negation:

- They had **no** sympathy for him.* (FICT)
 <compare: *They **didn't** have **any** sympathy for him.*>
- There was **nobody** in the hut.* (FICT†)
 <compare: *There **wasn't** **anybody** in the hut.*>
- I'll **never** be able to tell her.* (FICT†)
 <compare: *I **won't** **ever** be able to tell her.*>

When *no*-negation and *not*-negation are both possible, there is sometimes a slight difference of meaning. This is true of clauses containing *not a* v. *no*—compare 1–2 with 3–4:

- 1 *He is ten years old, he is **not a** baby.* (FICT)
- 2 *He **wasn't a** union member.* (NEWS†)
- 3 *She was **no** great beauty.* (FICT†)
- 4 *He is **no** quitter.* (NEWS†)

While 1 and 2 can be read as factual descriptions of a person, 3 and 4 express a judgment about a person's attributes. Similarly, *She's **not a** teacher* and *She's **no** teacher* are different in that the first is a statement about her job and the second a statement about her capabilities.



8.8.8 Choosing between *not*-negation and *no*-negation

In many cases, the choice between *not*-negation and *no*-negation is just not available. For a *not*-negated clause to be equivalent to a *no*-negated clause, it has to have some indefinite form following *not*, such as *any* or *a*:

She doesn't have a car yet. (FICT)
<compare: *She has no car yet.*>

Conversely, when a form of *no*-negation precedes the verb (usually as subject), there is no equivalent *not*-negated clause:

'*Nobody stole it?*' said James.
(FICT)

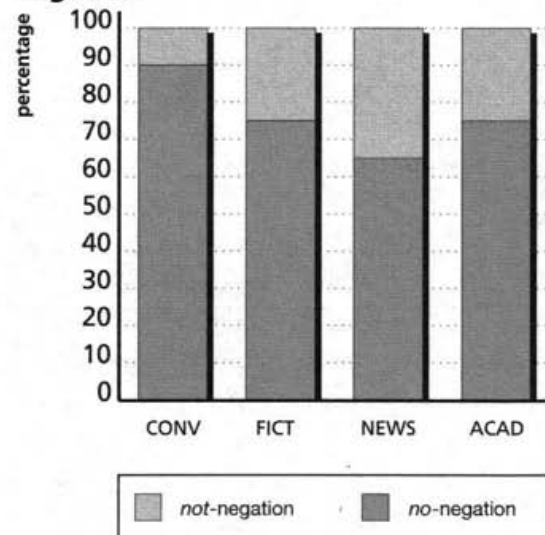
*Nothing can happen to you,
and nothing can get you.* (FICT)

Overall, *not*-negation is much more common than *no*-negation. As Figure 8.9 shows, *no*-negation is especially rare in conversation, but it is moderately common in the written registers. When *no*-negation does occur in conversation, it is often part of habitual collocations such as:

*There is ... no doubt/no need/
no point/no sign/no way*

*I have ... no idea/no choice/no
desire/no effect/no intention/no
reason*

Figure 8.9
Proportional use of *not*- v. *no*-
negation



8.8.9 The scope of negation

The **scope of negation** is the part of a clause that is affected by negative meaning. The scope may be restricted to a single word or phrase, in which case we consider it to be local negation rather than clause negation:

- 1 *One rabbit can finish off a few hundred young trees **in no time**.* (FICT)
- 2 *Robertson, **not unexpectedly**, claimed afterwards that his strike should have been recognised.* (NEWS)

In these examples, the negation is located in adverbials, and does not affect the interpretation of the main part of the clause. In 2, note the 'double negative' effect of *not unexpectedly*, which actually means that Robertson's behavior was expected.

Even more local is the following use of *nowhere* and *nobody*—where in effect these words are treated like nouns:

*It's in the middle of **nowhere**, isn't it?* (CONV†)

*He's a **nobody**, but you see I fell in love with him.* (FICT)

With clause negation, the whole proposition is denied, and the scope of negation extends from the negative element to the end of the clause. Placing an

adverbial before or after *not* often results in a difference of meaning. Compare 1 and 2 (the scope of negation is shown by underlining.)

- 1 'Our investigations indicate that this substance was not deliberately administered.' (FICT)
<i.e. the substance was administered accidentally, not deliberately.>
- 2 Alexander looked at Wilkie who deliberately did not see him. (FICT)
<i.e. he deliberately avoided seeing him.>

8.8.10 Assertive and non-assertive forms

The forms below are associated with either **assertive** or **non-assertive** contexts:

	assertive	non-assertive
adverbs	<i>already</i>	<i>yet</i>
	<i>sometimes</i>	<i>ever</i>
	<i>somewhat</i>	<i>at all</i>
	<i>somewhere</i>	<i>anywhere</i>
	<i>still</i>	<i>any more</i>
	<i>too</i>	<i>either</i>
determiners/pronouns	<i>some</i>	<i>any</i>
	<i>somebody</i>	<i>anybody</i>
	<i>someone</i>	<i>anyone</i>
	<i>something</i>	<i>anything</i>

Assertive forms are used mainly in positive clauses, whereas non-assertive forms are used with clause negation. Non-assertive forms follow the *not*, as in examples 1–3:

- 1 *There aren't any passenger trains.* (CONV†) <negation of: *There are some passenger trains.*>
- 2 'But he doesn't have to do anything.' (FICT†) <negation of: *He has to do something.*>
- 3 *I don't think [we had any cheese] did we?* (CONV)

Note that the scope of negation can extend into dependent clauses, shown by [] in 3.

Although non-assertive forms are particularly associated with negation, they are also used in other contexts:

- interrogative clauses (4 independent and 5 dependent):
 - 4 *Does anyone ever ring the bell Carrie?* (CONV)
 - 5 *Wonder if Tamsin had any luck selling her house.* (CONV)
- conditional clauses:

If there are any problems in performance-related pay, we can iron these out.
(NEWS)
- temporal clauses introduced by *before*:

I was with him before anyone else was. (FICT)
- comparative and degree constructions:

I can trust you, Babes, more than anybody. (FICT)

Another set of contexts for non-assertive forms are implicit negatives: that is, words (underlined below) which do not look negative, but convey a negative meaning.

- 6 *Most scientists, however, refuse to pay **any** heed or give **any** credence to *Psychical Research*. (ACAD†)*
- 7 *On the first occasion Mr Reynolds met the stoma care nurse he was very quiet and seemed reluctant to discuss **anything***. (ACAD)
- 8 *But I very rarely fry **anything** anyway*. (CONV)
- 9 *Jane requires you to guess at and check a set of mathematical functions without **ever** giving you the answers*. (ACAD)

Notice that such implicit negatives belong to various word classes: *refuse* (6) is a verb, *reluctant* (7) is an adjective, *rarely* (8) is an adverb, and *without* (9) is a preposition.

8.8.11 Assertive forms used in negative clauses

Although assertive forms like *some* are strongly associated with positive clauses, they are sometimes found in negative clauses, especially if they stay outside the scope of negation:

- For **some** reason it did not surprise him*. (FICT†)
*I don't mind talking, not to **some** people*. (CONV)

8.8.12 Multiple negation

Sometimes more than one negative word occurs in the same clause. Such combinations belong to two types: dependent multiple negation and independent multiple negation.

A Dependent multiple negation

This is a common feature of conversation in some dialects, but it is generally considered to be non-standard:

- You've **never** seen **nothing** like it*. (CONV) <meaning: *You've never seen anything like it.*>
*There **ain't** **nothing** we can do*. (FICT) <meaning: *There isn't anything we can do.*>

The corresponding clauses in standard English have a negative form followed by a non-assertive form (as in 8.8.10).

B Independent multiple negation

We use this term for repeated negative forms which occur when a speaker reformulates a negative utterance. In these cases, the negative forms are not integrated in the same clause:

- No, **not** tomorrow, she said*. (FICT)
*There's **no one** to blame **not** really*. (FICT†)

We also find repeated occurrences of *not* in the same clause, each adding its own negative meaning. Here two negatives make a positive meaning:

Oh well you sleep on sherry though – it makes you sleepy, you can't not sleep. (CONV) <meaning that you just have to sleep>

As it did turn out, I never did not smoke in the end. I lit a cigarette and kept them coming. (FICT)

Independent multiple negation is generally considered to be standard.

Review

Major points of Grammar Bite C: Negation

- ▶ Clauses are either positive or negative.
- ▶ Negative clauses are most commonly formed by using *not* or its contraction *-n't*.
- ▶ The verb as operator is a key tool for forming negation with *not/-n't*.
- ▶ Clause negation is the main type of negation, but there is also local negation.
- ▶ In clause negation, there is an important distinction between *not*-negation and *no*-negation.
- ▶ The scope of negation is important for choosing non-assertive v. assertive forms (e.g. *there aren't any...* v. *there are some...*).
- ▶ There are standard and non-standard forms of multiple negation.

GRAMMAR BITE

D Independent clauses

8.9 Major types of independent clause

An independent clause is a clause which is not part of any larger clause structure. However, independent clauses can be coordinated, and they can include embedded dependent clauses:

- simple independent clause (single clause):
You can give me a cheque. (CONV)
- coordinated independent clauses (two or more coordinated clauses):
He was crying and so I gave him back his jacket. (CONV†)
- complex independent clause (with one or more dependent clauses):
If you pay too much they'll give us the money back. (CONV†)

All independent clauses are finite, that is, they contain a finite verb form which specifies tense (e.g. *is, looked*) or modality (e.g. *can, would*).

Independent clauses are used to perform **speech-act** functions. There is a general correspondence between four basic speech-act functions and the four structural types of independent clauses, shown in Table 8.3.

A **statement** gives information and expects no specific response from the addressee. A **question** asks for information and expects a linguistic response. A **directive** is used to give orders or requests, and expects some action from the addressee. An **exclamation** expresses the strong feelings of the speaker/writer, and expects no specific response.