“We not ship to Russia”

I went onto e-bay this weekend and, instead of the gadget I was after, found some non-standard uses of English negation: “We not ship to Russia” or “We not use cheap couriers.” The usage seems so frequent with various sellers that it’s hard to believe they don’t know any better. On the contrary, the structure without the auxiliary seems so widespread that it must be intentional.

From an intercultural communication perspective, it makes perfect sense; English negation is really hard to distinguish from the emphatic form: “We don’t ship to Russia” is very similar to the emphatic “We do ship to Russia” and it’s easy for someone with limited proficiency to overlook the puny “n’t” (or not to hear it when spoken).

The non-standard “we not VERB” construction instead of the standard “we don’t VERB” construction by online sellers operating in an international environment is thus a great example of the adaptability of English — and all human languages — to its context of use. Is my little observation on e-bay thus further evidence for the fact that “language structure is partly determined by social structure” as a recent research paper that’s currently making the media circuit has it?

In that paper, Gary Lupyan and Rick Dale, a cognitive scientist and a psychologist, show that languages with large numbers of speakers, wide geographical spread and a high degree of language contact are less likely to have complex morphologies than languages with fewer speakers, limited geographical spread and a low degree of language contact. They call the former languages “exoteric” and the latter “esoteric” and advance a “linguistic niche hypothesis,” which proposes that

Just as biological organisms are shaped by ecological niches, language structures appear to adapt to the environment (niche) in which they are being learned and used.

Their key claim is that “exoteric” languages are learnt by adults and the more adult language learners a language has, the less morphologically complex it is. Negation is one of the variables they analyze and their claim is that “exoteric” languages

[are more likely to encode negation using analytical strategies (negative word) than using inflections (affixes) and are less likely to have idiosyncratic variations between word and affixation strategies.

“We not ship to Russia” is the perfect example! Unfortunately, the obvious problem is that “we not ship to Russia” is clearly the most stigmatized way to express negation in English. By contrast, the standard syntactic form to express negation in English is rather opaque. Furthermore, negation is not only expressed syntactically but also morphologically as, for instance, in to unfriend (which I seem to have read somewhere was voted word of the decade by someone). So, I hereby declare myself to be a non-believer of the idea that the theory of evolution applies to language!

Apart from the fact that there are many ways to express negation (or any of the other variables that are featured in the study), I see a couple of issues with some of the premises underlying the study:
A language is not a thing, it is not a biological organism. Sometimes, it’s very useful to treat a language as an entity, even as a biological organism, but that’s just a metaphor. Language is a practice, a process that “lives” in interaction.

To speak of “a particular language with a name” is always a reification, one that usually relies on political definitions, as I’ve discussed before. Linguistic research that accepts those political definitions as linguistic facts is fundamentally flawed. While it may be neater to only account for the standard language, we miss a key aspect about negation in English if we willfully exclude non-standard phenomena from the account (e.g., double negation (“I ain’t got no money”) in our case)

In language learning, it’s rarely only a case of survival of the fittest. From an intercultural communication viewpoint “We not ship to Russia” is clearly superior to “We don’t ship to Russia” and the former could thus be said to be “fitter” than the latter. Even so, the former is not going to displace the latter anytime soon because there are standard language ideologies, language teachers, textbooks, common usage and what not that are intervening in the evolutionary scenario. Admittedly, the authors do provide a little nod in that direction:

Morphological simplification following spread may greatly reduced [sic!] through prescriptivism (namely, formal instruction) as was common in the case of the spread of Russian in the 20th century.

Does morphological complexity equal difficulty? Linguistic difficulty is in the eye of the beholder. Personally, for instance, I find Chinese, a language that has very little by way of morphological complexity, pretty daunting because of the tones. English is another language with comparatively limited morphological complexity but it sure makes up for that with phrasal words (take out, take over, take along, take in, take off, take up ... huh?!)

Does number of language users, geographic spread and degree of language contact equal “social structure”? Not in my book.

How do you measure “degree of language contact”? The authors identify the degree of language contact as the “number of linguistic neighbors derived from Ethnologue [1] and the Global Mapping Institute [33].” Apart from the fact that I’m not sure this explains their procedure in full, this begs two key questions:

- **Linguistic neighbors of which variety?** For example, Irish English or Indian English? Indian English clearly has more “linguistic neighbors” and more intense contact with them than Irish English.
- **At which point in time?** The transformation of English from an inflectional language to an isolating one took place in the Middle Ages. That was clearly a time of intense language contact (Scandinavian settlement and Norman invasion) although it seems that the intensity of the contact situation mattered more than the number of languages involved. At the same time, at the time, English was really only spoken by a handful of speakers in a limited geographical area in the British Isles — so on Lupyan’s and Dale’s scale it would have been closer to the “esoteric” end of the continuum when the key grammatical transformation happened. How can contemporary data, collected at a single point in time, tell us anything about evolution?

Language is intricately linked to the social life of speakers. Humans “do things with words” and they do so in social contexts. I regard that as a fundamental of all thinking about language. Linguistic research should enhance our understanding of that fundamental in meaningful ways. If language gets reduced to one variable (“morphological complexity) and social structure to three variables (“number of speakers, geographical spread,
degree of language contact) I cannot help but feel that the research has missed the mark. "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted", as Einstein would have said.