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Not me getting with the times: A new kind of not-fragment in English

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Not me getting with the times: A new kind of *not*-fragment in English

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Abstract

In this paper, I describe a relatively new construction in colloquial use by many English speakers: a discourse-initial *not*-fragment that draws attention to a factual event and conveys some attitude towards it, typically that it is embarrassing, surprising, ironic, ridiculous, or simply bad. A prototypical example of this construction, which I call "spotlight *not*," is an utterance like *Not me going to Starbucks for the second time today*, which is taken to indicate that the speaker is indeed going to Starbucks for the second time that day, and that they find this fact embarrassing or surprising, ironic, etc. Informed by a pilot survey and interviews with speakers who use spotlight *not*, I discuss the demographics and meaning of this construction, its surface structure and syntactic properties, and some ideas about why it means what it means.

Keywords

Fragments — Generation Z — Attitude — Veridicality — Syntax — Irony

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Contents

1. Introduction

Imagine that a group of college students is walking back from Starbucks, and a few of them realize that ordering one Frappuccino for each was not enough to satisfy their craving—they simply *must* get more. As the group makes its way to the coffee shop again, it would be perfectly natural for one of the students to say, out of the blue:

(1)   Not us going to Starbucks for the second time today. (Adapted from Rior 2021)

Natural, that is, to a portion of English speakers today who understand from (1) that the speaker is acknowledging the group's second trek to Starbucks that day as a fact and conveying some attitude towards this event—that it is embarrassing, ironic, shameful, surprising, ridiculous, or simply bad in some way, depending on the intonation. Other speakers might be confused by such an utterance—is it denying the students' action, or dissuading them from it? Why is there no exclamation mark in its written form? Is it really not a response to a question? But for those of us whose mental grammars generate this kind of fragment, no such question comes up. It is a normal, colloquial construction that can indeed be discourse-initial.

I call this construction "the spotlight *not*-fragment" (or "Spotlight *Not*"), a metaphor inspired by its pragmatic function: it draws attention to an event[1] that the speaker believes is worth special mention because of how incredible (or embarrassing, shameful, surprising, bad, etc.) it is. Consider the following example from Twitter, where the speaker shames others using Spotlight *Not*.

(2)   Not y'all advertising parties in the middle of a pandemic [skull emoji][2] how embarrassing. (Spence 2021)

We can almost imagine the speaker in (2) shining a physical spotlight on the people advertising parties and seeing them look back out into the public in embarrassment. Spotlight *Not* helps the speaker call them out.

There seems to be very little literature on the properties of the spotlight *not*-fragment. Morris (2021) touches briefly on the syntax of this construction (which he calls "ironic *not*") but focuses on the evidence of its use and on its meaning compared to that of related constructions. As Larry Horn (pers. comm.) has pointed out to me, this construction also received a brief characterization from members of the American Dialect Society (ADS) in their Words of the Year 2022 competition, where the construction, which they call "*not X*," won in the category of "snowclone/phrasal template." Drawing on Morris (2021), they describe it as an "ironic framing device expressing an attitude of mock horror or incredulity" (American Dialect Society 2023).

It is my goal in this paper to provide a more extensive characterization of this construction, drawing on conversations with my consultants,[3] the results of a pilot survey I conducted, and the literature on similar constructions and related linguistic phenomena. I will discuss the meaning of the spotlight *not*-fragment, its relation to some similar constructions, its structure and syntactic properties, and finally some ideas about how Spotlight *Not* comes to mean what it means. But first, some background.

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[1] I use the term "events" throughout this paper as a cover term for both dynamic and non-dynamic (i.e. stative) eventualities, following Williams (2021).

[2] As described in American Dialect Society (2023), the skull emoji expresses "figurative death (from laughter, frustration, etc.)." It seems that "figurative death from frustration" would likely fit what the speaker intended in this case.

[3] My consultants for this paper are undergraduate students at Yale between the ages of 19 and 20. Throughout this paper, I use the term "consultants" for those whom I have interviewed and "respondents" for those who participated in my pilot survey, which includes people in other age groups.

2. Who says this, and since when?

The spotlight *not*-fragment is often seen in social media platforms, sometimes (but not always) with an image, video, or emoji that provides context or reinforces the attitude the speaker wishes to convey.

(3) Not me having a solo dance party in my bathroom while brushing my teeth. (u/thebanana-person1 on Reddit)

(4) Not him falling off the couch.[4] (@sbrichards on TikTok)

(5) Not them saying we'll get kicked out if we have our phones out during soundcheck. (@nessapjm on Twitter)

(6) a. Not us getting rained on as I'm trying to take hat pics to post on insta. (@allthingslillyann on Instagram)

    b. Not it raining the second we start taking hat pics. (@allthingslillyann on Instagram)

Figure 1. Screenshot of a tweet by Brie Larson featuring Spotlight *Not*.

The construction is not restricted to social media, however. As the Starbucks scenario suggests, Spotlight *Not* is also found in spoken language in very informal settings. In a series of video clips compiled by Morris (2021) to illustrate this use of *not*, the following example is uttered by a YouTuber in response to a video of a zoo-owning family:

(7) Not them having a whole zoo. (Morris 2021)

Some speakers associate Spotlight *Not* with Generation Z,[5] but the construction is not used exclusively by Gen Z speakers—Figure 1 shows a tweet by Brie Larson featuring Spotlight

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[4]In this case, for example, the fragment appeared as a caption for a video of a dog running and falling off a couch, and was accompanied by a laughing emoji.

[5]Some respondents in my survey suggested that this construction is characteristically a Gen Z one. See Appendix B, C, and D for some examples.

Not—nor did it likely originate with Gen Z. Morris (2021) cites evidence that Spotlight *Not* originated within African American English (AAE) speech communities more than a decade ago. In particular, examples of Spotlight *Not* can be found on Twitter from as long ago as 2008, posted by tweeters whose profiles suggest they may be African American, and who also seem to use AAE phenomena. The tweet in Figure 2 features the null copula and quotative *talkin' about* (also known as *talmbout*), and the latter is specific to AAE, according to Jones (2016).[6]

Figure 2. Screenshot of a tweet from 2010 featuring Spotlight *Not*.

Nevertheless, the general use of Spotlight *Not* in comments on Reddit seems to have greatly increased around 2020 and 2021, as Morris's (2021) chart in Figure 3 shows, and Morris (2021) notes that Spotlight *Not* occurred especially in Reddit communities that had a younger "readership."
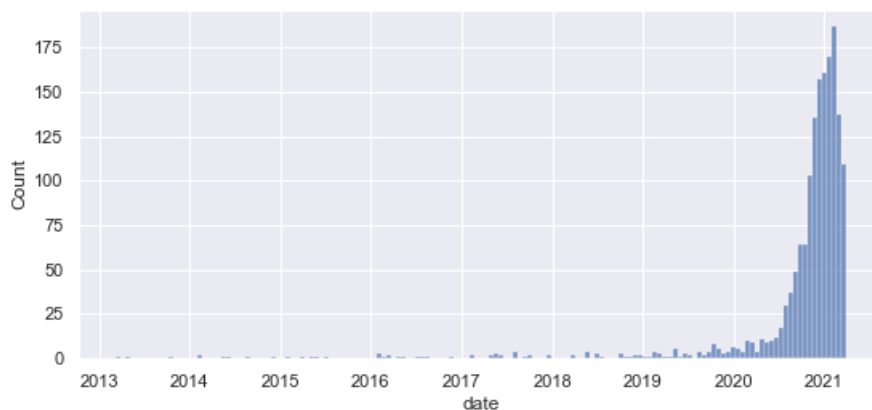
Figure 3. Use of Spotlight *Not* in Reddit comments from 2013 to 2021.
Source: Morris (2021)

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[6]That is, the quotative use is specific to AAE—Jones (2016) notes that *talmbout* is a "camouflage construction," since it is derived from the standard form *talking about*, but it "behaves as a verb of quotation," so its semantic and pragmatic properties are quite different from those of the mainstream, non-quotative *talking about*.

I conducted a pilot survey of acceptability judgements in April 2023, partly to test the acceptability of different versions of Spotlight *Not*, but also to see whether larger-scale surveys might find a correlation with age. Below, I discuss this survey and what the results indicate about the demographics of the spotlight *not*-fragment.

2.1 Survey methods

The survey consisted of 21 sentences or fragments, which respondents had to rate on a scale from 1 (totally unacceptable even in informal contexts) to 5 (totally acceptable).[7] One of the fragments, *Not me being lazy*, which I call the "construction control"—since I expected all users of Spotlight *Not* to find it acceptable[8]—also had another, open-ended component asking respondents what they thought it meant. There were also 4 demographic questions, asking the respondent's age, when they had started learning English, where they had grown up, and finally whether they were fluent in any languages besides English.

Respondents came from two groups. The first consisted of 36 Yale students between the ages of 18 and 27, whom I contacted directly about the survey. Since I wanted responses from speakers in other age groups, though with relatively similar backgrounds, I had the survey announced on the "Yale University Parents" Facebook page, which yielded 77 responses from members of the page—presumably parents or guardians of current or former Yale students[9]—between the ages of 38 and 66.

Responses were eliminated if they gave a rating of 1 or 2 for a grammatical control or a rating of 4 or 5 for an ungrammatical control, and also if the respondent started learning English after age 10. The motivation behind the cutoff at age 10 was Hartshorne et al. (2018:271), who found that "ultimate attainment" of language ability for L2 speakers is similar to that of "native bilinguals" if the age of first exposure to English is up to 10-12 years, at which point it declines continuously. With these inclusion criteria, only 94 out of 113 total responses were valid. Out of the 94, 34 were from the first group and 60 were from the second.

Before analyzing the results of the survey, I divided the entire pool of respondents into a group with Gen Z and Millennials (those born starting in 1981) and another group with older generations, since I expected that younger speakers would be more likely to find the construction acceptable. The first group, which I will call A, had 36 people between the ages of 18 and 40, and group B had 58 people between the ages of 45 and 66. I further define "group A-1" as the set of all people in group A who accepted the construction control with the expected meaning.

2.2 Survey results

There was a clear difference between the proportion of people in group A and people in group B who accepted (and understood) *Not me being lazy*. In group A, 91.7% of respondents rated it a 4 or 5 with a paraphrase that implies "I'm being lazy," and most of these respondents also noted some attitude that they believe is conveyed (that "me being lazy" is embarrassing, surprising, ridiculous, ironic, bad, etc.). Only 3 people in group A rated the utterance a 3 or less.

Meanwhile, in group B, only 10.3% of respondents rated it a 4 or 5 with the intended implication, and only one person indicated that the utterance conveys a particular attitude (embarrass-

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[7]The survey was roughly based on those of the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project (see Zanuttini et al. 2018), and is attached in Appendix A. It was administered online, as a Google Form.

[8]As I discuss in my conclusion, it is now clear to me that some speakers who use Spotlight *Not* would be more likely to say something like *Not me <u>falling</u> asleep during the test* rather than *Not me <u>being</u> asleep during the test*. It would have been wiser to select a construction control without copula *be*.

[9]Since membership is restricted for this Facebook page.

ment)—and this respondent noted at the end of the survey that they work in social media and are "exposed to a lot of ... 'youth speak.'" So, respondents from older generations seem less likely to be familiar with Spotlight *Not*.[10]

3. Characterization of Spotlight *Not*

3.1 Spotlight *Not* is (indeed) a fragment

I call this construction a fragment based on the criteria outlined by Lemke (2021). On that account, utterances are fragments if they (i) are "used to perform a speech act," (ii) lack a "finite verb," and (iii) "do not require an explicit linguistic antecedent" (Lemke 2021: 5).

Spotlight *Not* is used to perform a speech act. Unlike "labels" such as "Skim milk," "16 oz.," "sugar free"—which Lemke (2021) provides as examples of non-speech acts—Spotlight *Not* is used to indicate the factuality of an event and express an attitude towards that event, as we have seen with the example of *Not me being lazy*. Spotlight *Not* also lacks a finite verb—as I mention in section 3.4, the verb in Spotlight *Not*, if there is one, is tenseless (that is, non-finite); it is merely inflected with the progressive aspect marker *-ing*. Finally, Spotlight *Not* can occur without any explicit linguistic antecedent, since it can be discourse-initial. A recent example from my own use: I was in a rehearsal with my singing group, and we were singing a piece that we had performed dozens of times. Somehow I forgot the lyrics, and I immediately said:

(8)   Not me forgetting the lyrics.

We were in the middle of singing a song; no one had mentioned that I had forgotten the lyrics, nor had anyone asked me a question or signaled anything. I did not say something like "Of all things, I did not expect this—not me forgetting the lyrics." There was no explicit linguistic antecedent. Since all three criteria apply to Spotlight *Not*, I classify it as a fragment.

3.2 Structure of the spotlight *not*-fragment

The basic, superficial structure of the spotlight *not*-fragment may be represented by *Not X*, where X is itself a non-finite clause[11]—it may be a non-verbal small clause (SC) or a small clause where a verb is inflected with the aspect marker *-ing*, which Huddleston and Pullum (2002) call a "gerund-participial clause" (GPC).[12]

(9)   Not [GPC me going to Starbucks again]

(10)   Not [SC me on my way to Starbucks again]

Of these, Morris (2021) identifies the gerund-participial clause and adds another possibility, a "metalinguistic use," where the construction is said in response to a sentence by another speaker, and *Not* is followed by a quote—either the original sentence or part of it.

(11)   *Context: Speaker A has fallen, and Speaker B is helping them up.*
        Speaker A: I've been gaining some relationship weight, hold on.
        Speaker B: Not "relationship weight." (Morris 2021)

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[10]See the conclusion for limitations from this survey that prevent us from making a stronger conclusion.

[11]Further discussion in section 3.4.

[12]Morris (2021) also uses this term, noting the same source. We could simply call this clause a (verbal) small clause, but I will stick to the more specific nomenclature in Huddleston and Pullum (2002).

Some speakers cite yet another possibility where what follows *not* is simply a DP:

(12)   Not [DP the Starbucks cup]

But the form *Not DP* is part of mainstream English, so it is unclear whether this is the same construction. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on the fragments that contain a gerund-participial clause, noting some properties of the non-verbal small clause version along the way, although more work is certainly needed for those that feature a DP and for the metalinguistic use.

But in all cases of Spotlight *Not*, the fragment-initial *not* is present, so Spotlight *Not* generally falls into the category of fragments that Cappelle (2021) calls "*not*-fragments." One kind of *not*-fragment that Cappelle (2021) describes in detail is exemplified below.

(13)   Not him again! (Cappelle 2021)

(14)   Not on my watch! (Cappelle 2021)

(15)   Not if I can help it! (Cappelle 2021)

Cappelle (2021) calls this kind of construction *Not X!*, where X is "an NP [or DP],[13] a PP, an AdjP, an AdvP or a subclause." In terms of surface structure, then, *Not X!* and Spotlight *Not* are quite similar: in both constructions, X can be a DP or a subclause (if we understand non-finite clauses to be subclauses).

According to Cappelle (2021), "the enunciation" of *Not X!* "tends to be emphatic," and "stress falls on (an element in) X, following normal stress patterns for a phrase or clause." At least the latter seems to apply to Spotlight *Not* as well. Consider Figure 4, the recording of one of my consultants saying *Not me being clumsy*, analyzed using Praat. The pitch contour and spectrogram suggest that the stress falls within [*me being clumsy*] rather than on *Not*, since the highest pitches and most stretched syllables are within the former. And we would also expect this to be the case with *Not X!*, per Cappelle (2021).
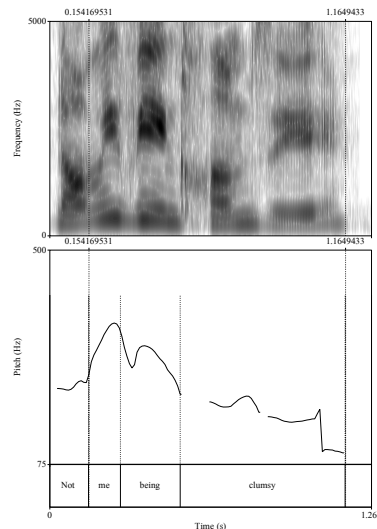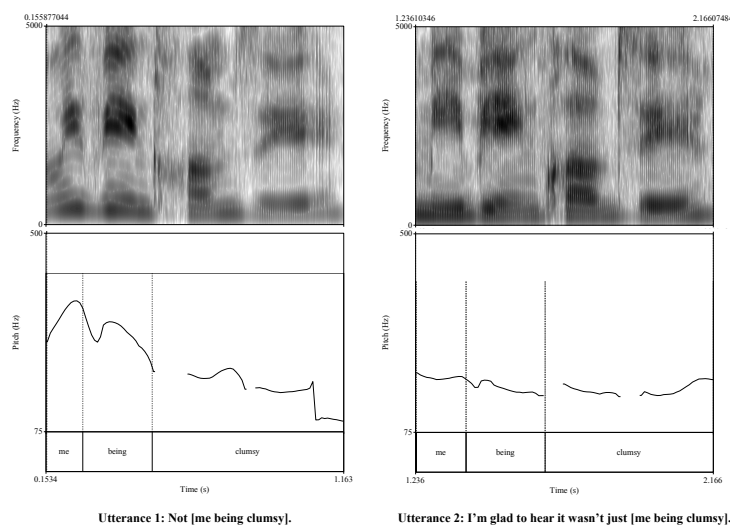

Figure 4. Spectrogram and pitch contour of *Not me being clumsy*

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[13]Cappelle (2021) calls the structure [*the face*] in *Not the face!* an NP, instead of a DP.

Compare this to Figure 5, a Praat analysis of the same consultant saying *I'm glad to hear it wasn't just me being clumsy* (which is not an instance of Spotlight *Not*, but it contains the gerund-participial clause [*me being clumsy*]).

Figure 5. Comparison between the spectrogram and pitch contour
of *me being clumsy* in Spotlight *Not* and in a sentence

Except for the sudden pitch drop at the end of *clumsy* in the first utterance (which I attribute to vocal fry), the pitch contour of [*me being clumsy*] in the first utterance, although clearly more exaggerated, seems to follow a similar overall pattern to the one in the second utterance,[14] as would likely be expected for *Not X!* based on Cappelle (2021).

But Spotlight *Not* seems to differ from *Not X!* in terms of meaning and use. Cappelle (2021) lists the following as the possible illocutionary forces of *Not X!*: (i) "strong denial of a relevant proposition P," (ii) "vow not to let the situation denoted by a relevant proposition P happen," or (iii) "expression of being outraged/shocked/saddened... at the situation denoted by a relevant proposition P'." The first two do not apply to Spotlight *Not*, and although the last is related, the emotions mentioned—"outrage," "shock," etc.—are rather strong compared to the ones involved in judging something to be embarrassing or surprising (or even shameful). It seems that the speaker's emotions tend to be rather mild in the case of Spotlight *Not*, which Morris (2021) also notes, despite the apparently exaggerated pitch contour of Spotlight *Not*.

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[14]There may be some additional stress on *me* in the second utterance, based on the audio recording and the difference in the length of [mi] across the two spectrograms. This suggests my consultant took the second utterance to implicate that someone else was being clumsy, which is slightly different from the meaning I intended (one that implicates that "me being clumsy" was not the reason something happened). The comparison between the two utterances is still informative, but perhaps another sentence with *me being clumsy* would have fit this discussion better.

3.3 Meaning

As my discussion so far has hinted, a verbal or non-verbal small-clause Spotlight *Not* triggers a *veridicality inference*, in the sense of White (2019) and Roberts (2019):[15] it gives rise to the inference that the event denoted by what follows *Not* is factual.[16] So, for example, (16a) gives rise to the inference that (16b) is true.

(16)   a. Not us getting rained on right now.

   b. We're getting rained on right now.

This veridicality inference is part of what makes Spotlight *Not* surprising for speakers who do not use it—they might expect the utterance in (16a) to entail "We're not getting rained on right now" instead. But a veridicality inference from an apparently negative utterance is not totally surprising. In this respect (and in its meaning in general),[17] Spotlight *Not* is very similar to *can't believe* constructions. As Roberts (2019) argues, these are usually veridical,[18] despite the presence of *n't* in the sentence and despite the non-veridicality of *believe* by itself or under negation with *do*-support:

(17)   a. Mary can't believe that it's raining.   (Roberts 2019)
          ∴ It's raining.
   b. Mary (doesn't) believe(s) that it's raining.   (Roberts 2019)
          ⫽ It's raining.

Besides giving rise to a veridicality inference, Spotlight *Not* also implicates an attitude about what follows *Not*. The range of attitudes Spotlight *Not* usually conveys seems rather extensive: it may indicate that the speaker is embarrassed about their own action (*Not me falling on my face*), embarrassed for someone else (*Not you falling on your face)*, or that the speaker thinks the content of the proposition is incredible or surprising *(Not his aunt being my mom's childhood friend)*, shameful, risible, or simply bad. In every case, though, some attitude is implicated.

In this respect as well, Spotlight *Not* is similar to *can't believe* constructions—the latter can also implicate some attitude about the content of the embedded clause, and there is an overlap between the set of attitudes Spotlight *Not* can implicate and those that *can't believe* can implicate. Consider the following examples:

(18)   a. Not the preacher yelling at those students.

   b. I can't believe the preacher is yelling at those students.

It seems that in both of these cases, we might infer (19):

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[15]It seems that the term "veridical" is traditionally used to describe a function that *entails* the truth of its argument (see Giannakidou and Mari 2021 for a more precise definition). The way it is used in Roberts (2019) is markedly different—what veridicality requires in Roberts's (2019) sense of the word is an inference, but not necessarily an entailment. In adopting this use, then, I do not mean to claim that the veridicality inference that Spotlight *Not* gives rise to is an entailment.

[16]Take the clause that follows the fragment-initial *Not*. A tensed version of this clause denotes a proposition p. What I mean when I say that this construction is *veridical* is that it gives rise to the inference that some such p is true.

[17]Both Spotlight *Not* and *can't believe* constructions can, for example, convey the speaker's surprise at an event, or that the event is in some way bad.

[18]Except in some special cases that force a different interpretation of *can't believe*:

(1)   No matter how hard the prosecutor tries to convince him, John can't believe that Mary is the murderer. He was with her on the other side of the town at the time of the crime. (Roberts 2019)

(19)   It's shameful for the preacher to be yelling at those students.

But this inference would be defeasible, which indicates that it is indeed an implicature:

(20)   a.   Not the preacher yelling at those students. I mean, good job—they deserve it—but I've never seen him yell at anybody.
       b.   I can't believe the preacher is yelling at those students. I mean, good job—they deserve it—but I've never seen him yell at anybody.

In the case of social media, the absence of additional comment or visual input seems to make the intended attitude unclear. Consider how differently the utterance in (18a), for example, would be interpreted if it were followed by a "laughing out loud" emoji, and if it were followed by an "eye roll" emoji. This kind of "ambiguity" (or perhaps obscurity) does not seem to be present as often or to the same extent in spoken Spotlight *Not* utterances, perhaps because intonation fulfills the ambiguity-clearing role of the emoji.

3.4 Syntactic properties of Spotlight *Not*

3.4.1 Polarity
Despite the presence of *Not* at the beginning, it seems that the polarity of the construction is not negative. The *Not* in Spotlight *Not* does not license *either*, *yet*, *at all*, or *anywhere*, which Huddleston and Pullum (2002:823) identify as negative polarity items (NPIs).[19] At the same time, Spotlight *Not* is grammatical with *too*, *already*, and *somewhere*, which are positive polarity items (PPIs), per Huddleston and Pullum (2002:829). My consultants and I find the examples below ungrammatical when an NPI is used, but grammatical when its PPI or non-NPI counterpart is used.

(21)   a.   *Not me being dumb *either*.
       b.   Not me being dumb *too*.

(22)   a.   *Not me laughing *yet*.
       b.   Not me laughing *already*.

(23)   *Not me being dumb *at all*.

(24)   a.   *Not me getting *anywhere* with this.
       b.   Not me getting *somewhere/nowhere* with this.

(25)   *Not him complaining *anymore*.

The fragment in (25), which features *anymore*, was also tested in the survey. Only one respondent in group A-1 (out of 33 respondents) accepted that fragment, and this respondent also accepted the sentence *Movie tickets are so expensive anymore*, which features non-polarity *anymore*, also known as "positive *anymore*" (see Horn 2021; Maher and McCoy 2011). It thus seems that *anymore* might only be licensed if it is not taken to be a negative polarity item.

More evidence towards this conclusion is found in the fact that a second *not* may appear after the fragment-initial *Not*, and in that case *anymore* might be licensed. A little more than half (18/33) of survey respondents in group A-1 accepted (26).

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[19]Huddleston and Pullum (2002) prefer the term "negatively-oriented polarity-sensitive items" for NPIs and "positively-oriented polarity-sensitive items" for PPIs, but I will use the more common (and simpler) terms.

(26)   ? Not her *not* talking to me *anymore*.

If the NPI *anymore* is licensed, then, it is likely because the second *not* (rather than the fragment-initial *Not*) takes scope over *anymore*. In fact, given the lack of NPI licensing in the absence of a second *not*, it seems that the first *Not* does not take scope over any item that follows it in a Spotlight *Not* utterance. In this respect, Spotlight *Not* is similar to *So AUXn't NP/DP* (SAND) constructions, such as *so don't I* (see Wood 2014). These contain the negative morpheme *n't*, but *n't* does not take scope over the NP or DP that follows it, and SAND allows PPIs but not NPIs, as shown below (Wood 2014:81–82).

(27)   a. Some dogs are mean, but so aren't *some* cats. (Wood 2014)
       b. *Some swimmers showed up at the zero-gravity expo, but so didn't *any* astronauts. (Wood 2014)

3.4.2 Restrictions on the subject
The subject of the gerund-participial clause or non-verbal small clause is a DP, but it must be in the accusative case rather than nominative case. It also seems less acceptable in the genitive case—only 3 out of 33 survey respondents in group A-1 accepted *Not my being dumb*.

(28)   a. Not me/her/him/them being lazy.
       b. *Not I/she/he/they being lazy.

(29)   ?? Not *my* being dumb.

It seems that some determiners might be more acceptable than others, particularly when it comes to quantifiers. Nearly all group A-1 survey respondents accepted the first two sentences below, but only about half accepted the last, with the quantifier *some*.

(30)   Not *the* dean of Yale College being related to your uncle.

(31)   Not *every* course at Yale being impossibly hard.

(32)   ? Not *some* straight-A students being late to class.

One respondent noted that they gave the utterance in (32) a rating of 3 "because the 'some' implied kind of an existential or more general reading" and they believe Spotlight *Not* "should refer to particular events." Based on this, it is possible that a Spotlight *Not* utterance with an indefinite DP would also be rated lower than one with a definite DP, such as (30), although I did not test this in my survey.

3.4.3 Restrictions on the predicate
The predicate of the small clause may be a PP or AdjP, but it seems that it cannot be a DP or NP; my consultants and I find (33) and (34) ungrammatical. Based on the survey results, a PP seems to be preferred over an AdjP (although neither was accepted by all respondents in group A-1).

(33)   *Not him [DP the worst person].

(34)   *Not them [NP finance bros].
       (At least in the sense of *Not them being finance bros.*)

(35)   Not me [PP on my way to Starbucks].
       (Mean rating from group A-1: 4.500)

(36) a. ? Not him [_{AdjP} asleep].
          (Mean rating from group A-1: 3.375)

   b. ? Not me [_{AdjP} sick because of the weather].
          (Mean rating from group A-1: 2.906)

Non-verbal small clauses seem less acceptable than gerund-participial clauses. One of the survey respondents in group A-1 left a comment that they would only give a 5 for versions of Spotlight *Not* that "have an -ing verb involved," noting that they would have preferred the Starbucks example from Rior (2021) if *on my way* had been replaced with "*going* or *being on my way*." Another respondent noted that "for a sentence like *Not him asleep*," they believe it would "be more grammatical to [them] if it was *Not him being asleep* or *Not him falling asleep*."

When there is a verb, there is no marker of tense, and the verb is inflected with the marker of progressive aspect *-ing*—it cannot be the bare form of the verb—which is what led me to call such a clause a gerund-participial clause.

(37) *Not I *am* being lazy. *(with* am *marking present tense)*

(38) *Not me *be* lazy.

(39) Not me being lazy.

3.4.4 Embeddability

It seems difficult to embed Spotlight *Not* into a sentence with its meaning preserved. Consider the following examples.

(40) Not me dozing off during the exam. *[Spotlight* Not *by itself]*

(41) It was not me dozing off during the exam.

(42) I wish it had not been me dozing off during the exam.

(43) I could have expected many things, but not me dozing off during the exam.

Examples (41) and (42) sound a little strange, but it seems to me that all four are grammatical. Yet none of these utterances seem to be equivalent in meaning. If *p* means "I dozed off (or was dozing off) during the exam," then we can infer ¬*p* from (41), while we can infer *p* from the Spotlight *Not* example. Examples (42) and (43) do seem to imply *p*, but (42) has a focus on *who* was dozing off, and seems to implicate an additional, counterfactual wish. The sentence in (43) comes closest to preserving the meaning of the original, but it restricts the meaning, and it is not exactly a case of embedding but one of coordination and possibly "stripping."

While Weir (2020) shows that opposite polarity tag questions with the expletive *it* can follow some discourse-initial fragments,[20] Spotlight *Not* does not seem to allow an opposite polarity tag question at all. My consultants and I find all of the following ungrammatical, except for the tagless fragment in (44a).

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[20]For example:

(1) *Context: A comes in and discovers that on the kitchen table, where there should be a beautiful roast leg of lamb, there is only a greasy plate. A looks at B and raises his eyebrows. A asks B:*
     The dog, was it? (Weir 2020)

(44) a. Not him looking like a frat guy.

      b. *Not him looking like a frat guy, is it?

      c. *Not him looking like a frat guy, isn't it?

      d. *Not him looking like a frat guy, isn't he?

      e. *Not him looking like a frat guy, is he?

      f. *Not him looking like a frat guy, doesn't he?

      g. *Not him looking like a frat guy, does he?

The ungrammaticality of opposite polarity tag questions here provides some evidence that Spotlight *Not* is not derived from a full sentence by ellipsis, since a full sentence requires a marker of tense that is typically repeated in an opposite polarity tag question.[21] Compare (45a) and (45b)—where the fragment may be derived from a full sentence—with (46a) and (46b).

(45) a. There's no rest for the wicked, <u>is</u> there?

      b. No rest for the wicked, <u>is</u> there?

(46) a. That's not him looking like a frat guy, <u>is</u> it?

      b. *Not him looking like a frat guy, <u>is</u> it?
        (At least with a Spotlight *Not* reading.)

Nevertheless, other clauses may be found at the end of a Spotlight *Not* utterance:

(47) Not them taking the stairs *when the elevator's right there*.

In (47), it seems that the clause [*when the elevator's right there*] is embedded in the VP [*take the stairs when the elevator's right there*].

4. A first pass at irony

How can Spotlight *Not* trigger the veridicality inference that it triggers? One way we could try to explain this is by analyzing the meaning of Spotlight *Not* compositionally, which is what Roberts (2019) does in the case of *can't believe*—something about the combination of the meaning of *not* and everything else gives rise to the veridicality inference. A compositional analysis is, of course, much harder in this case, since Spotlight *Not* is nonsentential, and the only element that is necessarily the same (and overt) in every instance of it is the fragment-initial *Not*.

The other way is to analyze it non-compositionally—perhaps it is some kind of idiom with open slots (similar to what American Dialect Society 2023 describes), or perhaps (as Morris 2021 argues) it is ironic.

Indeed, many survey respondents noted that the construction is uttered in an "ironic manner," "sarcastically," or with a "humorous/sarcastic tone."[22] And it could well be that these speakers have an intuition about how the positive meaning arises. But it is also possible that speakers associate

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[21] I say "typically" because, as Barros and van Craenenbroeck (2013) note, not all opposite polarity tag questions are "fully structurally isomorphic to their host clauses." For example:

  (1) Mr. Nelson usually smokes opium BEFORE class, isn't it? (Barros and van Craenenbroeck 2013)

[22] See Appendix B.

Spotlight *Not* with an intonation pattern (a "tone," in popular usage) that is similar to those found in ironic utterances—so that speakers are prone to describe it as ironic—and yet that the positive meaning is not merely implicated or does not otherwise arise through irony per se. This kind of speaker intuition is therefore not decisive here.

However, as Morris (2021) notes, the information conveyed by Spotlight *Not* makes it similar to a "non-literal" form of denial, where a speaker makes as if to deny a proposition that both the speaker and the audience know is true. Compare (48), an example of ironic denial, and (49), an example of Spotlight *Not*.

(48)   *Context: Someone has just called person X lazy. X responds:*
       I know you didn't just call me lazy. (Morris 2021)

(49)   Not you calling me lazy.

In (48), the speaker flouts Grice's maxim of quality by making as if to say they know an obviously false proposition ("you didn't just call me lazy"). The result, as Morris (2021) argues, is "an implicature about the speaker's attitude toward the proposition"—that they find its contradictory "so shocking or unpleasant" that they will pretendedly "persist in [their] belief" in the proposition "even in the face of clear evidence" against it.

It is easy to see how one might hold that the same applies to Spotlight *Not*—that (49) is actually an ironic denial of "you calling me lazy," so that the speaker is able to convey an attitude toward "you calling me lazy" through an implicature. Whether this analysis is correct is beyond the scope of this paper, but there are at least two hurdles that proponents of this analysis would have to overcome.

The first is that Spotlight *Not* can introduce information that the audience is not familiar with. A speaker may certainly reference some shared contextual knowledge, but that is not a necessary condition for a *not*-fragment to have a Spotlight *Not* reading. An analysis of Spotlight *Not* as ironic must contend with how this kind of *not*-fragment, especially those with gerund-participial clauses, can have a Spotlight *Not* reading (and usually does, for speakers who use Spotlight *Not*) even when there is no contextual information to suggest that the speaker is flouting a maxim, nor otherwise suggest a disparity between what the speaker means and what they ostensibly say.

The second hurdle is that even when Spotlight *Not* comes with context, it seems to exhibit different syntactic properties from those of its literal denial counterpart. Suppose someone posts two photos consecutively—one of themselves being lazy and one of their dog being lazy. They write one Spotlight *Not* caption for each photo, and these two captions are supposed to be "in conversation" with each other. The first caption, of course, is *Not me being lazy*. As Larry Horn (pers. comm.) has pointed out to me, one might argue that this caption conveys the same information as "Me being lazy" through irony, as if to ironically say "This is not me being lazy" and rely on the picture to indicate that the apparent meaning is not the intended meaning. But if that is the case—that is, if the caption is an ironic denial—then we might expect that the second caption *could* behave syntactically like the following literal denial:

(50)   Not my dog being lazy either.
       (As a caption, to mean "This is not my dog being lazy either.")

But the syntactic properties of Spotlight *Not* indicate otherwise—as we have seen in section 3.4, the negative polarity item *either* would render such a spotlight *not*-fragment ungrammatical.

It is important to keep in mind, finally, that even if we analyze Spotlight *Not* as not inherently ironic, that is not to say that it cannot be used ironically. Suppose a sports team won a particular match by a lot. The next day, a member of the team says to another:

(51)   Not us getting crushed yesterday, am I right?

The event that this utterance picks out—"us getting crushed yesterday"—is clearly not factual. The speaker and the audience both know it. If the speaker is adhering to the Cooperative Principle, their intention cannot be to suggest the truth of an obviously false proposition—by alluding to it in a construction that typically triggers a veridicality inference—just as someone who on a very cloudy day says, *I love how clear the skies are today*, cannot mean to presuppose an obviously false proposition. Instead, the speaker's utterance would be rightly interpreted as ironic. In this case, it is a way to celebrate or even flaunt the fact that the team won by a lot, but without doing so explicitly. So, even if we say that the construction is not inherently ironic, we can still say that some Spotlight *Not* utterances, like (51), are ironic.

5. Conclusion, limitations, and topics for further work

In this paper, I described the spotlight *not*-fragment (Spotlight *Not*). I first provided some information about who uses Spotlight *Not* and about its relatively new nature, based on information from Morris's (2021) analysis of social media and on my own survey of acceptability judgements. I then gave a description of Spotlight *Not*, covering its meaning, structure, syntactic properties, and similarity to other constructions like *Not X!* and *can't believe*. Finally, I speculated about some possible analyses of the meaning of Spotlight *Not*, in particular how one might explain the veridicality of the construction, and I noted some potential difficulties for each analysis.

It should be noted that most of the conclusions about Spotlight *Not* in this paper were informed either by conversations with my consultants or by the pilot survey, which have some limitations that prevent us from making stronger conclusions. Most of the consultants for this paper interact with one another regularly, so that their idiolects could be more similar to each other in this respect than that of speakers who use Spotlight *Not* but do not interact regularly or are not in the same geographical region. If that is the case, then some of the grammaticality judgements in this paper could be subject to idiolectical or dialectical variation that my consultants and I are not aware of.

Several limitations come with the pilot survey as well: the frequency of Spotlight *Not* examples in the survey may have biased respondents against it; there was an unbalanced number of grammatical and ungrammatical controls; and most of the sentences in the survey did not come with context, so respondents may have been confused about whether they should consider Spotlight *Not* utterances as stand-alone utterances or responses to questions they themselves had to imagine.[23] Most importantly, another construction control should have been used instead of *Not me being asleep*: several respondents in group A-1 found issue with the use of copula *be* or other "stative predicates" (in their words) in a Spotlight *Not* utterance. Perhaps a better example would have been *Not me falling asleep*, as a respondent suggested, or another utterance without copula *be*.

Many pertinent questions about Spotlight *Not* remain, in particular how it should be analyzed: What is its underlying structure? Is there a full sentence that a Spotlight *Not* utterance could be derived from? What is the function of the fragment-initial *Not*? While these important questions have yet to be addressed, and while the limitations of the survey and interviews for this paper call

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[23]See the comments in Appendix D.

for more research on Spotlight *Not*, my hope is that this paper has furthered our knowledge of this construction and demonstrated an important theme in linguistics about grammatical variation—despite the variety of possible meanings and of structures that it encompasses, and despite its perception as "Gen Z slang," the use of the spotlight *not*-fragment is systematic and rule governed. It is not the case that "anything goes."

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

A. Survey
Demographic questions

1. Age

2. How old were you when you started learning English? If you grew up in an English-speaking environment, say 0.

3. Where did you grow up? (City/State/Country) You can list multiple places, if applicable. In that case, please say roughly how long you lived in each place.

4. Are you fluent in any languages besides English? If so, which?

Sentences to rate from 1 to 5
(The average ratings from group A-1 are in blue, below the sentence or fragment each rating applies to.)

1. *Context: You are writing something in pencil, and the pencil lead breaks. You sharpen the pencil. The lead breaks once more. You say:* Not again! **(grammatical control)**
   4.96875

2. I didn't know she could dance. Not could well, anyhow. **(ungrammatical control)**
   1.1875

3. I'm glad to hear it wasn't just me being clumsy.
   4.8125

4. (a) Not me being lazy. **(construction control)**
      4.6875

   (b) *What do you think the sentence above means? Paraphrase it if you can.*

5. I never could have imagined that this was how Mizzou's championship dream would end. Not in a million years. **(grammatical control)**
   4.875

6. *Context: A student falls asleep in a class about the science behind sleep. Another student turns to a friend, points to the student that is sleeping, and says:* Not him asleep.
   3.375

7. Movie tickets are so expensive anymore. **(test for non-polarity *anymore*)**
   1.3125

8. Not me sick because of the weather.
   2.90625

9. Not me on my way to Starbucks for the third time today.
   4.5

10. So I told my mom I didn't do well on my Spanish test, and she goes, "Are you trying to give me a heart attack?!" **(filler)**
    4.71875

11. Not every course at Yale being impossibly hard.
    4.3125

12. Not him complaining anymore.
    1.53125

13. Cockroaches chase elephants when threatened, don't they? **(grammatical control)**
    4.71875

14. Not at me doing my homework at 2 a.m. **(removed because many respondents seemed to think the first *at* was a typo)**

15. Person A: Do you ever drink in the morning?
Person B: Not drink ever in morning. I only drink in the afternoon. **(ungrammatical control)**
1.0

16. Not her not talking to me anymore.
3.28125

17. We were so young back then, won't they? **(ungrammatical control)**
1.0645

18. Not some straight-A students being late to class.
3.5

19. Who left their goddamn ferret in the parking lot? **(grammatical control)**
4.84375

20. Not the dean of Yale College being related to your uncle.
4.34375

21. Not my being dumb.
1.9375

Request for comments: *Thank you for making it this far! Do you have any comments or questions about any of the sentences above or about the survey in general? (Optional)*

B. Select answers to question 4b from survey respondents in group A-1

- "I can't believe I'm being lazy (when I should be productive, active, etc?)."

- "It's so embarrassing that I'm being lazy."

- "It's for some reason ridiculous that I am being lazy."

- "It's stating 'I'm being lazy', but there's both a humorous/sarcastic tone and also definitely a notion of 'I can't believe it' - I think you could paraphrase it in the same regsiter as 'can't believe I'm being lazy, lmaoo'"

- "Look at me being lazy."

- "It's totally acceptable to me in the modern usage of 'I'm being lazy and that's surprising, embarrassing, and/or bad'"

- "It's not good that I'm being lazy (akin to: come on, now)"

- "I'm being so lazy haha"

- "I think of the sentence being almost sarcastic almost, like 'look at me being lazy. I can not believe I am being lazy' but sarcastically."

- "The sentence expresses a sense that it is ironic that I was just lazy. 'Funny that I of all people have just been lazy.'"

- "It's an expression of the irony of a situation; in this case the speaker probably claimed they were going to work and then didn't. Kind of calling themself out for it."

- "I am engaging in a behavior (being lazy) that for some reason I think isn't acceptable."

- "lighthearted critical judgement of your own actions of being lazy"

- "For me this is a construction that was popularized among Gen Z speakers through social media platforms like TikTok. In this context, the sentence above would mean something like 'I can't believe I'm being lazy' or 'wow, I'm being lazy'—basically the 'not' expresses some degree of disbelief or surprise, in a lighthearted and sometimes ironic manner."

- "It's a sort of embarrassed way of saying that one is being lazy."

- "'I'm lazy, and that's mildly undesirable for me' with a humorous tone that pokes fun at one's own faults."

C. Select comments from survey respondents in group A-1

- "I feel like I see what you're getting at! It seems to me that for me to give one of these sort of sentences a 5, it needs to have a specific subject and needs to have an -ing verb involved. ... The Starbucks one I would have given a five if it had had a 'going' or 'being on my way' "

- "My intuition is that the 'not _' construction should be followed by a non-stative predicate? I would deem 'not him (being) asleep' as ungrammatical but 'not him falling asleep' as fine."

- "I rated "not at me doing my homework at 2am" because of the extra 'at,' not because of the construction."

- "I put 3 for the straight A students sentence because the 'some' implied kind of an existential or more general reading and I think the 'not' construction should refer to particular events, usually ones currently taking place (at least in my grammar). Same for why I put 3 for the sick because of the weather sentence: I think I would have put a 4 if it was 'getting sick' instead of 'being sick'. Being is more stative than active for me."

- "These 'Not [subject]!' constructions seem to convey 'Ugh, oh no, not THIS.' I'd assume the above sentence has a meaning like 'Oh no, ugh, not THIS again — it's [subject/occurrence] again, and I'm slightly (but humorously) disappointed that this is the case.' And, for a sentence like 'Not him asleep...', I feel like it'd be more grammatical to me if it was 'Not him being asleep...' or 'Not him falling asleep...'."

- "Is 'not at me doing my homework...' a mistake or no?"

- "I feel like the last sentence is grammatically correct but because people often don't use that grammar form correctly (using a possessive in front of a gerund), it sounds too correct, especially given the colloquial use of the not construction."

- "I enjoyed it very much. Seems like there's a pattern of modern Gen Z slang that uses 'Not' at the beginning of a sentence in an ironic way that somehow makes sense to our little Gen Z brains now. Fascinating."

D. Select comments from survey respondents in the Yale University Parents group

- "(1) I don't think I am familiar with the 'Not me...' structure except when used in an ironic/sarcastic sense. If it means something else, I would rate it unacceptable. (2) Was the 2 a.m. question supposed to be 'Not me doing my homework at 2 a.m.'?"

- "I speak a lot of slang and some of these didn't even make sense to me when I said them out loud."

- "I've heard a lot of these comments from my own high school students."

- "I'm curious about your intent. Many examples begin with 'not' - why? Some examples have context, most don't - why? Since you asked about age, my guess is that you are examining age-related reactions to ambiguity in general. Just playing it straight up, my answers reflect me imagining the sentences were said in some context where the basic topic fit; e.g., 'not her talking to me anymore' could plausibly be in response to, say, someone prompting 'what will you miss about your pesky ex?' So most stuff could plausibly be OK in an informal context. But if the statement didn't relate to the context, then it's likely I'd be less generous in saying it's OK."

- "It's a bit hard when the statement is taken out of context. I can see some phrases being acceptable as a response or statement in a certain situation but as a stand alone statement, it doesn't quite make sense."

- "I work in social media so I'm exposed to a lot of, let's just say, 'youth speak.' I'd bet there are a lot of people my age who don't understand the 'Not me/him/her...' vernacular."

- "Starting sentences with 'not' implies a presumption came directly beforehand. Without having full context it is hard to say if these responses would be acceptable in the situation or not."

- "Some of the phrases I judged as not acceptable might make sense with context. The phrases that begin with 'not' are not sentences as they do not have subjects and predicates. The ferret question got a four from me as a nod to those who would be offended by the explicative."

- "I have never seen or hear the usage of Not above. Now I am curious about whether that is really a thing. Even after taking this survey I can't understand entirely how it functions. It is almost like the Not implies that it refers to something ironic or in reference to a mutually understood context."

- "The sentences pretty much all start with Not probably should have an exclamation mark or something at the end."

- "Interesting. 'Not me' usually speaking like this but it could happen."

- "I think you'll see a big difference based on age. TikTok has made the 'not' thing totally normal for Gen Z."

- "All those 'not me / not my' statements - watcha gettin at there?? Sometimes they could be ok, but it's so dependent on context, which you sometimes provided and other times didn't. For example, if someone said something to me like: 'Does your best friend complain about

how dumb you are?' (kidding, surely), I might say: 'Not my being DUMB . . . ' (meaning, but my friend complains about other things about me, maybe about my being selfish). But then again, I'd more likely say: Not about my being dumb (with 'about' in there). So, if my answers for all the sentences beginning with 'not' seem inconsistent, it's in part related to whether or not I could imagine a scenario where that sequence of words might come out of my mouth. When you gave the exact scenario that provided context for a sentence, it was easier to respond. Hope that helps! Fun survey!"