Messy Rooms and Messy Negations

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Target audience: This talk is designed for anyone who has ever been trapped by a parent's question and didn't know why. No background in linguistics is required — only the shared experience of childhood guilt. The presentation makes accessible three key concepts from formal linguistics: Jespersen's Cycle of negation evolution, the typological distinction between truth-based and polarity-based answer systems, and the pragmatics of biased questions. Listeners will leave with a new appreciation for why some questions feel impossible to answer, and perhaps a new weapon for family disputes.

Teaser comment: Every Sunday of my childhood, my French mother asked me the same question: "Tu n'as pas rangé ta chambre, non?" Every Sunday, I lost. Say "oui" — guilty. Say "non" — also guilty. Negation can be quite messy, just as my room was. Years later, armed with a linguistics degree and three academic papers, I finally understand: her question is the product of 2,000 years of grammatical evolution, engineered to trap children. The good news? French has an escape hatch. The bad news? My five-year-old sister knew it all along. The worse news? I still haven't cleaned my room.