

Kibbitzer 7

No Way

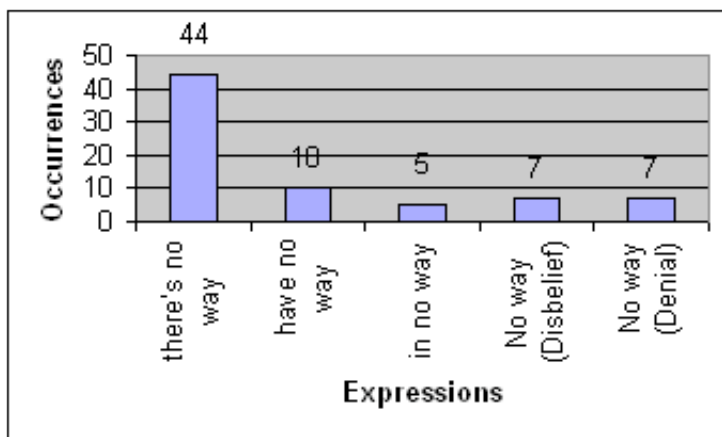
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Background:

International students at the University of Michigan (and elsewhere, of course) must learn many discursive subtleties if they are to successfully communicate and negotiate meanings in an academic context. As noted and investigated in many other EAP and MICASE-related materials, one of the primary questions of spoken academic discourse is, in what ways is it like and unlike both ‘conventional’ spoken discourse and written academic discourse. The challenge for university ESL instructors, particularly those who teach speaking courses, then, is to decide to what extent should they teach discourse strategies that are informal or even non-standard, and to what extent should they teach formal, academic skills and styles of communication.

The Details:

Undoubtedly, there are countless ways to express refusal in English. Choosing which form is most appropriate depends on a wide variety of social and linguistic factors. In particular, is the informal phrase “No way” an aspect of academic English? It is difficult to know how often such a phrase might really be useful for a NNS in a academic setting, and whether or not it is worth teaching. Some data from MICASE should help to elucidate its role.

The Data:

There are 80 occurrences of the two-word phrase “no way” in the MICASE database. Surprisingly, only a handful of them are used as a method of denial. Rather, most occurrences are as a subpart of several other formulaic sequences, as shown in the chart below:

Examples:

1. There's/There is/There was (*just, really, etc*) **no way** (44 occurrences).

there's **no way** to sling mud without getting your hands dirty

Similarly, there is one occurrence each of “no single way”, “no good way” and “no better way” with existential “there”.

2. [Pronoun] have/had **no way** of/to (10 occurrences)

right now we have **no way** of looking at those brain abnormalities while the person is still alive

Interestingly, in 6 out of the 10 occurrences, the complement of “have/had **no way**” is “of knowing”, as in:
 i mean we have **no way** of knowing, if one of them says that

3. In **no way** (5 occurrences)

the idea of community is in **no way** as problematic as that

Of the occurrences of **no way** as an entire phrase,

4. As an expression of disbelief (7 occurrences)

S6: um, Saturday is Halloween, and uh

SU-21: **no way**. Halloween? Saturday?

One usage among the expressions of disbelief is rather ambiguous. This excerpt comes from a psychology lab section, where groups of undergraduates are going to be doing brain dissections.

s1: okay. it's gonna hafta be four to a brain. dissection sheets are over here. alright. okay. we, we've procured some incredibly high technology, <S5 LAUGH> plastic knives, nice. [**SU-F: no way**] okay, gloves are over here.

Interpretation 1: SU-F is extremely surprised that the brains will be dissected with plastic knives, and thinks that her lab instructor must be joking.

Interpretation 2: SU-F understands the humor of “some incredibly high technology” and continues the joke by pretending that she is surprised that the university managed to acquire such “high technology” in order to do this lab.

In either interpretation, though, SU-F’s utterance is one of disbelief regarding the manner of dissecting brains. It is simply how genuine this disbelief is that is very ambiguous.

5. As denial or negation (7 occurrences)

s3: did you finish your other book?

s1: no, **no way**. <LAUGH> i'm a slow reader.

Those interested in English idioms will be interested to note that one of these six occurrences is in the phrase “No way Jose”.

Conclusion:

In short, there’s no way to deny that the words “no” and “way” represent a significant collocation in American academic English. However, rather than teaching this expression as a refusal strategy, it is clear from the corpus evidence that the most common usage of the phrase is in the “there’s no way” construction. Therefore, among the uses identified here, “there’s no way” should be the usage focused on by instructors, rather than “no way” as a direct refusal or negation.