

## 'Not Again' Diana Livesey Prize Essay Submission

*Not Again.* The phrase itself is inherently flawed. Nothing can ever happen again, at least not under the exact same conditions and with the same outcome. Even the really small things, like forgetting to turn your 06:00am alarm off for three consecutive weekends, forcing your Saturday to begin with the jarring familiarity of the working week. The same alarm tone could be played everyday for infinity, though the conditions of its existence would slightly alter. The weather would be somewhat different, as would the main news headline, and the feeling in your stomach. As well as different external conditions, the internal monologue to which the phrase 'not again' is spoken is continually influenced by the experience of language, emotions, and mood. Not only is the phrase paradoxical, it is also near impossible to experience 'groundhog day' repetition in the way the definition of 'again' suggests.

However, it would be limiting only to state that the phrase itself is flawed and that 'repeated' events are never exact replicas. Although this is true, it fails to account for the high frequency of the phrase in both spontaneous speech and your internal monologue. You can probably hear your parents saying it, if not yourself. In these cases, the spoken 'not again', could indeed be replaced with a non-verbal utterance, such as a heavy sigh. Either way, 'not again' very much functions in spoken language rather than planned writing, so it is fairly unproductive to apply abstract linguistic analysis to a phrase that has evolved as a direct result of speaking and feeling, rather than writing in the traditional sense.

Although we have established the improbability in ever experiencing an exact repeat, it is essential to consider the emotional dimensions of the phrase. The physical act of uttering 'not again', either as an internal or spoken monologue, occurs in response to a familiar feeling rather than a familiar event. If the recurrent event did not induce a particular state of emotion, then sighing 'not again' would not be the response. 'Not again' holds a specifically negative atmosphere, it isn't equitable, for example, to the feeling of *deja vu*. Therefore, it is most useful to consider the implications of the phrase based on its emotional capacity.

It is easy to see why, on the surface, the phrase 'not again' could be reduced to signifying the recurrence of a familiar event. Indeed, when we talk and write about our lives we usually inscribe the tangible: the events that can be written onto a calendar, the experiences that enhance a CV, and the relationships that hold titles that can be found on greetings cards. Although it is easier to document life based on the tangible, as the existence of 'not again' proves, the way we experience life is instead through a series of feelings.

With the recognition that phrases like 'not again' functions a) spontaneously and, b) emotionally, there is still a gap in terms of catering for its recurrence. Assuming that the archives of our lived experience are founded on emotional states rather than events, to utter, or think, 'not again' is to experience a feeling that we have preemptively categorized as negative, or one to avoid. Our internal categorization, therefore, need not rely on an exact replica of weather conditions, news headlines and a sinking stomach, but functions on a different conception of repetition. The feeling they induce, not necessarily by the event that happened, identifies negative states. Therefore 'not again' as an utterance is a way of representing, with language, the arrival of a familiar bad feeling.

If we are continually documenting our lives based on familiar feelings, which are often presented in phrases like 'not again', it calls into question whether we end up allowing

language not necessarily to dictate how we feel in a give scenario, but particularly influence how we document it internally. It may possible that repeated usage of a phrase like 'not again' determines how we remember experiences.

In trying to verbalize an intangible emotional state, the phrase 'not again' can become a space for people to inhabit once they *want* to put into language how they feel. However, the existence of such space immediately questions the capability of language to carry exact feelings. A phrase like 'not again' is useful to discuss because it is so familiar and frequently used. The phrase's familiarity illuminates its inherent problem: everyone is constrained by language as the way to communicate personal experience. One person's 'not again' could be another person's 'never mind', though there is no way of distinguishing this because the phrases are so commonly used and tied up in experience.

Another limitation of representing individual feelings in language is that recurrent phrases encourage us to document our lives as a continued span; each new utterance of 'not again' immediately attaches itself to the previous one, creating one long narrative. Although this narrative - categorized by the phrase 'not again' - does represent some genuine experience of feeling, it is less interested in small nuances of emotion, which can often get lost if they don't quite align with the language of the identifying phrase.

Although a series of problems have been established throughout this essay, the inadequacy of 'not again' does not necessarily have to only be proof of the limitation of language. Yes, language, and in particular frequent phrases like 'not again', can help us identify and document familiar feelings. However, the actual emotion we experience does not necessarily align with individual interpretations of a phrase. As a result, the language we choose to explain our feelings at a given moment may be 'correct' at that time, though with each new experience, the phrase evolves and carries new meaning. It is also worth noting that this phrasal adaptation is happening for every individual, exaggerating the struggle of human communication. It seems difficult to assume that we can understand how our friends are feeling if we recognize that the language we use to document our own experiences may not be accurate.

Language cannot be an accurate representation of feeling.

What then, is the purpose of these stock phrases? Living in a fast-paced world may encourage us to lazily categorize feeling into language that is 'close enough'. However, as manifested in the recurrent 'not again', recognizing familiarity in negative experience could provide the trigger for pausing to assess why some experiences make you feel a certain way, rather than just knowing that they do. The next sighing 'not again' could be the cue to mapping your experience of feeling, a process that, in theory, could lead to the extinction of the phrase from your immediate vocabulary.

'Words are not enough to tackle the crisis in mental health' - *The Guardian*, 10th January 2017

**Holly Beddingfield, Second Year, English**