

Negation from the Low Countries to the North Sea Shore

Jespersen's Cycle in the History of Dutch, Frisian, and Low German

Daniel Hrbek (✉ daniel.hrbek@uni-osnabrueck.de)

Since Proto-Germanic times, there have been many syntactic developments that characterise modern West Germanic dialects – including (sentential) negation. As the examples from Old Frisian (1), Old/Middle Dutch (2), and Old Saxon/Middle Low German (3) show, the original Germanic negative element was a preverbal (often clitic) particle *ni/ne* (a), which later – traditionally attributed to phonological weakening (e.g. Hertel 2022) – had to be reinforced (b) with a second, postverbal particle OFri. *nāwet*/ODt. *niewiht*/OSx. *nēowihht*, Late OFri. *naet*/MDt. *niet*/MLG *nicht* (< PGmc. **ni io uuiht* ‘not a thing’; cf. Lenz 1996: 188). Ultimately, *ne* was dropped completely (c), so that all modern West Germanic languages now only have a single, postverbal negative particle. This phenomenon is known as *Jespersen's Cycle* (Jespersen 1917), with stage II, the so-called bipartite negation, being particularly prominent. Although both negative elements occur simultaneously, they do not cancel each other out (Behaghel 1924: 80); rather, they are only able to reverse the truth value of the proposition in combination.

In recent years, urgently needed research has been done for the history of negation in High (e.g. Jäger 2008) and Low German (Breitbarth 2014). But even if parts of the Continental West Germanic dialect continuum now can be considered well-studied, there is still a lack of a comprehensive overview that analyses this highly conspicuous pattern in a cross-lingual and comparative way. This is aggravated by the fact that only minor studies exist for the other two languages, Dutch (Vosters & Vandenbussche 2012; Zeijlstra 2002) and Frisian; in the case of the latter, there is only a single short overview (Bor 1990) that focuses neither on diachrony nor on empiricism. Now, I would like to close this gap and take a closer look at the change of negation in the closely related North Sea Germanic languages and place the results in a larger, but (as far as possible) theory-neutral context in order to analyse the Ingaevonian Jespersen's Cycle in an uniform and comparative way.

For this purpose, the development of sentential negation is analysed not only diachronically, but also (as far as possible) diatopically, in order to gain an overview of the spatio-temporal spread of this phenomenon. Other factors associated with this cycle (e.g. prefixation and position of the finite verb) will be included as well, so that a comparison with the historical dialects of High German (Hrbek & Schallert forthcoming) can be made at selected points, leading to a better insight into this process and its areal and dialectal realisation. In the case of (Old) Frisian, this will also provide the first (and simultaneously large-scale) empirical evidence ever that Jespersen's Cycle occurred there at all. In addition, I would also like to address methodological difficulties such as the ambiguity of preverbal *ne* (Breitbarth 2009; Hrbek forthcoming) and the postverbal particle, which was still homophonic to the negative indefinite pronoun – its source of origin.

Modern corpora such as *Brieven als buit*, *Referenzkorpus Altdeutsch*, and *Corpus Oudfries*, which are balanced according to various criteria, serve as the source of data for this and thus provide several hundred negated sentences each, enabling a comparable analysis of these three languages, their historical stages and their dialects. Therefore, I will also present what a corpus linguistic methodology that allows a comparison across languages and language stages might look like. In doing so, I not only want to break a lance for (chronically) under-researched languages such as Old Frisian, but also share my experience in the field of comparative historical Germanic linguistics, which is also committed to historical dialectology (cf. Wiesinger 2017), especially with other early career researchers.

Referenced Linguistic Examples

- (1) a. *and nammermar ne mot hi anda godis huse wesa mith ore kerstene*
and nevermore NEG may he in God's house be with other Christian
lioden
people

First Rüsting Manuscript; XVII.6 (*On Killing a Relative*)

- b. *Ief hi dan naet komma ne welle*
if he then NEG come.INF NEG wants

Jus Municipale Frisonum; III.57,6 (*Old Skeltariucht*)

- c. *Jsrahel, dines Godes nama scheltu naet wrswerra*
Israel yours God's name shall=you NEG take in vain

Jus Municipale Frisonum; II.8d (*Haet is riucht? What is law?*)

- (2) a. *minon eygenen wingardon nemochte ich behoodan*
my own vineyard NEG=could I cultivate

Old Dutch (*Leiden Willeram*; f. 16v)

- b. *Want ic ne wille niet, broeder, dat ghi onwetende sijt*
because I NEG want NEG brother that you unknowing are

Early Middle Dutch (14th c.) (*Lectionarium van Amsterdam*; 40)

- c. *want menne mach Gode niet deylen*
because drove may God NEG divide

Late Middle Dutch (16th c.) (*Gheestelike brulocht*; 1,206)

- (3) a. *thes ni habda he êniga geuuruhte te thi*
that.GEN NEG had he any bad deed to you

Old Saxon (Old Saxon *Genesis*; II,635)

- b. *so ne scal he nicht vor dat perd antworden*
so NEG shall he NEG for the horse stand up

Middle Low German (13th c.) (*Schra of Nowgorod II*; 31)

- c. *Jdt ys nicht gudt / dat de minsche allene sy*
it is NEG good that the man alone be.CONJ

Middle Low German (16th c.) (*Bugenhagen Bible*; f. 6v)

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