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## **A WEST GERMANIC DIACHRONIC CONSTANT: THE CASE OF NEGATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS**

**Abstract:** This paper explores the common path of sentence negation patterning in the Early West Germanic languages. The intention is to determine the general set of markers, which realize the negation pattern. Our assumption is that West Germanic languages, as it has been shown in many papers, contrast with East Germanic and North Germanic languages in negation marking. Our aim is to determine the status of the grammatical phenomenon in question within the suggested period. Assuming that all West Germanic languages share a similar sentence negation pattern, we lay special emphasis on their structural characteristics. We also hypothesize that the gradual changes of this period were occurring due to the general rearrangement of these language systems, which incurred the elimination of the redundant elements. According to Jespersen's Cycle, all the languages under consideration exhibited multiple negation, i.e., the phenomenon of negative concord (NEG-concord). The latter implies that the preverbal negative particles were removed from the negation construction due both to their weakening and to the rise of the new supportive element, which originated from the independent structural unit *wiht* 'thing'. The rise of the supportive element in the Early West Germanic languages is considered to be a part of the Common Germanic NEG-concord pattern. This lexical-grammatical element turned out to be the one that permitted further elimination of multiple negation in the West Germanic languages.

**Key words:** negation, Old Germanic languages, negative concord, grammaticalization, grammatical redundancy

### **1. Introduction**

In this paper, the sentence negation system in Early West Germanic languages is regarded in the context of grammaticalization theory, which allows us to arrive at conclusions based on data from Old Germanic relics. Aiming to provide an adequate description of the negation pattern in these languages, we will outline a small set

of assumptions: (i) regardless of life stage, living languages change constantly; (ii) changes in any specific time-phases of any closely related languages, such as West Germanic languages, occur at different rates; and (iii) there is a structural pattern shared by the majority of the group of languages in question, the so-called *linguistic constant*.

As is the case of the other Indo-European groups of languages, both the old and new, the West Germanic group employs negative markers to implement sentence negation strategies. The latter differ both synchronically and diachronically in the quantity of markers, and their arrangement and involvement of supportive elements. The evolution of sentence negation patterns in Germanic languages has been described as Jespersen's Cycle (Jespersen, 1917). It has demonstrated that further development of the negation strategies in these languages was mostly due to the grammaticalization of the phenomena in question, which might have incurred the elimination of the redundant structural elements. In historical linguistics, numerous studies have already shed some light on the possible causes of the grammaticalization of sentence negation patterns (Lehmann, 1995; Hopper & Traugott, 2003; Traugott & Trousdale, 2010; Haspelmath, 1998; Fischer, 2009; Diewald, 2010). In our view, this is best described by Lass in terms of unidirectionality, which implies that "all grammatical items in natural languages ultimately derive from lexical items" due to the semantic bleaching of the latter (Lass, 2000, p. 207-227). In the papers which highlight the issues of grammaticalization processes, another two indicative notions are mentioned: the notions of *shared grammaticalization* (see Aikhenvald, 2007; Heine & Kuteva, 2005; Robeets & Cuyckens, 2013) and the notion of *grammatical redundancy*, which has been borrowed from the information theory (Shannon & Weaver, 1964) and further developed on the linguistic grounds (Witt & Gillette, 1999; Chiari, 2007). In this regard, the multiple negation constructions of the earlier periods in the history of the West Germanic languages are treated together as one of the instances of structural redundancy. This discussion is focused on structural changes which took place in the syntax of negation from the seventh throughout the eleventh centuries.

## **2 An outline of the history of the negation system in the Germanic languages**

The present-day picture of sentence negation in Germanic languages exhibits the common pattern VERB FINITE NEG, that is, apart from English, which employs AUX NOT INFINITIVE to implement a sentence negation pattern, cf.: German (1) *Ich spreche nicht* ('I do not speak'), Dutch (2) *Ik was niet siek* ('I was not sick'), Frisian (3) *Ik fergeat him net* ('I forgot him not') and English (4) *I do not speak* (I AUX NEG VERB NON-FINITE), (5) *I have not spoken* (I AUX NEG VERB NON-FINITE). Unlike English, all other West Germanic languages are V2

type, and display a common path of grammaticalization. Remarkably, the shift of the typological profile of the English language from V2 to V3 is one of the reasons for the deviation from the common Germanic path and the consolidation of the AUX NOT INFINITIVE pattern.

With regard to the path of the sentence negation development, it would be reasonable to assume that PIE dialects used the negative particle *\*ne* ‘not’ in preposition to the finite verb to mark the sentence negation (Lehmann, 1974; Delbrück, 1897, p. 521-524). The reconstructed negative particle *\*ne* is most directly presented in Germanic (OE *ne*), Balto-Slavic (Lith. *ne*), Lat. *ne*. Another negative particle *\*me* was used in imperative clauses (Fortson, 2004, p. 149). According to the structural principles applied to the arrangement of syntactic elements, the negative marker follows the finite verb in OV languages and is preverbal in contrast to VO languages (Lehmann, 1973, p. 47-66).

Now let us present the sentence negation pattern of the languages in question during the historical timespan.

### 3. Negation strategies in the history of English

Present-Day English shows some deviation in sentence negation patterning when compared to that of other West Germanic languages, by displaying the structurally different AUX VERB NOT pattern (Buniyatova, 2021, p. 97-109). Notwithstanding the later developments, in the earlier periods of their development, the Germanic languages show similarities in the implementation of sentence negation. Old English (seventh-twelfth centuries) demonstrates the negative clitic *ne* in preposition to the finite verb (Fischer et. al, 2004, p. 324), e.g.:

- (6) OE *ne mihte se deað hine gehæftan* (Alf.H. XV, 226)  
 NEG could the death him restrain  
 ‘death could not hold him captive’

The negative sentences of that period also display merging of the negative clitic with the modals and preterito-presentia verbs, which resulted in contracted forms such as those of the type *nolde* (<=ne-wolde), *nyllan* (<=ne-willan), *nytan* (<=ne-witan), *nabban* (<=ne-habban), *næron* (<=not wæron) etc. (Fischer et al., 2017, p. 157), as it is exemplified in (7)-(8), e.g.:

- (7) OE *gif ic nolde oðrum mannum cyðan* (Alf.H. Prefatio, 8)  
 If I NEG-wanted other men say  
 ‘If I would not declare to other men’
- (8) OE *þeh hie him þæs geþæfende næren* (Orosius 50, 17)  
 though they him that agreeing NEG-were  
 ‘Though they were not in agreement with him on that’

It should be noted that by the end of the Old English period, constructions with double/multiple negation occur where the preverbal clitic *ne* is accompanied by additional negative markers, e.g., *naht*, *noht* ‘not’, *nalles*, *næfre* ‘never’, *nane* ‘no’. Other arrangements are also possible. In addition, one has to bear in mind that the negative particle *naht* descends from the negative indefinite *nawiht* ‘nothing’, which evolved from the structural unit *wiht*, and as will be shown below, is an essential element in the common Germanic NEG-concord pattern. In the Middle English negation pattern, two or more negative markers merged semantically to realize the phenomenon of negative concord (NC) (Traugott, 1992, p. 268), e.g.:

(9) OE *þæt þær nane oðre on ne sæton* (Boethius, XXVII, 61,20)  
 that there NO others on NEG sat  
 ‘that no others would sit there’

(10) OE *þæt hi ofer þæt ne dorston nohte gretan þa halgan stowe* (Gregory, Dialogues 211)  
 that they after that NEG dared NOT at all attack the holy place  
 ‘that they did not dare at all attack the holy place after that’

In the ME period (twelfth-sixteenth century) negative constructions underwent structural changes. The double negation *ne ... naht* is attested mostly for the first half of the period, while by the end of the sixteenth century the clitic *ne* is being gradually dismissed. The NEG-concord constructions lose their emphatic character and are changed into a single negation pattern (Crystal, 2019, p. 45). In Early Modern English, the auxiliary *do* compensated for the loss of clitic *ne*. After that, there was a tendency to put the negative particle *not* in preposition to the finite verb (Jespersen, 1940, p. 427-429). However, the English pattern AUX VERB NOT, a deviation from West Germanic practices, resulted in the placement of the negative particle *naht/not* in postposition to the finite verb.

#### 4. Negation strategies in the history of German

The specific pattern of Present-Day German sentence negation is VERB FINITE NICHT, e.g.:

- (11) *Ich gehe nicht* – ‘I do not go’  
 (12) *Ich bin nicht gegangen* – ‘I have not gone’

In Old High German the main negation strategy is a preverbal clitic *ni*, placed separately or cliticized to the finite verb, e.g.:

- (13) OHG *dat du neo dana halt mit sus sippan man dinc ni gileitos* (Hildebrandslied 31-32)  
 dass du noch nicht eher mit seinen verwandten Mann Ding NEG geführt  
 ‘that you have not chosen such a close relative as your opponent’

- (14) OHG *Ni wolt er fon niawihti then selbon win wirken* (Otfrid II, 10, 1-2)  
 NEG wollte er von nichts den selbst Wein tun  
 ‘He did not want to create wine out of nothing’

In Late OHG (eleventh century) the particle *ni* was already weakened to *ne*, and in MHG negation appears as *ne-*, *en-*, or *-n*, both proclitic and (more rarely) enclitic to the finite verb (Paul et al., 2007, p. 388), (Jäger, 2008, p. 125-127), e.g.:

- (15) MHG *Herre, ich enweiß wer er sy* (Prosalancelot I 29, 381)  
 Herr, Ich NEG-weiß wer er sei  
 ‘Lord, I don’t know, who he is’

The OHG period demonstrates the early signs of grammaticalization which can be traced on a structural level. Special consideration is given to the structural unit *wiht*, which was semantically bleached and grammaticalized into the negative element. The negative indefinite *niowiht* contains the original substantive *wiht* “being, thing” in addition to the negative semantic. However, the meaning of *niowiht* (and also the phonetic form) in OHG has been weakened: it loses its indefinite semantics and thus becomes an independent negation marker *ni(e)ht* (Jäger, 2008, p. 107). Since this free negation particle appears together with the preverbal clitic, sentences with double negation arise, i.e., sentences with two negative markers, but with a single negative meaning. The phenomenon of NEG-concord takes place, meaning that multiple negatives result in one logical negation (Fischer et al., 2004, p. 54), e.g.:

- (16) OHG *Ih nehabo niht ir gemeitun so uilo geueeinot* (Notker, Psalter 6,23-24)  
 Ich NEG-habe nicht vergeblich so viel geweint  
 ‘I have not cried so much in vain’

- (17) MHG *Ichn weiz niht, herre, wer ir sit* (Parzival 15221)  
 Ich-NEG weiß nicht Herr wer ihr seid  
 ‘I do not know, Lord, who you are’

In Late MHG, preverbal clitics *ne/en/n* lose their meaning as negation carriers and become rare. In the second half of the MHG period clauses also exemplify a single negation with *niht*, e.g.:

- (18) MHG *Nu sunln wir niht verliesen* (Parzival 1862)  
 Nun sollen wir nicht verloren gehen  
 ‘Now we do not want to surrender’

With the disappearance of negative clitics in Late MHG and ENHG, the particle *niht* (the original negative indefinite) serves as the only negation marker. Structurally this negation pattern corresponds to the one in PDG, namely VERB FINITE NICHT in main declarative sentences and with the finite verb at the end in subordinate clauses.

As the material shows, the development of negation in German is parallel with that in English. The use of a twofold negative marker in the sentences had been developing for some time. Let us consider the development of sentence negation patterns in other West Germanic languages.

## 5. Negation strategies in Old Saxon

Old Saxon is the earliest written form of the Low German language and is closely related to Old English, Frisian, and Low Franconian. It is witnessed from the eighth to the twelfth centuries in the north of present-day Germany and the Netherlands. The Old Saxon language kept its name until the beginning of the twelfth century, and from then on it developed into Middle Low German (Galée, 1910, p. 1). The Old Saxon language is represented by two poems, *Heliand* and *Genesis* (ninth century), and other short texts from the North German area. As other Germanic languages, OS underwent a number of changes in the development of negative markers, from the preverbal particle *ni/ne* to double negation with a negative adverbial *niht/niet* (< *ni(eo)wiht* ‘nothing’) and back to the mononegation (Breitbarth, 2013, p. 346). The following sentences (21)-(22) from *Heliand* and *Genesis* exemplify the negative constructions with a preverbal negative marker, e.g.:

(21) *nu ik ni uuelda mina triuuua haldan* (Altsächsische Genesis I, 66)  
 so I NEG wanted my loyalty maintain  
 ‘because I did not want to keep my loyalty’

(22) *endi ni uuilliad eniga fehta geuuirken* (Heliand 16:1317)  
 and NEG want any fights do  
 ‘and do not want to do any fights’

Like other Germanic languages of the early period, OS displays a number of Neg-supporters, e.g., indefinite pronouns, nominals, generalizers, adverbs (including preposition phrases), etc. These elements’ mission was to emphasize negation, e.g., *an thesarū uueroldi* ‘in the world’, *(io)uuīht* ‘(any)thing’, *mid uuīhti* ‘with any(thing)’, i.e. ‘at all’, *(nio)uuīht* ‘(no)thing’. The point is that such ‘supporters’ produced negative emphatic effect to illuminate the polarity of negation, thus reflecting the pragmatic scale of negation discourse (Breitbarth, 2014, p. 19), e.g.:

(23) *That ni skal an is lība gio līdes [anbītan], wīnes an is weroldi* (Heliand 2:126-127)  
 that NEG shall to his life ever cider enjoy wine at his world  
 ‘Never in his life will he drink hard cider or wine in this world’

(24) *Ni bium ik mid wihti [gilik] drohtine mīnumu* (Heliand 11:935-936)  
 NEG am I with anything like Lord mine  
 ‘I am not at all like my Lord’

## 6. Negation strategies in Old Frisian

Traditionally, the development of the Frisian language is divided into the following periods: Proto-Old Frisian (until approximately 1275), Old Frisian (1275-1550), Middle Frisian (1550-1800), and Modern Frisian (from 1800 to the present) (Haan et al., 2010, p. 25). It should be noted that a number of aspects of the specified periodization, in particular, the inconsistency of the designations “Old-” and “Middle Frisian” in comparison to the time marking of related Germanic languages, have been repeatedly discussed (Campbell, 1959), (Arhammar, 1995, p. 72). The issue regarding correlation of timespan and name for Old Frisian period remains debatable: whether the traditional view of the Old Frisian language is Old Germanic, tends towards Middle Germanic, or it is regarded as an intermediate variant between the two. The term ‘Old Frisian’ mistakenly assumes that Old Frisian chronologically belongs to the same historical period as Old English, Old Saxon, Old High German, and Old Netherlandic languages, and this is due to linguistic characteristics (Markey, 1981, p. 40-45). The language known as ‘Old Frisian’ is dated from 1300 to 1500 and tends to be named as Middle Frisian (Campbell, 1959, p. 2). It is also suggested that Frisian was more archaic than its neighbouring languages and that it linguistically corresponded to OE and OHG (Versloot, 2004, p. 257).

Negation strategies in Old Frisian demonstrate the adverbial clitic *ne* (in different spelling *ni/en*) that immediately precedes the finite verbal form as the main sentence negation tool. It is placed as a separate word or proclitically with the following verb (Bor, 1990, p. 27), e.g.:

(25) *Abel and inseptha ne achma ther on to skriuande* (R1 78, 9-10)  
scar and seam NEG must one thereon to write  
‘one must not write scar and seam on this’

(26) *thet hi thine kempa winna ni mey* (SK XXXI, 3)  
that he the champion defeat NEG may  
‘that he may not defeat the champion’

The negative marker *ne* was written as a separate word or merged with an auxiliary, e.g., *nabba* (ne+habba), *nella* (ne+wella), *molde* (ne+wolde), *nachte* (ne+achte), *nis* (ne+is) (Haan, 2001, p. 631). In the course of time, *ne* in combination with some other words, e.g., *naet*, *na*, *neen*, *ner*, *nimmen* has completely lost its independent status. On the other hand, in *nellet* and *nabbe* the independent meaning of *ne* is still quite clear (Bor, 1971, p. 97).

Another sentence negation strategy in Old Frisian employs the adverb *naet*, which was originally a compound *nawet* < *nā wet*, cf. PDE *not* < OE *na-wiht*, PDG *nicht* < OHG *neowiht* < *ni eo wiht*, of which the second element was a noun, and its function was that of a pronoun with a negative meaning (Bor, 1971, p. 98).

Other than the single negation pattern, the clauses with double and notably multiple negation are also attested in Old Frisian/ The latter include additional NEG-words, namely adverbs, indefinite pronouns, and coordinating conjunctions, e.g., *naet*, *nawet* etc. (Haan et al., 2010, p. 55-57). In clauses with double negation *ne* still generally precedes the finite verb, e.g.:

(27) *nawet kuma ne machte* (R1 IV 16-17)  
 NOT come NEG could  
 ‘He could not come’

(28) *Thu ne skalt thines godis noma nawet idle untfa* (R1 IV 23-24)  
 thou NEG shalt thy God’s name NOT in vain use  
 ‘You shall not use your God’s name in vain’

## 7. Negation strategies in Old Dutch

In Old Dutch, the negation system was undergoing syntactic changes already in the ninth century. This is recorded in the translations of De Wachtendonckse Psalmen and ‘The Wachtendock Psalms’ from Vulgate Latin psalms. In these texts the preverbal clitic *ne* is placed in the left-hand position to the finite verb (Zeijlstra, 2004, p. 82-83), e.g.:

(29) OD *ende in uuege sundigero ne stunt* (WP 1:1)  
 and in way sinners NEG stood  
 ‘And didn’t stand in the way of sinners’

(30) OD *Galico scieton sulun imo in ne sulun forhtun* (WP 63:5)  
 suddenly shoot will him and NEG will fear  
 ‘Suddenly they will shoot him, and they will not fear’

In the course of Old Dutch and in Middle Dutch (twelfth-sixteenth century), like in other Early Germanic languages, the early signs of grammaticalization are attested. Old Dutch displays negative clauses with strengthening negative adverb *niet* < *niuueht* ‘nothing’ (Zeijlstra, 2004, p. 83), which shows the beginning of the second stage of Jespersen’s Cycle, e.g.:

(31) OD *Niuueht so ungenethere nohc so* (WP 1:4)  
 NEG so impious NOT so  
 ‘Not like this, impious, not like this’

The sentence negation strategies in Middle Dutch are realized through *ne/en* particle cliticized to the finite verb, whatever the position of the latter in the sentences, involving extra NEG-particle *niet*, or other, i.e., *niemant* ‘nobody’, *nemmer* ‘never’, *nergens* ‘nowhere’, which originate from merging *ne* with the indefinite pronoun/ adverb (De Schutter, 1994, p. 472), (Mooijaart, 2010, p. 1034), e.g.:

- (32) MD *daer si niet meer of ne weten* (Reynart the Fox 21)  
 which they NOT more about NEG know  
 ‘that they know no more about’
- (33) MD *ne hads mi eene niet ghebeden* (Reynart the Fox 27)  
 NEG have me one NOT requested  
 ‘if a certain lady have not asked me’
- (34) MD *Hi ne wilde van den fellen diere*  
 he NEG wanted of that cruel animal  
*nemmeer hoeren die tale* (Reynart the Fox 956-957)  
 NEVER hear these words  
 ‘He no longer wanted to hear the words of that vicious animal’

In Late Middle Dutch negative marker *ne* gradually disappeared from use, and a single negation pattern with the NEG-word *niet* or with a negative indefinite became the standard during Early New Dutch times in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries (Mooijaart, 2010, p. 1034-1035).

## 8. Common practices in the establishment of a negation pattern

Proceeding from the above, it would make sense to consider the common path in the formation of negation in Old West Germanic languages. One of the distinctive features in the structure of the negation pattern is the structural element *wiht/uuht* ‘thing’ and its grammaticalized form *ni(o)uuht/nawiht* ‘not a thing’. The rise of this element is considered to be a part of the Common Germanic NEG-concord pattern. The early signs of grammaticalization have been traced within the suggested timespan. This full-content unit was eventually licensed to eliminate multiple negation markers in West Germanic languages.

In terms of Jespersen’s Cycle, High German reached the third stage with a free negative particle at the beginning of the fourteenth century (Jäger, 2008, p. 149). English, as the least morphologically conservative of the Germanic languages, kept the preverbal negative marker *ne* until the fifteenth century and rearranged the sentence negation into a singular pattern in the fifteenth century (Wallage, 2005, p. 195). Old Saxon (Low German) disposed of the multiple negative constructions between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Breitbarth, 2014, p. 44). In Old Dutch, in parallel with a sporadic single negation, there is also a double negation, implemented in the construction *ne ... niet*, where *niet* functions as an intensifying adverb. In Middle Dutch, the ratio is changed, and a double negative is more frequently used. In Old Frisian the double negative construction *ne ... nawet* prevails, coexisting with the separate singular use of *ne* and *nawet* (Bor, 1990, p. 40). Accordingly, post-verbal negation markers (Germ. *nicht* < *ni (io)uuht*, Eng. *not* < *ne (io)wiht* ‘not anything’, ‘not something’) initially served as reinforcing

elements and were used together with a preverb to emphasize negative content. In this case, all the West Germanic languages reveal NEG-concord, resulting in the semantic negative nucleus irrespective of the number of negative markers in the sentence.

In case of the old West Germanic multiple negation, we are dealing with structural redundancy, “since all NEG-elements merge in a semantic nucleus of negation” (Buniyatova, 2021, p. 101). The sentence negation systems in Old West Germanic languages lost their redundant elements at different stages of their development conditional on a number of (socio) linguistic factors. It makes sense to assume that the languages under consideration display a linguistic CONSTANT, reflected in sentence negation patterning.

In light of this discussion, we have concluded that the shared grammaticalization path in the West Germanic languages was coordinated by the universal principles of grammatical changes, i.e., reanalysis and analogy. The West Germanic languages, being the reflexes of Proto-Germanic, belong to the language group of the V2 word-order type. They have gone through a number of changes followed by the reduction of redundant elements. The English sentence negation pattern AUX NOT INFINITIVE is an exception in the West Germanic regular picture of the sentence negation strategy. At the same time negation patterning with PDE verbs *to be* and *to have* displays the same old pattern of negation as Present-Day German, e.g., ‘*you are not here*’ – ‘*du bist nicht hier*’ without AUX. The verb *to be*, due to frequency of use and thus fissilisation, does not follow the new pattern typical of PDE. The same partly concerns the verb *to have*, e.g., ‘*you have not (got) any time*’ vs ‘*you don’t have any time*’.

## 9. Conclusion

This paper traces the changes which took place within the sentence negation system in the history of West Germanic languages. The development of the negation system is viewed as a redundancy-managed process. Notwithstanding the individuality and systemic differences, West Germanic languages underwent a common path in the elimination of redundant elements thus arriving at grammaticalized patterns. They shared similar strategies in the formation of the sentence negation pattern. Specifically, in earlier stages of their development they faced a shift from preverbal particle to postverbal particle, sharing proclitics *ne/ni* and the post-verbal negative element. At the end of the Old Germanic period (about eleventh century) the supportive negative marker *ni(o)uuht* ‘not a thing’ loses its original adverbial meaning and progresses further through grammaticalization.

The analysis of the second and third stages of Jespersen’s Cycle in the development of the negation system shows that post-verbal negators originally played a supportive role and were used together with preverbal clitics for emphatic

purposes. Such combinations of proclitics with additional, ‘NEG-supporting’ elements in the earlier stages of these languages demonstrate the phenomenon of structural redundancy. The languages followed the principle of transparency, eventually developing grammaticalized patterns of negation. The Germanic languages, which have a common ancestor and belong to the V2 type, have gone along a common path of grammaticalization. An exception is the English language with its pattern AUX NOT INFINITIVE (excluding negative constructions with PDE verbs *to be* and *to have*), which stands apart from other Germanic languages for a number of reasons. The provided discussion allows us to substantiate the previously accepted assumptions regarding the common shifts in the construction of the Old Germanic negation pattern. The latter has been validated by the emergence of an additional reinforcing element in its structure.

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