

Jespersen's cycle in Middle High German: A phonological perspective

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In my talk, I offer a phonology-based explanation for the diatopic variation concerning the use and loss of the bipartite negation marker (ex. 1 and 2) in Middle High German (MHG).

Formed by the former Old High German single preverbal marker *ni* (>MHG *ne/en*) and originally strengthening *niowiht* ‘nothing’ (> MHG *niht*), the construction is seen as evidence for a typological change commonly known as Jespersen’s Cycle.

Although Jespersen (1917) suggested the prosodic characteristics of the preverbal element to play a crucial role in the renewal of the expression of standard negation, modern formal accounts hardly address the phonological side of the development (e.g. Jäger 2008 for MHG, Breitbarth 2014 for Middle Low German). They also don't offer any explanations for the fact that *ne/en* persisted much longer in Western Central German (WCG) sources than in Upper German (UG) sources (Behaghel 1918). The same holds for a possible influence by the finite verb's position, another variation factor identified within the data presented in this talk. About 500 negated sentences containing the bipartite negation marker or single *niht*, taken manually from nearly 200 charters of the 13th century (Newald et al. 1932–2004), were investigated. The results do not only suggest beginning loss of the bipartite marker in WCG verb-initial clauses (ex. 1), in contrast to verb-second and verb-final/late clauses, but also a certain left-over stability with UG verb-final/late clauses (ex. 2).

- (1) *da he ir sint Heruifte niet uirgoldin inhat* WCG charter (796), 1286
 because he her since autumn NEG repaid NEG=has
 ‘because he hasn’t been repaying her since last autumn’
- (2) *daz er ez niht enwēst* Eastern UG charter (1800A), 1298
 that he it.GEN NEG NEG=knew
 ‘that he didn’t know of it’

In order to capture these differences I propose an analysis within the framework of Prosodic Phonology (Selkirk 1981ab, Nespor & Vogel 2007), following the adjustments made by Kabak & Schiering (2006) for function words (fnc) in German varieties. Basically assuming that utterances are hierarchically organized into syllables ($\sigma_{s(\text{trong})/w(\text{eak})}$), feet (F) and prosodic words (ω), I argue that the preverbal part becomes exclusively enclitic in the course of the phonological development of unstressed syllables in High German, in particular when affected by the loss of the vowel schwa (/ə/).

Following Hayes (1995), I claim that at least in WCG the stray alveolar nasal, being of rather high sonority, can only be prosodified by means of an anaptyctic syllable (*en*). That syllable, in turn, can only be integrated into the left-adjacent prosodic unit – which is why it is initially lost in verb-first clauses. Finally, I propose the following two prosodic representations in verb-second and verb-final/late clauses, depending on whether the host is a lexical word (Lex, ex. 1 and 3a) or another fnc (ex. 2, 3b):

- (3) syntax: a. [Lex Fcn] b. [Fcn Fcn] c. [Lex]
phonology ([$\sigma_s \sigma_w \sigma_w$]F)_w ([$\sigma_s \sigma_w$]F)
 i. [$\sigma_s \sigma_w \sigma_w$]F → ([$\sigma_s \sigma_w$]F)
 ii. [$\sigma_s \sigma_w$]F → ([σ_s]F)

According to my approach, the MHG bipartite negation marker is lost eventually for two reasons: First, *en* continues to constitute the unstressable syllable of a phonological foot (either trochee or dactyl), which in turn constitutes the domain of /ə/-deletion. This process is primarily known for leading to the loss of whole posttonic stem syllables in many lexical words, e.g. *wandelen* > *wandeln* ‘to change’ or *swane* > *swan* ‘swan’. They display a prosodic structure (3c) identical to the both fc_n sequences containing the preverbal element (3ab). Second, after Schwa deletion *n* turns into a stray consonant again which is finally deleted because of still not constituting a suitable coda in most phonological environments.

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