Negative cycles and grammaticalization

Maj-Britt Mosegaard Hansen

The Oxford Handbook of Grammaticalization
Edited by Bernd Heine and Heiko Narrog

Print Publication Date: Oct 2011
Subject: Linguistics, Historical Linguistics, Morphology and Syntax
Online Publication Date: Sep 2012 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199586783.013.0046

Abstract and Keywords

This article analyses the grammaticalisation of the negative linguistic cycles. It suggests that it is plausible to assume that negation must be a universal feature of language and that negation appears to invariably receive overt expression in language. It considers the form of clause negation that is considered most basic in a given language, which applies productively in declarative main clauses, and which does not involve quantifiers. It also discusses Jespersen's cycle.

Keywords: negative linguistic cycle, grammaticalisation, language, clause negation, declarative main clauses, Jespersen's cycle

1. Introduction

It is plausible to assume that negation must be a universal feature of language. Indeed, according to Miestamo (2005: 5), ‘no languages without negation have been found’. Yet, unlike its conceptual counterpart affirmation, which is normally left implicit, negation appears to invariably receive overt expression in language (cf. Greenberg 1966: 50). Formally, then, negation is clearly the marked pole of the affirmative-negative opposition.[1]

In this chapter, the term ‘negation’ will henceforth be used to refer to what Payne (1985: 198) calls ‘standard’ negation, viz. the form of clause negation that is considered most basic in a given language, which applies productively in declarative main clauses, and which does not involve quantifiers. Thus, to take English as an example, standard negation is expressed in that language by the particle *not*, frequently taking the form of an enclitic *n't* on the finite verb, usually in combination with *do*-support, as in (1). English has a variety of other ways of negating states (p. 571) of affairs (some of them exemplified in (2–4)), but while this is true of many languages, such additional constructions will not be discussed here.

(1) John didn't sing.

(2) For John not to have sung is surprising.
(3) Nobody sang.
(4) That song remained unsung.

It is a salient feature of standard negation that its formal expression tends to evolve and change over time. Of particular interest in the context of grammaticalization is the fact that, cross-linguistically, the relevant changes appear very frequently to follow cyclical patterns. Two such patterns have been identified in the literature, the more widely known of the two being the so-called Jespersen Cycle (so dubbed by Dahl 1979: 88, but originally described by Jespersen 1917), while the other—identified and discussed by Croft (1991b)—takes the form of a negative-existential cycle. Jespersen's Cycle, along with possible explanations for it and its link to grammaticalization, will be discussed in section 2 below, followed by a brief treatment of Croft's Cycle along similar lines in section 3. Given that Croft's Cycle is not only of significantly more recent formulation, but also narrower in scope than Jespersen's, there is—unsurprisingly—a vastly more extensive literature on the latter. The structure of the present chapter, and the relative amplitude of the discussion devoted to each of the two cycles, reflect that fact.

2. Jespersen's Cycle

This pattern of evolution pertains to a number of languages which express negation through one or more markers of an adverbial nature. Jespersen (1917: 4) describes the cycle as follows:

> [t]he original negative adverb is first weakened, then found insufficient and therefore strengthened, generally through some additional word, and this in turn may be felt as a negative proper and may then in the course of time be subject to the same development as the original word.

Schematically, the complete sequence can be illustrated using French (in an extended sense, including its mother language Latin at one end, and French-based Creoles at the other) as Table 46.1.[2]

(p. 572) With respect to Stage 5, it must be noted that no variety of French has fully reached this stage yet, in terms of having completely abandoned the use of *ne*. Nevertheless, conversational registers of Québecois and Swiss French, in particular, come very close, showing rates of *ne*-retention of only 1.5 per cent and 2.5 per cent, respectively (Sankoff and Vincent 1977: 252; Fonseca-Greber 2007: 256).

Table 46.1. The evolution of French clause negation (sample sentence: 'I do not say…')

Stage 0 (Classical Latin)	*non dico*	The negator is preverbal
Stage 1	*je ne dis*	The preverbal negator is phonetically reduced
Stage 2	*je ne dis (pas)*	The preverbal negator is optionally complemented by a postverbal element
Stage 3	*je ne dis pas*	The postverbal element grammaticalizes as part of a discontinuous negator embracing the verb
Stage 4	*je (ne) dis pas*	The original preverbal negator becomes optional
Stage 5 (future French?)	*je dis pas*	The negator is postverbal
Stage 6 (Louisiana French Creole)	*mo pa di*	The previously postverbal negator migrates to preverbal position

A number of other languages, particularly (but not exclusively) of European origin, appear to have gone through some or all of the stages set out in Table 46.1; for instance Afrikaans (Biberauer 2009), Bantu (Devos and van der Auwera 2009), Brazilian Portuguese (Schwegler 1988; Schwenter 2006), Catalan (Espinal 1993), Dutch (Burridge 1983), English (Frisch 1997; van Kemenade 2000; Wallage 2008), German (Abraham 2003), Greek (Kiparsky and Condoravdi 2006), and Italian (Bernini and Ramat 1996; Zanuttini 1997; Hansen and Visconti 2009).

Although, superficially, the similarities among these various languages in terms of how negation has evolved are quite striking, the reality is—as one might expect—somewhat more complex than Jespersen's original formulation would suggest.

For one thing, the different stages are not necessarily as neatly ordered as Table 46.1 suggests. For instance, Schwenter (2006) shows that in Brazilian Portuguese negation can be expressed by a plain preverbal *naõ* or by an embracing *naõ…naõ* construction (cf. (5)), which seems to suggest that the language is currently at Stage 2 (p. 573) of Jespersen's Cycle. However, speakers also have the option of using a plain sentence-final

naõ (cf. (6)), which would be indicative of Stage 4. Stage 3 appears not to (have) be(en) instantiated at all, insofar as the embracing construction is still considered non-canonical:

(5)

A. *O João não foi à festa*. B. *Não foi não*.
'A. João didn't go to the party. B. He didn't go.' (Schwenter 2006: (11))

(6)

A. *Você gostou da palestra da Maria?* B. *Gostei não*.
'A. Did you like Maria's talk? B. I didn't.' (Schwenter 2006: (12))

Furthermore, once a language has reached Stage 3, Stage 4 is in fact not the only possible next step. Thus, the language may instead add an obligatory or optional third negative marker, as in (7) below. This has happened in some Bantu languages (Devos and van der Auwera 2009) and in Lewo (van der Auwera (2009: 57):

(7)

Laadi (Devos and van der Auwera 2009: (69))		
ka	*-na*	*-tim-uny -ááni -ko*
NEG1-1SG.TM -dig-FIN -NEG3 -NEG2		
'I hadn't dug.'		

At stages 2–4 of the cycle, the relative status of the pre- vs. postverbal negative element may be unclear or controversial. Even when the forms appear identical from one stage of the cycle to the next, their morphosyntactic and semantic status may have changed. Thus, Rowlett (1998) and Wallage (2008) have argued cogently that in French and English, respectively, the preverbal marker—*ne* in both cases—was the principal negator only so long as the postverbal marker (*pas* and *not*, respectively) remained optional. However, once the latter was fully grammaticalized and could no longer be left out, i.e. once these languages reached Stage 3, the evidence points to it being the principal negator, while the preverbal element became more akin to an agreement marker (Rowlett 1998: 134; Wallage 2008: 673). It is perhaps significant in this connection that, according to Frisch (1997: 32), Stage 3 never became properly entrenched in English. In other words, the language may in fact have passed directly from Stage 2 to Stage 4.[3]

The property of being a sufficient exponent of negation must, of course, be transferred from the pre- to the postverbal marker before the transition to Stage 4 (i.e. loss of the preverbal marker) can take place. In contradistinction to English and French, Biberauer

(2009) shows that, in contemporary Afrikaans, the postverbal marker is phonetically, semantically, and categorially weak compared to the original preverbal marker, in as much as only the latter can be modified, reinforced by other elements, and stressed, while only the former can felicitously be omitted. (p. 574) She concludes that this language appears to remain stably at Stage 3, with no signs of dropping its preverbal negator.

Finally, in languages that appear to have reached Stage 4, where the postverbal negator is strong enough to appear on its own, but is still in competition with the bipartite form, the use of the postverbal negator alone may differ pragmatically from bipartite negation.[4] According to Schwenter (2006), Brazilian Portuguese postverbal *naõ* in (6) above differs from the embracing *naõ…naõ* construction exemplified in (5) by being felicitous only in dialogic contexts. Fonseca-Greber (2007), on the other hand, suggests that bipartite *ne… pas* seems, in conversational Swiss French at least, to have developed a new function of expressing emphasis, in contrast to the by now pragmatically neutral postverbal *pas*. If this is also true of colloquial French as spoken in France, then such a new contrast may prevent French from eventually reaching Stage 5 of Jespersen's Cycle.[5]

2.1. Explaining Jespersen's Cycle

As pointed out by van der Auwera (2010), Jespersen's account focuses exclusively on the formal properties of negation, and essentially explains the negative cycle as being triggered by the phonetic weakening of the original preverbal marker (i.e. in the case of French, the weakening of Latin N‿o·N to Old French *ne*). According to Kiparsky and Condoravdi (2006: 4), however, the evidence of such phonetic weakening is not very strong across languages.[6] Moreover, as mentioned above, contemporary Afrikaans appears to be one language where it is the innovative postverbal marker that is phonetically weaker (cf. Biberauer 2009).

Observing that Latin N‿o·N itself is assumed to represent the univerbation of IE **ne* + OENUM (‘one’), Jespersen's contemporary Antoine Meillet proposed instead (without reference to Jespersen) that pragmatics may be the driving force in the negative cycle:

> Les langues suivent ainsi une sorte de développement en spirale: elles ajoutent des mots accessoires pour obtenir une expression intense; ces mots s’affaiblissent, se dégradent et tombent au niveau de simples outils grammaticaux; on ajoute de nouveaux mots ou des (p. 575) mots différents en vue de l’expression; l’affaiblissement recommence, et ainsi sans fin. (Meillet 1912: 140)
>
> ‘Languages thus undergo a sort of spiral development: they add extra words to obtain an intensified expression; those words weaken, wear out, and are reduced to the level of simple grammatical tools; new or different words are added for expressive purposes; the weakening process begins anew, and so on without end’. (My translation.)

There are a number of reasons to believe that Meillet's account may be more accurate, and certainly, from the point of view of grammaticalization theory, we would expect the formal changes that characterize the cycle to be driven by the meanings attached to different constructions rather than the other way around.

Thus, neither the transition from a simple preverbal negator to bipartite negation nor the transition from bipartite negation to a simple postverbal negator is achieved abruptly: as Table 46.1 suggests, both these transitions are characterized by periods of variation between the older and the more recent strategy, represented by Stages 2 and 4. Given that, in at least some cases, these stages last for centuries and appear quite stable, it is plausible to assume that the competing strategies may, at least initially, differ not just in form, but also in aspects of their meaning.

Observed differences in contemporary Stage 4 languages were briefly touched upon above. With respect to Stage 2 languages, contemporary descriptions do, indeed, frequently treat the bipartite construction as pragmatically different from the plain preverbal negator. Such differences would be inexplicable if the reinforcing element had been introduced simply to compensate for the formal reduction of the original negator.

At an intuitive level, the pragmatic difference in question seems to have to do with somehow emphasizing—or, to use Meillet's term, ‘intensifying’—negation. Now, far from being contingent on the canonical negator having been formally weakened, the ability to express negative emphasis would appear to be a universal feature of languages (Schwegler 1988: 36; Kiparsky and Condoravdi 2006: 7), and it is moreover a category which is commonly formally marked by the addition of a particle-like expression.

Indeed, frequent etymological sources for reinforcing postverbal markers have in common that they are elements which naturally lend themselves to the expression of emphasis. Thus, we find negative reinforcers derived from quantitative expressions denoting minimal amounts, i.e. expressions which either are negative polarity elements or have NPI-like properties (Israel 2001). Saliently, this is the case with French *pas* (⟨ Latin PASSU(M) ‘step’) and its principal medieval competitors, *mie* (⟨ MICA(M) ‘crumb’) and *point* (⟨ PUNCTU(M) ‘point’), as well as similar or cognate expressions in other Romance languages (e.g. Catalan *pas*, Italian *mica*). Alternatively, postverbal markers can be based on negative interjections, presumably originally added as emphatic tags. This appears to be the case, for instance, in Brazilian Portuguese (Schwegler 1988: 38) and in Afrikaans (Biberauer 2009).

(p. 576) All of this points to the weakening and ultimate loss of the original preverbal negator in Jespersen's Cycle being, in fact, the consequence rather than the cause of increasingly frequent use of the new postverbal marker.

If we accept this, can we be more precise about the exact nature of the perceivedly more ‘emphatic’ forms of negation expressed by bipartite structures at Stage 2? For, as Schwenter (2006) points out, emphasis is a rather ill-defined notion in itself.

Several studies have suggested that the use of bipartite Stage 2 negation in various Romance languages is subject to discourse-functional constraints linked to the presupposed or otherwise given nature of the negated proposition or its underlying positive counterpart (e.g. Bernini and Ramat 1996; Espinal 1993; Schwegler 1988; Zanuttini 1997; Schwenter 2006; Hansen and Visconti 2009; Hansen 2009). According to Zanuttini (1997: 61), for instance, in Italian only (9) below would constitute a felicitous exchange with the addition of *mica*, whereas (8) would not:

(8)

A. *Chi viene a prenderti?*
B. *Non so. Ma Gianni non a (*mica) la macchina*.
'A. Who's coming to pick you up?
B. I don't know. But Gianni doesn't [*NEG2] have the car.'

(9)

A. *Chi viene a prenderti—Gianni?*
B. *Non so. Ma Gianni non a mica la macchina*.
'A. Who's coming to pick you up—Gianni?
B. I don't know. But Gianni doesn't [NEG2] have the car.'

Schwenter (2006) suggests that Brazilian Portuguese *naõ…naõ* only appears in propositions that are already activated in the short-term memory of the hearer, while Hansen and Visconti (2009) and Hansen (2009b) propose that medieval French clauses negated by *ne…mie/pas* were constrained to be either already activated in the short-term memory of the hearer or inferable (i.e. accessible to activation) based on other propositions thus activated. In all the relevant Romance languages, the plain preverbal markers, on the other hand, are compatible with propositions conveying information that is entirely new to the discourse.

We may speculate that if French, unlike Italian, Catalan, and Brazilian Portuguese, has proceeded to Stage 3, this may perhaps be attributable to the fact that the bipartite negator in medieval French could mark propositions which were merely inferable. A pragmatic constraint including inferable propositions may be more easily loosened to embrace pragmatically neutral negation than one which includes only directly activated propositions.

The gradual loss of the preverbal marker in Stages 4 and 5 is perhaps explained by the typologically strongly marked nature of discontinuous negation (Bernini and Ramat 1996: 44): Stage 3 negation may be inherently unstable due to its discontinuous form.

(p. 577) 2.2. Jespersen's Cycle and grammaticalization

The question must now be asked to what extent the individual developments that together make up Jespersen's Cycle are actually instances of grammaticalization.

Phonological reduction of the preverbal negative marker, insofar as it plays a role in the Cycle at all, is not in and of itself a matter of grammaticalization. Where phonological reduction is evidence of cliticization, however, as in the case of the English *n't* contraction, and the loss of stress in French *ne*, for instance, secondary grammaticalization (defined as the evolution of an already grammatical item towards an even greater degree of grammaticalization, cf. Brinton and Traugott 2005: 76f.) is clearly involved.

Nor is the initial insertion of postverbal 'emphatic' elements, so long as these retain their original meaning (as is the case with Latin MICA(M), exemplified in (10)), as such a matter of grammaticalization:

(10)

quinque dies aquam in os suum non coniecit, non micam panis (Petronius, Satyricon, 1st c. AD)
'for five days he didn't put any water in his mouth, not a crumb of bread'

Once such elements become bleached of their literal meanings, however, and become general-purpose NPIs, capable of appearing with semantically non-harmonious verbs, as in (11), and subsequently acquire actual negative meaning, as evidenced by their ability to occur alongside NPIs (cf. (12)), they can be considered to have undergone grammaticalization, as evidenced by context expansion (Himmelmann 2004):

(11)

1. *Tut seie fel, se jo mie l'otrei!* (*Chanson de Roland*, v. 3897, *c*.1080)
2. 'May I be a complete traitor, if I grant it in the least!'

(12)

Tuit vos Franceis ne valent pas meaille. (*Li coronemenz Loois*, v. 2433, *c*.1150)
'All your Frenchmen aren't [NEG2] worth a dime.'

Assuming that bipartite constructions are pragmatically marked at Stage 2, the 'unmarking' that must take place before the transition to Stage 3 can occur represents further bleaching and context expansion, which together with the obligatorification of the postverbal marker that characterizes Stage 3 represents secondary grammaticalization.

The gradually increasing deletion and eventual loss of a redundant preverbal marker in Stages 4 and 5 is, of course, not grammaticalization.[7] Finally, ulterior word order changes that result in the erstwhile postverbal marker taking preverbal position in the clause may be attributable to analogical change, Stage 5 speakers (p. 578) taking the lexical rather than the finite verb as their point of reference (Schwegler 1988: 50f.); cf. (13):

(13)

J'	*ai*	*pas*	*dit*	*ça*
1sg.S	FIN.AUX	NEG	LEX	DEM
‘I haven't said that/I didn't say that.’				

3. Croft's Cycle

Croft (1991b) identifies a different type of negative cycle, involving the interaction of negation with existential predicates. This cycle involves three synchronic language types and has three stages, each consisting in the transition from one type to another.

Type A languages use the regular verbal negator to negate existential predicates, e.g. (14):

(14)

Tzutujil (Croft 1991b: 7, (3))			
ma	*ko*	*ta*	*jaay*
NEG	EX	IRR	house
‘There aren't any houses.’			

Type B languages, on the other hand, employ a special negative existential predicate, as in (15):

(15)

Amharic (Croft 1991b: 9, (17))	
səkk^{w}ar	*yälläm*
sugar	NEG.EX.3SG
‘There is no sugar.’	

Type C languages, finally, feature a polysemous marker which is both a regular verbal negator and a negative existential, cf. (17), from the Australian Aboriginal language Nunggubuyu, whose verbal negator *wa:=’ri* is one of the 3.SG forms of the negative existential verb exemplified in (16):

(16)

Nunggubuyu (Croft 1991b: 11, (31))			
aŋga:	=	*‘ri*	*ana-lha:wu*
it.B	=	NEG.EX	words
‘There must be no words.’			

(17) (p. 579)

Nunggubuyu (Croft 1991b: 11, (32))			
wa:	=	*ri*	*ŋa = ŋadugumbi:-ni ŋaŋ = jama:-’*
it.A	=	NEG(EX) I.fished	I.did.thus
‘I didn't fish like that.’			

Croft's Cycle then consists in successive (though possibly overlapping) shifts from A to B, from B to C, and from C back to A. A ⟩ B comes about via univerbation (phonological fusion) of the regular verbal negator and the existential predicate, resulting in a new predicate with an added element of meaning. This might suggest that the diachronic process involved in this shift is lexicalization; but as the change brings about a new paradigmatic contrast between a positive and a negative existential predicate, both of which have functional rather than content meaning, it can legitimately be regarded as a case of grammaticalization (cf. Brinton and Traugott 2005: 100).

B ⟩ C involves the semantic bleaching of the existential meaning of the negative existential, resulting in context expansion of the new regular verbal negator. This represents a clear case of grammaticalization. There is an interesting overlap with Jespersen's Cycle here, inasmuch as Croft (1991b: 13f.) suggests that this shift is triggered by the use of the negative existential as a marker of emphasis (cf. (18)):

(18)

Mara (Croft 1991b: 14, (41))		
ganagu	*wu-nayi*	*maluy*
NEG	3SG/3SG-saw	NEG.EX/EMPH
‘He didn't see him at all/He saw nobody’		

In the C ⟩ A change, the negative existential reading of the polysemous marker is lost and the purely negative reading derived from it is used in combination with positive existentials. This implies constructional analogy, which in and of itself does not make this development an instance of grammaticalization. There is, however, further context expansion—and hence increased grammaticalization—of the already grammaticalized negative marker.

Croft (1991b: 22f.) explains the sequencing of changes by suggesting, first, that the initial fusion of the verbal negator and the existential predicate (i.e. A ⟩ B) probably has to take place before the negative existential can be used emphatically, to avoid creating a sequence of two predicates. The value of this explanation is not quite clear, however, as [‘Normal’ Predicate + Negation + Existential Predicate] seems to be no more nor no less a sequence of two predicates than [‘Normal’ Predicate + Negative Existential Predicate]. Indeed, Croft himself observes that certain strongly isolating languages constitute exceptions to the general pattern by progressing directly from Type A to Type C.

Secondly, that Type C must be derived from Type B is explained by the logical requirement that the negative existential undergo weakening before syntactic analogy can take place. Finally, Type C is said to be inherently unstable, in so far as the equation between negative existential and verbal negator makes it appear as if the existential predicate is simply absent when negated, leading to the introduction of the positive existential in these constructions.

Notes:

(1) Many scholars have argued that negation is likewise conceptually marked with respect to affirmation. For reasons of space, the present chapter will not enter into that particular debate, but see Horn (1989: 45ff.) for an overview.

(2) Note that Louisiana French Creole represents an expected future development of Standard French only insofar as a cyclical development in the strict sense is envisaged (whereby movement of the postverbal marker to preverbal position is a precondition for the cycle to repeat itself in a formally similar way). It is entirely possible that the actual evolution of French negation will not go beyond Stage 4 or 5 as represented in Table 46.1, and that it may instead take a slightly different direction, such as adding an additional postverbal marker. Accordingly, van der Auwera (2009), taking a broader view of the notion of ‘cycle’, explicitly argues for the existence of a variety of Jespersen Cycles.

(3) Indeed, the same may be true of conversational spoken French, to the extent that, from the time postverbal *pas* became obligatory, there is sporadic evidence in the literature that *ne*-deletion was taking place in informal discourse (Martineau and Mougeon 2003: 129).

(4) Stage 2 may, of course, likewise be characterized by pragmatic differences between the competing modes of expression. That possibility will be discussed in greater depth in section 2.1 below.

(5) At Stages 2 and 3, at least, a language may also have competing postverbal elements, possibly with pragmatic differences between them: thus, in medieval French, the adverbs *pas*, *mie*, and to a lesser extent *point* and *go(ut)te* (which was restricted to a very small number of verbs), were in competition for the postverbal slot, while Classical and Modern Standard French show variation between *ne…pas* and *ne…point*. A pilot study by Hansen (forthcoming) suggests that, in medieval French, the precise choice of postverbal marker may have affected the speech act expressed by the negated clause.

(6) Even French is not a fully convincing case, given that *ne* only lost its ability to carry stress towards the end of the Middle French period (16th c.), i.e. approximately half a millennium after the language entered stage 2 of Jespersen's Cycle (Martineau and Mougeon 2003: 123f.).

(7) If Fonseca-Greber's (2007) analysis, briefly mentioned above, is correct, and the loss of Stage 4 French *ne* is being halted by its developing a new function as a marker of emphasis, then such a development would qualify as a case of exaptation (Lass 1990), and regrammaticalization.

Maj-Britt Mosegaard Hansen

Maj-Britt Mosegaard Hansen obtained her PhD from the University of Copenhagen in 1996. She has been Professor of French Language and Linguistics at the University of Manchester since 2007. She is the author of two monographs and numerous journal articles and book chapters. Her principal research interests are language change, semantics, pragmatics, and functional-cognitive linguistics.