The loss of multiple negation in English: a consequence of Jespersen’s Cycle?

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1 Introduction

Two changes are central to the syntax of negation in the history of English.

1. The replacement of the verbal clitic negation *ne* by the phrasal negator *not*. (Jespersen’s Cycle, comprising four stages (1).

   (1) a. we ne  mugen þat  don
       we NEG can  that do
       ‘We cannot do that’ (CMTRINIT,103.1370), C12th
   b. I ne  may nat  denye it
       I NEG may not deny  it
       ‘I may not deny it’ (CMBOETH,435.C1.262), C14th
   c. I know nat  the cause
       I know not  the cause
       ‘I do not know the cause’ (CMMALORY,627.3549), C15th
   d. Cann’t you give me a Bill upon Cherry in the mean time?
       (FARQUHAR-E3-P2,25.237), C17th

2. The loss of multiple negation in the standard language. In (2) and (3) we see change from a situation in which more than one negative can appear in a clause with a sentential negation reading, to a situation in which only one negative can appear in such clauses.

   (2) a. They cowd not fynd no londe. . . (TORKINGT-E1-H,62.386)
       b. He did not know any thing of my coming there. . . (LISLE-E3-P2,4.118.331)
   (3) a. but he was so hard, þat no begger myght gete no good of hym. . .
       ‘but he was so hard that no beggar might get no good from him’ (CM-MIRK,104.2825)
b. “No, Sir,” quoth he, “that wold I not, sith no parliament maye make any such lawe.”

‘“No, Sir, said he, “that I would not, since no parliament may make any such law”’ (ROPER-E1-H,86.87)

The question this paper will address is whether there is any relation between the two changes, and how the two changes can be formalised within a Minimalist syntactic framework, to take account of the relationship between them. Jespersen (1924) observes that:

…repeated negation [multiple negation] becomes an habitual phenomenon in those languages only in which the ordinary negative element is comparatively small in phonetic bulk …If this repetition is rarer in modern English and German than it was formerly, one of the reasons probably is that the fuller negative *not* and *nicht* have taken the place of the smaller *ne* and *en.*
(Jespersen 1924, 333)

I will consider two accounts which link the availability of multiple negation to Jespersen’s Cycle in the syntax, arguing that neither of them accommodates the distribution of multiple negation found in English. The data for this paper come from two electronic corpora the PPCME2 (Kroch and Taylor, 2000) and the PPCEME (?).

## 2 The syntax and typology of negation

Jespersen’s Cycle involves two sentential negative markers which are distributionally distinct, *ne* a clitic on the finite verb, and *not* an independent phrasal element. Within the Principles and Parameters tradition, *ne* represents the head of NegP whilst *not* represents its specifier.

(4) NegP
    /\          /
   not  Neg'  ne  XP

At a later stage, English *not* becomes a head (*n’t*) associated with the finite verb. Haegeman and Zanuttini (1996) and Rowlett (1998) relate the availability of multiple negation to Jespersen’s Cycle, in terms of these two syntactic positions.

- Haegeman and Zanuttini (1996) links the availability of multiple negation to the availability of the negative head, arguing that languages like German which do not have multiple negation do not project NegP, but have negation as a VP-adjunct.

- Rowlett (1998) argues that stage two of Jespersen’s Cycle marks a shift in the locus of [NEG] features from Neg to spec,NegP. He claims that when [NEG] features are associated with Neg, multiple negation is possible, but when [NEG] features are associated with spec,NegP, multiple negation is impossible.
3 Jespersen’s Cycle and multiple negation

3.1 Present Day English

Present Day English standard and non-standard dialects differ in their use of multiple negation. Both the standard and non-standard dialects have negation marked on a head (the finite verbal clitic *n’t*), which should make multiple negation available according to Haegeman and Zanuttini (1996); Rowlett (1998), yet multiple negation is strongly stigmatised in the standard language.

3.2 Typology of negation in Early English

English multiple negation is of two types:

(5) Multiple negation with the sentential negative markers *ne* or *not*.
   a. And thenn our soverayne myght not no longer hyde hys maryage,
      ‘and then our sovereign could not hide his marriage any longer’
      (CMGregor,227.2288)
   b. and no þing þai ne sparede
      and no thing they NEG spared
      ‘and they did not spare anything’
      (CMbrut3,45.1352)

(6) Multiple negation between negative quantifiers or adverbs without the sentential negative marker.
   a. and no man seyd no-thyng a-geyns hem
      and no man said nothing against them
      ‘and no man said anything against them’
      (Kempe,33.730)

In addition, there are two strategies for avoiding multiple negation:

(7) Inclusion or omission of the sentential negative marker (cf. (5))
   a. I haue done the no wronge.
      ‘I have done you no wrong’
      (Boethco-E1-P1,32.253)

(8) The replacement of negative quantifiers in the scope of negation by negative polarity items (NPIs) like English *any*.
   a. for I know not of anie other match,
      ‘for I do not know of any other match’ (Hoxinden-1650-E3-P2,178.175)

In the majority of clauses, the loss of *ne* leads to the loss of multiple negation (as in (7)), leaving a negative quantifier as the sole expression of negation. *not* appears in no more than 6.5% (n=413/6353) of clauses with negative quantifiers in the Middle or Early Modern English data I have examined (see Figure 1)

The introduction of *any* into negative contexts (8a) in these data is not concurrent with the introduction of *not* or the loss of *ne*.
3.3 The syntax of multiple negation in early English: some problems

3.3.1 Rowlett (1998)

Rowlett proposes to formalise Jespersen’s observation as follows:

(9) Jespersen’s Generalisation: A language is an NC [negative concord, or multiple negation] language iff the regular marker of pure sentential negation is not associated with spec,NegP. (Rowlett, 1998, 87)

Some predictions and problems:

- Multiple negation persists long after *not* is established as a sentential negator (see Figure 2). Within the scope of *not* or a negative constituent, negatives are not replaced by *any* until the C16th.

- This account cannot accommodate clauses like (5a) which exhibit multiple negation with *not*, which is productive in some C15-16th century texts. In these cases we see that the introduction of *not* does not lead to a concurrent replacement of negative quantifiers by *any* (see Figure 1).

- It has nothing to say about clauses like (3) where multiple negation is lost, but *not* is absent.

- It has nothing to say about why *not* is so infrequent in clauses with indefinites (see Figure 1), and why multiple negation is lost despite these contexts’ resistance to *not*.

Figure 1: The frequency of *not* in sentential and multiple negation
3.3.2 Haegeman and Zanuttini (1996)

Haegeman & Zanuttini (1996) propose that languages which exhibit multiple negation have a negative head.

- This makes multiple negation available at stages one and two of Jespersen’s Cycle, when ne is present. However, not all multiple negation in English involves ne.

- This account explains why non-standard English has multiple negation, as Pollock (1989); Chomsky (1995) have argued that PDE has a negative head. The hypothesis predicts that multiple negation is structurally possible, but does not accommodate the difference between standard and non-standard dialects in respect of multiple negation.

- This account does not say anything about the resistance of clauses with negative indefinites to the introduction of not (see Figure 1).

In the next section, I propose that the variation seen in English multiple negation is a matter of lexical choice between two types of negative quantifiers with different morphosyntactic features, and that this variation is linked to the changes in morphosyntactic features which drive Jespersen’s Cycle.

4 A feature based account

4.1 Parametrising multiple negation and semantic compositionality

Both Haegeman and Zanuttini (1996) and Rowlett (1998) take a semantically non-compositional approach to multiple negation. They propose that each negative quantifier introduces
negation (−) at LF. To obtain multiple negation readings, the negative force of all but one negative element must be factored out when they all take sentential scope. This does not lend itself to the parametrisation of multiple negation.

I propose a compositional approach in which only one of the negatives in multiple negation has LF-interpretable [NEG] features (cf. Ladusaw (1992); Zeijlstra (2004)). Multiple negation can be analysed as syntactic agreement, with the modifications proposed by Hiraiwa (2001) and others to allow multiple agreement between elements with matching features.

4.2 A feature based account of Jespersen’s Cycle

Jespersen’s Cycle involves a change in the the value of the negative features associated with the finite verb at stage two (??).

(10) Stage One: ne+Vf [pol:neg]
(11) Stage Two: ne+Vf [pol:] . . . not [pol:neg]

The change impacts on multiple negation contexts. At stage one the negated finite verb has the feature [pol:neg]. Therefore, if semantic compositionality is to be preserved, the negative quantifiers in multiple negation at this stage must have the unvalued feature [pol:] in local (spec-head or head-complement) agreement with ne+Vf.

(12) vP
     ne+Vf [pol:neg]  v'  VP  t
     never [pol:]     no-one [pol:]  t

At stage two of Jespersen’s Cycle, there are two potential ways to ensure that the features of ne are valued negative.

(13) Introduce not resulting in the sequence ne . . . not . . . neg Q.

(14) Reanalyse the string ne . . . neg Q so that ne bears [pol:] and negQ bears [pol:neg].
Change in the feature value of \textit{ne} ([pol:neg] \textgreater{} [pol:] in clauses with negative quantifiers does not necessitate the introduction of \textit{not}. Change in the feature value of \textit{ne} leads to a new featural option for negative quantifiers as self-licensing LF markers of negation. Both (13) and (14) are equally grammatical. This account has several advantages:

- It provides a syntactic framework for understanding why \textit{not} is much rarer in multiple negation contexts than elsewhere, whilst it can appear in these contexts it is not required to.

- It explains the origins of the distinction between \textit{no}-negation and \textit{not}-negation Tottie (1991) which persists into PDE.

- It accommodates standard and non-standard dialects of English. Non-standard dialects are dialects in which the reanalysis of negative quantifiers from [pol:] \textgreater{} [pol:neg] does not become the established norm.

- Reanalysis of negative quantifiers forms the basis for variation between multiple negation and non-multiple negation systems. It allows multiple negation and non-multiple negation within a single clause (15).

(15) there shall no poore neghebore of myne berre no losse by eny chaunce hapned in my howse.

‘No poor neighbour of mine shall bear any loss through any accident which happened in my house’

(MORELET1-E1-H,423.15)

- The choice between multiple negation and non-multiple negation is a lexical one. Standard and non-standard varieties can be structurally parallel, marking negation on a finite verb using the affix \textit{n’t}, but differ in their use of multiple negation.

- The introduction of \textit{any} within the scope of negation follows if the reanalysis of negative quantifiers from [pol:] to [pol:neg] is generalised to all instances. This change postdates Jespersen’s Cycle and is subject to evaluation in the speech community (Nevalainen, 1996).

5 Further questions and directions for research

- The variation between \textit{negQ [pol: ]} and \textit{negQ [pol:neg]} is subject to extralinguistic constraints. How does the evaluation of variants develop in the context of standardisation? How are the variants socially and dialectally distributed?
Does the development of the negative verbal affix *n't* affect the availability of multiple negation.

How does the development I propose feed into the distribution of *no*-negation and *not*-negation in the history of English.

Other evidence may support the idea that morphosyntactic feature change in the lexicon affects negatives in this period. Nevalainen (1997) links the rise in subject-inversion following initial negatives to the loss of multiple negation. Under my account, negative quantifiers only become negative operators when their features change from [pol:] to [pol:neg].

**References**


