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# Studies in the Evolution of the English Language



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# Elimination of grammatical redundancy in the history of English: The case of negative constructions

**Abstract:** This paper presents a description of multiple sentence negation involving negative concord (NC) in the history of the English language with special emphasis given to the elimination of redundant Neg-elements, including cliticized adverbs, pronouns and adjectives. The type of redundancy manifested by the system of sentence negation within the suggested timeline is viewed as textually-bound, paradigmatic, and non-obligatory. The author of the paper outlines the distinctive features of the redundancy from a diachronic perspective. The study maintains that changes occurring in the English negation system represent the case of grammaticalization empirically observed in the data taken from literary monuments. The evolutionary path of the phenomenon in question is traced through three periods in the history of the English language, specifically Old English, Middle English and Early Modern English.

**Keywords:** multiple negation, negative concord, redundancy, grammaticalization

## 1. Preliminaries

In this paper the diachronic changes occurring in the English negation system are regarded as an empirical case of grammaticalization supported by the data taken from literary sources. Before embarking on the analysis, I shall give a brief description of the concepts used within the framework of grammatical change theory. Closely linked with topic of grammaticalization are certain mechanisms of diachronic change, typically explained either on formal or functional grounds. Such change on the latter has received a comprehensive treatment in English historical studies, with authorities having expressed their stances (Fisher 2000: 1–37, Frisch 1997: 21–64, Harris, Campbell 1995: 19–34, Jespersen 1917, van Kemenade 2000: 51–72, Traugott 1995: 31–54, 1996: 181–187, etc.). In my view, this process is best described by Lass (2000: 207–227) in terms of unidirectionality, which implies that “all grammatical items in natural languages ultimately derive from lexical items” (cf. also definitions in Campbell, and Mixco 2007: 73).

Proceeding from the above, let me explain why I have chosen the much-discussed topic of sentence negation. My rationale lies in the assumption that all natural languages at any synchronic state of their development display the

property of redundancy, which is often associated with ambiguity, opacity, polysemy and synonymy. It seems that further studies of sentence negation with respect to its centuries-long elimination of the redundant elements could bring about new insights into language evolution theory, grammaticalization in particular. Moreover, it could help us better understand how the overall system works and how the interplay of the elements of different structural levels can compensate for historical losses.

First of all, however, I shall review the interpretation of redundancy and its special forms, grammatical in particular. Arising from information theory in the middle of the twentieth century, the concept of redundancy was adopted by various humanistic disciplines, such as linguistics, psychology, literary studies, etc. (Shannon, Weaver 1964; Witt, Gillette 1999; Chiari 2007 et al.). In linguistics, the problem of operable definitions that would take into account the complexity and variety of the manifestations of redundancy at each level of analysis, has been repeatedly discussed, bringing about a set of clear-cut concepts of redundancy relevant to Present-day languages (Chiari 2007: 11).

From a wide range of proposed definitions, I have selected the one most closely corresponding to the objectives of the present investigation. It is given by E.-J. C. Wit and M. Gillette in their technical report presented at the University of Chicago in May 15, 1999. Their theoretical stance envisages linguistic redundancy as: “a multifaceted phenomenon <...> that is not merely a superficial quality of language, but a constraint at the heart of its origin and the dynamics of its development” (Wit, Gillette 1999: 4–12). Most importantly, they distinguish between grammatical redundancy (“the internal systematicity and rule governed behavior of a language in which two or more of its features serve the same function”) and contextual redundancy (“the repetition of information that is, in a grammatical sense, nonobligatory” (ibidem). Cf. also the definition proposed by I. Chiari, which takes into consideration both the functional aspects of redundancy originated by repetition and the statistical aspects, which connect redundancy to predictability factors.

... we observe redundancy where: a) more than one element from the same level plays the same distinctive role; b) the elements from one level show different frequencies of occurrence, or there are constraints to the combinations of elements in sequences. The former can be called *vertical redundancy*, the latter *horizontal redundancy* (Chiari 2007: 12).

This approach shifts the discussion of multiple negation to a theoretical plane. There has to be a notion of redundancy worked out for diachronic studies that would account for the available data. It would also be natural to assume that



the pathways of the development within the sentence negation system were asymmetrical at different periods in the history of the English language given the dialectal divergences and genre specifics of its literary monuments. Before highlighting this issue, let me now present examples of sentence negation patterns in the three periods of the history of English.

## 2. Empirical considerations

### 2.1. An outline of the negation system in Present-Day English

Quirk et al. (1985: 775–79) give three types of negation: *clause negation*, *local negation*, and *predication negation*. Since sentence negation is the subject of the present work, I shall dwell on two of its varieties realized through: (i) clause negation, as in (1–2); and (ii) constituent negation, as in (3–4). The formal standard pattern, i.e. **Aux (NOT) V** and **NOT/NO**, etc., negating a lexical item or phrase. Cf.:

- (1) I have not finished my paper.
- (2) They do not play chess.
- (3) She is not an intelligent woman.
- (4) No lady would behave like this.

These types of negation are the result of a lengthy historical development, caused by a set of diachronic operations, implemented by three or more mechanisms of syntactic change (for the discussion see Harris, Campbell 1995). Firstly, let me present the sentence negation strategies in the earlier periods of the English history.

### 2.2. Old English (600–1100 AD)

The general overview given by E.C. Traugott (1995: 267–72) shows that sentence negation strategies are realized through (i) placing *ne*-particle in the preposition to finite verb; (ii) involving extra Neg-words in post- or preposition to the *ne*-particle (NC); yet more importantly (iii) NC concord is a common practice throughout the period, but not obligatory. Neg-words, which signify negation, are, in effect, cliticized indefinite pronouns, adverbs and adjectives, e.g., *na* ‘none,’ *nalles*, *næfre* ‘never,’ *na-with*, *naht*, etc. The sentences in (5–8) exemplify some of the NC patterns in Old English texts. Cf.:

- (5) ... *næron hi naþorne on Frysisc gescæpene ne on Denisc* ... (AS Ch., 897; CT, B.I.)  
 neg-were they neg-either not in Frisian shape not in Danish  
 ... they were not created either after Frisian or after Danish design

- (6) *Næs he æðelboren, ne him naht to þām cyne cunne ne gebyrode* (Ælf., NoI, 72–3)  
 neg-was he noble-born not him not to the royal race not born  
 He was not of noble birth, nor did he belong to the royal kin
- (7) ... *þæt no man ne mihte nan weorc wyrcan...* (Oros. 1.1, 7, 27)  
 that no one not could none work to-work...  
 ...that no one could do any work...
- (8) ...*nē þær nēnig witenā wenan þorfte / beorht rebote to banan folmum* (Beo 157–8)  
 not there neg-any councillor imagine would noble repentance to killer-'s hands  
 ...no counsellor would imagine noble repentance from killer's hands

There is a constraint on the number of Neg-elements used in sentences, depending on their complexity. Double, triple or even quadruple negatives are attested in the Old English prose. However, they can occasionally occur in poetry, as in sentence (8). The on-going use of NC patterns is typically accounted for by (i) phonetic weakness of *ne*-particle, and (ii) emphatic accent effect produced by Neg-words. According to D. Crystal (1995: 45): “extra negative words increase the emphasis, making the negative meaning stronger. It is not clear just how emphatic the *ne*-element is in the Chronicle examples, but the cumulative effect is not in doubt.” The latter seems to be natural as they are frequently placed in the initial position of a sentence, i.e. in V-1 clauses. It should be noted that emphatic accent is a distinctive feature of NC patterns in other languages also, e.g., in Present-Day Romance and Celtic and Slavic languages, where Neg-particle co-occurs with cliticized Neg-elements.

The hypothesis of redundancy as a language-inherent property traced at any period of its development, brings us to the key point of the present work, i.e., to the need for a definition of this concept that is applicable to diachronic studies. Given the above cited descriptions of redundancy in E.-J. C. Wit and M. Gillette (1999: 4–12), and I. Chiari (2007: 12), I assume that the multiple negation is not ‘built-in’ to the grammatical structure of the earlier stages of the history of English. It would be better described as a textually-bound linguistic phenomenon. To substantiate my claim let me refer to sentences negation techniques in languages other than English. It would be reasonable to assume that typologically NC languages are divided into those, which practice dispersemarking of negation [+NC] and those, which practice the holistic one [-NC]. For instance, highly inflectional Slavic languages represent the first type, employing particle *ne* in preverbal position and extra Neg-elements, e.g., cliticized adverbs and pronouns. Being conjoined with emphatically charged Neg-elements, it provides an additional expressive meaning to the sentence.



It is to be noted, that in Slavic studies multiple negation is treated as a system-inherent property. It seems as if NC strategy in Present-Day Slavic languages were similar to the NC strategy employed in the earlier stages of the history of English, and the latter can be treated as a case of grammatical redundancy. However, textual findings in Old and early Middle English help me arrive at a different conclusion. In my view, the presence of NC pattern mostly depends on the type of text, its composition, objectives, addressor's intentions and addressee's expectations. In the case of prose, a special consideration should be paid to religious texts, which aim at persuading of target audience. In case of "Aelfric Catholic Homilies," one cannot escape noticing a variety of NC patterns, where emphatic Neg-element is often placed in V-1 position, which is typical of rhetorical and poetic speech. Another indicative feature of these texts is their profuse employment of cliticized verbs, such as *nyllan* 'ne-willan,' *nytan* 'ne-witan,' *nabban* 'ne-habban' et al. In contrast to "Homilies," in other sample of religious prose Wulfstan's "Canons of Edgar" the preference is given to ne + VP pattern due to the deontic character of the work, being a list of author's instructions to his ecclesiastical fellows. It is also worth mentioning legal prose, "Anglo-Saxon Charters" for one, as well as historical records, such as "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" and "King Alfred's Orosius," each displaying a relatively scanty use of cliticized Neg-elements, including verbs. The appearance of NC constructions in poetic texts mostly depends on their meter and rhyme. A special word should be dedicated to epic poetry, "Beowulf" in particular, in which either ne + VP or NC patterns are subject to Vackernagel's law concerning the position of unstressed clitics.

In my view, the facts of redundancy detected in the earlier literary monuments should be interpreted on formal grounds, based on the asymmetry of the plane of expression and plane of content of NC clauses. Structurally, Neg-elements represent an individual class of words, each having a specific lexical-grammatical meaning, as in case of cliticized indefinite adverbs, pronouns and adjectives. The plane of content of the NC pattern, is a conjoined meaning of the sum of Neg-elements. In case of the Old English multiple negation we are dealing with structural redundancy, since all Neg-elements merge in a semantic nucleus of negation. Therefore, this type should be regarded in terms of textually-bound, non-obligatory redundancy, in other words, in paradigmatic terms rather than in the syntagmatic ones.

### 2.3. Middle English (1150–1500 AD)

A number of crucial changes involving all structural levels of the language system occurred in this period. Grammatical shifts were going on at a slow pace, being

divergent in timing and dialect variety of forms. The movement to the pattern of the Present-day English type AUX NOT was underway, which is confirmed by the continuing reduction of double and triple negators. The indicative change of this period is the transition from the preverbal regular marker *ne* to the post-verbal *not* in late Middle English. However, throughout the period, there was frequent use of bipartite *ne...neg-word* (Fisher 1996: 280–285; see also Frish 1997: 21–64).

The typical features of the Middle English sentence negation system include: (i) preverbal *ne*-particle is used independently, or it is reinforced by Neg-words such as *næfre*, *nan*, *nāping*, as in (10–11); (ii) the Old English pattern ‘*ne ...na/naht*’ remains the regular negator in the first half of the period, though gradually losing its emphatic force, as (9); (iii) the newer negative element *naht/noht* (later *nat/not*) is interpreted as the true negator, making the old negator *ne* redundant (Jespersen 1917) by the end of the period. The Middle English negation strategies are exemplified by NC patterns presented in sentences (9–14):

- (9) 1200: Forr he *ne* majg *nohht* elless Onn Ennglissh wnttenn rihhtte  
word (Orm 108–9)  
for he not might not otherwise on English write right this word  
for he could not otherwise write this word in English
- (10) 1250: ...*Ne* recche ich *never* what þusegge (O&N, 60)  
not care I never what you say  
...I do not care what you say
- (11) 1300: ...*Ne* funden he *non* þat dede hem sham... (Hav. 57)  
not found they neg-one that did them shame  
...they found none who did them shame...
- (12) 1320: At dome he sal *not* sitt allan, Bot felau soþer manian... (Curs.  
22769–70)  
at doom he shall not sit alone but fellows other many  
At Doom he shall not stay alone, bot with many other fellows...
- (13) 1362: His sel shulde *not* be sent to deceyve the peple (PP, Prologue)  
his seal should not be sent to deceive the people  
his seal should *not* be sent to deceive people
- (14) 1400: Bot Arthure wolde *not* ete til al were serued ... (Gaw. 85)  
but Arthur wolde not eat till all were served  
but Arthur would not eat till all were served...



Now let me return to the subject of redundancy. The second half of the Middle English period (1300–1500 AD) demonstrates a steady anchoring of the postverbal negator *not* in different genres and dialectal areas. Accordingly, the reduction of the extra Neg-elements, reinforcing negative semantics within sentence negation patterns, reached its maximum point since the Old English period. On the other hand, taking an evolutionary stance in the diachronic investigation, one cannot expect the immediate loss of the earlier textually-bound patterns, since any language embraces diachronic and synchronic units at a time. Continuous slow-paced changes occurring in natural languages do not imply steep leaps no matter how speedy these changes may occur.

I shall conclude the empirical overview of the first two periods of the history of English by saying that in case of the sentence negation system we deal with formal changes in negative constructions, whereas their meaning remains intact though having lost their emphatic character. I would also suggest that the on-going reduction of the NC pattern, accelerated in the second half of the Middle English period, and the replacement of principal negator *ne* with a phonetically heavier *not/nat* (< OE *naught/nought*) as a single marker of negation represent an important fragment in the grammaticalization process. It fits in with the general path of simplification and optimization of the English grammar, which implies stripping of redundant morphemes, rearrangement of sentence elements and transition from SOV- to SVO order (cf. Kiparsky 2015: 10–12).

#### 2.4. The Early Modern English (1500–1700 AD)

The Early Modern English sentence negation differs from that of Middle English in three aspects due to the following changes: (i) disuse of Old and Middle English regular negator; (ii) obsolescence of NC patterns, though they are occasionally found alongside simple *not* throughout the sixteenth century, and (iii) the rise of AUX NEG in the late seventeenth century. Cf. the instances in (15–18) that came down from the previous periods of the English history.

- (15) 1531: ... *nor* one man hath *nat* al vertues and good qualities  
(Eliot, Gov, B.1).
- (16) 1601–2: I have one heart, one bosom, and one truth,  
And that *no* woman has, *nor neuer none*  
Shall mistris be of it, saue I alone (Shakespeare, Twelfth  
Night, Barber, 199).
- (17) 1667: *Nor* did they *not* perceave the evil plight ... (Milton, PL.)

The disappearance of *ne* and the exclusive use of *not* in the rightward position to the verb, as well as the rise of empty *do*, attested as early as the thirteenth century, are the final results of the Middle English period. It is assumed that this type of *do* developed out of full-content verbs, presumably periphrastic or substitute *do*. Its spread in Early Modern English is accounted for the growing need to assimilate massive numbers of French loanwords into the native inflectional system. The pattern EMPTY DO + INFINITIVE was specifically used to avoid hybrid forms (i.e. attaching of morphological formants to the borrowed words) (Fisher 1996: 154–8). Throughout the Early Modern English period *do* performs the function of the support-element, taking on tense markers of the main verb, as in (18) and (19).

- (18) 1557: The phisicion *dothe* but gesse and coniecture that his receipt  
shal do good (Wisser 1969: 1502)  
the physician do-es but guess and conjecture that his receipt  
shall do good  
The physician presumes that his receipt shall do well.
- (19) 1602: It lifted up it head. And *did* address Itself to motion (Wisser  
1969: 1505–1506)  
it lifted up its head and address-ed itself to motion  
It lifted up its head and set off to motion.

As it has been exemplified in sentences (12), (13), and (14), in late Middle English negative marker was already placed immediately after the first verb, including the reanalyzed modals, such as *can*, *may*, *shall*, or *will*. New Negative Placement rule, as well as the reanalysis of pre-modals and their isolation as a grammatically distinct class of words in the fifteenth century were going on in parallel with other changes in the general context of SVO fixation and ensuing elimination of V2- and V-fronting rules (Lightfoot 1979: 107–19). According to F.Th. Visser, the earliest appearance of ‘I do/did not speak + infinitive’ type’ falls on the late Middle English period (Visser 1969: 1529). Its rival type ‘I speak not’ disappears in the eighteenth century, though occasionally attested in the nineteenth century. Empirical evidence of the periphrastic *do* transformation into grammatical operator shows that it is limited to interrogatives, negatives, anaphoric VPs and tag-questions in the late Middle English and Early Modern English (Lightfoot 1979: 119).

In this period, VP was undergoing intensive restructuring that involved rearrangement of the paradigmatic relations through embracing new periphrastic



constructions to express tense, mood and aspect distinctions. The developments within the Aux phrase were unfolding in a strictly diachronic order (Fisher 1996: 158). As it has been shown before, modals were the first to get the grammatical status of auxiliary words. The combinations with other verbs, including *do*, were next in turn to be firmly established in this paradigm. The material of the investigation shows that it occurred around the seventeenth century, presumably in its second half. Grammaticalization of the periphrastic *do* and the resultant establishment of **AUX NOT + Infinitive** phrase was the consequence of the principle of analogy, set off in the context of other structural changes in this period.

Another important point in the discussion of the English negation system is the re-analysis of pre-quantifiers, which were derived from the Old English indefinite adverbs, pronouns and adjectives. In the Old English and Middle English NC patterns Neg-cliticized pre-quantifiers played the role of supportive elements intensifying the general meaning of negation (see 2.2., 2.3). Cf. Present-Day English, *some, any, anything, nothing, few, all, each, every, much*, etc. In the sixteenth century they were singled out as a distinct class of words, being distanced from numerals, adjectives and pronouns due to their new diagnostic features. Quantifiers were likely to conjoin with AUX NOT + INFINITIVE pattern to complete the grammaticalization of negative construction in the seventeenth century.

The story of the New Placement Rule, with NEG-marker in postposition to the V-finite, would not be fully described, if we ignore the persistent occurrence of its conservative rival V NOT until the nineteenth century. Their parallel functioning is mostly characteristic of induced-discourse, in poetry and elevated prose, e.g.:

- (20) 1789: I doubt not but they will greatly contribute (Triumphs  
Fortitude; Murray 1908, 220)
- (21) 1821: I seek ... no pleasure but in parting not (Byron, Sardanapath,  
iv, i; Murray 1908, 220).

### **3. Elimination of multiple negation as a step in the process of grammaticalization**

First, let me substantiate my point in general terms. It is maintained that the evolutionary path of the English language, observable signs of which can be traced as far back as in early literary monuments, shall be

characterized as a redundancy-managed process (see in Fisher, Rosenbach 2000: 25). Notwithstanding, that we typically apply the concept of the Present-Day English grammar in diachronic analysis, i.e. employ the so-called inverted synchronicity technique, we cannot help admitting that earlier texts were overloaded with redundant forms. Among such morpho-syntactic phenomena, one can name Old English and early Middle English homonymous case inflections, doubling of prepositions, negative markers, subjects, etc., that persisted until the nineteenth century.

The abundance of additional, for instance, emphatically charged elements, as in case of NC markers, is often attributed to discourse-driven character of the Old English Grammar. In view of the general drift of the English language towards analyticity, which accords with the general concept of system's incessant movement towards simplification and optimization, one would expect ensuing removal of its semantically-devoid forms. And it stands to reason, to claim that redundancy, among other things, contributed to the grammaticalization of various patterns, including NEG-construction in the seventeenth century.

Now, let me explain it in orderly manner. Based on the unidirectionality principle, which implies that all grammatical items are derived from lexical items due to the semantic bleaching of the latter, I would suggest that there were at least two main events that amount to the establishment of AUX NEG + INFINITIVE. Firstly, it is the complex elimination of the principal negator NE and its support-elements (mostly cliticized adverbs, pronouns and adjectives), since the fixation of the SVO-model required the rightward position of the negator to the finite verb. Phonetically light NE is substituted with a heavier NOT.

Secondly, it is the rise of the grammatical operator NOT (< OE nought/naught). In the fifteenth century, it drops the cluster-point status (Lass 2000: 208), being deprived of its lexical and grammatical features. The negative sentence paradigm is stripped of redundant Neg-elements in line with the general drift towards simplification and avoidance of morphological complexity.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The diachronic changes within the system of the English sentence negation present a special interest, firstly, in view of their systematicity and orderly fixation throughout the suggested period of time, and, secondly, in view of their implications for the historical English studies. The present paper has addressed the theoretical and empirical objectives set up here to trace the changes within the sentence negation paradigm through three periods in the history of the



English language, specifically Old English, Middle English and Early Modern English.

The evolutionary path of the English language, observable signs of which are traced as far back as in early literary monuments, is treated as a redundancy-managed process. An empirical evidence shows, the development of the English sentence negation represents a special case of empirical grammaticalization, unfolding as a set of structural changes, primarily, and the elimination of the redundant Neg-elements in NC clauses throughout three historical periods. It is crucial to note that the formal changes, occurring in this particular type of clauses are not followed by the meaning changes, since all Neg-elements are conjoined in a semantic nucleus of negation.

Another theoretical point with respect to the NC redundancy in the earlier periods of the English language development is a definition of this phenomenon in the context of diachronic studies. This discussion has formulated and utilized a working definition of diachronic redundancy, based on the ideas worked out for Present-Day languages, be it discourse-pragmatic or morpho-syntactic accounts. The redundancy detected within the first two periods of the English history is described as a non-obligatory, i.e. ungrammatical, textually-bound linguistic phenomenon.

The evolutionary path of sentence negation in English represents a succession of changes involving the reduction of the repetitive Neg-elements, the rise of new categorial items owing to the reanalysis of pre-modals and pre-quantifiers, their isolation as distinct classes of words, grammaticalization of the periphrastic *do* and the ensuing appearance of AUX NOT + Infinitive phrase in the seventeenth century. It is important to mention the mechanisms, triggering the changes in the suggested period, i.e. reanalysis, principle of analogy, and language contact, being last but not least in this line.

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