THE LEXICAL REANALYSIS OF N-WORDS IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH:
A CASE OF DISAMBIGUATION

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Abstract

The loss of Negative Concord (NC) has long been attributed to external factors. This study redresses this issue and provides evidence for the failure of external factors to account for the ultimate disappearance of NC in Standard English. A detailed study of negation in Late Middle English and Early Modern English reveals that the process of decline of NC was a case of a natural change, preceded by a period of variation. A close study of n-indefinites in negative contexts and their ultimate replacement with Negative Polarity Items (NPIs) in a number of grammatical environments shows that the decline of NC follows the same pattern across contexts, which indicates that the loss of NC is a natural process. The decline of NC took place at the same rate across contexts indicating that the loss of NC is triggered by a change in a single underlying parameter setting. Accordingly, a theory-internal explanation is suggested. N-words underwent a lexical reanalysis whereby they acquired a new grammatical feature [+Neg] and were thus reinterpreted as NQs, rather than NPIs. This lexical reanalysis was triggered by the ambiguous status of n-words between [+Neg] and thus between single and double negative meanings. The observed change, involved in this process of disambiguation, is treated as a case of parameter resetting as this lexical reanalysis affected a whole set of lexical items and can thus economically account for the different observed surface changes.

1. Introduction

Modern Standard English (henceforth MSE) is not characterised by the operation of Negative Concord (NC), which is the use of two or more negative elements which do not cancel each other out and together express a single negation. MSE therefore exhibits a virtually uniform [-NC] system as shown in (1). However, earlier English and some dialects and varieties of English do use NC, as illustrated by the following examples belonging to Middle English (ME) and Early Modern English (ENE) respectively (see also: Burnley 1983: 61; Barber 1997: 283):

(1) a. Elena did not see anything.
   b. She never mentioned it to anyone.

(2) a. 'my cousin Sidly could not be with vs no more could Mr Paston'
   b. 'there is no possibility which I am much perplexed for being no less.'
   (The Paston Letters, 53 & 54)

(3) a. 'They have not as yet proceeded no further'
   b. 'never saw people so far out in the way in no disease'
   (Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies of GB Vol. II, 13 & 30)

ME and ENE exhibited variable use of [-NC] and [-NC] systems, i.e. speakers belonging to these two periods used both single and double/multiple negation to express the negative
meaning. The use of more than one negative element within one clause without canceling each other out (Jack 1978; Frisch 1997; Smith 2001; Jeyri 2001) was a prominent feature in ME. Several studies have addressed issues related to negation, in terms of both the generative framework and in terms of language change theories. However, very few have addressed the loss of NC as an independent issue. It has also been largely assumed that the loss of NC was the outcome of prescriptive views on language use, and of taking Latin, a [NC] language, as a model for the English grammar. Because of these assumptions, the issue of why NC was lost in MSE has not been given enough attention. In fact, even questions such as when and how NC was lost have yet to be fully addressed. In this paper, we readdress the issue of why NC was lost in MSE based on a detailed study of the nature of the change.2

In the Late Middle English (LME, 1550-1600) and ENE periods, negative utterances varied between I heard no reason, a grammatical option in MSE but rather restricted to formal contexts; I did hear no reason, which is ungrammatical in MSE; I did not hear no reason; I did not hear no reason, which is also ungrammatical in MSE, and I did not hear any reason, a grammatical variant in MSE. These variants coexisted, though at different frequencies in our studied periods, namely LME and ENE. Taking into consideration the fact that these variants are semantically equivalent, the following issue arises: why did English negation develop into the last option? In other words, why did we have a move towards option four throughout this diachronic development of the English system of negation? For this purpose, the issue of the nature of the change is addressed through a detailed study of the process of the decline of NC and its gradual loss which was triggered by the new element of ambiguity that appeared in the Late ENE period.

In Old English (OE, prior to 1450) and Early Middle English (EME, 1450-1475), negation was mainly expressed by means of the primary negator ne. At a later stage ne was phonologically weakened (Jespersen's 1917 Negative Cycle) and the sentential negator not was introduced to reinforce the negative meaning, as the following examples illustrate:

(4) a. ‘that he ne moverght selle his fis’
b. that he may not sell his fish

(Ingbohm 2003: 146)

After the loss of the primary negator ne, not became the main sentential negator, and in the later ME period, came to be used together with another negative element. Speakers felt the need to add a second negative element to their negative utterances since the negative meaning was always achieved through the use of two negative elements within a single clause. Accordingly, n-items came to be used together with the newly acquired sentential negator not to the effect of reinforcement, as illustrated by the following examples:

(5) ‘I would not for no good...’
(6) ‘I am not able to deserve with no power’

(The Listeria Letters, Vol. V: 305 & 196)

Another common way of expressing negation made use of two n-items yielding NC between the subject and the direct object of a clause, or between the direct object and another phrase, e.g. an adjunct as in the following examples:

(7) ‘no privie sale shold go against no man’
(8) ‘yet they can get no money for nothing’

(The Plumptson Letters: 114 &199)

By the LME and ENE periods, speakers had an alternative option, which now made use of any-items such as anybody, anywhere, ever, etc., in contexts where n-items such as none, nothing, never, etc., occurred, ambiguity between these two variants, which in turn led to competition, arose. This ambiguous speech continued to exist until the early stages of the ENE period with competition between the use of n-words and any-words in negative contexts, as illustrated in (11) and (12), respectively. Following this period, the ambiguous speech finally settled and the use of non-assertive items was grammaticalised.

(11) ‘my Cosen Siclyd could not be with vs no more could Mr. Pston.’ (L18: 53)
(12) ‘Newes of the Country I cannot possesse you with any but of the death’ (L11: 47)

(The Passton Letters, 53 & 47)

2. Negative Concord and Jespersen’s (1917) Negative Cycle

The history of English negation reflects Jespersen’s (1917) idea that there is a developmental pattern in systems of sentential negation. This pattern is often referred to in the literature as the ‘Negative Cycle’. It is suggested that the original negative markers, e.g. ne in OE, weaken phonologically and often become clinched to the finite verb, thus losing much of their negative import. They then need to be reinforced by an independent element which eventually becomes the sole negative marker. The dititic marker becomes optional and eventually disappears. This cycle is reflected in the history of English negation. In OE, sentential negation was usually expressed by ne alone. In the ME period ne was reinforced by not and later disappeared completely with not becoming the only sentential negator.

Smith (2001: 111) summarises the different stages in the development of negation from the OE period until the ENE period, illustrating Jespersen’s Cycle. Table 1 below shows the stages of development in negation throughout the Pre-Modern English period. It indicates that there was variation between at least two options within each stage, with the exception of OE.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old English</th>
<th>Early Middle English</th>
<th>Middle English</th>
<th>Early Modern English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ne V</td>
<td>ne V ne not</td>
<td>Ne V not</td>
<td>V not do not V</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Forms of negation from Old English to Early Modern English (Smith 2001:111)

3. Negative Polarity Items versus Negative Quantifiers

In English, polarity items (Pis) are licensed by both negative and interrogative elements. It is proposed that Pis are licensed by a c-commanding negative or interrogative element. With respect to negation, the focus of this study, and from a semantic point of view, NC creates a problem: why would more than one occurrence of a negative element in a single clause be interpreted as a single negation? The answer might have to do with the nature of n-words themselves. The question arises as to whether constituents such as nothing, or none are (i)
negative quantifiers, elements that can convey the negative sense independently of other negative elements in the clause, or (ii) whether they are negative polarity items (NPiS), elements that do depend on other negative elements within the clause to license them.

There has been a debate in the literature on whether n-words are NPiS or negative quantifiers. Giannakidou (2000: 459) gives the following definition of n-words: 'n-words occur in NC structures and can be associated with negative meaning' and states that 'Polarity sensitivity is a form of semantic dependency between PPs and context. PPs are sensitive expressions in that they are dependent on some property of the context for their interpretation' (Giannakidou 2000: 464). She points out that languages with negative quantifiers (NQs) are n-words that are negative quantifiers (NQs), under the assumption that they do contribute negative meaning in the absence of the negative marker. Based on these arguments and those developed by Zanuttini (1991), we assume in this study that n-words are NQs in MSE. The situation in ME, however, is different because of the changes the system of negation was undergoing. Ingham (forthcoming) states that, 'during the transition phase, N-indices temporarily became polysemous between a NQ and an NPi, and in the latter use were licensed by a negator in a higher clause.'

4. Grammar competition and language change

Kroch (1994: 180) argues that syntactic change, the outcome of a diachronically unstable alternation, 'proceeds via competition between grammar-incompatible options which substitute for one another in usage.' He emphasizes that change involves the alternation between old and new forms over a considerable period of time. He argues that the two grammars in operation are in competition with one another and proposes that variation in the context of syntactic change is between options that are grammatically incompatible and, therefore, that the variation reflects grammatical competition. He suggests that the course of evolution of competing variants in syntactic change, the coexistence of the variant forms is diachronically unstable: one form tends to drive the other out of use and so out of the language. The changes in frequency in the time course of a syntactic change indicates a shift in language users' overall tendency to use one grammatical option over another in their language output. This changing tendency is reflected in the changes in surface contexts where usage frequencies can be measured. The unity of the change, however, Kroch suggests, is defined at the level of the grammar, not at the level of surface contexts, and the options in question are not alternating realizations within a single grammar, rather they seem always to involve opposed grammatical choices not consistent with the postulation of a single unitary analysis.

(Kroch 1994: 183)

This variation between incompatible syntactic options in historical change is indicative of grammar competition. Using the Principles and Parameters model of grammar (Chomsky 1986), grammar competition can be seen as a competition between grammars that differ from each other in terms of a particular parameter setting.

As these theories suggest, there is considerable friction between the parameter-setting model of grammar change, which essentially emphasizes discontinuity, and the fact of synchronic variation between older and newer forms in the language. With competing structures coexisting in the grammar of speakers, there must be opacity available in the syntax. It is generally assumed that individual speakers have variable usage, and that part of their knowledge of language is that certain variants are more frequent than others. The

question that arises then is whether this is a core part of linguistic competence, or something that is separate from the knowledge of grammar as such. In Kroch (1989), a view of synchronic variation and change has been developed which deals to some extent with this friction. The idea is that speakers are in some way bilingual: they acquire more than one grammar which differ in respect of one parameter. These grammars are in competition; there is a period of variation between the two, and eventually, as ambiguity arises, one variant is replaced by another. 

5. Internal mechanisms: Reanalysis

Harris and Campbell (1995), on the other hand, identify three basic mechanisms for syntactic changes to take place; there are reanalysis, extension which is a subtype of reanalysis, and borrowing. Reanalysis was introduced as a major factor in explaining and understanding syntactic change. Harris and Campbell (1995) give the following definition for reanalysis emphasizing the fact that it does not affect the surface structure but only the underlying structure.

Reanalysis ... is a mechanism which changes the underlying structure (surface constituent structure) of a syntactic pattern and which does not involve any immediate or intrinsic modification of its surface manifestations.

(Harris and Campbell 1995: 61)

Reanalysis, it has been assumed, is triggered by structural ambiguity. Structural ambiguity implies that each of the possible readings of a sentence is a possible structure in the language. According to Harris and Campbell, the two possible readings with their different structures are not ambiguous in other contexts. Therefore, reanalysis can only take place if the two analyses are possible. However, Harris and Campbell argue that opacity is not a prerequisite to reanalysis and that it can trigger grammatical changes. They refer to structurally ambiguous patterns as the basis of reanalysis.

Lightfoot's (1979, 1991) theory of language change states that a change in syntax consists of an abrupt grammatical reanalysis within the new generation acquiring the language. Hróarsson (2002) suggests:

A resetting of parameters in an individual's grammar is necessary abrupt, whereas innovation in a speech community is gradual (innovations gradually spread in a language community). Hence language change is gradual whereas grammar change is abrupt.

(Hróarsson 2002: 8, fn)

6. Reanalysis: cause versus effect

A common view of syntactic change is that reanalysis is the outcome of syntactic change (Lightfoot 1999). According to this view, reanalysis only takes place when a new form achieves categoricity and the old form with which it was competing drops out of use; the
disappearance of the old form forces learners to structurally reanalyse the new form. Friesch (1994), however, argues that numerous quantitative studies of syntactic change indicate that the emergence of a new structural option is the prerequisite, rather than the consequence of syntactic change and variation (Kroch 1989; Taylor 1990, 1994; Friesch 1991) and gives further evidence against the standard view of historical change based on a study of sentential negation in ME. It has been argued that not in ME was reanalysed from being a sentence adverb to being the sentential negator (Pellock 1989; Roberts 1993), after the negative particle ne was lost due to its phonological weakening. Under the standard account, the absence of ne made language learners reanalyse not as the sentential negator (Friesch 1994: 189), assuming that the reanalysis of not is a direct result of the loss of ne. Contrary to this standard view of change, Friesch (1994) claims that the reanalysis of not was the cause, rather than the consequence, of the loss of the negative particle ne. He argues that the loss of preverbal position for not occurs more than a century before the loss of ne, and thus, that the reanalysis of not precedes the loss of ne. Furthermore, Friesch claims that not was reanalysed not only syntactically but also semantically. Not is reanalysed as an ordinary, non-emphatic, sentential negator before ne is lost, knowing that when not was used with ne in EM, it behaved as an emphatic negator, and that emphatic terms in general are weakened over time (Friesch 1986; Horn 1989).

The functional reanalysis of not can simultaneously explain the loss of the preverbal position of not and the loss of emphatic meaning for not. Once not is reanalysed as a sentential negator, ne and not serve the same function. Ne is no longer necessary, and is lost.

Friesch (1994) claims that the change in negators in ME is a change in which, contrary to the standard view, reanalysis is not forced upon language learners as a result of syntactic constraints. He argues that the reanalysis of not as a sentential negator precedes the loss of the OE sentential negator, ne, creating a syntactically and semantically redundant system of negation. Ne is later lost from this redundant system. In other words, change occurs after the innovation of a new structural position for not makes ne redundant. Santorini’s (1993) data are also concluded to contradict the standard view of syntactic change as the result of reanalysis of structurally ambiguous clauses at the end of a change, indicating instead a reanalysis at the beginning of the change.

7. Grammar competition

LME and ENE speakers were endowed with two grammars, i.e. they had an old grammar which is [+NC] and a new one which is [-NC], and accordingly varied their use and alternated between both systems. These two grammars coexisted and were competing for the same structural position. In the case of our study, two forms which have identical meaning and the same discourse function were in alternation. Kroch (1994) states that the relative frequency of a pair of alternating, equivalent forms is fixed at any one time by community norm, i.e. by a tendency for speakers to use a form at the same rate at which they hear it used. Some such assumption, Kroch argues, is needed to account for the fact, firmly established by quantitative studies, that speech communities share common rates of use for linguistic alternatives.

The changes in frequency of use of n-words and NPs that we have established over a period of one and a half centuries indicate a shift in language users’ overall tendency to use one grammatical option over another in their language output. This changing tendency is reflected in the changes in surface contexts where usage frequencies can be measured. The unity of the change, however, Kroch (1994) argues, is defined at the level of the grammar, not at the level of surface contexts. This study supports the idea put forward by Kroch (1994) that syntactic change, the outcome of a diachronically unstable alternation, proceeds via competition between incompatible grammar options which are used interchangeably. Our observed change involves the alternation between the [+NC] grammar and the [-NC] grammar over a considerable period of time. Differences between these two varieties lie in the weights accorded to the competing variants. These grammars are in competition: there is a period of variation between the two, and eventually only the newer grammar remains as an option. The two grammars in operation are in competition with one another and the observed variation in the course of this case of syntactic change is between options that are grammatically incompatible, therefore, the variation reflects grammar competition.

The question that arises then is whether this is a core part of linguistic competence, or something that is separate from the knowledge of grammar as such. In Kroch (1989), a view of synchronic variation and change was developed which deals to some extent with this friction. The idea is that speakers are in some way bilingual: they acquire more than one grammar that differs in respect to one parameter. We assume that individual speakers have variable usage, and that part of their knowledge of language is that certain variants are more frequent than others. This idea is further explored in the following section.

8. Parameter change

Data, collected for the purpose of our study (see details in note 3), suggest that the observed variation and grammar competition stabilized at the end of the sixteenth century and only one option continued to exist. What happened then is that this variation ceased to exist when the [-NC] grammar became obviously more favoured in contexts where it was competing with the older grammar. Once the usage of the new grammar reached 80% or more of the cases, as opposed to only 20% or less of cases of the old grammar, then the change in the child’s PLD became more evident and consequently the child acquires this grammar which he hears more often. The input of the new grammar reached a critical level, i.e. when the evidence given for the child became a predominantly [-NC] grammar, the new generation ended up choosing the new grammar, having only been exposed to obsolete cases of the old one.

Both alternatives, the use of n-words and any-words, were possible, but NC gradually became less frequently attested in the texts through the ENE period and the decline in the frequency of n-words indicates. This reflected a change in the performance of speakers in terms of the likelihood of choosing one or the other of the available analyses. There was no reason, then, to say that the gradual change observed in the texts manifested a change in individuals’ grammars; although they do not reflect changes in grammars, such changes nevertheless affect the trigger experience, in Lightfoot’s terms. The declining frequency of NC across contexts may interact with other factors to resist the parameter differently.

In the early stages, during the second half of the fifteenth century, evidence for NC was still robust enough to set the parameter [+NC] appropriately. Evidence for this parameter became less robust throughout the sixteenth century as a result of the increasingly frequent use of any-words provided some more evidence for their use. Consequently, as NC in E-language diminished to a low point, underlying NC became unlearnable and the parameter [+NC] ceased to be set differently. We argue that this change in parameter setting took place towards the end of the sixteenth century, based on the fact that the new parameter [-NC] became standard across contexts by that time.

To summarise, the empirical record shows that the use of NC underwent some gradual statistical shifts through the Late Middle and ENE period. If the consulted texts are reliable indicators, LME NC was almost categorically used across contexts, but by the end of the sixteenth century, children heard NC utterances only less than 10% of the time; the grammar
had been reanalyzed in such a way that it became underlyingly a [-NC] one. The new parameter setting manifests itself equally in all contexts. This implies that a change in the PLD took place. At NC decreased and reduced the clues for a [+NC] grammar, the use of any-words became more frequent and provided a new trigger for a NPI grammar.

We have argued above that the observed change in NC was triggered by the resetting of a certain parameter. In the following section, we suggest lexical ambiguity as a possible explanation for the resetting of this parameter. We discuss which parameter was reset in subsequent sections.

9. Lexical ambiguity

Variation, as is generally recognized, may develop into a change or it may not. Liberman (1994: 1) states, 'Change presupposes a period of variation although variation need not produce change'. It can, in fact, survive for a considerable period of time without causing ambiguity. If there is ambiguity, then it is likely that the different variables involved will undergo some changes in frequencies until one option is opted out of the language and communication will be successful. Ingham’s (forthcoming) analysis, based on Ladusaw’s (1992) analysis of Romance languages, suggests that the situation was polysemous, whereby n-indefinites could behave as either NPs or as NQs. In our study, we would like to suggest that the situation was not just polysemous but crucially ambiguous, which triggered the change in the parameter setting of n-items (we return to this issue in the following section).

The idea of ambiguity is further developed below. At some stage, the variation observed in our period, whereby the same negative meaning (SM1) is referred to in two or more different structures (S1, S2, S3, etc.), developed into some sort of ambiguity where one structure S1 corresponds to several meanings (M1, M2, M3, etc.).

The development from variation to ambiguity can be mapped in (15) below.

(13) SM1: S1
     SM1: S2
     SM1: S3

In the earlier stages of our period, a single semantic meaning (SM1), the negative meaning, is expressed in at least two different possible structures, S1 and S2, as shown in (14) below. At a later stage, ambiguity arose and a single structure (S1) came to have at least two different semantic meanings (SM1), as shown in (15) below.

(14) SM1 = Single semantic negation
     S1 = Neg/n-item + n-item
     S2 = Neg/n-item + any-item

(15) SM1 = Single semantic negation
     SM1 = Double negation

As the parameter setting changed and n-items were still introduced in sentences that are already negative, either through verbal negation or through other n-items, two readings became available and ambiguity arises between a parameter setting that allows for (i) a clause with a single negative meaning and (ii) a double negative meaning, as the following example (16) illustrates:

(16) They said nothing to nobody

Utterances like (16) are quite common in our period and were intended to convey a single semantic negation. However, with n-word being lexically reanalyzed, this utterance became ambiguous (we shall return to this issue in the following section) and impossible in the intended reading of a single negation (late sixteenth century). It is, nevertheless, grammatical on a different reading in English, corresponding to the reading of real double negation. The fact that this doubly negated reading is available explains the development into a single option with a new parameter setting disallowing the co-occurrence of two or more negative indefinites. If variation involves ambiguity, the language normally develops a single option, dropping the least fit grammar, in Lightfoot’s terms, in order to disambiguate meaning.

10. Lexical reanalysis

In this section, we will address the observed changes in terms of lexical reanalysis based on the argument that these changes were triggered by lexical ambiguity which led to a change in a single parameter setting. To be able to characterize these changes, we will describe our period in terms of Time1 and Time2, the purpose of which is to provide a descriptive framework of the situation at different stages and of what shifts were involved in the process. Time1, running from LME until about 1550, characterizes a stage where [-NC] was characteristic of the speakers’ output. This stage represents a period of variation and overlap where the grammar was mainly [+NC] throughout, though with different weights. This period culminated in an ambiguous status for n-indefinites. In Time2, the time-span from 1550 onwards, the situation was disambiguated and [-NC] grammar became almost categorical. In order to provide a coherent picture of the change in negation, we move slightly backward in time and call it Time0, i.e. the period between EME and 1450. In Time0, negation was expressed through the use of ne solely. With the phonological weakening of ne, not was introduced to reinforce the negative meaning as illustrated in the following example:

(17) a. ‘...that he ne move ought sell his fish’
   b. ‘...that he may not sell his fish’

   (Ingham 2003: 146)

By LME, the use of ne...not was very rare. After the loss of ne, another NC pattern became available to the speaker of the LME and ENE periods. We now have the sentential negator, head of NegP, not co-occurring with an n-word either in sentences with a main verb or with an auxiliary verb, as illustrated, respectively, in the examples below, a NC variety that is not accounted for in the previous literature. Our data show that both (18) and (19) were common options in LME.

(18) 'and kepe not your promise at no tyme'
(19) ‘that he shall not be hurt in no wise’

   (The Stanor Letters: L. 63 & 92)
A second type of NC that existed mainly in LME is the use of two negative indefinites within the same clause, something referred to in the literature as Negative Spread (den Besten 1986). N-words occurring in the lower position in the clause structure are licensed by the first n-word in the same clause. This is illustrated in (20) and (21).

(20) ‘Maxwell will ask no recce of no man’

(21) ‘Ie will in no wise come to no end’

(Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies of GB, Vol. II, 128 & 164)

Another characteristic of Time is the paucity of examples where negation is expressed through the use of a single negative element. Utterances such as (22) and (23) below seem to be very rare in our texts in Time.

(22) ‘and Medlich, you needys no licence’

(23) ‘But my Lord yf lytt yew to take no displeasure to underscrope the worthy trewthe’

(Christ Church Letters: 45 & 51)

These utterances were unproductive and we therefore may assume that they were not actually part of the grammar of the speakers at that time. In EME, single negation, when expressed through only one n-item within the VP, is ungrammatical. This is also the case in NC romance languages (see e.g. Ladusaw 1992). Ladusaw (1992) argues that in NC languages a single negative expression does not successfully express negation, since in systems such as Ladusaw’s n-items occurring in a VP must be licensed. According to Ladusaw, in NC languages, n-words do not directly express negation because they are not NQs and cannot be mapped into a single negative representation.

To summarise, the situation in Time was, as Ingham (forthcoming) proposed, polysemous i.e. n-words were interpreted as both NPs and NQs. In Time, this polysemous situation developed into a semantically ambiguous one, mainly with the observed rise in the frequency of any-words in contexts that were strictly restricted to n-words. This explains the fact that in sentences such as (24), we still obtain the negative meaning, i.e. the negative meaning is conveyed by the single negative element, in this case no, which then behaves as a NQ. In sentences such as (25), the negative element lower in the clause, in this case no, is licensed by the one in the higher position, in this case not.

(24) ‘for I came have no mone of my father’

(25) ‘so that hys shall not be no thing predecyall to your payment’

(The Willowyghy Letters, 37 & 29)

The situation in Time (1450) and Time (1450-1549) is summarised in (26) below.

(26) a. The use of not + n-item
   b. The use of n-item + n-item
   c. Rare use of V = n-item

In Time (1550-1599), the situation became crucially ambiguous, and cases of n-words behaving as NPs became more and more uncommon until they virtually disappeared at Stage 6 in our data (1575-1599). Stage 6 in our study stands for the point where n-words started behaving purely as NQs, following the lexical reanalysis they underwent. The situation in Time is summarised under (27) below.

(27) a. V + not + any-item
    b. Aux. + not + V + any-item
    c. N-item + any-item

This is in addition to the fact that the structure in (26c) became much more frequent. Originally, the structure in (26c) was relatively unproductive. This, according to Ladusaw (1992), is triggered by the fact that such utterances do not adhere to the rules natural NC languages comply with. However, with the parameter for NQs being reset, n-words stopped being ambiguous between NPs and NQs. The lexical reanalysis and the resulting new NQs status n-words have acquired enabled them to express the negative meaning without having to be c-commanded.

The observed changes can thus be summarised as follows in Table 2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Not + n-word</td>
<td>Not + any-word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) N-item + n-word</td>
<td>N-item + any-word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) V + n-word (rare use)</td>
<td>V + n-word</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Summary of the changes from Time to Time.

Three fundamental questions then come to mind:

1. Why were n-words replaced by any-words in contexts where they are preceded by a verbal negation, either ne or not?
2. Why were n-words replaced by any-words in contexts where they are preceded by another negative indefinites?
3. Why did the previously unacceptable structure in 26c (repeated in 3 in Table 2) become more productive?

These observations imply that there was a change in progress. We would like to argue that these three surface changes were triggered by a grammar change, the resetting of a single parameter. Although on the surface level these changes might seem to be unrelated, they can in fact be reduced to a common underlying source, i.e. to one question, namely how the change in the parameter setting ever took place. We argued that the polysemous status of n-items (Ladusaw 1992; Ingham, forthcoming) developed into a status of ambiguity whereby both the single and the double negative meaning were possible readings for a single structure. This triggered a parameter change which affected a set of lexical items, namely n-indefinites. This parameter resetting had the benefit of disambiguating single and double negation readings. The question then is, what is it that has changed in the competence of these speakers that made them interpret things differently?

The change from Time, a transitional phase, to Time, involves the resetting of an underlying parameter: the lexical reanalysis of n-words from NPs to NQs. Before the parameter change, n-words were ambiguous between NPs, elements that are dependent on other elements higher in the clause for their interpretation, and NQs. With these utterances becoming less frequent and thus not robust enough in the primary linguistic data (PLD) available to the child, the parameter allowing for n-words to co-occur with other negative elements higher in the clause was reset and n-words came to be re-interpreted as NQs, after behaving as NPs. They became independent elements in the sentence and able to convey negative meaning without "seeking help" from another negative element, either a sentential negator or another n-word. Ingham (forthcoming) states that n-words were always interpreted
as NPIs up to 1350. However, if our analysis is appropriate, 1350 does not mark the time when n-words stopped being interpreted as NPIs: n-words continued to be treated as NPIs long after that date. Our data show cases of n-words co-occurring with other negative elements in the same clause well after 1350. This lexical reanalysis in the nature of n-items only took place when the frequencies of n-items were showing a constant decline and evidence for their introduction in negative contexts were not robust enough to keep the same parameter setting. This stage corresponds to the second half of the eighteenth century in our data analyses.

One observation in favour of our analysis is that this change took place across the board, even in contexts where NC took the pattern of two or more n-words co-occurring in the same sentence. In short, n-words declined dramatically in contexts where they had to be licensed by another n-word higher in the clause and were replaced by any-words in the contexts considered. This new parameter setting was not only true of cases where verbal negation is involved, but also cases where two or more n-words are involved in expressing negation. Our data indicate that the lexical reanalysis of n-items was across the board, i.e. in all the syntactic contexts considered. This is in accordance with Haspelmath (1997: 219) who argues that, if in a language negative pronouns do not co-occur with verbal negation, they also do not co-occur with each other, and conversely. In the following section, we attempt an explanation for the observed changes as part of a theory of NPIs and lexical reanalysis.

Going back to the third observed change in Time (26c), namely the rise of utterances that make use of a single negative element to express the negative sense, this adds support to the argument put forward above. The fact that we now started to come across negative sentences that make use of a single negative element and still convey the negative meaning, while before these utterances were considered ungrammatical in Lutskov’s (1992) framework, means that these n-words have acquired a new feature [+Neg] that enables them to express the negative sense independently of other negative elements within the same clause. In the texts consulted, we noticed that the ENE period exhibits more occurrences like (27) above. In order to be more certain, all private letters written prior to 1450 were consulted and cases of single negation were collected. The letters written between 1400 and 1450 amounted to 34 letters from miscellaneous sources. Accordingly, we also looked at 34 letters from the following period, i.e. 1450-1499 and collected cases of single negation expressed through a single negative element. The results indicate that negative utterances expressed through a single negative element were twice as frequent in the period between 1450-1499, where 51 cases of single negation were recorded, as in the period between 1400-1449 where only 25 cases of the same were found.

Ticken-Boon van Ostade (1996) also talks about the rise in the frequency of these utterances. However, she does not give an explanation of why this happened. She reports instances where double negatives were changed into sentences with a single negation as illustrated in the change from (28) to (29). In these cases, it was the second element (n-indefinites) which was allowed to solely express the negative meaning, as illustrated in the following examples (italics added) given in Ticken-Boon van Ostade (1996: 1547).

(28) But Merliem wolde no lette her have no reste
(29) But Merlym wold lete ker hau no rest

(Ticken-Boon van Ostade 1996: 1547)

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Accordingly, we would like to argue that the use of n-words in structural positions where only any-words are found today was only a stage in the transition the system of negation was experiencing in Middle and ENE. During this transitional stage, the role of n-words was to reinforce the negative meaning after the loss of bi-particite negation, namely the use of ne...not. This caused ambiguity to arise between a single and a double interpretation of the negative sense. What happened is that n-items, which became ambiguous between NPI and NOQ interpretation, underwent a lexical reanalysis and acquired a new single status, that of NOQs, as from the time they could stand on their own and express the negative meaning. The change in the status of n-items is a change that affected a whole set of lexical items and is better treated as a case of parameter resetting as it allows us to account for a variety of phenomena economically. We have shown how all the above stated surface changes can be accounted for in terms of the resetting of a single parameter, that of the features attributed to n-indefinites; a resetting which applied across the board.

To summarize, our data analyses and findings clearly indicate that the change is natural and was internally-driven, rather than triggered by some external factors. This conclusion is supported by the unidirectionality of the change maintained in the case of our study. Unidirectionality is the property of a type of linguistic change which happens in one direction but not in the reverse direction. It is argued to be one of the most important aspects of language change from the point of view of linguistic theory. It is clear in this research that unidirectionality of the change is maintained. Negative expressions have undergone a lexical reanalysis whereby they become negative indefinites; the opposite cannot be true. The ambiguous status of n-items in ME and ENE between NPIs, i.e. non-negative indefinites, and NOQs, i.e. negative indefinites, culminates in the development of these n-items into proper negative indefinites, i.e. items that are inherently negative. This development made their use in contexts where another negative element already exists higher in the clause structure impossible without causing a double negation reading. This change was also observed in all the contexts considered.

Our analysis, therefore, does not adhere to the idea posited by Ingham (forthcoming) that the loss of NC is triggered by the loss of the ex-sentential negator ne. Ingham (2003; forthcoming) treats the loss of NC as a direct outcome of the loss of the ex-sentential negator ne. This analysis can be criticized on two grounds. First, it suggests that the newly acquired status of not (Frisch 1997) is not crucial for the maintenance of NC based on the idea that ne was always the head of NegP. Our data, however, show that after neg-reanalysis took place another type of NC, one where the newly established sentential negator not co-occurs with another n-word, became productive. While being productive in our period, this type of NC was not accounted for in Ingham (forthcoming), as his analysis is based on den Barten’s (1986) categorisation of NC-types, namely Negative Doubling and Negative Spread. Our data analyses point to this gap in the literature. Second, even if we assume that ne was always the head of NegP while it co-occurs with not, with ne generally moving with the verb and thus occurring in a higher head (e.g. Inf or Agrp), it is the surface not, not ne, that is the co-commanding element of other negative elements lower in the clause structure. Accordingly, in cases where NC involves the co-occurrence of not together with an n-word, not continued to license n-words as it used to do before ne disappeared, i.e. the change in the status of not as a head of NegP (Frisch 1997) did not change the fact that not has always been the closest licensor of n-words. Accordingly, we would like to argue that the loss of ne could have triggered the introduction of the polysemous status that n-items developed, but it is unlikely that the loss of ne was the direct factor behind the loss of NC.
11. Conclusion

We have argued that the decline of n-words and their ultimate replacements by any-words in negative contexts occurred at a gradual pace, over generations, and as far as Bailey's (1973) principle of linguistic change is concerned, the change followed an S-shaped curve in all the contexts studied. This gradualness of the decline of n-words, and the corresponding gradual rise in the frequency of any-words in negative contexts, are the outcome of a competition between two grammatically mutually exclusive options, namely n-words and any-words in negative contexts, and the resulting ambiguity. Our data indicates that NC declined at the same rate in all observed macro contexts (non-coordinate and coordinate clauses) and micro contexts (Object and Adjectives). The decline of NC follows the same path in all the contexts observed in a Parallel Curvature rather than parallel lines. This then emphasises the view that these surface changes, changes in performance, are manifestations of a change in a single underlying parameter setting.

We have studied the nature of n-words and their behaviour in different contexts at Time 2 and Time 3. We have argued that n-items underwent a process of lexical reanalysis whereby their status changed from NPs to NQs, free-standing elements that can convey the negative sense independently of any other negative elements in the clause. Based on the texts consulted and our data analyses, we have concluded that our findings are more compatible with Kroch's theory of linguistic change than with Lightfoot's (1991; 1999), and that individual speakers are not uniform in their usage, but rather possess and make use of two grammars, [aNC].

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and the editors of this volume for their comments. The usual disclaimers apply.

Notes

1. This study sets no distinction between NC and multiple negation; within the literature they are both used interchangeably to refer to the same phenomenon. This study always refers to NC.

2. An example of one variety in which NC operates is African-American Vernacular English (see e.g. Labov 1972: 785), as the following example illustrates:

(i) 'Ain't nobody ever thought about pickin' up nothin'.

This study focuses on Standard (British) English and excludes further discussion of other varieties which exhibit NC.

3. We studied the decline of NC over a period of one and a half centuries, precisely from 1540 until 1599. This period was divided into six periods of twenty-five years each (Stage 1: 1450-1474, Stage 2: 1475-1499, Stage 3: 1500-1524, Stage 4: 1525-1549, Stage 5: 1550-1574 and Stage 6: 1575-1599) and we deemed appropriate to account for the observed change across this time line and to serve as a convenient expository device for this purpose. We collected data from thirty-two sources, namely private correspondence, materials likely to show linguistic usage of the spoken language, belonging to LME and ENE. All private letters that belong to our period, based on their dates of writing established in the printed edition, were included and all occurrences of n-words and any-words within these texts are counted. Our corpus is a fuller version of the Corpus of Early English Correspondence (CEEC), whose 'sampler' was published in 1999, and more uniform in nature in terms of genre. Only private correspondences were included in our corpus because of the nature of the change we are addressing. For further details see Kajel (2004).

4. Any-words are also found in conditional and interrogative clauses alongside negative ones.

5. It has been postulated that an absorption mechanism allows n-words and the negative marker to merge into one semantic negation, according to the NEG-satisfaction approach (Zanuttiniti 1991; Haegeman & Zanuttiniti 1991; Haegeman 1995).

6. Ingham (forthcoming: 16) gives the following examples:

(i) 'Hit maketh non evidens for neither side'
(ii) 'He may love none other wight in no maner'.

7. Haspelmath (1997: 221) rejects the hypothesis that overtly negative indefinites can be reanalysed as 'non-negative' indefinites.

References


