



Negation in Old English
Prose: Corpus studies
in constituent negation,
negative raising and
negators as equivalents
of clauses

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1. Introduction

My thesis consisting of four research articles focuses on negation in the earliest form of the English language. This language, Old English, or Anglo Saxon, is recorded in manuscripts dating back to the years before about 1150 AD. Three of the articles represent further research on the themes introduced in my master's thesis, entitled *A Syntax of Negation in King Alfred's Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which I completed at the University of Jyväskylä some forty years ago. These articles aim to uncover factors that explain the variation among a set of negators in litotes-type adverbial phrases, in which an idea is expressed by the denial of its opposite, as in *Then after not a long time he arrived in Rome*, and contrastive constructions, such as *He is abbod na biscop* 'he is an abbot, not a bishop'. The aim is also to find out how the negators are employed as response words to yes-no questions, in polar-alternative questions, and as exclamations. The aim of the fourth and final article is to provide evidence of transfer of negation from the nominal clause to the matrix clause (i.e. negative raising) with four verbs expressing thinking and assumption. Variation among the negators is partly explained by referring to grammatical factors, but can also be due to external factors, which are discussed under diatopic, diachronic, and genre-based variation. Here the term diatopic refers to the four geographic areas of Old English texts, i.e. West Saxon, Mercian, Northumbrian and Kentish.

Since there are no native speakers of Old English among us, we must focus our research on the copies of various manuscripts which go back to the Old English period. Before presenting the corpora, the methods, and the main

results obtained, I will give a short introduction to the concept of negation. In this section, I also include some observations on negation in logic, even though it is obvious that natural language cannot be reduced to logic.

2. The concept of negation

Negation is a basic phenomenon in human language. Typological studies which cover hundreds of languages show examples of the ways of expressing sentential negation in a language by means of a negative particle, an affix, or, as in Finnish, a verb form. No language has ever been reported to lack an expression of negation. This is understandable. Interaction among people would be impossible without negation. Negation is also a psychological and cognitive universal. We come into contact with this phenomenon early in our lives. Most babies understand and learn to use the word *no* (*nein*, *nej*, *ei...*) during the second year of their lives. A few years later, toddlers show their fondness for this word: *But you must eat your porridge. – No; It is time to go to bed. – No.* Negation is at the core of human language right from the start. Our daily communication consists of affirmations, refusals and denials, and we resort to negation when we want to warn or advise someone.

Negation is also a basic concept in logic and mathematics. In classical (Aristotelian) logic, which represents the earliest and simplest formal logic focusing on single-predicate propositions that are either true or false, negation may be defined simply as an operator (connective) that changes the truth value of a proposition p to its opposite $\sim p$ (not- p), as in the following, *Mary is happy*, *Mary is not happy*. The non-negative and the corresponding negative propositions (p and $\sim p$) are mutually exclusive. It is not true of any proposition p that it can be both true and not true.

The change of truth value is the semantic core of negation in both propositional logic and natural language, but there are also essential differences between the two kinds of characterizations of negation. The presence of the special logical operator makes negation univocal in classical logic, whereas in natural language negation may take a variety of different surface forms.

In natural language, negative constructions can be classified roughly into two categories according to the scope of negation, i.e. the part of a clause that is affected by a negative meaning. A negator may operate upon a whole

clause, *the order was not perfect* (sentence negation), or upon one or more of its constituents, *the disorder was perfect* (constituent negation). These examples show that natural language allows negation below sentence level, which is not possible in classical logic.

There are also other differences. In logic and mathematics, negation is recursive, so that the negation of $\sim p$ is equivalent to p . This is not always true of natural language. For example, in Old English two or more clausal negators in a clause do not cancel out each other. In natural language, the interpretation of a negative sentence also depends on the focus of negation. Here the focus refers to the point which receives some prominence in the clause. The clause *Mary did not kiss Bill* has various interpretations depending on which word is made prominent. The examples indicate that in Present-Day English the intonation pattern may have a bearing on the interpretation of a sentence in spoken language. In a study of Old English structures, we cannot benefit from native informants and determine with any certainty the intonation patterns and degree of stress.

We also consider the clause, *I don't think that Alfred is fond of cakes*, in which the negative element is transferred from the nominal clause to the matrix clause, semantically equivalent to *I think that Alfred is not fond of cakes*, in which the negative element is in the nominal clause where it logically and semantically belongs. In natural language, there are also approximate negators, such as *seldom* and *barely*, and indirect means on expressing negation. The discussion so far can be summarized by referring to Otto Jespersen: “Natural language has a logic of its own”.

The plethora of various negative constructions makes a comprehensive definition of the notion of negation impossible in natural language. In this thesis, I resort to the traditional approach and define the words and constructions introduced by the element *ne* or the contracted form *n-* that is agglutinated to various stems as negative. The articles of this thesis are based on the occurrences of a set of eight such lexemes in two corpora. Some occurrences of the prefix *un-* are also included.

3. Data and research methods

The data of the thesis are drawn from two corpora. The article on negators in adverbial phrases, and the one on contrastive constructions are based on a select corpus of 19 texts, both prose and glosses; no poetry is included. Since I started the collection of this corpus long before the era of online databases, I collected the whole corpus manually. The size of this corpus is well over 600,000 Old English words, which is significantly larger and more versatile than the corpora used in the earlier studies on Old English negation. The corpus comprises over 11,200 instances of words or phrases introduced by the proclitic *n-*, or the negator *ne*. Since the orthography is not fixed, the spellings of the negators vary, which explains that, in this corpus alone, the number of different spellings of the negative forms is 229. This peculiarity of Old English has to be kept in mind when one starts searching negators from an online database.

An optimal sample of texts represents maximally the variety under examination. In this thesis, the select corpus was planned in view of the various text types, dialects and periods of Old English to cover the needs of the articles on the variation of negative constructions in Old English prose and glosses. The selection of the corpus was conducted through purposive sampling, which is one form of non-random techniques. This method means selecting categories or groups of items to be studied on the basis of their relevance to the research questions. This makes the technique useful in exploratory research. The technique focuses on some features or processes which the researcher is interested in. Since the chosen technique relies on the researcher as to the selection of the texts that are to be studied, it is subjective and vulnerable to errors in judgment. In order to convince the reader of the representativeness and heterogeneousness of the sample I resorted to the categorization of OE texts in the *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts*. This categorization is based on the sub-period, dialect, and text type of a great number of Old English prose texts.

Two key concepts related to the selection of the corpus, representativeness and balance, call for a closer examination. The textual evidence attests four Old English dialects: Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon, and Kentish. However, the distribution of the prose texts is biased. The bulk of the data represents the West Saxon dialect, whereas the non-West Saxon material is scanty.

The localization of Old English writings is often problematic, since the texts, including the ones that derive from non-West Saxon originals, were copied and standardized by West Saxon scribes. With the exclusion of the short passage of *The Life of Chad*, which has preserved some of the Mercian elements of an older OE original, the major extant non-West Saxon texts are interlinear glosses. Inclusion of the glosses among the texts widens the non-West Saxon portion of the select corpus making the study of differences between the non-West Saxon and West Saxon gospels possible at least on the lexeme level, even though they hardly reflect the general language of the period.

The select corpus was planned to include enough data to reveal something about the frequencies of the phenomena under examination, and enable me to examine what is rare, or what is typical of the constructions under investigation. The purposive sampling technique proved to be useful in the articles on adverbial phrases and contrastive constructions, in which the frequencies of the phenomena studied are high. In the two other articles, the data were drawn from the online database of *The Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus* (DOEC). This database comprises a copy of each text surviving in Old English; in some cases, more than one copy is included. The texts of the prose part cover the OE period before the year 1150 AD. The extension of the corpus was necessary in order to have enough data for these articles.

The analysis of the data is based on both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Since the aim is not only to give examples of different constructions, but also to explain the variation among the negators in them, the description of the findings is supplemented by quantitative data indicated as frequencies and percentages. This makes comparisons among the constructions in texts of different sizes possible.


4. The main results

In the article on adverbial phrases, and the one on contrastive constructions, the focus is on constituent negation. The analysis of the data indicates that negative contrastive constructions are mainly used as rhetorical means to emphasize the ideas that the author considers important in homilies, and other texts, such as conversations between a master and his disciple, which are intended to influence people. Such rhetorical devices are not used, for

example, in *De Temporibus Anni*, which is a scientific treatise, and their scarcity in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is understandable, since a chronicle is by definition an account of events arranged chronologically usually without analysis or interpretation. Special rhetorical devices can be noted, such as anaphora, which refers to repetition of a word or expression at the beginning of successive phrases or clauses for rhetorical effect, as in *I am strong. I am ready*, and antimetabole, which refers to a figure of speech that reverses the relative position of a pair of key terms in parallel phrases, as in *Eat to live, not live to eat*. Anaphora and antimetabole belong to literary style. Some simple forms of contrastive constructions, such as *He is abbod na biscop* ‘he is an abbot, not a bishop’, may have been used in everyday conversations. To sum up, the preponderance of contrastive constructions in homilies point to genre-based variation.

The litotes-type adverbials mainly occur in narrative texts. It seems that the OE translators of Bede’s *History* and Gregory’s *Dialogues* considered the *negatio contrarii* type of expressions of the source texts as a rhetorical means worth retaining in their translations. These adverbials are stylistically marked and are used as embellishments. The numerous examples of such constructions in these two texts point to genre-based variation. The results also suggest that the litotes-type adverbials are early rather than late, and Mercian rather than West Saxon.

The number of occurrences of the five negators in polar answers, polar-alternative questions and as reaction signals is low in the corpus. However, my article shows certain patterns in which the negators occur in the data. The results indicate that the adverb *na*, which has given Present-Day English *no* in answers, occurs in responses to polar questions and in polar-alternative questions. My fourth article provides evidence of constructions that can be labelled as instances of negative raising. Such constructions may be explained by referring to pragmatic factors. Negative raising seems to be used as a hedge to lessen the impact of an opinion in dialogues and conversations in which they typically occur. This conclusion is based on my observations on the verb *wenan* (to fancy, imagine, believe, think, expect, hope, fear). It could be tested in a separate study that would also include other verbs denoting belief and assumption.

My approach, which combines both descriptive and quantitative analysis of data drawn from a sufficiently large corpus proved to be beneficial in providing answers to the research questions. There is, of course, room for more work. The bulk of the studies in the present thesis focuses on constituent negation, contrary to the mainstream research into negation in Old English, which has mainly dealt with the particle *ne* and sentential negation. The extension of the notion of negation to subclausal units opens up new perspectives for the study of Old English negation. 

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