

# Abstract for Conference Booklet

Agnes Jäger & Doris Penka

Universität Frankfurt am Main & Universität Tübingen

jaeger@lingua.uni-frankfurt.de & d.penka@uni-tuebingen.de

## Marking sentential negation in German: Evidence from diachronic data

The different ways in which languages mark sentential negation and possible theoretic explanations for this divergence have recently received great attention by linguists. The most basic distinction is whether a language exhibits negative concord (NC), i.e. one semantic negation is marked by several ‘negative’ constituents in the clause, as in the Polish example (1).

*Nikt nie uderzył nigogo.* (Polish)  
n-person<sub>NEG</sub> hit.3.SG n-person  
‘Nobody hit anybody.’

In contrast, in Modern Standard German (MSG), just as in Standard English, sentential negation is marked either by the negative particle *nicht* or a negative indefinite, but not both.

- a. *Niemand kam.* (MSG)  
n-person came  
‘Noone came.’
- b. *Er kam nicht.*  
he came<sub>NEG</sub>  
‘He didn’t come’
- c. *Niemand kam nicht.*  
n-person came<sub>NEG</sub>  
\*‘Noone came.’  
‘Noone didn’t come.’ (= Everyone came.)

While recent work on the different ways sentential negation is marked has focused on synchronic data (a.o. Haegeman, 1995; Zeijlstra, 2004; Penka 2007), in this talk, we take into account diachronic data from an extensive corpus study of several Old High German (OHG) and Middle High German (MHG) texts in order to analyze the development of German. While MSG does not exhibit NC, the previous stages of

OHG and MHG were NC-languages. Interestingly, these diachronic stages of German show a type of NC not previously discussed in the literature.

In OHG, sentential negation is generally marked by the negation particle *ni*, which cliticizes to the finite verb. In clauses involving an indefinite expression, it can additionally be marked by a negative indefinite, cf. (3), thus employing an NC-structure.

*thes man nihéin íó gimáh in uuorolti ér ni gisah.* (OHG)  
 that-GEN man n-DET ever thing in world before NEG saw  
 ‘of which nobody had ever seen anything in the world before’ (Otfrid I, 9, 32)

In contrast to NC-languages like Polish (cf. (1) above), however, negation in OHG is not marked on all indefinites in the scope of negation, but generally only on one, cf. (3). Several negative indefinites co-occurring under an NC-interpretation in one clause are virtually unattested (see Jäger, 2006). The same holds for the subsequent stage of MHG. MHG occasionally employs a bipartite negative marker, the clitic *ne/en* and the adverbial *niht*, the predecessor of Modern German *nicht*, as in (4).

*er en-kvnd-ez niht verenden* (MHG)  
 he NEG-could-it NEG accomplish  
 ‘He could not accomplish it’ (Nibelungenlied (A) III 96, 4)

In most cases, *niht* is in fact already used without *ne/en*. Crucially, while negative indefinites can co-occur with the negative clitic *ne/en*, they generally do not co-occur with the negative particle *niht* - the only noteworthy exception being the determiner *kein*, which can, however, be shown to still be in transition from NPI to negative indefinite (‘any’ > ‘no’).

We propose the following analysis for the negation system of German in its different diachronic stages: Following the analysis of NC in Zeijlstra (2004), we assume that negative indefinites in NC-languages are semantically non-negative. Rather, they serve as morpho-syntactic markers of sentential negation, and have to be licensed by a semantic negation, which may be realized covertly. Moreover, we argue that the negation particle *ni* in OHG is also semantically non-negative. Consequently, the ‘real’ bearer of sentential negation in OHG is an abstract negation operator, in parallel to what Zeijlstra argues to be the case in the Slavic languages. But in contrast to these, an abstract negation operator can license at most one negative indefinite (in addition to the negative clitic *ni*). This state of affairs persists in MHG. But MHG also employs the negative particle *niht*, which we take to constitute a semantic negation. While *niht* may license the negative clitic *ne/en*, it cannot license negative indefinites. This closely resembles Standard French, where negative indefinites cannot co-occur with the negative particle *pas* under an NC-reading.

*Personne n' est pas venu.* (Standard French)  
 n-person NEG is NEG come  
 \*‘Noone came.’  
 ‘Noone didn't come.’ (= Everyone came.)

Following Penka's (2007) analysis of French, we assume that negative indefinites are sensitive to whether the semantic negation is expressed overtly or covertly. In French and MHG, negative indefinites can only be licensed by a covert negation, but not by a negative particle denoting negation.

From this negation system, it is not a big step to the non-NC system found in MSG. Rather than assuming that negative indefinites became inherently negative, we propose that the only change was the disappearance of the additional negative particle on the verb. Apart from that, the negation system is still basically the same as in the previous stages of OHG and MHG: Negative indefinites are semantically non-negative and are obligatorily licensed by an abstract negation operator. Each negative indefinite is connected to an abstract negation. While such an analysis seems at first glance surprising for MSG, it is confirmed by the fact that negative indefinites in MSG give rise to so-called split readings, where the negation and the indefinite take scope independently of each other (see Penka and von Stechow, 2001):

*Du musst **keinen** Schlips tragen.* (MSG)

You must n-DET tie wear

'It is not necessary that you wear a tie.' (salient reading:  $\neg > \text{must} > \exists$ )

Split readings are hard to account for under the assumption that negative indefinites in MSG are inherently negative quantifiers. But their existence follows straightforwardly from our analysis, which reveals a large amount of diachronic continuity throughout the development of the negation system in German.

Overall, the diachronic development of the negation system in German suggests that the transition from an NC to a non-NC language is less dramatic than usually assumed. Thus, our work on negation exemplarily shows how diachronic data can fruitfully serve to supplement synchronic data in arriving at an adequate linguistic typology and theory.

## References

- Haegeman, L. (1995). *The Syntax of Negation*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Jäger, A. (2006). *History of German negation*. PhD Dissertation, Universität Jena.
- Penka, D. and A. v. Stechow (2001). Negative Indefinita unter Modalverben. In R. Müller and M. Reis, eds., *Modalität und Modalverben im Deutschen*. Linguistische Berichte, Sonderheft 9, Helmut Buske Verlag, Hamburg, pp. 263-286.
- Penka, D. (2007). *Negative Indefinites*. PhD Dissertation, Universität Tübingen.
- Zeijlstra, H. (2004). *Sentential Negation and Negative Concord*. LOT publications, Utrecht.