

The syntax of ‘nothing’ in Old English

While Jespersen’s cycle (*ne* > *ne...not* > *not*) proceeds apace only in Middle English, it clearly has its roots in the reanalysis of the indefinite pronoun *nāwiht* ‘nothing’ as a non-argument (adverb) in Old English (two-stage reanalysis with DP > AP before later integration into the negative system proper as Spec, NegP). However, relatively few clear-cut instances of non-argument use of *nāwiht* occur at that stage. As in other languages therefore, we need to explain how the adverbial negator that formed the basis for ‘incipient Jespersen’s cycle’ arose in the first place. This paper will address this problem by examining the possible pathways of change, including consideration of the possible bridging contexts for this reanalysis, using as data all instances of *nāwiht* in the York Corpus of Old English (YCOE).

Two aspects of the problem will be considered: first, it will be suggested that, crosslinguistically, contexts with ambiguous argument structure provide a favourable context for the emergence of new adverbial negators. In particular, optionally transitive verbs (‘eat nothing’ > ‘eat not’) and predicates permitting optional extent arguments (e.g. ‘succeed nothing’ > ‘succeed not’ or ‘care nothing’ > ‘care not’) present difficulties for successful acquisition of the nominal status of negative indefinite pronoun:

- (1) & he nowiht fromade in his lare
and he nothing succeed.PAST.3SG in his teaching
‘and he had no success in his teaching’ (YCOE, cobede)

Around 23% of instances of *nāwiht* in the YCOE fall into these categories, suggesting ample opportunities for acquisition failure. The suggestion that new negators emerge from extent arguments also provides an explanation for why they are always emphatic or pragmatically marked: extent arguments are inherently linked to scales, and this feature is carried over into their new uses as negative adverbs.

Secondly, *nāwiht* is often (around 29% of tokens) used as a specifier of adjectives and adverbs, either with negative concord and narrow-focus interpretation as in (2), or without negative concord as in (3), in which case a constituent negation interpretation results.

- (2) ne dorste he [_{AP} nawuht hrædlice] ut of ðære ceastre faran...
NEG dared he nothing quickly out of the city go.INF
‘He didn’t dare go at all quickly out of the city...’ (YCOE, cocura)
- (3) þæt mynster wæs ... getimbred [_{AP} noht micle] ær from Hegiu
the monastery was built nothing much before by Hegiu
‘The monastery was built not long before by Hegiu’ (YCOE, cobede)

Defending the specifier analysis, it will be argued that this represents a development unconnected to Jespersen’s cycle, but one which is common in Germanic, with parallels in Present-day English *nothing* (*She is nothing like her brother*) and *no* (*She is no better than her brother*). Parallels both within Old English to other constituent-like negators that behave in this way (*nā* and *n(e)alles*) and to the other early Germanic languages (e.g. Old High German *nalles*) suggest that this represents the extension or retention of an existing system for constituent and narrow-focus negation in Germanic. A reanalysis of a negative indefinite next to an adjective as forming a constituent with that adjective presents a plausible origin for this structure, schematically:

- (4) We [VP [VP did nothing] better] today than yesterday. =>
We [VP [VP did] [AP nothing better]] today than yesterday.

Consideration of these two aspects of Old English negation yield insights both into the early development of English negation, but also the extent of the similarities and differences in the pathways of change for negative systems crosslinguistically.