

JESPERSEN'S CYCLE AND THE HISTORY OF GERMAN NEGATION – CHALLENGES FROM A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

In recent years, historical sociolinguists have started to look at developments that are shared by European or 'Western' languages not only from a typological, but also from a sociohistorical point of view (e.g. Deumert and Vandebussche 2003; Vandebussche and Elspaß 2007). In the light of the standardization histories of such languages after the Middle Ages, external factors of language change appear to be more influential than internal factors. The traditional histories of most European languages focus on written language (which is intertwined with the *spread* of the written word, particularly via printed texts) and they are determined by such factors as the rise of standard varieties (entailing a suppression of other languages and varieties, e.g. regional dialects) and the selection and codification of variants (entailing a stigmatization of other variants), which are governed by notions about 'good' and 'bad' language(s). In this paper, we will present and discuss some key developments in the history of New High German against the background of the rise of standard (High) German and the standard language ideology in the German-speaking countries. The case of negation in German will serve as a concrete example to illustrate these developments.

1. Objectives and structure of the paper

In this paper, we will firstly reassess the traditional description of a particular grammatical phenomenon in the light of new data and advances in the field of Historical Sociolinguistics. The phenomenon under scrutiny is polynegation in New High German. The second part of this paper presents some ideas on a view of language history as seen 'from above' and 'from below' respectively. In the third part, some established as well as recent views on the history of negation in German will be portrayed, in particular with respect to the question whether Jespersen's cycle is a model which can adequately account for this history. Part four presents metalinguistic as well as (new) linguistic data from New High German and discusses the possible impact of such data for a reassessment of the history of negation. From there, the concluding section five will look more generally at the value of sociolinguistic approaches for historical linguistics and will plead, in particular, for an acknowledgement of 'oral' varieties in the research on historical grammar and grammatical change.

2. Language history (and the history of New High German) viewed from different angles

Traditional textbooks on the history of German – like textbooks on the history of most other Western languages – are dominated by two notions:

- a teleological approach to language history, cf. the notion of a 'unified German language' and the route metaphor in phrases like "der Weg zur Hochsprache" 'the way to the standard language' (Bach 1965: 468) or "Auf dem Wege zur Sprach-einheit" 'on the way to language unity', "Wege zur Höhe (ca. 1750 bis 1790)" 'routes to the zenith (ca. 1750 to 1790)' (Eggers 1986, chapter titles), and
- the presentation of historical periods of German as (more or less) separate and 'closed systems' (e.g. Roelcke 2009, Speyer 2010).

The first notion (language teleology) has resulted in accounts in which language histories were told as long marches toward uniform *standard* languages. Language history was largely reduced to the study of literary or chancellery language, thus *conceptually written*¹ and *formal* language. For German, language historians suggested – though this is no longer current wisdom – that standard language varieties existed as early as the Early (court of Charlemagne) and the High Middle Ages (Courtly Romance). Luther's contribution in the sixteenth century was equally seen as standing in the long tradition of further refinement of the language, and his mythical position as the father of standard or High German is still commonplace in popular belief and non-specialist account of German language history. As regards the post-reformation period of New High German, in particular since 1650, virtually the only interest of language historians lay with *printed* texts, as these were seen as representing *the* language proper. From a sociolinguistic point of view, the focus on the printed medium often coincided with a focus on the high varieties employed by some privileged groups of the societies, thus minorities in the respective populations. 'Non-standard' variation – let alone language use by *non-elites* – was usually regarded as corrupt and unsuitable for linguistic research. This notion may be termed 'a view from above', and it is strongly influenced by the modern 'standard language ideology' (Milroy and Milroy 1985: 22–23).

The second notion, the idea of uniform language systems in different language periods, has led to a simplistic view of language change. Identifying distinct historical periods such as Old English, Old High German, Middle High German, or Middle Dutch served as a means of coming to terms with the wealth of diverse data from closely related language varieties from a certain period in time, and it thus permitted large-scale comparisons between different groups of varieties from a typological perspective. However, it has long been known that these categorisations are based on simplified data sets (e.g. 'normalised' historical texts in the Lachmann tradition of 'restoring' Middle High German; cf. Fleischer and Schallert 2011: 64–66 for an instructive example of 'supplementing' such texts with additional instances of double negation!). In data sets of this kind, linguistic variation was seen as exceptional and best to be ignored. The standard language ideology, which promoted the idea of invariant languages, is, in our view, fundamentally ill-conceived. The nineteenth-century idea, for instance, – still maintained by

¹ The terms 'conceptually oral language' and 'conceptually written language' refer to Koch's and Oesterreicher's (1985) model of 'language of immediacy' vs. 'language of distance' (*Nähesprache* vs. *Distanzsprache*). In contrast to the dichotomy between the 'written' and the 'spoken' medium, the linguistic conception of a text can be established only relative to prototypical texts of 'immediacy' and prototypical texts of 'distance'. Texts of a particular text type are placed on a continuum between oral and literate, according to a specific combination of communicative parameters, such as 'degree of orality vs. degree of literateness', 'plannedness', 'degree of situational formality' etc. Cf. Oesterreicher (1997) for further explanations of the model in English.

many today – that a fairly uniform Middle High German existed in the Middle Ages was motivated by nationalist historiography (for a critical discussion, cf. Durrell 2000) and the conscious and active disregard of linguistic variation found in contemporary texts. Whilst this practice is no secret to modern scholars, many historical grammars of, say, German are still based on a very limited and, in many instances, artificially standardised set of texts.² Studying language with this type of textual basis will result in a picture of linguistic homogeneity, not borne out by a broader evidence base. This has repercussions for our understanding of language change which, because of the narrow empirical foundation, can look much slicker than it actually was, as we shall argue is the case for the application of Jespersen's cycle to the history of German.

The effects of these two notions and their underlying ideologies are particularly noticeable in the language histories of the most recent periods, which for many modern languages arguably begin roughly in the seventeenth century. Sociolinguistically, the modern period is a particularly interesting period in the histories of languages like English, French, German, Dutch etc., not least because of radical changes in their social history, such as the rising literacy rates, the massive increase and diversification of written language data and, in particular, the effects of standardization processes (cf. Deumert and Vandebussche 2003). Particularly for the modern period, where a wide range of text types is available for scholarly inspection, it would seem to be a strangely narrow enterprise to write language histories solely on the basis of data from historical grammars, which are traditionally based on selected varieties and text types and which do not take into account language-*external* factors.

The modern period thus appears to be an ideal testing ground for the study of language change from a radically new perspective in language historiography, away from a 'view from above' to a 'language history from *below*'. A 'from below' approach has basically two aspects (cf. Elspaß 2005: 3–20, 2007a: 4–5):

Firstly, a 'language history from below' would focus on the language use of larger sections of the population, particularly the *lower classes*, and thus it is a first step to a long overdue consideration of the vast majority of the population in language historiography. From the Early Modern period onwards, these people were not just dialect *speakers*, but increasingly also readers and writers, due to the 'demotization' of the written language after the Middle Ages (Maas 1985) and massive literacy drives in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

² This is true even for the 24th edition of Hermann Paul's Middle High German grammar (Paul 241998), which most contemporary introductions to Middle High German are based upon. The editors' team of the revised 25th edition (Paul 252007) aimed at a consideration of a wider range of text types. The chapter on negation, however, has remained virtually unchanged from previous editions (cf. the editor's note *ibid.*: VII).

Secondly, the concept ‘from below’ calls for a different starting point of the description and explanation of language history. It involves an acknowledgment of those language registers which are basic to human interaction. The point of departure for research would be the concept of ‘*language of immediacy*’ or ‘*conceptual orality*’ (cf. Koch and Oesterreicher 1985), which is prototypically represented by speech in face-to-face-interaction. For obvious reasons, we cannot access spoken data from the time before the twentieth century. A ‘language history from below’ would thus start with metalinguistic data and the analysis of texts which are “as close to speech, and especially vernacular styles, as possible” (Schneider 2002: 71). Such material is perhaps best represented in ego-documents, such as personal letters and diaries (cf. Elspaß 2012 for discussion).

In this paper, some key developments in the history of New High German against the background of the rise of standard (High) German and the standard language ideology in the German-speaking countries will be presented. The case of negation in German will serve as an example to illustrate the effects of such processes on the development of a particular grammatical phenomenon.

As is common with many Germanic languages, language histories traditionally divided German into different historical stages, often in the form of convenient chunks of about three hundred years each. In this line of tradition, the history of German is divided into four stages:

Table 1. Language periods in the history of German (traditional version)

- Old High German (beginning to c. 1050)
- Middle High German (c. 1050 to c. 1350)
- Early New High German (c. 1350 to c. 1650)
- New High German (from c. 1650)

To reflect the significant differences between the language and sociolinguistics of the stage before 1945 and today, Elspaß (2008) suggested a *fifth* period in distinguishing between ‘Middle New High German’ period and ‘Late Middle New High German’ or ‘Contemporary High German’:

Table 2. Language periods in the history of German (revised version)

- Old High German (beginning to c. 1050)
- Middle High German (c. 1050 to c. 1350)
- Early New High German (c. 1350 to c. 1650)
- Middle New High German (c. 1650 to c. 1950)
- Late New High German or Contemporary High German (from c. 1950)

The main difference between the 'Middle New High German' period and 'Late Middle New High German/Contemporary High German' is that in the former the first language of the majority of speakers was a dialect, with the predecessor of modern standard German being restricted to conceptually written texts and higher language registers. For most members of the generations born in the second half of twentieth century Germany and later, a (regionally marked) variety of standard German has become the mother tongue. Thus, whilst in the Middle New High German period, significant numbers of people had been diglossic (with the local dialect being the dominating variety in spoken language), the majority of the population in the German-speaking areas (except for Switzerland) is today *monoglossic*.

Sociolinguistically, we witness two crucial developments which allow an investigation of texts 'from below' in the Middle New High German period:

- First, the number of people who actively and passively were able to take part in written communication rose from about ten per cent at the beginning to almost hundred per cent at the end of this period (Grosse et al. 1989: 12). For nineteenth-century German, for instance, we have at our disposal texts not only from the elite, but from *all* strata of the society – even from the lower classes (cf. Elspaß 2007b).
- Secondly, both the overall number of texts and as well as the range of text types increased significantly during this period – including not only printed, but also handwritten texts, especially private texts which represent 'language of immediacy' or 'conceptual orality'.

The data informing the analysis here (cf. 3) were taken from a corpus of texts containing both features of 'language of immediacy' and texts from different strata of society, or, to be more precise, by educated as well as partially-schooled writers. The corpus consists of 648 private letters by writers from all German speaking countries and regions with a total of 700,000 words. 60 of the 648 letters were written by 25 people (mostly men) with secondary or higher education, and 588 letters by 248 writers – men and women – with primary education only. Most letter writers were in the process of emigrating or had just emigrated (mainly to the US). Several letters were written by relatives or friends of the emigrants at home (cf. Elspaß 2005: 67–72 for details).

3. Conflicting views on a possible adaption of Jespersen's Cycle for the history of negation in German

Negation is a particularly well-researched topic in linguistic analyses, as it exemplifies a concept which demonstrates a direct mapping of propositional logic to human languages, in a way which is difficult to find for other grammatical categories. In the standard varieties of modern Germanic languages, sentential

negation (as opposed to constituent negation) is expressed by a single free morpheme (e.g. *nicht* in German or *not* in English) which negates the central proposition of the sentence. In addition, bound morphemes such as *un-*, *in-*, or *dis-* etc. can co-occur in the same sentence, but following the “laws” of propositional logic, the existence of two negative elements in a sentence are deemed to cancel each other out and result in a positive reading of the sentence:

- 1.a *A win is **not** likely* negative reading
 1.b *A win is **unlikely*** negative reading
 1.c *A win is **not unlikely*** positive reading

In addition to the philosophical interest in the representation of negation in modern standard languages, the history of negation in individual languages has attracted plenty of scholarly interest as languages appear to change in certain predictable ways. Multiple negation – with *negative* reading – is a well-known phenomenon not just of many modern non-standard varieties but also historical stages from all Germanic languages. The belief that a double negative is *wrong* “is perhaps the most widely accepted of all popular convictions about ‘correctness’” (Aitchison 2001: 12; cf. also Cheshire 1998). Most famously, Jespersen’s cycle, proposed some 100 years ago by the Danish Anglicist Otto Jespersen (1917), suggests that there is a linear development between different stages (Figure 1):

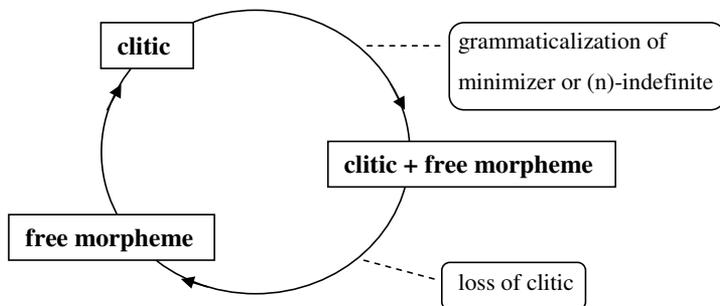


Figure 1. Jespersen’s Cycle (adapted from Jäger 2008: 15)

These three stages have been attested, for example, in the histories of most Germanic languages, where typically the oldest attested stages form negation with a preverbal negative clitic, followed by a stage where the negative reading was optionally strengthened with a supporting word, followed by the grammaticalization of the supporting word as an obligatory negative marker, and finally with the loss of the clitic. In German we would thus find:

Table 3. Phases of negation in German according to Jespersen's Cycle (following Donhauser 1996: 202)

Phase I (OHG):	<i>ni</i>	+	V fin		
Phase II (OHG):	<i>ni</i>	+	V fin	+	<i>(niwiht)</i>
Phase III (MHG):	<i>en/ni</i>	+	V fin	+	<i>niht</i>
Phase IV (ENHG):	<i>(ne)</i>	+	V fin	+	<i>nicht</i>
Phase V ([M]NHG):			V fin	+	<i>nicht</i>

ni/en/ne: negative (clitic) particle

niwiht/ni(c)ht: negative particle (≈ 'nothing')

The traditional view of 'Jespersen's cycle' implies a development from a mononegative construction in Old High German with a negative pre-verbal particle (*ni*) to a double negative system in Middle High German in which the weakened particle is strengthened by an additional post-finite negation particle (*niht* < *niwiht*) and finally back to a mononegative system in New High German. Thus, Jespersen's Cycle describes "the repeated pattern of successive weakening and restrengthening of the negative marker" (Horn [1989: 446], quoted from Lenz 1996: 183). According to Barbara Lenz (1996: 184–5), Jespersen's Cycle can be observed in other Germanic languages such as English, Dutch and Norwegian.

Table 4. Jespersen's Cycle in English, Dutch and Norwegian (traditional view, from Lenz 1996: 184–5)

English	Dutch	Norwegian
OE <i>ic ne sege</i>	OLF <i>en + V</i>	ON <i>ne + V</i>
EME <i>I ne seye not</i>	MD <i>en + V + niet</i>	MN <i>ne + V + eigi/ekki</i>
LME <i>I say not</i>		
NE <i>I do not say</i>	ND <i>V + niet</i>	NN <i>V + ikke</i>
<i>I don't say</i>		
<i>[aj dn sæj]</i>		

The cross-linguistic comparison seems to yield strong evidence for the existence of Jespersen's Cycle in the Germanic languages. It is for the other contributors to this volume to say whether this is still regarded as an adequate model for the history of negation in English, Dutch or French. For German, it is certainly *not* unanimously accepted. Almost as a response to Lenz' article (and published in the same conference volume), Karin Donhauser (1996) casts doubts on the validity of

Jespersen's Cycle for the history of German. She has two main objections. First, she stresses that the assumption that the major periods in German, i. e. Old, Middle and New High German, are characterized either by only mononegation or only polynegation simply ignores the available data. Throughout Old High German texts, for instance, polynegation had always been an option, see example (2) from the Old High German Tatian translation (adopted from Donhauser 1996: 203):

2. *Ther heilant ni gab iru nihhein antuurti* (Tatian 85,3)

'the Saviour NEG gave her NEG-a/one answer'

Donhauser also points to the fact that polynegation may not be acceptable in the standard written variety of contemporary High German, but that it certainly is acceptable, if not common, in non-standard varieties, such as dialects and colloquial German.³ Her objections to the validity of Jespersen's Cycle for German can be further supported by data from Agnes Jäger's study on the *History of German Negation* which demonstrates that in *none* of the three Middle High German texts which she studied, the two-partite negation with the negative particle was "the one dominant pattern to express sentential negation" (Jäger 2008: 120). Similarly, Anne Breitbarth's Middle Low German corpus has only 37.4% of two-partite constructions with 'en...n-word', whereas in 62.4% "n-words are able to mark sentential negation on their own" (Breitbarth and Haegemann 2010: 70).

Donhauser's second objection is that the traditional view of Jespersen's Cycle only focuses on the negation particles *ne/en* and *nicht* and that it does not take into account other means to express negation in German like negation pronouns, such as *niemand* 'nobody', *kein(e/er)* 'no-one', or other negation adverbs, such as *nie* 'never', *nirgends* 'nowhere', *keinesfalls* 'under no circumstances' (Donhauser 1996: 203).

Donhauser's general argument is that Jespersen's Cycle does not adequately describe the history of German negation. Rather, the development may more aptly be described as degrammaticalisation or lexicalisation, in that the abstract feature

³ "Im Nonstandard, in den Dialekten und ebenso im standardsprachnahen gesprochenen Deutsch, sind Mehrfachkennzeichnungen der Negation auch im Neuhochdeutschen möglich, wenn nicht sogar geläufig." (Donhauser 1996: 203). Wellmann (in press) even found as many as 136 instances of double negation in the 7.3 billion words corpus "Deutsches Referenzkorpus", in a corpus of printed texts of contemporary German. In most of these instances, double negation was used to create certain stylistic effects. In some cases, double negation was formally part of a formulaic construction. A prominent example is the slogan "Keine Macht für Niemand!" ('No power to nobody!'), which is known in particular from the title of the 1972 album of a famous German rock group and several books. Lenz (1996: 190), however, only concedes that polynegation is possible in dialects („in einigen regionalen Varianten des Deutschen, wie etwa dem Bairischen und dem Zürichdeutschen"). Cf. footnote 8 for more data from present-day colloquial German.

NEG is moved from syntax to lexicon, where it defines a specific new lexical field.⁴ Thus, polynegation was not a unique (and not even a dominant!) feature of Middle High German syntax, rather it was and remained a structural option throughout the history of German (“eine durchgehend präsente Strukturoption”, *ibid.*).

4. (New) Data from the history of New High German

For our purposes, the important problem with Jespersen's elegant model is that it suggests a linearity of development, while we argue that historical stages are never as discrete as the model would require them to be. It also ignores the sociolinguistic side of the history of German which, we argue, is particularly important for an assessment of the history of negation.⁵ Certainly, systemic changes in language histories occur, and for the case of negation we witness the loss of the proclitic *en* in the medieval stages of Dutch and English. As for German, the grammars of Early New High German attest last occurrences of the two-partite negation in the sixteenth century (Ebert 1993: 426). A new corpus of interrogation records of witch craft trials, however, reveals instances of this type of double negation for the beginning of the seventeenth century (Macha et al. 2005: 86):

3. *O ich en Kan nicht. ... ichn Kan nicht. ... ich nichten weiß ... ich en kan nicht* (Minden 1614, 60, 63, 65, 69; our emphasis)

“O I NEG can NOT ... I NEG-can NOT ... I NOT-NEG know ... I NEG can NOT”

But crucially, the perceived loss of the (emphatic) negative reading of other types of multiple or polynegation (Jespersen's stage 3) only occurred in the respective *written* languages, due to external, sociolinguistic factors, namely the prescriptive influence of grammarians in the eighteenth century. No such systemic changes occurred in oral varieties, which had not been subjected to the interference of prescriptivists. These changes in the written languages did not coincide with the beginnings of grammar writings: in the first German grammars from the 1570s, double negation was presented as a “legitimate, sometimes even positive [...] rule of German” (Langer 2001: 167). However, influenced by rationalist thinking, late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century grammarians considered double negatives as ungrammatical and succeeded in creating the myth that such constructions are illogical (*ibid.*: 171–2). From the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries we find

⁴ “das abstrakte Merkmal NEG verlagert sich von der Syntax in das Lexikon und definiert dort ein Wortfeld, das in einer spezifischen Weise wortartübergreifend organisiert ist” (Donhauser 1996: 206).

⁵ Similarly Jäger's erudite study on the history of negation in German (2008) excludes sociolinguistic concerns and, somewhat surprisingly, focuses almost exclusively on data pre-1500.

examples where grammarians note that multiple negation causes emphatic negative reading – rather than cancelling each other out and yielding positive reading:

4. Duae negationes apud Germanus [!] non affirmant, sed magis negant: vt *Es ist keiner unter denen nicht, der etwas guets thuet*. (Ölinger [1574: 192], quoted in Langer 2001: 161; our emphasis)

‘amongst the Germans, two negations do not affirm, but negate more strongly, e.g. *there is not noone amongst those, who contributes anything good.*’

5. Zwey zusammen gesetzte Verneinungswörter verneinen noch härter, wie auch bey den Griechen vnd Franzosen / als: *Es sol der Guldenen bulle nichts nicht benommen und abgebrochen seyn*. (Girbert [1653: tab. LXIV], as quoted in Langer 2001: 163; our emphasis)

‘two conjoined negative words negate even harder, as it is the case amongst the Greeks and the French, as in: *nothing should not be taken from the Golden Bull.*’

And in the seventeenth century we continue to find this usage in texts written by grammarians and language teachers on grammar, e.g. in Johannes Angelus Sumaran’s discussion of Italian letters:

6. *k* **Kein** *k* haben sie gar **nit** / sondern anstatt deß *k*, brauchen sie das *ch* nemblich / *che cosa*, liß *ke cosa* (Sumaran [1623: 26], as quoted in Langer 2001: 162; our emphasis)

‘*k* – no *k* do they have not, but instead of the *k*, they use *ch*, *che cosa*, pronounced *ke cosa*.’

However, seventeenth-century grammarians seem to have become somewhat sensitive towards the use of polynegation. Justus Georg Schottelius, for instance, eliminated “a handful of double negatives” in his 1663 grammar (*Ausführliche Arbeit Von der Teutschen HauptSprache*) compared to his earlier grammar (*Teutsche Sprachkunst*) from 1641, but “still listed double negatives of the form *mit nichten nicht* as an acceptable emphatic form of negation in the grammar of 1663” (McLelland 2011: 293).

From the late seventeenth century we find the first comments by grammarians rejecting this usage but, as Carl Friedrich Aichinger’s comment shows, it was still in use in the eighteenth century:

7. Die Teutschen brauchen offft, wie die Griechen und Franzosen zwo Verneinungen, ohne daß eine Bejahung draus wird. (Aichinger [1754: 457], as quoted in Langer 2001: 168)

‘The Germans frequently use, just like the Greeks and French, two negations, without this resulting in affirmative reading.’

The famous eighteenth-century grammarian Johann Christoph Gottsched simply stated that this use – though acceptable in the past – was old-fashioned in his time and ought to be abolished from good writing (Gottsched [1759], as quoted in Langer 2001: 169), and after Gottsched, no grammarian of (written) German proposed that two negative elements in a clause yielded emphatic negative reading.⁶ The nineteenth-century grammarian Heinrich August Schötensack (1856: 557), for example, claimed that New High German had adopted the ‘law’ in Latin grammar that a double negative makes a positive, i. e. an affirmative statement. Such references to language models as ideal norms to be followed are well-known from prescriptive grammars, not just of German but also, e.g., English (cf. Tiekens-Boon van Ostade et al. 1998). As we saw above, however, polynegation existed and was also noted by German grammarians as existing in Ancient Greek and French, yet the model of Latin – where double negation caused positive reading – was clearly seen to be superior and to be followed instead.

How did these stigmatisations affect language use? According to standard textbooks on the history of German, double negation had virtually vanished from written German by the beginning of the eighteenth century (Admoni 1990: 187). This is certainly true for formal and *printed* texts, and its disappearance from such texts is possibly due to an almost systematic stigmatisation of double and polynegation by eighteenth century grammarians and schoolmasters (cf. Davies and Langer 2006: 246–251). But had the construction died out from spoken German? As noted earlier, in a number of dialects and non-standard supra-regional varieties of German – as in English (Cheshire 1998), Flemish (Breitbarth and Haegemann 2010), and Low German (cf. e.g. Lindow et al. 1998: 284–5, Reershemius 2004: 76) – and even in colloquial standard German polynegation never ceased to exist. And the fact that a grammarian and grammar school teacher like Schötensack felt the need to issue a ban on double negatives in his nineteenth-century grammar would clearly suggest that he encountered the construction in everyday spoken and probably even written language.

⁶ Note that some grammarians as early as Stieler ([1691], as quoted in Langer 2001: 165) offered a more differentiated view on different types of polynegation which ought to be used sparingly and according to good judgement (“nach dem Gehörurteil”). Stieler further reports that whilst the use of two separate negative words (= free morphemes) yields emphatic negative reading, this is not the case where one of the negative elements is a bound morpheme. Examples such as *Es ist nicht unbillig* have positive reading and sound milder (“klinget gelinder”) than *Es ist billig* (and thus echoing its modern usage today).

In this context, it is worth noting that even the ‘best authors’ of German literature, classical writers such as Schiller, Goethe and other eighteenth and nineteenth-century writers employed double negatives repeatedly in their works, as they seem to have appreciated the stylistic nuances that the use of double negatives can create (Paul 1920: 334). Wladimir Admoni, one of the leading experts on the historical syntax of German, provides us with a brief but revealing comment on double negatives in nineteenth-century German. In his textbook of 1990, he writes that ‘in modal-affirmative contexts, double negation only occurs in the representation of *coarser types of colloquial language*’ (ibid.: 225, our emphasis).⁷ Here the existence of double negatives is denied on purely stylistic grounds, or in other words, we are confronted with the elitist view that non-standard varieties do not have a legitimate place in the history of language and language change (cf. Milroy 1999: 30–1).

These observations are important in our assessment of the applicability of Jespersen’s cycle, which, as we argue, does not explain the lack of change in non-standard varieties where multiple negation with negative reading continues to survive, contrary to Jespersen’s predictions. We argue that the data used in previous accounts of the systemic history of negation is only able to paint such a picture because a significant body of other data has largely been ignored by academic research, in particular that of oral varieties and registers. In the following, we will try to provide a better and more comprehensive view of the actual range of grammatical possibilities and variants of the language at the time by extending the traditional corpus of German texts to include data from ‘language of immediacy’.

In Elspaß’s (2005) corpus of nineteenth-century emigrant letters, we find – in our view unsurprisingly – a number of examples with multiple negative elements. In some of these examples we encounter a use of negation identical to that in written German, i. e. where two negative elements cancel each other out and their use is motivated by stylistic consideration:

8. *Meine Lieben, es ist nicht unmöglich daß dieses mein letztes Schreiben ist* (letter by Friedrich Martens, 15.06.1861, from Elspaß 2005)

‘My dears, it is **not impossible** that this is my last letter.’

However, the majority of instances of multiple negation are used to express emphatic negative reading, even though it has been assumed (by Admoni 1990 and others) to have disappeared from written German by then:

⁷ ‘Im modal-affirmativen Bereich des Satzes kommt die doppelte Negation nur bei der Wiedergabe der größeren Umgangssprache vor.’

9. *er habe ihr **nih**e das Heirathen **nicht** versprochen.* (letter by Friedrich Schano [26.02.1853], from Elspaß 2005)
 “he has her **never** the marriage **not** promised”
 ‘He has never promised to marry her.’
10. *sag ja zu **nimant** **nichts** weil es braucht nimant was wissen* (letter by Johann Händler [19.02./03.1924], from Elspaß 2005)
 “say MOD-PART to **nobody** **nothing** because it-needs nobody something know”
 ‘Just don’t tell anybody, because that’s none of their business.’

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of polynegative constructions with this reading in letters by writers with only basic school education (as documented in Elspaß 2005: 539–57). It shows a particularly strong use in the south of Germany. A quarter of the writers (20 out of 77) from the Upper German dialect regions used double negatives at least once in their letters, whereas only 8 out of 84 writers from the Central German and 4 out of 96 writers from the Low German dialect regions used such constructions. Note that the texts are not written in dialect, as even a fleeting glance over the examples 9 to 12 shows; this also explains why the texts from the north yield so few instances of polynegation despite the fact that polynegation is an established and frequent construction of Low German, the dialect of the north (Lindow et al. 1998: 284–5).⁸ Instead, the writers of the letters aimed at what they must have considered to be ‘proper’ written German – the target variety of their schooling – albeit in an informal register, as their letters were written to family and friends.

⁸ The data from figure 2 indicating a regional preference of the use of double negation can be supported by present-day data from the ‘Atlas of colloquial German’ (“Atlas zur deutschen Alltagssprache”, cf. Elspaß and Möller 2003), acquired 2005/06 from 2626 informants from 399 towns in the German-speaking countries. Two maps show that nearly all towns for which the informants suggested that the use of double negation is ‘typical’ are situated in the Upper German dialect region, cf. http://www.atlas-alltagssprache.de/runde_3/f07f_f08a/ [14/2/2012].

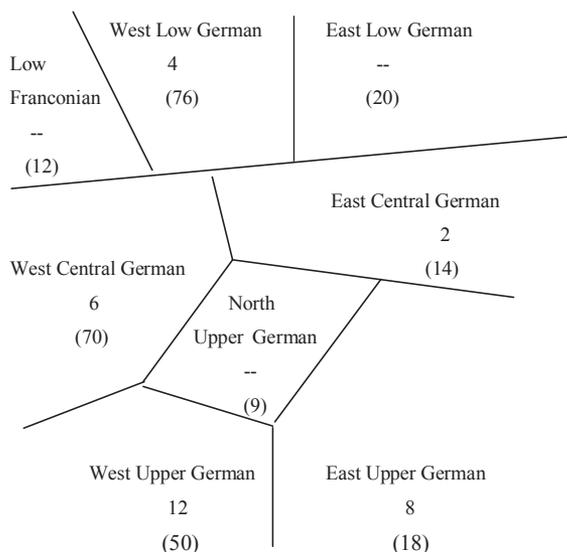


Figure 2. (Raw) number of 19th century letter writers using double negatives. (Numbers in brackets give the total number of letters from the respective area.)

Most of the 43 instances of double negatives in the letter corpus are of the type *kein(-) + nicht*, as in examples (11) and (12).⁹

11. *kein geistiges Getränk darf nicht verkauft werden* (letter by Katharina Hinterer [31.07.1887], from Elspaß 2005)

“no spirituous liquid is allowed not sold-to-be”

‘It is not allowed to sell spirits.’

12. *es sind nur Eichen und Pappel kein Fichten oder Tannen Baum ist hier nicht* (letter by Matthias Gamsjäger [09.12.1896], from Elspaß 2005)

“there are only oaks and poplars no spruce or pine tree is here not”

‘There are only oak trees and poplars. No spruce or pine tree is/can be found here.’

⁹ *kein(-) + nicht* is also the most widely used type of double negation in Wellmann’s (in press) study of present day standard German.

In general, ten different types of double negatives can be found in the letter corpus, which can – in Donhauser's terms – be described as part of the lexical field that expresses negation in Middle New High German (Table 5):

Table 5. Types of double negatives in a nineteenth-century letter corpus (Elspaß 2005)

<i>noch</i>	<i>weder noch</i>	<i>kein(-)</i>	<i>nicht</i>
<i>nie(mals)</i>	<i>kein(-)</i>	<i>kein(-)</i>	<i>nichts</i>
<i>nie</i>	<i>nicht</i>	<i>kein(-)</i>	<i>niemand</i>
<i>niemand</i>	<i>nichts</i>	<i>kein(-)</i>	<i>kein(-)</i>
<i>niemand</i>	<i>kein(-)</i>	<i>nicht (meh)r</i>	<i>nicht</i>

Quantitatively, polynegation has never been a very prominent construction. Whereas in the Early New High German period (1350–1650), “in certain regions, up to 35% of negative sentences contained more than one negative marker”, by the early seventeenth century, the highest frequency of polynegation was a mere 1.3% in East Central German (Davies and Langer 2006: 242, following Pensel 1976). Similarly, a recent study by Saskia Grandel (2011) on late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century interrogation records shows that only 2.4% (36 instances) of negative sentences contained double negation (with texts from Eastern Upper German again showing the highest proportion, i. e. 4.4%, cf. *ibid.*: 29).¹⁰ The 43 instances of double or multiple negation in the nineteenth-century letters (entirely documented in Elspaß 2005: 277–80) constitute less than 1% of the c. 5,850 instances of negation in the whole corpus. But these numbers should not be mistaken for an indicator of marginality of these constructions. As they were frequently (or even mostly) used for emphasis, they were the marked rather than the default case. Thus, to achieve certain stylistic effects, it seems quite natural that a speaker or writer who had double negation in his or her linguistic repertoire would use it sparsely. In the light of the main argument of our paper it is important to note that multiple negation continuously belonged to this repertoire and that it was and still is a structural option of many native speakers of German.

¹⁰ Grandel analysed 56 interrogation records of witch trials from Macha et al. (2005). 16 of them (28.6%) contained at least one case of double negation. Interestingly, in 28 out of the 36 instances, double negation appeared in the documentation of the (voluntary or forced) statements of the accused, see example 3 above. This may be considered as further evidence for the preference of double negation in more ‘oral’ language registers in Middle New High German.

4. Conclusion

Recent claims by researchers like Donhauser (1996) that Jespersen's cycle cannot be as readily applied to the history of German as the model would require is corroborated by new evidence from 'oral' text types like interrogation records and private-letter correspondence. The important stage in Jespersen's prediction where a period of multiple negation is followed by a stage of mononegation is not borne out by the German data which have come to light in (historical) sociolinguistic research and, in particular, in a view of German language history 'from below'. This poses important questions not just for our understanding of the grammatical developments of negation but also the historiography of languages in general. As, among others, Ágel (2003), Reichmann (2005, for German) and Bex and Watts (1999, for English) have shown, textbook accounts of language history are frequently biased by a focus on standard languages, sketching the history of, say, German or English, as an almost teleological path from the 'confused' variability of the Middle Ages to the successful creation of a prestige language norm over the centuries. We have sought here to provide further support for a much more differentiated view of language history which departs from the monolithic perspective to embrace the whole range of language varieties. In particular, an adequate language history needs to acknowledge the role of non-standard varieties and oral language registers much more than has previously been the case.

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