Grammaticalization and Jespersen’s cycle of Negation

**Grammaticalization Theory (Heine, Kutev 2002: 2)**

Grammaticalization describes the development from lexical forms to grammatical forms and from grammatical to even more grammatical forms. It is concerned with the genesis and the development of grammatical forms, and its primary goal is to describe how grammatical forms and constructions arise and develop through space and time and to explain why the structures are the way they are.

**Four mechanisms of grammaticalization:**
1. Desemanticization (or “semantic bleaching”) - loss in meaning content
2. Extension or context generalization – use in new contexts
3. Decategorization – loss in morphosyntactic properties characteristic of lexical or other less grammatical forms
4. Erosion or “phonetic reduction” - loss in phonetic substance

OE:  ne án wiht (nicht + ein + Wicht (= Mensch))
OE  ne + Verb + ne án wiht
ME:  ne + Verb + naught / nought
ModE:  en + Verb + not

**Jespersen’s 1917 Negative Cycle**

**Definition of Jespersen’s Cycle:** (Blake, 1988: 90)

Jespersen’s Cycle: (Blake, 1988: 90)

- All languages have a tendency to place the negative element early in the sentence, though it will not necessarily, or even usually, carry the principal stress.
- The absence of stress can result in this element becoming weak. When that occurs, the negation may be strengthened by the addition of a further negative element later in the sentence, and this later element may in time completely replace the original one. This process of weakening and strengthening can commence again.

1. “Classic” Old English: ne, always preceding the finite verb
2. Late Old English and throughout the Middle period: ne strengthened by not; finite verbs placed between ne and not
3. Beginning in the Late Middle English period: ne in the ne... not periphrastic negation is commonly left unexpressed; finite verbs placed in front of not
4. Beginning in the 15th century: two parallel alternatives arise in the domain of “lexical” verbs:
   - The inflected lexical verb follows not (this type, which was never very frequent, disappears in the second half of the 18th century)
   - The uninflected lexical verb follows not while a finite form of the dummy verb do precedes not (survives as the only way of marking clausal negation with lexical verbs; not develops an enclitic form -n't from around 1600)

**Other aspects of Jespersen’s Cycle**

Frens Vossen and Johan van der Auwera (2014: 52-53) found out, that other languages, meaning austronesian languages, further developed their negation system by expanding to triple negation. Let’s look for example at the development of negation in Aarschot dialects.

- **Single** en
- **Double** en... niet
- **Single or Double** niet or en... niet... niet
- **Double or Triple** niet... niet or en... niet... niet

**Languages that don’t really follow Jespersen’s Theory**

English and French both follow Jespersen’s Theory of Negation and both are at the same stage. But there are other languages that don’t follow his theory whose development stop at a certain stage.

The Italian and the Spanish language stopped developing at Stage 1. (Beukema 1999: 11)

- **Italian** Gianni no parla. (Gianni doesn’t speak.)
- **Spanish** No hablo español. (I don’t speak spanish.)

German for example stopped at Stage 3. (Jespersen 1917: 10)

Ich singe nicht. (I don’t sing.)


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Controversy about “I not say.”

There is a discussion among linguists whether the negation in the manner of “I not say.” developed due to Jespersen’s Cycle or whether it was a trait of a poets’ language.

Shakespeare and Jonson used this kind of negation frequently, but it was not only part of their emphatic and poetic language. It was also a characteristic of the spoken language in everyday situations at that time.

Another proof for “I not say.” being part of the negational development can be seen, when looking at children learning French as their mother tongue. This kind of negational pattern is short lived and only lasts for about a month. In English History it was also a relatively short period, being a pattern only used in the 16th and 17th century. (Beukema 1999: 13-17)

English | French
--- | ---
Ic ne sege. | Je ne di
2. Ic sey ne not. | Je ne dis (pas)
3. I say not. | Je ne dis pas (standard written French)
4.1. I do not say. | Je dis pas (colloquial French)
4.2. I don’t say. | “I don’t say.”

**Figure 1:** Comparing the development of negation in the English and French Language.