

Introduction to the special issue: “Jespersen revisited: Negation in Romance and beyond”



This special issue of LINGUA assembles five selected papers presented at the conference “Negation and Clitics in Romance” (University of Zurich, February 24th and 25th 2012) which focus on diachronic variation in the expression of (sentential) negation, widely known as the *Jespersen cycle*. The volume contains one paper on Italo-Romance, two on French, and two on Dutch, which ensures a certain comparative aspect.

The morphological exponents of sentential negation are one of the most prominent examples of “cycles” in the diachrony of human languages (see e.g. [van Gelderen, 2009, 2011](#)). Linguistic cycles are defined, in general, as linguistic changes “where a phrase or a word gradually disappears and is replaced by a new linguistic item” (cf. [van Gelderen, 2009:2](#)). The so called *Jespersen cycle*, named after the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen³ (cf. [Jespersen, 1917, 1924](#)), describes the evolution of sentential negation as it has taken place or is currently taking place in many Indo-European languages such as English, French (cf. [Larrivée and Ingham, 2011](#)), and German (cf. [Jäger, 2008](#)) as well as other Romance, Germanic, and Slavic varieties (negative cycles have been described e.g. for Russian, cf. [Tsurska, 2009](#), and Afrikaans, cf. [Biberauer, 2009](#)).

The Jespersen cycle involves the phonetic weakening of a preverbal negative marker, which tends to be doubled by a second postverbal element (such as Latin/French PASSUM > *pas* ‘step’, MICAM > *mie* ‘crumb’, GUTTAM > *goutte* ‘drop’ or PUNCTUM > *point* ‘point’). These items, called *minimizers*, express small quantities and are seen initially as reinforcements of the first negative marker. Later on, they acquire an independent negative meaning and express sentential negation, first in co-occurrence with the former negative, and then alone, as the former negative is first cliticized and then lost in most cases.

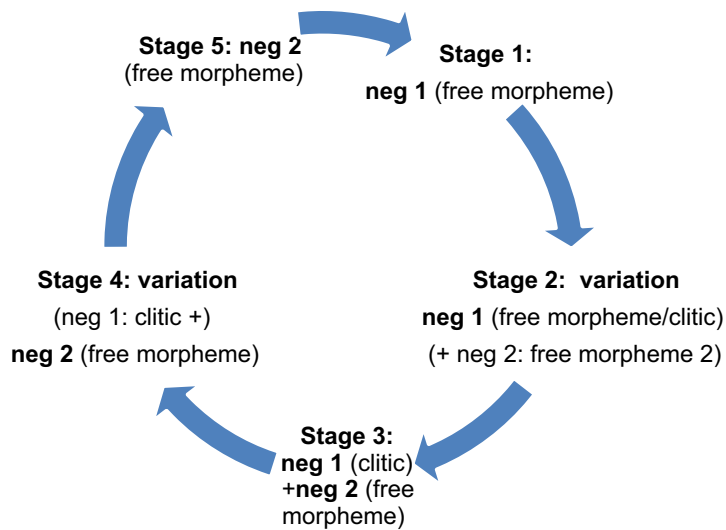
In light of some recent descriptions of the negative cycle (cf. [van der Auwera, 2010:79](#); [Jäger, 2008:15](#)), [Jespersen’s \(1924\)](#) original examples from French, English and German (cf. [Jespersen, 1992\[1924\]:479–480](#)) in (1) can be described as part of a five-stage cycle, as shown in (2) and (3).

(1) [Jespersen’s \(1992\[1924\]:479–480\)](#) examples from French, English and German

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
Latin/French	<i>jeo ne di</i>	variation	<i>je ne dis pas</i>	variation	<i>je dis pas</i>
German	<i>nisagu</i>		<i>ih ensage niht</i>		<i>ich sage nicht</i>
English	<i>ic ne secge</i>		<i>i ne seye not</i>		<i>i say not</i>
	I NEG say		I NEG say NEG		I say NEG
	‘I do not say’		‘I do not say’		‘I do not say’

³ Otto Jespersen was neither the first nor the only early researcher investigating this kind of grammaticalisation phenomena. Also the Egyptologist Alan Gardiner (cf. [Gardiner, 1904](#)), Antoine Meillet (cf. [Meillet, 1912](#)) and the Flemish dialectologist Edgard Blancquaert (cf. [Blancquaert, 1923](#)) investigated this kind of language change.

(2) The Jespersen cycle in five stages

(3) The evolution of French negation particles according to a five-stage Jespersen cycle⁴

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
Our 5 stages	<i>non</i> <i>ne</i>	<i>ne</i> <i>ne...pas</i>	<i>ne</i> <i>ne...pas</i> <i>pas</i>	<i>ne...pas</i> <i>pas</i>	<i>pas</i>
Jespersen's 3 stages	<i>jeo ne di</i>		<i>je ne dis pas</i>		<i>je dis pas</i>

Following [van der Auwera \(2009\)](#) and many other recent descriptions of the Jespersen cycle, we choose to illustrate not only the three allegedly static stages of the cycle (1, 3, and 5), but also those stages of linguistic variation (2 and 4) that allow the change to take place (cf. [van der Auwera, 2010:79](#); [Völker, 2003:103–127](#) for a discussion).

Some recent works challenge the cyclic view of negation adopted here. [Breitbarth \(2009\)](#), for example, argues that the Jespersen cycle in West Germanic can be described in terms of two simultaneous reanalyses: while the former negative marker is reanalyzed as a polarity element, an independent reinforcer becomes the new negative marker. [Chatzoupoulou \(2013:36\)](#) attempts to redefine the Jespersen cycle in semantic terms as the fluctuation between intensified and non-intensified negation, in order to capture languages with a different morpho-syntactic makeup of negation (such as the Modern Greek negator *dhen* 'not', which is based on the intensified but not discontinuous negative indefinite *udhén* 'nothing'). [Larrivée \(2011\)](#) prefers the broad notion of "pathways of change" ([Larrivée, 2011:1](#)) rather than a *cycle* for the changing morphology of negation in many languages, since most empirically documented changes do not fit the picture of "an orderly movement from preverbal to postverbal negative marking and back" ([Larrivée, 2011:2](#)). Negative polarity and negative uses of certain items can co-exist for a long time and change is not necessarily unidirectional. From this perspective, even the evolution of French sentential negation stays "largely speculative" ([Larrivée, 2011:11](#)), as the presumed evolution of *pas*, *point*, and *mie* from positive elements to 'measure phrases' (as in *je ne marche pas* 'I do not walk a step') and subsequently to negative polarity items is hard to empirically prove by careful analyzes of the available historical data (see also Grive-Smith 2010 for more empirical evidence).⁵

Despite the undeniable weaknesses of the Jespersen cycle as a cross linguistic concept which may induce too strong generalizations, it can be seen as a powerful metaphor that provides a very helpful framework for the structured

⁴ For Latin, [Jespersen \(1992 \[1924\]\)](#) notes the forms *ne dico* and *non dico* as preliminary stages, adding that the former was limited to some verb forms such as *nescio* 'I do not know', *nequeo* 'I cannot' and *nolo* 'I do not want'. In all other cases we find, according to [Jespersen \(1992 \[1924\]:479\)](#), *ne* reinforced by *oenum*, 'thing'; *ne-oenum* giving rise to the Latin form *NON*, which can be seen as a preliminary negative cycle.

⁵ [Möhren \(1980\)](#) gives many other small quantity expressions in Old French that do not go on to develop an autonomous negative meaning.

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