

The Middle Dutch negative clitic: Status, position and disappearance

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Abstract

The Middle Dutch negative clitic *en/ne* disappeared from standard Dutch in the 17th and 18th centuries (in Flemish dialects it is still around). The factors favoring the deletion of the clitic in the initial stages of this change have been well-studied (cf. [van der Horst and van der Wal, 1979](#); [de Haan and Weerman, 1984](#); [Burrige, 1993](#); [Hoeksema, 1997](#); [Zeijlstra, 2004](#); [Postma and Bennis, 2006](#); [Breitbarth, 2009](#)), and show interaction of syntactic with phonological factors. The negative clitic is syntactically a proclitic on the finite verb, but phonologically an enclitic, which creates problems in V1 contexts (questions, conditionals and imperatives), precisely the contexts where *ne*-drop is most frequent. In the present paper, using a large database of occurrences from 1200 to 1800 covering most of the Dutch-speaking regions, we go over the evidence for this account, and look at some complications (some texts have phonological as well as syntactic proclisis when the clitic element is *ne*, rather than *en*) and refinements (difference between *niet* 'not' and n-words). Alongside factors favoring deletion, there are also factors favoring retention to consider, especially for the later periods (16th–18th centuries). In particular string adjacency of *niet* + *en* turns out to matter greatly in preventing deletion of the clitic element. As a result, we see mostly SOV-clauses retaining clitics. We argue that the adjacency effect is an interface effect, as a result of syntactic chunking: reanalysis of a frequently recurring string as a unit. Both types of effect, V1, and string adjacency in SOV-clauses, are still reflected in dialect patterns in the SAND atlas ([Barbiers et al., 2008](#)): SOV clauses with clitic negation are more wide-spread in Belgium than main clauses, and V2 main clauses with clitic negation in turn are more wide-spread than V1 clauses. The main *new* findings of this paper are (1) differences between *niet* and n-words, and (2) the importance of adjacency in accounting for the longer retention of clitic negation in SOV contexts. In addition, the paper uses a broader data spectrum (more dialects) and more data points (3800 negative sentences) than previous studies. Two recent theoretical proposals regarding the loss of clitic negation in Dutch ([Zeijlstra, 2004](#); [Breitbarth, 2009](#)) are discussed and criticized. © 2014 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction¹

Middle Dutch had embracing, or bipartite, negation consisting of a clitic element *ne* or *en*, and a negative element, either *niet* 'not' or some n-word, or possibly another negation-like element like focus adverbial *maer* 'but, only' ([Stoett, 1923](#); [van der Horst and van der Wal, 1979](#); [Burrige, 1993](#); [Zeijlstra, 2004](#); [van der Horst, 2008](#); [Breitbarth, 2009, 2013](#); [Rutten et al., 2012](#); [Nobels, 2013](#)). The sentences in (1) present some illustrative examples:

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¹ This paper has benefited greatly from comments by the audience at the negation and clitics workshop at the University of Zürich, February 2012 and three anonymous reviewers. I appreciate their work and input, as well as the guidance from the editors.

- (1) a. Hi en sall nyet busscop blyuen / Die den luden onrecht leert²
 He NEG will not bisschop stay / who the people injustice teaches
 ‘He who teaches the people injustice, will not remain bishop’
- b. Orlof te etene in destad uan gend ne mot men den sieken niet geuene³
 Permission to eat in the town of Ghent NEG must one the sick not give
 ‘One must not allow the sick to eat in the town of Ghent’
- c. Item soe en sal nemant up de mercket staen mit schoen toe verkopen
 Also, so NEG will nobody at the market stand with shoes to sell
 dan up de rechte merkede
 than at the right market⁴
 ‘Also, nobody may be selling shoes at the market, except at the correct market’
- d. Ten was maer een clein gebot dat God geboet⁵
 it-NEG was but a small bidding that God commanded
 ‘It was but a small bidding that God commanded’

In special contexts, such as the restriction of universal and superlative determiners, n-words may also be interpreted as nonnegative polarity items, rather similar to the use of *personne* or *jamais* in French (cf. Hoeksema, 1997, and for French, e.g. Muller, 1991; de Swart and Sag, 2002). I adopt the position of Zanuttini (1991), Hoeksema (1997), Herburger (2001), that n-words may be ambiguous between negative quantifiers and non-inherently negative polarity items. Cf. also Section 5.2 below for some discussion pertaining to this point. Very rarely, in combination with a few polarity-sensitive verbs and verbal constructions, there is also still a remnant of the ancient system of single negation making use of just the clitic (Stoett, 1923; Hoeksema, 1997; Postma, 2002a,b), an archaic remnant that disappears after the 16th century, cf. the examples in (2) below:

- (2) a. ic en weet wanen hi quam⁶
 I NEG know whence he came
 ‘I don’t know whence he came’
- b. want du ne canst een hare ghemaken wit ochte suart⁷
 for you NEG can a hair make white or black
 ‘For you cannot make (even) a hair white or black’
- c. ken weet waer vlien⁸
 I-NEG know where flee
 ‘I don’t know where to flee’

There is also another construction, traditionally called *paratactic* negation, illustrated below in (3). The two negative clitics used in the paratactic construction are in italics:

- (3) Paratactic negation
 Hen es enghene dinc so verborghen, *sine* sele vertoegt werden
 It-NEG is no thing so hidden, it-NEG will shown become
 noch so verholen, *sine* sele goppenbart werden⁹
 Nor so concealed, it-NEG will revealed become
 ‘There is nothing so hidden, that won’t be shown, nor anything so concealed, that won’t be revealed.’

Paratactic negation is best seen, not as a form of negative concord, but as a negative-polarity construction. The construction takes the form of a main clause, with clitic negation on the finite verb in second position, and this main clause

² Heinric van Veldeke, *Sint Servaes*, verse 1231. In G.A. van Es, ed., *Sint Servaes Legende*. In dutschen dichtede dit Heynriek die van Veldeke was geboren. Naar het Leidse handschrift uitgegeven met medewerking van G. I. Lief tinck en A. F. Mirande, Antwerpen: Standaard-boekhandel, 1950.

³ Statutes of the Ghent lepers’ hospital, 1236. In Maurits Gysseling, *Corpus van Middelnederlandse teksten (tot en met het jaar 1300)*, Reeks I. *Ambtelijke bescheiden*, page 25, lines 5–8. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977.

⁴ Rules of the Groningen Guild of shoemakers. In: P.J. Blok et al., *Oorkondenboek van Groningen en Drenthe*, II (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1899), nr. 613, sub item 34.

⁵ *Gedichten van Willem van Hildegasberch*, page 7, lines 36–37. Ed. W. Bisschop and E. Verwijs, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1870. Photographic reprint, HES, Utrecht, 1981.

⁶ Hadewijch, *Werken. Deel 2: Proza* (ed. J. Vercoullie). C. Annot-Braeckman, Gent 1895, p. 146.

⁷ *Het Luikse diatesseron* (ed. C.C. de Bruin). E.J. Brill, Leiden 1970, p. 19–20. On the use of the prefix *ghe-* in this type of sentence, see Postma (2002a), Rem et al. (2006).

⁸ Het spel van de V vroede en V dwaee Maegden (ed. Jules M. Ketele). Gent n.d. (1846), p. 47, line 658.

⁹ Diatessaron Leodiense. Cf. note 7, page 54, lines 12–13.

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