THE GRAMMATICALIZATION OF NEGATIVE REINFORCERS IN OLD AND MIDDLE FRENCH:
A DISCOURSE–FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I propose a discourse–functional analysis of the uses of different forms of clause negation in Old French (9th–12th century) and Middle French (13th–16th century), namely the bipartite, “reinforced”, forms *ne...mie* and *ne...pas* versus the simple preverbal negator *ne*, which at the time constituted the canonical form of clause negation in French.

The literature has traditionally considered these three forms to have been synonymous, and hence in essentially random variation, in older stages of the French language (e.g., explicitly to this effect, Perle, 1878: 5; Sten, 1938: 30; Togeby, 1974: §258, and implicitly, Yvon, 1948; Price, 1962; Foulet, 1965; Harris, 1978; Winters, 1987). As will be shown below, however, a fine-grained qualitative analysis of several Old and Middle French texts supports the hypothesis that there was, in fact, a functional differentiation between them for several centuries preceding the eventual generalization of *ne...pas* as the standard form. Indeed, a few previous studies

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1 It should be noted that some of the above-mentioned authors do suggest that the choice between the forms may have been influenced by syntactic features or – in the case of poetry – metrical considerations, e.g., Perle (1878: 5) and Foulet (1965: 262).

2 There do not appear to be any differences in meaning and/or function between *ne...mie* and *ne...pas* in Old and Middle French texts. *Ne...mie* was gradually confined to certain non-dominant dialects before disappearing completely in the course of the 17th century, while *ne...pas* was preferred in other
Guiraud, 1964; Martin, 1972; Schwegler, 1988: 41ff; Marchello-Nizia, 1999: 114) have already argued for the existence of a semantic and/or pragmatic difference. The present proposal, however, differs from theirs in salient ways (cf. the discussion in Section 3). Furthermore, I suggest an explanation of the subsequent grammaticalization of the bi-partite ne...pas as the standard negator of French, replacing the older preverbal ne, in terms of a very specific, and fairly frequent type of context in which reinforced negation is found to occur in Old and Middle French, and which I argue was the pivotal “bridging” context (Evans and Wilkins, 2000: 550; Heine, 2002: 84, redefined in Hansen, 2008: 62–63)\(^3\) that allowed for the functional reanalysis of the bi-partite forms as expressing canonical negation.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2 discusses the overall diachronic evolution of French negation in terms of a series of stages known as “Jespersen’s Cycle”; Section 3 presents the hypothesis pursued in this paper, and discusses the central notions of discourse status and markedness; in Section 4, I analyze a set of empirical data from a representative choice of Old and Middle French texts; finally, Section 5 is a conclusion.

### 2. French Negation and Jespersen’s Cycle

The diachronic evolution of standard negation in French is frequently cited as a textbook example of what, following Dahl (1979: 88), has become commonly known as Jespersen’s Cycle, whereby

> [t]he original negative adverb is first weakened, then found insufficient and therefore strengthened, generally through some additional word, and this in turn may be felt as a negative proper and may then in the course of time be subject to the same development as the original word (Jespersen, 1917: 4).

Thus, Old French used a simple preverbal ne (< Latin NON) as the standard marker of clause negation. At a very early stage, however, it became possible to reinforce this ne by a variety of dialects, among which the one spoken in and around Paris. The remainder of this paper will not consider reasons for the eventual obsolescence of ne...mie, but some suggestions can be found in Hansen and Visconti (2009).

\(^3\) Heine (2002: 86) defines bridging contexts as contexts where, in addition to its “source” meaning, a given linguistic expression also allows for an innovative “target” meaning to be inferred. Whereas this author requires that the latter be the more plausibly intended of the two meanings, hence foregrounded with respect to the source meaning, Hansen (2008: 62f) argues that the innovative interpretation is backgrounded, and thus merely possible, in bridging contexts, and only comes into the foreground at the subsequent stage of evolution, namely in so-called “switch” contexts.