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Abstract

This study has been made to review the matter of Negative Contractions in Old English which are demonstrated through the fusion of the negator *ne* and a verbal element by dropping the head phoneme of the latter. In this study, I disagree with Warner (1993), in which he proclaims that there is no unitary criterion to permit such contraction because there are plural rules from different respects that collectively license the contraction. This understanding, however, is flawed when facing the exception that cannot be ruled out by it, moreover, categorial redundancy also overtly exists. A refined version of such criterion will be given in this study, which largely emphasize the phonological conditions and paradigmatic traits.

1. The negative contractions in Old English

The negative particle *ne* in Old English is allowed to be fused with certain verbs as its descendant not does, only with the difference that *ne* would be attached onto the head of the verbal elements and not is supposed to be postposed in the contracted form of *can't* in Modern English, illustrated in (1). In Mitchell (1985), the adverbs of negation *ne* and *ni* are referred as contractible when they precede certain adverbs, pronouns and verbs. Some examples are given in (1).

(1) a. Ic þe cwellan nylle.

I you kill not will

‘I don’t want to kill you’

b. I can’t eat that pie.

As noted above, unlike Modern English, in which such contraction only occurs when there must be a verbal element that is adjacent to the negator, Old English has a wider scope of other parts of speech.

(2) a. *ne + āþer = nāþer* ‘neither’ Adjective

b. *ne + æfre = næfre* ‘never’ Adverb

c. *ne + ān = nān* ‘none’ Pronoun

In González and del Pilar (2007), OE negative-verb contraction is believed to occur mostly with

aspectual modals, together with a part of preterite-present verbs. They have given us a rather complete table that includes a good number of negative contractions, as repeated in (3).

(3). **nabban** (< *ne* + *habban* ‘have’)

nad (< *ne* + *had* ‘had’)

nagan (< *ne* + *agan* ‘owe’)

nart (< *ne* + *art* ‘are’)

nas (< *ne* + *was* or *ne* + *has*)

nere(n) (< *ne* + *were(n)*)

nillan (< *ne* + *willan* ‘will’)

nis (< *ne* + *is*)

noīde (< *ne* + *wolde* ‘would’)

nytan (< *ne* + *witan* ‘know’)

not (< *ne* + *wot* ‘knew’)

To give an overall description of these occurrences, Warner (1993) has made an effort in one of his peripheral paragraphs in *English Auxiliaries* to clarify what is unproblematic for contraction and what is not. The criterion in question is divided into two parts: (i) the adequate candidate must be head by [h], [w] or vowel. (ii) the adequate candidate must be a member of either preterite-present verbs group or potential auxiliary group. Based on this dichotomy, Warner proposes that there is no a unitary criterion that fully describes and regularizes the emergence of negative contractions.

In this study, some flaws of Warner’s conclusion will be pointed out and amended in following sections. To sum them up, I will focus on the categorial redundancy, phonological condition and morphology-oriented generalization, and present a rather concentrated criterion than Warner’s.

2. A condensed phonological filter

There are two items which are separately preterite-present verb and potential auxiliary, and do not conflict with the phonological conditions manifested above, but they still fail to be contracted with *ne*, as depicted in (4).

(4) a. *unnan* + *ne* ≠ **nunna*

b. *weorðan* + *ne* ≠ **neorðan*

Warner’s phonological condition cannot cover these two exceptions. And I assume that due to the

limited number of contractible items, it is quite difficult to extract a general principle to rule (4a) and (4b) out.

In this study, however, I have refined the phonological filter by adding a more precise constraint to negative contraction and unifying the head phoneme selection. The amended principle will be noted as ‘condensed’ in this study.

First, we can give (4b) a plausible explanation through the contrast of monophthong and diphthong. Given *weorðan* is the only member in the candidates group whose stem vowel is a diphthong, thus what differs it from its kind may stand as a benchmark to clarify its distinctiveness. The pronouncing time of the stem vowel seems irrelevant to our current topic since *āgan*, that is headed by a long vowel, demonstrates a good example of negative contraction in (5).

(5). *ne + āgan = nāgan*

As for the illegality of *unnan*, a similar approach can also be applied to it. It is the only member in the candidates’ group which is headed by a high back vowel. Therefore, the value of the head vowels takes its part in the contraction process on par with stem vowels.

The variation of [h], and [w] does not require a specified description, and their unsteadiness can be easily observed in some declinations of Old English nouns.

(6) a. *feoh* ‘money’

plural genitive: *feona*

singular dative: *feo*

b. *bearu* ‘grove’

plural genitive: *bearwa*

plural accusative: *bearwas*

Note that [h] in (6a) is lost when the noun is declined for different cases and numbers, while [w] in (6c) replaces [u] in the same case. The deformation of [h] and [w] can also be found in the Modern English materials, that they are silent in certain Germanic-root words.

(7) a. ghost, aghast, Beckham, Nottingham

b. sword, write, wrench

In spite of the typological intricacies, we can see both [h] and [w] as semivowel, because they are

articulated without closure of the vocal tract, which is a typical feature of vowel. On this basis, the phonological condition of Warner can be reworded as (8).

(8). All the appropriate items that are contractible must be headed by a non-u-vowel (or semivowel) and their stem vowels are monophthongal.

With the reword of the phonological condition of Warner, a condensed criterion will not only suppress the redundancy of the earlier one, but also solve the problem of the two exceptions in (4).

3. The categorial status of potential auxiliaries.

I disfavor the status of potential auxiliary group for following reasons. (i) preterite-present verbs are largely overlapped with potential auxiliaries, and they are highly homogeneous in the sense of auxiliary formalization. (ii) when the verb *habban* ‘have’ is used as a full verb, it can also be contracted with *ne* without being part of either candidate groups. (iii) the distinction between potential auxiliaries and full verbs is vague, because they can be used independently without infinitives. Hence, the legitimacy of this group is fragile, specific examples of (i), (ii) and (iii) are given in (9).

(9) a. Overlaps: *cunnan* ‘can’, *durran* ‘dare’, *magan* ‘may’, *motan* ‘may’, *sculan* ‘should’

b. Hē **næfde** þā ealles landes būton seofon fōtmæl;

he hadn’t these all lands without seven foot

‘He did not have any land other than that seven feet.’

(William the Conqueror 2.7)

c. Ðas VIII **magon** wið nygon attrum.

these nine can against nine poisons

‘These 9 men can resist nine sorts of poisons.’

(ASPR VI, 116ff.)

First, it is well known that the process of grammaticalization involves the high frequency of each lexical items per se, and the whole duration of grammaticalization is coherent, so we can say the genres of preterite-present verbs and auxiliaries are just chronically separated segments. For further reading, see Heine (1993), in which he proposes that auxiliaries had gone through the maxima historical evolution and reached its ‘developmental end-point’. The term ‘overlaps’ is referred to the visible columns of the two candidates’ groups, though it is more persuasive to analyse such overlap as the distinction between the prototype and its derivation.

The meaning and subcategorial status seem insignificant in the process of contraction, as illustrated in (9b), *næfde* plays a role of main verb just like ‘I have an apple’, while *haven’t* in Modern English

cannot be interpreted as ‘the absence of ownership’, as in (10). Hence, *næfde* in (9b) is an unexplainable exception violating Warner’s generalization.

(10). *I haven’t any money.

At last, *magon* in (9c) is subject to both preterite-present verbs group and potential auxiliary group, and what differs it from its modern descendant is that a Preposition Phrase is taken as its complement. Similar usages are named as ‘independent use’ by Mitchell and this sort of occurrence manifests the immaturity of the auxiliary group in the respect of morphological formalization.

4. An alternative criterion relating irregular paradigm

I will postulate that after passing the phonological filter mentioned above, only the candidates who have irregular inflectional paradigm is adequate for contraction. This proposition is formed through the properties that preterite-present verbs and potential auxiliaries have in common. The division of preterite-present verbs group and potential auxiliary group will be diminished following this assumption.

Preterite-present verbs is namely a good embodiment of irregular paradigm, to put this briefly, a preterite-present verb would take a canonical preterite form to denote a present meaning while take a canonical present form to do another way around.

(11).

Infinitive	1st.Sg.Prs	1st.Sg. Prt	Pl. Prs
Witan	Wat	Wiste	Witon

In the case of potential auxiliary group, *willan* and *habban* are respectively called as ‘anomalous verb’ and ‘independent verbs’ by Mitchell, in that, *willan* would be conjugated into *wolde* regardless of tense and number, and *habban* would undergo a stem-vowel mutation when inflecting for different numbers. Given the fact that *willan*, *habban* alongside *beon* ‘be’ (also an anomalous verb) are the only three non-preterite-present verbs that can be contracted with *ne*, the isolation between preterite-present verbs group and auxiliary group will be neutralized under this analysis.

To be specific, what the term ‘preterite-present’ emphasizes is the reversed tense-meaning arrays, then it might not be fully applicable when phonological features are involved. Likewise, the main contents of the term ‘auxiliary’ is carried out by expressing modality or aspect as well as its syntactic features which are largely bound with the phrasal infinitiveness and correlation with the main verb. In this study, I assume that the two groups are not the optima domains in which we can elaborate this

topic.

Then, an alternative criterion is accessible by combining phonological condition and this morphology-oriented generalization, only when an item meets the former can it proceed to verify the later:

(12) a. **Phonological Filter:** Only when the verb is headed by a non-u-vowel (or semivowel) and its stem vowel is a monophthong can it be selected as possible items.

b. **Morphology-oriented generalization:** Only possible items with irregular inflectional paradigm are contractible with *ne*.

The generalization of Warner is reasonable when the solid facts of Old English Negative Contraction seem discrete in the sense of licensing condition. A more condensed criterion, however, is still available, since all it does is to regulate the value of the vowel and one single morphological feature without ruling out these illegal items verbatim. The criterion in (12) also eliminates the dilemma concerning the ‘unexplainable’ exceptions, the flaw of Warner’s description would largely recede.

Reference:

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