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# SOME HISTORICAL NOTES ON ENGLISH NEGATION: UNETHES, ALMOST, AND HARDLY

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## 1. Introduction to the research problem

In Modern Standard English the scalar modifiers almost and hardly combine with different indefinite series, the any-series and the n-series respectively:

(1) I saw hardly any of the visitors / I hardly ever see visitors

(2) I saw almost none of the visitors/ I almost never see visitors

Historically, this system has not always been the same, first because over the centuries, there has been lexical replacement. Hardly, which is often considered semantically negative (Partee 2004), replaced the synonymous Middle English term unethes, similarly called by Fischer (1992) and Iyeyiri (2001) “implicitly” or “quasi-” negative. But there would also seem to have been a shift in terms of the syntactic behaviour of these two implicitly negative items. In line with Modern English hardly, unethes co-occurred with any-series items, as in:<sup>2</sup>

(3) So þicke were in ech bouȝ, / Þat vneþe eni leef hi miȝte þeron iseo  
“They were so thick on each bough that they could scarcely see any leaf on there”

(Early South-English legendary Ms. Laud, 108, 36 Vita sancti Brendani, c. 1280)

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<sup>2</sup> All medieval English citations are taken from the Middle English Compendium (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/hyperbib/>).

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But unlike hardly, it was also able at least in Late Middle English to combine with n-series items:

(4)a And fro him comeþ out smoke & stynkande fuyr & so moche abhomynacioun, þat vne þe noman may þere endure  
“And from him comes smoke and stinking fire and so many horrors that hardly anyone can stand it there”

(Mandeville’s travels, Chapter XXXII)

(4)b Of berd unnethe hadde he nothyng  
“He scarcely had any beard”

(Chaucer, RomA 833)

(4)c Vneþes myghte non kepe his eye, / þat he nas y poynt bakward to flye  
“Hardly anyone could keep looking, that wasn’t about to fly to the rear”

(Manning, Story of England)

By modifying n-series forms now realised as no man, nothing and none, unethes thus overlapped with the distribution of almost, whereas hardly and almost are now syntactically quite distinct, as we see in (1) and (2).

The earlier system, as is often the case, can still be seen in non-standard English, where hardly can combine with an n-series item, as in:

(5)a And uncle Albert, he wouldn’t do nothing, hardly  
(FRED corpus, CON\_005. Cornwall, Southwest of England)

(5)b “I didn’t get credit for nothing hardly that I done in most of this news media and the TV people and everybody,” Ingram said  
(Sporting News, (USA) Jan 30, 2014)

(5)c Who’s going to make a game with loads of features that hardly noone can actually use lol  
(Google)

(5)d When I get my braces tightened, I hardly never feel any pain, especially like I did when first getting them placed on  
(Google)

In this article we consider how to interpret the alternative possibilities displayed by Late Middle English *unethes*, and why Modern Standard English hardly has a more restricted distribution. It will be seen that the descriptive facts are generally to be handled in terms of the loss of Negative Concord (Iyeyri 2001) after the Late Middle English period.

## 2. Overview of changes in English negation, 14th-15th centuries

As is well-known, a striking change took place to the syntax of negation in the textual record of English between the mediaeval and the modern period. Early and Late Middle English were Negative Concord languages, that is, words such as ‘none’ and ‘never’ were or could be accompanied by the sentence negator, at first *ne*, subsequently *not*. Examples are:

(6)a ... þt nan ne seide na wiht  
that any NEG said any thing  
“...so that none of them said anything”  
(St Katherine EETS OS 80, 1252 (c. 1220))

(6)b Þese swyn mowe not be i-kept by no manere craft  
“These pigs can’t be kept by any kind of skill”  
(Polychronicon 361,3 c. 1385)

By the late 16th century, as shown by Nevalainen (1998) and Kallel (2007), Negative Concord was nearing extinction in educated written English, although of course it has survived in non-standard varieties. In contexts such as those in (6) above, any-series indefinites now became regular. The reasons for this change are explored in e.g. Ingham (2006, 2007). He argued for a three-stage process as follows. In Early Middle English, the sentence negator *ne* was essentially obligatory; when it was lost in the 14th century, English did not straightaway move into a non-Negative Concord phase, but experienced several generations of an intermediary phase still retaining Negative Concord but with the sentence negator *not* instead of *ne*.

Ingham (2006) found the first signs of any-series items in negative contexts, as part of the loss of Negative Concord, appearing in Northern-origin texts of the late 14th century. In this connection, it is important to note that instances of *unethes* co-occurring with an *n*-word are found in

the 14th and early 15th centuries, in other words in this intermediary phase while English was starting to lose obligatory Negative Concord, and beginning to adopt the modern distribution of indefinite items. We wish to show below that the timing of the phenomena observed was not fortuitous.

### 3. Almost and hardly in Modern English

Quirk et al. (1985: 445) define almost and hardly as “downtoners”, as they are lexical items that “have a generally lowering effect on the force of the verb or predication and many of them apply a scale to gradable verbs” (Quirk et al. 1985: 597). As illustrated in (7), the approximator almost forces an interpretation of the predicate as  $\neg p$  (e.g. she didn’t have a car accident), while also conveying the idea that the subject was close to experiencing the event denoted by the verb (i.e. having a car accident) (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 559).

(7) She almost had a car accident (but in fact she didn’t)

By contrast, the minimizer hardly is used in a context involving pragmatically the smallest value on a scale of relevant possibilities. A sentence such as (8) is interpreted as close to  $\neg p$  (e.g. she doesn’t eat vegetables), this being the possibility at the bottom of a scale that goes from eating vegetables on every possible occasion, to not eating vegetables at all (or only very rarely).

(8) She hardly eats vegetables

Minimizers are incompatible with any other negative elements in Modern English:

(9) \*She hardly doesn’t eat vegetables / \*She eats hardly no vegetables

However, they can select indefinites from the any-series, as illustrated in (10a), and non-assertive polarity items, as exemplified in (10b):

(10) a She eats hardly any vegetables

(10) b She hardly eats vegetables at all / in a month of Sundays

In this respect, *hardly* and *almost* clearly contrast. As can be seen in (11), *almost* can co-occur with negative elements, but, as shown in (12) and (13), it cannot co-occur with any-indefinites, nor can it occur with non-assertive polarity items.

(11) She almost doesn't eat vegetables / She eats almost no vegetables

(12) \*She eats almost any vegetables

(13) \*She almost eats vegetables at all / in a month of Sundays

In addition, while *hardly* is downward entailing, including hyponyms in its entailments, *almost* is upward entailing, not including them. This is illustrated in (14) and (15) respectively:

(14) She hardly ate vegetables entails: She hardly ate broccoli

(15) She almost ate vegetables does not entail: She almost ate broccoli

Partee (2004) provides a semantic account of *almost* and *hardly* that explains why they contrast in the manner illustrated in (8)-(15). Partee (2004: 238) suggests that *hardly* and *almost* are structurally related in the sense that the former can be analysed as ALMOST + NEG. This is shown in (16):

(16) He hardly moved = he almost didn't move  
(Partee 2004: 238, (40))

Assuming this NEG component to be a negative operator bearing an interpretable syntactic negative feature [iNeg] (Zeijlstra 2004), the incompatibility of *hardly* with seemingly negative elements such as the sentential negative marker *not*/*n't* or negative quantifiers like *nobody*, *nothing*, *no* is straightforward: two [iNeg] features cannot co-occur unless a Double Negation reading (i.e., the cancellation of negation, resulting in a positive reading) is intended. Furthermore, the [iNeg] feature in the NEG operator of *hardly* can license any-indefinites and non-assertive polarity items very much in the same way as the sentential negative marker or a negative quantifier does.

#### 4. Distribution of scalar modifiers in late Middle English

We shall next examine the distribution of scalar modifiers in pre-modern English. In terms of the lexical items involved, scarcely and hardly are not found in the relevant sense, with a polarity licenser function, until the Early Modern period. That function was expressed in Middle English by unethes<sup>3</sup> (derived from Old English *uneaðe* “not easily”), which most commonly licensed the non-assertive polarity any-series, and minimisers such as those meaning a “piece of bread”:<sup>4</sup>

(17) (=3) So þicke were in ech] bou3, / Þat vneþe eni leef : hi mi3te þeron iseo

“They were so thick on each bough that they could scarcely see any leaf on there”

(Early South-English legendary; Ms. Laud, 108, 36 *Vita sancti Brendani, Abbatis de Hybernia*, c. 1280)

(18) ...ure bendes he unbon[d] and bohte us mid his blode. / We 3eueð uneðe for his luu nete a stuche of ure brede

“He released our bonds and redeemed us with his blood. We scarcely give a morsel of bread for his love”

(Poema Morale XVIII, c.1200)

Unethes was also commonly used with a wide range of predicates of various aspectual types, cf. the following 14<sup>th</sup> century examples:

(19) His kneis war bolned sua / þat vnethes might he ga

“His knees were so swollen that he could hardly walk”

(a1400 (a1325) *Cursor (Vsp. A. 3)* 12685)

(20) Ande vneþe myghte we gete þo kokbote

“And we could scarcely get the ship’s boat”

(The Acts of the Apostles 27, 17 c. 1425)

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<sup>3</sup> The OED 3rd ed. gives the first citation of unethes in a negative clause in c. 1340.

<sup>4</sup> cf. Old French ‘mie’.

The modern English adverb almost, originally ealmost in the sense of “most of all”, was used in Middle English, however, with predicates having a bounded eventuality reading:

(21) Po hit [the ship] cam almost þerto, vpe þe roche hit gan ride  
“When it almost arrived there, the ship rode up on the rock”  
(c1300 SLeg.Brendan (Hrl 2277: Horst.) 157)

(22) He was almost naked  
(c1300) Havelok (LdMisc 108) 962

It was also used in the 14<sup>th</sup> century with quantifying expressions, as in Modern English:

(23) þe est partie is almost alle wildernesse  
“The eastern part is almost all desert”  
(Polychronicon 14,19)

(24) And þys ys now a comun synne / þat many onē fallyn ynne, / For  
almost hyt ys euery-whore  
“And this is now a common sin that many a one falls into, for it is  
almost everywhere”  
(Robert of Brunne, Handlyng synne, 10th Commandment)

Almost modified n-words such as no, nothing and none, at least from the late 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards:

(25) ... þat seculeris & curatis may almost gete no bok of value  
“... that secular priests and curates may get almost no worthwhile text”  
(Wyclif VI. Of Clerks Possessioners. Cap. 18)

(26) .... defaute of Scolemaistres of Gramer / where of as now ben  
almost none in the vniuersitees of Oxenford and Cambrigge  
“...lack of grammar teachers, of whom as now there are almost none in  
the Universities of O. and C”  
(An Anthology of Chancery English)

The semantics of unethes and almost seemed to contrast in Late Middle English in much the same way as hardly/scarcely contrast with almost today. Unethes was used in a context involving pragmatically the smallest or least value on a scale of relevant possibilities, and was not aspectually

restricted. Almost was used to modify an expression signifying a boundary of an eventuality. That boundary could be the point of non-existence, as when it modified none or nothing.

The problem, as shown in section 1, is that in Late Middle English we also find unethes modifying n-words, as in (2). Further examples of this pattern are:

(27) Al my breste bolleþ for bitter of my galle; May no suger so swete  
aswagen hit vnneþe

(Langland Piers Plowman A. v. 100, 1362)

“My breast boils with the bitterness of my gall; Hardly may sugar  
however sweet, sweeten it”

(28) Bitwixe men and gold ther is debaat / So ferforth that unnethes is  
ther noon

“Between men and gold there is altercation, so much so that there is  
hardly one...”

(Chaucer, Can. Yeom. Tale ll. 1388-90)

(29) so þat þe scanteloun vnneth touche at neiþer ende þe erth

“... so that the measuring stick hardly touches the earth at either end”

(Edward, Duke of York Master of Game (Digby) xxv (c. 1425))

(30) The causey..is so over-flowyn that ther is no man that may an-ethe  
passe it

“The causeway is so covered in water that hardly anyone can cross it”

(Paston Lett. & Papers (2004) I. 605 (1477))

The position is thus that in Late Middle English unethes could be used both with n-items and also with the non-assertive any-series, a paradoxical state of affairs which we address below.

## 5. Syntactico-semantic analysis of scalar modifiers in Middle and Modern English

In order to account for the puzzling distribution of unethes in Late Middle English as compared to Early Middle English and Modern English, we have to take into account not only its grammaticalization from a lexical content adverb (Old English *uneaðe* “not easily”) to an inherently negative scalar modifier, but also the development of n-words, which change from

Negative Concord elements to inherently negative quantifiers in the transition from Middle English to Modern English. Ingham (2007) modelled this transition in terms of the acquisition by n-series items of alternative lexical entries. In Early Middle English they were syntactically but not semantically negative, and thus required the presence of a sentence negator. Their syntactically negative status is represented in (31a) by a [uNeg] feature (Zeijlstra 2004, where ‘u’ means semantically uninterpretable but syntactically active, requiring to be licensed by a semantically negative element such as the sentence negator). In Late Middle English n-series items gained an alternative [iNeg] entry, i.e., their negative property was now semantically negative, and n-series items are seen to negate a clause by themselves, as in the Modern English example in (2) above.

The two lexical entries for n-words, which in the Late Middle English period co-existed, are given in (31).

- (31) a. n-word<sub>1</sub>: non-negative, specified as [uNeg].  
b. n-word<sub>2</sub>: negative, specified as [iNeg].

As has been shown in earlier sections, unethes contributed (scalar) negative meaning to the clause (see examples (17)-(20)). In addition, it licensed negative polarity items and minimizers (see examples (17) and (18)). Therefore, there is reason to believe that unethes was at first inherently negative, with an [iNeg] entry. At this point, we can conjecture that it underwent a process of grammaticalisation (Hopper and Traugott 2003) turning it into a negative element that behaved similarly to Modern Standard English hardly.

What may seem surprising, however, is the fact that unethes does not seem to co-occur with n-words in Early Middle English.<sup>5</sup> This is unexpected given that in the Middle English period, English allows Negative Concord and, hence, n-words such as no, none, nothing, etc. can behave as negative polarity items and co-occur with other negative expressions. Why is Negative Concord between unethes and n-words unattested in Early Middle English, both in OED and in our own data searches, whereas it was possible in the Late Middle English period?

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<sup>5</sup> The well-known imbalance in data availability between Early and Late Middle English makes it difficult to claim conclusively that the lack of examples of unethes modifying n-words in Early Middle English is due to its grammatical inability to do so.

We want to suggest in this article that the answer to this question is to be found in the semantic and syntactic properties of different negative elements, namely the adverb unethes and n-words. Following Partee's (2004) assumptions on hardly, we assume that Middle English unethes has the structure in (32). While the ALMOST component is responsible for its scalar behaviour, NEG stands for a negative operator that contributes negative meaning to the clause:

(32) unethes: ALMOST (NEG)

With respect to the difference that seems to exist between the ability of unethes to license n-words in the Early Middle English and the Late Middle English period, we wish to return to this issue in further research, as this question needs considering in depth, but extends beyond the limits of the present study.

More data exist in the Late Middle English period and clearly show that unethes could modify both negative polarity items / minimizers and n-words. We claim here that such a distribution is the result of two crucial factors. First, when unethes grammaticalised at an earlier stage from an ordinary adverb, it gained an [iNeg] lexical entry corresponding to the scalar modifier sense. Second, Middle English continued to be a Negative Concord language, which resulted in unethes being able to co-occur with n-words of the kind in (31a). This would explain the data in (27) and (28) (where unethes has an n-word in its scope) as a case of Negative Concord. As a result, two syntactically different versions of unethes became possible in Late Middle English.

(33) a unethes<sub>1</sub>: negative, specified as [iNeg].  
b unethes<sub>2</sub>: non-negative, specified as [uNeg].

This would allow us to explain examples such as (29) and (30), where 'unethes' occurs under the scope of the n-word noman "nobody" (which would be of the kind in (31b), specified as [iNeg]), and under the scope of the negative marker nat "not", specified as [iNeg].

With the complete loss of Negative Concord in some varieties of English in the Modern English period, the [uNeg] lexical entry for 'unethes', as in (33b), ceased to exist. The same was the case with the [uNeg] entry for n-series items, as in (31a), which made it impossible for unethes<sub>1</sub> (specified as [iNeg]) to modify items of the n-series (now having only an [iNeg] property) if a single negation reading was intended. The distribution of unethes would now only allow it to modify the indefinites

in the any-series and minimizers. Lexical replacement then saw *hardly* taking over the functions of *unethes*, its inherent negative meaning being incompatible with elements of the n-series.

## 6. Summary and conclusion

In this article, we have shown that *unethes* (the Late Middle English equivalent of ‘hardly’) occurred with both any- and n-series in Late Middle English. To explain this state of affairs, we have presented an account of the development of *unethes* as the consequence of a process of grammaticalisation from a lexical content word, meaning “with difficulty”, to a scalar modifier specified with a negative syntactic feature, [iNeg] that can license indefinites of the any-series and minimisers, as well as n-words containing an uninterpretable negative feature [uNeg]. Because Middle English was a Negative Concord language, *unethes* also developed a [uNeg] lexical entry in conformity with other n-words, hence making it possible for it to be under the scope of negation. However, as *unethes* was crucially different from n-words in that it was not an indefinite, this had further implications for its syntactic behaviour, to which we plan to return in future research. In any case, it has been shown that the change in the distribution of scalar modifiers *unethes* and *hardly* between Late Middle and Early Modern English is in line with the general tendency of English to lose a Negative Concord grammar over that time span.

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