

Old English

Review of the OE situation:

- Negation is expressed by the negative particle (preverbal adverb) *ne*, which precedes the finite verb (1).
- The negated verb is usually initial in main clauses (2); however, the personal pronoun subjects can sometimes precede the negated verb (3):
- Especially in West-Saxon *ne* can be optionally cliticised (3):
- Negation can also be expressed by a negative indefinite pronoun (including adverbial pronoun) or quantifier (must be expressed so in non-finite clauses), but the negative adverb *ne* is still usually present (see sentences (4) and (5)). Combining *ne* with *nā* or *nāwiht* could produce a more emphatic form of negation in OE (once again see (4) and (5)).

(1) ...ac hie ne dorston þær on cuman
...but they not dared there in come (Or 1 1.17.27)

‘...but they did not dare enter there.’

(2) Nat Ic, cwæð Orosius ...
not-know I said Orosius ...
‘I do not know said Orosius...’

(3) He nolde beon cyning.
he not-want to-be king
‘He did not want to be king.’

(4) ...þæt he **na** siþþan geboren **ne** wurde
... that he never after born not would-be
‘...that he wouldn’t be born afterward.’

(5) **Nis** he **na** gesceapen, **ne** he **nis na** gesceaft
not-is he not created, nor he not-is not created
‘He (God) is not created, nor is he a creation.’

Middle English

Between the OE and ME periods some important changes took place in the system of sentence negation.

- *ne**naht* (*na* disappears fairly quickly) used more and more frequently and cannot be considered truly emphatic.
- In early ME *naht* acquires a fixed position; it follows *ne* and is placed after a finite verb. In the course of the ME period *ne* *naht* (also *nat*, *nought*, *not*) becomes the regular negator.

(6) he no schuld nouzt fram hem go (Sir Orfeo late 13th /early 14th c.)
he no should not from them go
‘He would not go from them’.

(7) ne reche ich nozt (the Owl and the Nightingale)
not care I not
‘I do not care.’

- Because *ne* was now normally supported by *naht* it could be dropped (phonologically it is a weak element). By late ME *nat/not* alone becomes the common negator while *ne* and *ne ... not* become infrequent.

(8) I know not þe (Sir Gawain late 14th c.)
I know not you

Negation in the history of English

'I don't know you.'

- (9) Arthure wolde not ete (Sir Gawain)
Arthur wanted not eat
'Arthur didn't want to eat.'

- The disappearance of *ne* precipitates the corrosion of multiple negation, but the PDE norm was not established until the MnE period. Where MnE has *not ...anything/ not ... ever*, ME normally (this usage persists into the 17th and 18th c. has *not .. nothing/ not ... never*.

- (10) But nevere gronte he at no strook but oon (CT)
but never groaned he at no blow but one

- (11) They cowd not fynd no londe (Torkington 62)
they could not find no land

Modern English

- In early MnE, after the loss of *ne*, there is a tendency to place *not* **before** the verb, possibly associated with the wish to express negation early in the sentence. This tendency may have been strengthened by the general movement of adverbs to a pre-verbal position.

- (12) I not doubt He came aliue to Land (Shakespeare *Tempest*)

- (13) They.... possessed the island, but not enjoyed it. (1740, Johnson *Life Drake*)

- This construction (S + not + verb) is first attested in late ME. It is rare in early 16th c.; more common by the end of the century. In the 17th c. it gives way to *do*-periphrasis (see the handout on *do*-periphrasis for details). In non-standard English survives even later, typically in spoken language.