The Jespersen Cycle (JC) has been widely discussed from the perspective of numerous languages, and two types of analysis emerge from recent works:

- Morphosyntactic impoverishment of the old marker catalyses the cycle, as the interpretable negative feature is transferred to the reinforcer (van Kemenade, 2000; Roberts & al, 2003; Willis, 2008).
- The shift is caused by two simultaneous changes: reanalysis of the old marker into a polarity marker, and reanalysis of the old reinforcer into a negative marker (Breitbarth, 2009).

Common to both types of analyses is the following point: The interpretable negative feature should not at any time be carried by two morphological items simultaneously. This implies that the emergence of the bipartite strategy ne..pas or ne..not correlates with the loss of negative feature for ne in both French and English. In this paper, I challenge this shared premise on empirical ground by presenting the previously unnoticed data of Fe’fe’ (a Grassfield Bantu language), and by offering a different analysis for existing data from Middle English, Middle Welsh and French.

| (1) | Siani lē sî ɣé kô | ‘Siani did not go to the farm.’ |
| (2) | Siani sî kû ɣé kô bû | ‘Siani will not go to farm.’ |
| (3) | Pàʔ Siani lē ɣé kô | ‘Siani cannot go to the farm.’ |
| (4) | Siani hû ɣé kô | ‘Siani has never gone to farm.’ |
| (5) | Siani kû ɣé kô | ‘Siani has not gone to farm.’ |
| (5b) | Siani kû fû ngé kô | ‘Siani did not go to the farm (earlier today).’ |

Table 1 sums up the distribution of negative markers in (1) – (6). We observe that older markers are either in non indicative environments or in subordinate clauses, while new markers occur in indicative main clauses. Furthermore, at the exception of lē, older markers are in free variation with new ones as shown in columns 3 and 4 of the table. Hence, at the introduction of new markers, older ones persist in the language and one obtains a syntactic effect that lays strict restrictions on their distribution. This results into complementary distribution and free variation between co-existing markers.

Contrary to the standard analysis that presents JC as a series of discrete stages, data from Middle English, Middle Welsh and French show that multiple stages of JC co-exist in other language families as well. In Middle English, ne, ne..not and not co-existed, while Middle Welsh displayed the co-existence of ny(d), ny(d)...ddim and ddim (main clause), na, na..ddim (subordinate and imperative clauses), and peidio /beidio (imperatives and infinitives). Moreover, the contemporary co-existence of ne, ne..pas and pas in French is also revealing. Hence, the empirical data challenge the view that each language is at a discrete or clear-cut stage at any particular time. Rather, a language as a whole can be at more than one stage at the same time. Thus, we observe that subordinate environments are often one stage behind main clauses. For instance, at the point in Middle Welsh when main clauses had
gone through stages 1, 2 and 3 and completed the cycle, subordinate clauses were still transiting from stage 1 to stage 2 (see Borsley & al, 2005 for data). Furthermore, during the period when ne, ne...not and not co-existed in Middle English, there was a restriction on the distribution of the oldest marker ne, which was relegated to subordinate and if-clauses. On the contrary, the new marker not was highly disfavoured by subordinate clauses, and mostly found in main clauses (see Wallage, 2008 & Jack, 1978&kb for data). In the case of French, the older ne is found not only in subordinate environments, but is also associated with modal verbs. Such instances of variation illustrate what Hopper & Traugott (2003) term competition between the old and the new. It follows that standard analyses oversimplify the full richness and variety of JC. Hence, non-default markers that co-exist from stage 2 with the default for each stage are marginalised and excluded from standard accounts.

Taking into consideration a) The availability of multiple stages in the same time span resulting in competition between the new and old, b) The syntactic environments that get into play to make the alternate usages of co-existing forms possible, I argue that JC, just like any other language change, involves a period of synchronic “competition between grammatically incompatible options which substitute for one another in use” (Kroch, 1994). Therefore, I propose that the synchronic variation exhibited by the Féřľě? negation system is the result of an ongoing change. The correlation of synchronic variation with gradualness can be demonstrated in the case of French, English and Welsh with evidence from historical records. A language change account for Féřľě? however necessitates other tools, since Féřľě? lacks recorded dated from previous centuries. Adopting the uniformitarian hypothesis, my approach to the Féřľě? data is both analogical and comparative. First, typologically similar stages to the present state of the Féřľě? negation system are identified in French, English and Welsh. This provides a common type for Féřľě? and these languages in their previous states. On this basis, distributional generalisations are established, first in the languages with historical records, then by analogy for Féřľě?. Second, following Greenberg’s (1978) synchronic typology, I compare the sister languages of Féřľě? in their synchronic states, interpreting each language type or state as a stage in the diachronic process. This results in a comparative reconstruction dynamicizing the relation between synchronic variants. I conclude that a competing grammars approach provides a more factual account for the variation and continual shifts exhibited in negation systems during JC cross-linguistically.

References