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Negative Concord and the Constant Rate Hypothesis

Abstract The loss of negative concord (NC) in Early Modern English is one of the issues that have been given little consideration. The rise of the polarity item *any* in contexts where the *n*-word series were used instead, has unfortunately also received little attention in the literature. Linguists have generally attributed the loss of NC to prescriptive views in the 17th and 18th centuries (Baugh and Cable 1978; Fischer 1992). For this study, I collected tokens of the alternating NC constructions and polarity *any* constructions in non-literary sources, namely private correspondence (an average of six to seven sources for each period looked at, depending on availability), belonging to Late Middle English (LME) and Early Modern English (ENE). These are grouped into three main historical periods (1451/1500- 1501/1550- 1551/1600). I compared their relative frequencies in some syntactic environments, namely two grammatical functions, objects and adverbials, and two grammatical constructions, non-coordinate and coordinate ones. On analysing data, figures summarizing the cases and contexts for these two different variants, i.e. cases with *n*-words versus cases with non-assertive forms, i.e. the *any*-series, in negative constructions, suggest that the transition in the frequency of use of these two variants is already established well before the 17th century. Data suggest that there is an obvious stage effect. The late 15th and early 16th centuries showed that NC was still surviving very strongly particularly in coordinate negative contexts. In the later 16th century NC has virtually disappeared in both non-coordinate and coordinate negative contexts.

This paper explores the diachronic behaviour of NC and polarity item *any* during the transition from one option to the other in LME and ENE. I propose a preliminary account of this change based on The Constant Rate Hypothesis (CRH) outlined in Kroch (1989, 1994). My results support Kroch's (1994) general claim that morphosyntactic change occurs as a result of competition between two mutually exclusive options. However, when fitted into the logistic model, data suggest that the rate of decline of NC manifests a constant rate effect in some contexts but not in others. Does this constitute a problem for the Constant Rate Hypothesis? An account of the changing frequencies in these two variants in negative contexts suggests that the observed change reflects not only structural, internal properties but also the likely effect of some functional factors, namely rhetorical factors, which could have favoured the choice of one form over another.

The observed change is also considered from a sociolinguistic point of view. I collected data from 16th century private letters by female authors. On comparing their frequencies with those by male correspondents, I found that gender differences are statistically not significant. Female correspondents are not more advanced in their use of the innovative form *any*, as we would expect them to be (Gauchat 1905; Chambers 1995; Labov 2001). This confirms Nevalainen's smaller-scale findings in her sociolinguistic study on the loss of NC.

Key words: Negative Concord/*Any*-series; The Constant Rate Hypothesis; Gender effect.

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