

Cyclic change in the distribution of indefinites in negative polarity environments

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It is well known that changes in indefinite systems often lead to an item becoming restricted to more ‘negative’ contexts, whether through the introduction of a restriction on its distribution to weak NPI contexts (interrogatives, conditional, comparatives, negatives etc.) or an outright restriction on its use to negative environments only. The development of French *rien* ‘nothing’ or *personne* ‘no one’ from earlier generic nouns (Latin *rem* ‘thing’ and *persona* ‘person’) are well-known examples of this phenomenon, which Ladusaw (1993) terms the ‘argument cycle’. New items are created to fulfil the earlier functions (such as French *quelqu’un* ‘someone’), giving this process a cyclic nature.

This paper argues that there are two related argument cycles, one in which an item specialises for negation, disappearing from non-negative affective environments according to a unidirectional order determined by the hierarchy: conditional > interrogative > comparative > negation. French *rien* exemplifies this cycle. A second cycle, the free-choice cycle, involves the spread of earlier free-choice indefinites into some of the same contexts. In this cycle, the item spreads to new contexts according to the hierarchy: free-choice item > comparative > conditional > interrogative > negation. Examples of this second cycle include French *quelqu’un*, Polish *kto-kolwiek*, Russian *kto-libo*. These cycles are compatible with Haspelmath’s (1997) semantic map of indefinites, based on synchronic typological generalisations, but further restrict possible pathways via which synchronic distributions may be reached.

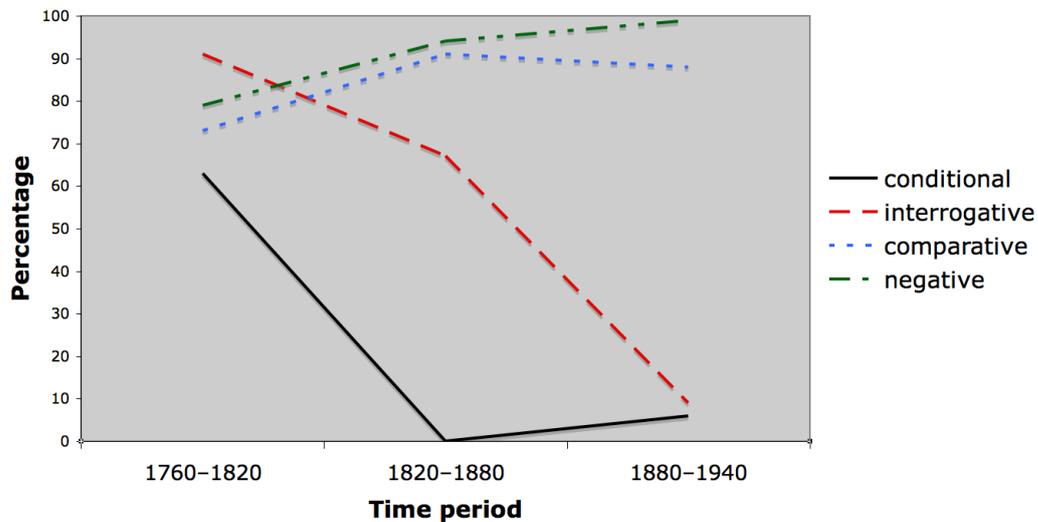
These cycles will be examined using historical data from Modern Welsh, which I will argue has recently undergone both cycles: one series of indefinites (the *neb*-series) has undergone narrowing of distribution to negatives and comparatives only (‘anyone’ > ‘no one’), while another (*unrhyw*-series indefinites), originally free-choice items, has spread to comparatives, conditionals, interrogatives and negative clauses. Detailed corpus-based investigation of texts from 1760 to the present day shows these developments to have obeyed the hierarchies proposed (cf. Figure 1 for the *neb*-series for instance).

The narrowing of the *neb*-series also interacts with the emergence of a new postverbal negator (*ddim*) in Welsh (Jespersen’s Cycle) and the loss of the preverbal negator (*ni*), illustrated as the shift from (1) to (2). I argue that *neb*-series items had initially (seventeenth century) been negative polarity items licensed semantically via c-command by an affective operator. Their licensing environment comes to be reinterpreted as syntactic licensing, a [uNeg] feature licensed by the [iNeg] feature of the preverbal negative marker *ni*. With the loss of *ni*, this feature is transferred to the *neb*-series items, allowing them to appear with negative interpretations in interrogatives and conditionals, witness the contrasting interpretations of conservative (3) and innovative (4) (both with the *neb*-series item *dim* ‘any(thing)’).

Spread of the *unrhyw*-series follows a different pattern, these items developing only semantic licensing via an affective operator. I argue that Jespersen’s Cycle lowers the position where negation is interpreted in Welsh from the C-domain to the T-domain (perhaps due to English contact), giving rise to a new contrast between the series: while *neb*-series items continued to be licensed with negative interpretations in subject position (5) (as throughout the history of the language), the new *unrhyw*-series items disappear from subject positions as Jespersen’s Cycle progresses (6).

Further evidence will also be considered from Romance and Finnic and argued to be compatible with these hierarchies. I argue that the first cycle is motivated by children’s failure to acquire the full set of contexts in which negative polarity items occur, while the second is motivated by pragmatic extensions in adult use.

Figure 1. Percentage of clauses where 'anyone, no one' is expressed using *neb*.



Data

- (1) Ni chysgais i.
NEG sleep.PAST.1S I
'I didn't sleep.' (Conservative pre-Jespersen's Cycle pattern)
- (2) Chysgais i ddim.
sleep.PAST.1S I NEG
'I didn't sleep.' (Present-day post-Jespersen's Cycle pattern)
- (3) A oes **dim rhew** ac eira yn Awstralia?
Q be.PRES.3S any frost and snow in Australia
'Is there any frost and snow in Australia?' (*Awstralia a'r cloddfeydd aur*) (1852)
- (4) tase **dim** arath i 'ch atal chi
be.COND.3S nothing other to 2P stop.INF you
'if there was nothing else to stop you'
(Gwilym Hiraethog, *Llythyrau 'Rhen Ffarmwr* 62.15-16) (1870)
- (5) Ni welodd *neb* John.
Welodd *neb* John
NEG saw no.one John
'No one saw John.' (*Neb*-series licensed in subject position)
- (6) Ni welodd unrhyw un John.
*Welodd unrhyw un John.
NEG saw any.one John
'No one saw John. / Anyone didn't see John.'
(*Unrhyw*-series loses licensing in subject position diachronically)

References

- Haspelmath, Martin. 1997. *Indefinite pronouns*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Ladusaw, William A. 1993. Negation, indefinites, and the Jespersen Cycle. In Joshua S. Guenter, Barbara A. Kaiser & Cheryl C. Zoll (eds.), *Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, 437-46. Berkeley: Berkeley Linguistics Society.