Genitives under negation in Middle High German

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The fact that German underwent the renewal of the expression of sentential negation known as Jespersen's Cycle between its Old (750–1050) and Middle High German periods (1050–1350) is well known (cf. Jäger 2008 and literature cited there). As a consequence, the original pre-finite negation particle *ni* (later *ne/en*) became first reinforced by *nicht*, originally a negative indefinite ('nothing'), and finally replaced by it. In recent years, evidence has mounted that the bridging context making *nicht*'s reanalysis from indefinite pronominal argument to adverb was one where the indefinite was an argument of a transitive verb taking a genitive attribute, which came eventually to be interpreted as internal argument of the verb itself (Pickl 2017; Breitbarth/Lucas/Willis 2020). Example (1) for instance is ambiguous: either *niawiht* + genitive attribute (*es* 'it.GEN') is still the argument of *zawên* 'succeed' (='nothing of it'), or *niawiht* wthout *es* is already an adverb (= 'not/at all'), with *es* being the argument of the verb, though not in the case it would normally have in an affirmative clause (in this example, nominative).

(1) *ni   zawêta   imo   es   niawiht.*
     NEG succeed.PRS.3SG 3MSG.DAT 3NSG.GEN nothing

    'He succeeded at **nothing of it** / He did **not** succeed at **it** at all'
    (Otfrid, *Evangelienbuch* 2, 5.12) (Lockwood 1968: 207; Jäger 2008: 113)

One might expect that after the reanalysis of the indefinite pronoun *nicht* as the new negator, genitive argument marking in negative clauses would disappear in cases where the verb selects an accusative or nominative in affirmative clauses (of course, there are verbs in historical German that select the genitive also affirmative clauses). Interestingly, however, genitives keep occurring in negative clauses at a high frequency (ca. 75%) throughout MHG (2a), and well into the ENHG (1350–1650) and even NHG periods (1650–), cf. (2b).

(2) a. *sô   brich mîner   triuwe   nicht*
         thus break my.GEN faithfulness.GEN NEG
         (Wolfram, *Parzival*, 13th c.) (Dal & Eroms 2014: 20)

    b. *ich kenne deiner   nicht*
         I   know you.GEN NEG
         (Uhland, *Die Bildsäule des Bacchus*, 1815) (Dal & Eroms 2014: 20)

We are thus dealing with a kind of form-meaning mismatch: the data look as if *niht* still were a quantifier selecting a genitive attribute long after it should have been reanalysed as a negative adverb. In the current paper I present an analysis, departing from a proposal in Breitbarth/Lucas/Willis (2020), which is able to capture this apparent mismatch: before becoming the new negator, *nicht* is a negative indefinite, able to select a genitive attribute. As it becomes reanalysed as a negative adverb, I will argue in the current paper, the quantificational structure stays in place, now as an empty quantificational shell around the genitive. MHG *nicht* does not not normally co-occur with negative indefinites (NI) such as *niemand* 'no one'. It does co-occur frequently with the determiner *kein* 'any/no', which varies between NPI and NI behaviour. I therefore argue that the genitive under negation in MHG is a form of negative concord (NC) with this quantifier, which, as other forms of NC, depends on the formal features of the elements involved.

References

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