On the Negative Contraction of Old English Verbs

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Abstract

This study reviews the matter of Negative Contractions in Old English which are formed through the fusion of the negator *ne* and a verbal element by dropping the head phoneme of the latter. In this study, based on the previous analysis of Warner (1993), in which he proclaims that there is no unitary criterion to permit such contraction because there are plural rules from different respects that collectively license the contraction. The licensing condition for contraction is seemingly a discrete one, which, on the other hand, covers all the cases of negative contraction. This understanding, however, is flawed when facing the exceptions that cannot be ruled out by it. We will give an empirically-based reasoning about why such exceptions may occur. Moreover, a refined version of licensing condition will be reformulated in this study, too, which largely emphasizes the phonological conditions and paradigmatic traits of the inflections of contractible items.

1. The Negative Contractions in Old English

The negative particle *ne* in Old English is observed to be fused with certain verbs. As depicted in (1), the consonant of *ne* would be contracted with the stem of a lexical item while ellipting the initial phenome of it.

(1)   a.   Næfð   he no forlæten ðone   truwan … (CP 447.12)
               not-has he no abandon the   fidelity
               'He hasn't abandoned the fidelity…'

        b.   Ic   nylle   ðæt bræde   etan.
               I   not-will   that meat   eat
               'I don't want to eat that grilled meat'

Unsurprisingly, like Modern English, contractions in questions are optional. Thus, *Næfð* in (1a) can be transcribed as *Ne hæfð*.

(2)　　　a.　heo wordum…hyran ne　wolde. (Genesis A 2567b-2571a)
　　　　　　she words　　obey not will
　　　　　　'She doesn't want to obey the orders.'
　　　　b.　She will not take a part in that conspiracy.

The examples in (2) manifest a good point of the issue. It has been thoroughly discussed that the preference between contraction and non-contraction form is affected by stylistic feature (verse or poem and for example) and dialectal distinction. The relating matter will not be unfolded in this paper, for further readings, see van Bergen (2008), Mitchell (1985), Mönkkönen (2018), Ogura (2008).

Ne generally behaves by analogy with its descendant *not*, only with a few differences: (i) *ne* would be attached onto the head of the verbal elements while *not* is supposed to be postposed in the contracted form like *can't* in Modern English, the contrast is illustrated in (3).

(3)　　　a.　Ic　þe　cwellan nylle.
　　　　　　I　　you kill　　not will
　　　　　　'I don't want to kill you'
　　　　b.　I can't eat that pie.

(ii) in Mitchell (1985), the adverbs of negation *ne* and *ni* are referred as contractible when they precede certain adverbs, pronouns and verbs. That is, unlike Modern English, in which such contraction only occurs when there is a verbal element that is adjacent to the negator, Old English is seemingly to have more diversities regarding the target of negative contraction. (One can also see such negative expressions in Modern English as unbreakable compounds of contracted forms that have been formally solidified through the process of grammaticalization. Only verbal elements, however, can be contracted with *not* optionally.)

(4)　　　a.　ne + āþer = nāþer 'neither'　　*Adjective*
　　　　b.　ne + æfre = næfre 'never'　　*Adverb*
　　　　c.　ne + ān = nān 'none'　　　*Pronoun*

In González and del Pilar (2007), Old English negative-verb contraction is observed to occur mostly with modals, together with part of preterite-present main verbs. They have given us a rather complete table that includes a good number of negative contractions, repeated in (5).

(5).　　　***nabban*** (< *ne* + *habban* 'have')
　　　　　nad (< *ne* + *had* 'had')
　　　　　nagan (< *ne* + *agan* 'owe')
　　　　　nart (< *ne* + *art* 'are')
　　　　　nas (< *ne* + *was* or *ne* + *has*)
　　　　　nere(n) (< *ne* + *were(n)*)
　　　　　nillan (< *ne* + *willan* 'will')

nis (< *ne* + *is*)
nolde (< *ne* + *wolde* 'would')
nytan (< *ne* + *witan* 'know')
not (< *ne* + *wot* 'knew')

Many other languages also demonstrate contractions, for example German, akin to English in the sense of linguistic cognation, does not display negative contraction. In fact, articles and adverbs can go through contraction with prepositions, depicted in (6).

(6) *German*
    a. Sie ist erregtins ins Hotel gerauscht.
       she is excitedly in the hotel rush
       'She has excitedly rushed into that hotel'
    b. Wir haben darüber schon gesprochen.
       we have there over already talked
       'We have talked about that.'

Ins in (6a) is the contracted form of *in das* and *darüber* comes from *da über*; the contraction in German is likewise optional in contrast to Romance languages like French and Italian whose vowel-initial words must be contracted with the articles.

(7) *French*
    a. Vive L'Empereur.
       Live the emperor.
       'Hail to the emperor.'
    b. *Vive le Empereur

    Italian
    c. L'unione fa la forza.
       the union do the force
       'Unity is strength.'

(8) *French*
    a. Je n'habite pas ici.
       I not live PAS here
       'I don't live here.'
    b. Ce ne sont pas mes fleurs.
       This not is PAS my flower
       'This is not my flower'.

Obviously, the banning of two adjacent vowels in French is the only reason that triggers the contractions as demonstrated in (7) and (8). Hence, it is safe to say that such contractions (along with other kind of contraction like article-vowel one) in French are triggered by the phonological

characteristics of the adjacent words where the contraction is compulsory, whereas Germanic languages like Old English and German do not seem to coerce one of the two adjacent vowels to be cancelled off.

Now, as shown above, since none of the contraction is *coerced* in Old English while not all the forms of contraction are permitted, it is not dubious that in the case of Old English, there should be conditions that need to be met to license a legit negative contraction. With the assistance of such licensing conditions, one can avoid the problem of overgeneration of negative contractions, in fact only a few of verbal elements are contractible. Related topics will be discussed in Section 2.

To give an overall description of the negative contraction in Old English, Warner (1993) gives discussions in one of his peripheral paragraphs of *English Auxiliaries* to clarify what is adequate for contraction and what is not. The criteria in question are divided into two parts: (i) the adequate candidate must be headed by [h], [w] or vowel. (ii) the adequate candidate must be a member of either preterite-present verbs group or potential auxiliary group. Based on this dichotomy, Warner proposes that there is no a unitary criterion that fully describes and regularizes the emergence of negative contractions.

Though roughly correct, some flaws of Warner's conclusion will be pointed out and amended in following sections. To sum them up, I will focus on the phonological condition, categorial redundancy, and morphology-oriented generalization, and present a rather condensed criterion than Warner's.

2. The Exceptions and the Hypothesis of Lexical Similarity

First, this section will present the exceptional cases that Warner's generalization would wrongly predict in the respect to phonology.

There are two words which are subject to preterite-present verbs and potential auxiliaries respectively, and none of them seems to conflict with the phonological conditions manifested above by Warner, but they still fail to be contracted with *ne*:

(9)　　a.　　unnan + ne ≠ *nunnan
　　　　b.　　weorðan + ne ≠ *neorðan

It is apparent Warner's generalization cannot cover these exceptions, since both of them conform to all the licensing conditions. Here I assume that due to the limited number of contractible items, it is quite difficult to extract a general principle to rule (9a) and (9b) out (the total number of preterit-present verbs is no more than 11). On the other hand, I would argue that there are certain inherent traits embodied in *weorðan* and *unnan* that may account for such phenomenon.

First, let us take a look at the case of *weorðan*. We can give (9b) a plausible explanation through the contrast of monophthong and diphthong. Given *weorðan* is the only member in the candidates group whose stem vowel is a diphthong, thus what differs it from its kind may stand as a benchmark to clarify the observed distinctiveness. The pronouncing time of the stem vowel seems irrelevant, since āgan, which is headed by a long vowel, demonstrates a desirable example of negative contraction as (10) shows.

(10).　　　āgan + ne = nāgan

　　As for the case of *unnan*, a similar approach is also accessible. That it is the only member in the candidates group which is headed by a high back vowel. Therefore, the value of the stem vowels takes its part in licensing the contraction on par with head vowels.

　　Another available reasoning can be made if we consider the over-reduplication of certain consonant would be excluded in natural language. Note if *ne* and *unnan* are allowed to be contracted, it would result in a word like *nunnan* which contains four phonemes of [n]. According to Mitchell (1969), all the consonants in Old English word are supposed to be pronounced. Therefore, *nunnan* would sound like [nu-n-na-n], which I assume would be a word that is too hard to articulate due to too many nasal consonants.

　　Besides that, we will present a hypothesis that the crucial reason which is responsible for the aforesaid two exceptions, namely *weorðan* and *unnan*, may be attributed to the similarity between the contracted forms and some commonly used words. That being said, ruling out these two exceptions is simply in order to avoid the confusion that may happen within the conversational utterance.

　　This hypothesis can be manifested by comparing contracted forms of *weorðan* and *unnan* with the lexical entries in Old English dictionary. The dictionary used in this study is *A Modern English - Old English Dictionary* composed by Mary Johnson in 1927.

　　Consider the cases given in (11-12) that the inflected forms of *weorðan* phonologically resemble to some very frequently used words: *neah/neor* 'near' , *nearu* 'danger', *neoseð* 'finds out'. And the infinitive form *weoðan* would turn into *neoðan* if contracted with *ne*, which is an independent preposition whose meaning is 'down, below'. They are not only phonologically identical, but also they share completely the same spelling.

(11).　　　weorðan→　1st.sg.prs　→　weorðe +ne　=　neorðe
　　　　　　weorðan→　3st.sg.prs　→　wierð + ne　=　nierð

(12).　　　weorðan→　1st.sg.prt　→　wearð + ne　=　nearð
　　　　　　weorðan→　3st.sg.prt　→　wearð + ne　=　nearð

　　The most commonly seen inflected forms of *weorðan* are 1st/3rd singular present/1st/3rd preterite (just like any other verbal elements). Thus, I focus mainly on these inflected forms.

　　As for another exception, i.e., *unnan*, whose 1st/3rd singular present form is *ann*. Then, its contracted form would be *nann* , and if it were inflected into accusative case it will turn out to be *nænne*. Both of the two forms are just slightly different from *nan* 'none' and the latter is certainly a basic word.

　　By contrast, the commonly appeared forms of other candidates do not give rise to the same problems as *weorðan* and *unnan* would. In (13), I present a table in which some of the most commonly conjugated form of candidate words will be listed:

(13).　　habban:　　　hæfþ, hæfde

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willan:      wille, wolde
wesan:       art, is
witan        wat, wiste
etc…
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The contracted forms of words in (13) have been listed in (5), and after comparing them with the lexical items which seem most alike to our candidates, there exhibits a very different picture as (14) shows:

(14).　næfþ or næfde : næftig 'poor', næfebor 'auger'
　　　nylle or nolde: nýfellan 'to fill anew'
　　　nis or nart : nið 'abyss', néahtún 'neighborhood'
　　　nat or niste : nistan 'to build a nest'

The most common inflected forms of *habban* have two 'similar' equivalents if it gets contracted with *ne*, i.e., *næftig* and *næfebor*, whereas none of them sound like *næfþ* or *næfde* due to the fact that the total number of syllables within each of them does not match. Such mismatching is not seen in the cases of *neorðe* or *nann*.

Nýfellan, being the most similar word to *nylle,* its infinitival form has one more syllable than the later. The singular conjugated form of *nýfellan* is *nýfelleþ* and *nýfelde*, they do not seem to sound like *nylle* or *nolde* (distinct stem vowel), the total number of syllables are not matching neither. Also, it does not seem like a frequently-spoken word.

As discussed above, we can foresee that *nis/nart* and *nat/niste* will face the same situation as *næfþ /næfde* and *nylle/nolde* do. For concreteness, *nis* and *nið* may be alike enough to get Old English listeners confused, the latter one meaning 'abyss', however, can hardly be classified as 'used every day'. The case of *nistan* tells the same story, as it seems quite unlikely for one to utter 'build a nest' every single day.

3. The Categorial Status of Potential Auxiliaries

The status of potential auxiliary group also seems inconsistent for following reasons. (i) preterite-present verbs are largely overlapped with potential auxiliaries, and they are highly homogeneous in the sense of auxiliary formalization. (ii) when the verb *habban* 'have' is used as a full verb, it can also be contracted with *ne* without being part of either candidate groups. (iii) the distinction between potential auxiliaries and full verbs is vague, because they can be used independently without infinitives. Hence, the legitimacy of this group is fragile, specific examples of (i), (ii) and (iii) are given in (15).

(15)　a. Overlaps: cunnan 'can', durran 'dare', magan 'may', motan 'may', sculan 'should'
　　　b. Hē　**næfde**　þā　　ealles landes　būton　seofon　fōtmǣl.
　　　　　he　　hadn't　these all　lands　　without seven　　foot
　　　　　'He did not have any land other than that seven feet.'
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(William the Conqueror 2.7)

c. Đas　VIIII　**magon** wið　nygon attrum.
these　nine　can　against nine　poisons
'These 9 men can resist nine sorts of poisons.'

<div align="right">(ASPR VI, 116ff.)</div>

First, it is well known that the process of grammaticalization involves high frequency of usages, and the whole duration of grammaticalization is arguably coherent, therefore we can say the division of preterite-present verbs and auxiliaries are just chronically separated segments. In the same spirit, Heine (1993) proposes that auxiliaries had gone through the maxima historical evolution and reached its 'developmental end-point'. Therefore, despite the distinctions embedded in their surficial functions, morphology and general classification, potential-auxiliary does not seem to be an independent cluster of verbs that is needed to be separated from preterite-present verbs.

Now, notice that the meaning and subcategorial status of all the verbal elements in question seem insignificant in the process of contraction, as illustrated in (15b), in which *næfde* plays a role of main verb just like 'I have an apple', while *haven't* in Modern English cannot be interpreted as 'the absence of ownership', illustrated in (15b). Hence, *næfde* in (15b) is an unexplained exception violating Warner's generalization.

(16). *I haven't any money.

At last, *magon* in (15c) is subject to both preterite-present verbs group and potential auxiliary group, and what differs it from its modern descendant is that the Preposition Phrase *wið nygon attrum* is treated as its complement. We may construe such structure as either Ellipsis of Verb or Main Verb Phrase, depicted in (17) and (18) respectively. The structure of (11), however, does not seem plausible because it does not appear in the form of pseudo-gapping, hence such ellipsis is not recoverable. Therefore, one can only fill in the gap with the verb that is conjectured by oneself, and the barred *gefeohtan* exemplifies the very matter.

(17)　Đas VIIII **magon** (~~gefeohtan~~) wið nygon attrum.
(18)　Đas VIIII [vp**magon** [ppwið nygon attrum]].

Similar usages are named as 'independent use' by Mitchell and this sort of occurrence demonstrates the immaturity of the auxiliary group in the respect of morphological formalization. Hence, in the subsequent section, term of 'auxiliary' will be excluded from the general condition that licenses the negative contraction.

4. An Alternative Criterion

In this section, I will present a two-layered condition for the licensing of negative contraction without the definition of potential-auxiliary or preterite-present verb, because two partially overlapped verb clusters can display categorial redundancy. As have been discussed in Section 2,

the two exceptions *weorðan* and *unnan* provide us proper motivation to improve the phonological filter originally proposed by Warner, since it incorrectly predicts that *weorðan* and *unnan* can be selected for contraction.

Here, I will firstly refine the preliminary version of phonological condition (i.e., only those who are headed by [h], [w] or vowels are contractible) by adding a more precise constraint to negative contraction and unifying the head phoneme selection.

As to the phoneme [h] and [w], I argue that they seem to fall under the same category in two ways. First, their unsteadiness can be easily captured in declinations of Old English nouns.

(19)　a.　*feoh* 'money'
　　　　　plural genitive: *feona*
　　　　　singular dative: *feo*
　　　b.　*bearu* 'grove'
　　　　　plural genitive: *bearwa*
　　　　　plural accusative: *bearwas*

Note that [h] in (19a) is lost when the noun is declined for different cases and numbers, while [w] in (19b) is substituted for [u] in the same case. The deformation of [h] and [w] can also be found in the Modern English literature, that they are silent in certain Germanic-rooted words.

(20)　a.　ghost, aghast, Beckham, Nottingham
　　　b.　sword, write, wrench

Secondly, despite the typological intricacies, we can see both [h] and [w] as semivowel, because they are articulated without closure of the vocal tract, which is a typical feature of vowel. On this basis, the phonological condition of Warner can be recurred as (21).

(21) All the appropriate items that are contractible must be headed by a non-*u*-vowel or semivowel and their stem vowels must be monophthongal.

(21) is a condition that is built up by two disjunctions, and each of them is specified to deal with the situation of the two exceptions. Recall that *weorðan* is the only member of potential auxiliaries whose stem vowel is diphthong, while *unnan* is also the only member of 　　preterite-present verbs whose head vowel is a high back vowel. Note also that (21) is only a 'vowel-filter', which I believe is much simpler than Warner's specified phonological constraints. With the reword of the phonological condition of Warner, my condensed criterion will suppress the redundancy of the earlier one, in which a tripartite restriction is in need.

I postulate that after passing the phonological filter reformulated above (I use the word *pass* for expository purpose, since the set of licensing conditions are supposed to be unordered), only the candidates who have **irregular inflectional paradigm** are adequate for contraction. This proposition is manifested by the properties that preterite-present verbs and potential auxiliaries have in common. In the same spirit, the definition of preterite-present verbs group and potential auxiliary group within the licensing conditions will be discarded following this assumption.

Preterite-present verbs are namely embodiments of irregular paradigm, to put this briefly, a preterite-present verb would take a canonical preterite form to denote a present meaning while take a canonical present form to denote a preterite meaning. For concreteness, *walked* would be interpreted as *'walks'* if Modern English obtains this kind of declination method, formalized in (22).

(22).

Infinitive	1st.Sg.Prs	1st.Sg. Prt	Pl. Prs
Witan	Wat	Wiste	Witon

In the case of potential auxiliary group, *willan* and *habban* are respectively called as 'anomalous verb' and 'independent verbs' by Mitchell, in that, *willan* would be conjugated into *wolde* regardless of tense and number, and *habban* would undergo a stem-vowel mutation when inflecting for different numbers. In other words, they do not show regular inflections.

Given the fact that *willan, habban* alongside *beon* 'be' (also an anomalous verb) are the only three non-preterite-present verbs that can be contracted with *ne*, the isolation between preterite-present verbs group and auxiliary group will be neutralized under this analysis.

To be specific, what the term 'preterite-present' emphasizes is the reversed tense-meaning arrays, then it might not have the full coverage when phonological factors are involved. Likewise, the main contents of the term 'auxiliary' is carried out by expressing modality or aspect as well as the syntactic features of those specified 'verbs' which are largely bound with the phrasal infinitiveness and correlation with the main verb. In this study, I assume that these two groups may not offer us the optimality regarding the shared properties of verbal elements in which we can elaborate the discussion of negative contraction.

Then, I argue that an alternative criterion is available by combining phonological filter and this morphology-oriented generalization:

(23)　　a.　**Phonological Filter**: Only when the verbal element is headed by a non-*u*-vowel or semivowel and its stem vowel is a monophthong, can it be selected to meet the Main Condition.

　　　　b.　**Morphological Condition:** Only the verbal element (which have passed the Phonological Filter) with irregular inflectional paradigm is contractible with *ne*.

The generalization of Warner is roughly correct that the solid facts of Old English Negative Contraction is discrete in the sense of licensing condition. A more condensed criterion, however, is still available, since all it does is to regulate the value of the vowel and one single morphological feature without ruling out these illegal items verbatim. The criterion in (23) also eliminates the dilemma concerning the 'unexplainable' exceptions, the flaw of Warner's claim would largely recede.

5 Conclusion

In this essay, it has been made clear that Old English does have the phenomenon of negative contraction that patterns with its modern descendant. The licensing of such contraction, however, is much complicated in the former. Previous studies have made efforts to formalize the restriction of such contraction in association with the combination of conditions and the presupposed definitions. As I have suggested early, their generalizations are roughly correct, on the other hand, the purpose of this paper is to eliminate all the descriptive redundancies and fix the subtle bugs. Therefore, I have assumed a two-layered license condition for negative contraction without resorting to the blurred classification of verbal elements (present-preterite verbs and potential auxiliaries). In addition, in this paper I have attempted to explain why are *weorðan* and *unnan* not allowed to form a negative compound with *ne*, that the essential factor would be the lexical similarity. In contrast, one may hardly think of a commonly used simple word that is pronounced as [kaːnt], [`hævnt] or [`mʌsnt].

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古英語の動詞−否定辞縮約現象について

　　本稿は古英語における動詞−否定辞の縮約をテーマにし、その縮約の許可条件を検討する。古英語の否定辞縮約は現代英語に違い、助動詞以外に過去−現在動詞や異体動詞もその部類に入る。故に、数多くの先行研究において、その縮約現象を取り扱うにあたって、離散的な叙述的条件を用いて説明を果たしたが、本研究はより凝縮した縮約条件を発案し、「音声部門」と「屈折状態部門」にわけ、一般化された許可条件を立てることを試みた。

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