

*Analysing the development of negation in Welsh:  
Some problems in interpreting Middle and Modern Welsh texts*

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## INTRODUCTION

- the Welsh negation system has undergone substantial change since Middle Welsh (at least)
- against the background of European (and other) languages these changes follow patterns seen frequently in different languages; they are not random
- the changes are not confined to a single period; the changes affect every part of the negation system and occur continually over a long period
- although negative clauses appear frequently in texts, the changes affect the (syntactic) status and meaning of individual elements, so...
- to trace and explain the changes needs a significant amount of data, enough to be able to compare negation system in a large number of texts across several periods
- electronic textual corpora go some way towards facilitating this sort of research

Structure of the talk

Part 1: outline of the major changes in the Welsh negation system on the basis of textual evidence;

Part 2: discussion of how we know about these developments and the difficulties in collecting and analysing data from the texts

## 1 THE WELSH CHANGES IN THEIR CROSSLINGUISTIC CONTEXT

### 1.1 Jespersen's Cycle

- a historical process that creates a new negative adverb which replaces the original negator

The history of negative expressions in various languages makes us witness the following curious fluctuation: the original negative adverb is first weakened, then found insufficient and therefore strengthened, generally through some additional word, and this in its turn may be felt as the negative proper and may then in course of time be subject to the same development as the original word. (Jespersen 1917: 4)

- has happened in:

French (*pas* 'step, pace, track' strengthens and replaces the inherited negator *ne*)

Middle High German *en* ... *nicht*      Middle Dutch *en* ... *niet*

Middle English *ne* ... *no(ch)t*      Old Norse

Arabic *mā* ... *-š*      Berber, many languages of west and central Africa

Celtic: Welsh *ni(d)* ... *ddim*      Breton *ne* ... *ket*

(Relatively) fixed patterns of change:

Stage I. Particle in front of the verb to negate the statement, *ny(t)* in Middle Welsh:

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- (1) ...ny cheffy di varch gennyf i.  
NEG get.PRES.2S you horse with.1S me  
 ‘...you will not get a horse from me.’ (Ystoryaeu Seint Greal 1940) (MW)

## Stage II.

- (according to Jespersen) the particle weakens and is reinforced by some other element
- a reinforcing element is introduced, optionally at first (stage IIA)
- the reinforcing element becomes compulsory in the end (stage IIB)

In Welsh: (*d*)*dim*, noun meaning ‘thing, object’ > Middle Welsh indefinite pronoun ‘anything, unrhyw beth’ > reinforcing element in sentences where it cannot be analysed as object (or subject) of the verb.

Conservative contexts:

(i) direct object:

- (2) Ac ny mynnwys ef dim. (direct object)  
 and NEG want.PAST.3S he anything  
 ‘And he didn’t want anything.’ (Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi 27.10–11) (MW)

(ii) complement to a verb of succeeding, a verb of caring or a verb of compensation (*tygyaw* (*tycio*) ‘work, help’, *diwygyaw* (*diwygio*) ‘compensate, put right’ etc.) expressing the extent to which something succeeds, the extent to which it is (un)important, or the extent to which compensation is made:

- (3) Ny thalwys idaw hynny **dim**...  
 NEG pay.PAST.3S to.3MS this anything  
 ‘And this didn’t help him in any way (to any extent).’  
 (Ystorya de Carolo Magno 99.23) (MW)

A new pattern emerges in texts from the end of the 13th century onwards (*dim* has no relationship with the verb) (Willis 2006):

- (4) A gwedy gwelet o 'r benhin hynny ny chyffroas arnaw **dim**...  
 and after see.INF of the king that NEG agitate.PAST.3S on.3MS at.all  
 ‘And after the king saw that, he did not become agitated (in the least)...’  
 (Brenhinedd y Saesson 70.9–10) (MW)
- (5) A phan weles ynteu daruot llad y varch, ny  
 and when see.PAST.3S he PERF.INF kill.INF 3MS horse NEG  
 lidiawd **dim** yr hynny...  
 become.angry.PAST.3S at.all despite that.NEUT  
 ‘And when he saw that his horse had been killed, he still didn’t get angry (in the least).’  
 (Ystoryaeu Seint Greal 2874) (MW)

- Jespersen saw the phonetic weakening of the preverbal negative particle as the motivation for the cycle (‘drag chain’)
- today the universal tendency to overuse emphatic negation tends to be seen as responsible for Jespersen’s Cycle (‘push chain’)
- speakers create a new way to emphasise negation, such as Modern Welsh *o gwbl* ‘at all’
- adverbs like *o gwbl* or *at all* emphasise negation by conveying the meaning that the event or the state described did not happen even to the least possible extent:

- (6) Dyw Ifan ddim yn gwyllo teledu. SIMPLE NEGATION  
 NEG.be.PRES.3S Ifan NEG PROG watch.INF television  
 ‘Ifan doesn’t watch television.’ (ModW)
- (7) Dyw Ifan ddim yn gwyllo teledu o gwbl. EMPHATIC NEGATION  
 NEG.be.PRES.3S Ifan NEG PROG watch.INF television at.all  
 ‘Ifan doesn’t watch television (at all, in the least, even to the least extent).’ (ModW)

- such adverbs develop frequently
- sometimes they come to be used more frequently over a number of generations, until they lose their newness and their emphatic quality
- hence they begin to express simple (unemphatic) negation
- by then, speakers of the language will have created a new form or forms to convey emphasis

· at first, the emphasising adverb is used in non-assertive (negative-polarity) contexts: negative sentences, questions, after 'too', 'everyone' and 'all', in comparative clauses etc.

- (8) Ydy Ifan yn gwyllo teledu o gwbl?  
be.PRES.3S Ifan PROG watch.INF television at.all  
'Does Ifan watch television at all?' (ModW)
- (9) Mae Ifan yn rhy ifanc i wyllo teledu o gwbl.  
be.PRES.3S Ifan PRED too young to watch.INF television at.all  
'Ifan is too young to watch television at all.' (ModW)
- (10) \*Mae Ifan yn gwyllo teledu o gwbl.  
be.PRES.3S Ifan PROG watch.INF television at.all  
'Ifan watches television at all.' (ModW)

· this is the function of *dim* in the Middle Welsh texts that use it to reinforce negation:

- (11) Ac yno y wylaw a orugant y edrych a allei  
and then 3MS watch.INF PRT do.PAST.3P to look.INF PRT can.IMPF.3S  
ymdidan dim ac wynt.  
converse.INF at.all with them  
'And then they watched him to see whether he could converse with them at all.'  
(*Ystoriaeu Seint Greal* 5213) (MW)

· later on, (*d*)*dim* changes the linguistic context in which it appears:

- Stage IIA: optional in negative main clauses  
possible in non-assertive clauses (interrogative, comparative, conditional)
- Stage IIB: compulsory (or more compulsory) in negative main clauses  
impossible in non-assertive clauses that are not negative

Hence it becomes:

- negative rather than non-assertive
- non-emphatic (simple) rather than emphatic

Stage III. The particle in front of the verb can be omitted (stage IIIA), disappearing completely from the language in the end (stage IIIB):

- (12) Cheiff dynion ar fusness ddim eiste 'n hir, Na  
can.PRES.3S men on business NEG sit.INF PRD long NEG.COMP  
fernir, 'n hwy mewn Tafarneu...  
judge.PRES.IMPERS them in taverns  
'Men on business can't sit for long without them being judged in taverns...'  
(*Tri chryfion byd* 684) (1789)
- (13) Mi roedd hi yn discwyl iddo fo ei chymeryd hi  
PRT be.IMPF.3S she PROG expect.INF to.3MS him 3SF take.INF her  
ac wneist [sic = wneiff] o ddim.  
and do.FUT.3S he NEG  
'She was expecting him to take her but he won't.'  
(Bangor Consistory Court, Denio & Penmorfa, Suggett 1983) (1778)

## 1.2 The negative pronoun cycle

The same tendencies are seen with pronouns and negative quantifiers:

· emphatic forms lose their emphatic quality and form e.g. *dim yn y byd* ‘anything in the world, anything at all’ > *dim byd* ‘nothing’, *neb ryw* ‘any kind of ... (at all)’ > ‘any’ (Middle Welsh)

- (14) ...am nad oedd ef yn kasav **dim yn y byd**  
 for NEG.COMP be.IMPF.3S he PROG hate.INF anything in the world  
 yn gymaint a medd-dod.  
 PRED so.much as drunkenness  
 ‘...since he hated nothing in the world (nothing at all) as much as drunkenness.’  
 (*Gesta Romanorum* 1889) (16th century)
- (15) Heb feddwl **dim yn y byd** ar droed, A'm Greuawdwr erioed...  
 without think.INF anything in the world on foot about creator ever  
 ‘...without thinking anything (at all) (on foot) about the Creator ever...’  
 (*Tri chryfion byd* 1359) (1789)
- (16) fel na cheis i ddim amser i syfenu **dim byd.**  
 so.that NEG.COMP get.PAST.1S I any time to write.INF anything  
 ‘...so that I didn’t get any time to write anything.’ (*Llythyrau ’rhen ffarmwr* 5.3–4) (1847)

· forms become inherently negative e.g. *dim* ‘anything’ > ‘nothing’, *neb* ‘anyone’ > ‘no one’  
 · new forms develop to renew the old items e.g. *unrhyw beth* replaces *dim (byd)* in non-assertive contexts

English gloss	Middle Welsh	Modern Welsh (spoken)
‘any X, no X’	<i>dim</i> (X) ‘any’ (mass noun) <i>un</i> (X) ‘any’ (count noun) <i>yr un</i> (X) ‘any’ (count noun, member of a group) – <i>neb</i> (X) ‘any’ [ <i>neb ryw</i> ‘any kind’ > ‘any’] [ <i>dim o</i> (X) ‘any of’ > ‘any’]	<i>dim</i> (X) ‘no’ (all nouns) – <i>’run</i> (X) ‘no, not a single’ (count)  <i>unrhyw</i> (X) ‘no’ (all nouns) – – [ <i>mo</i> ‘particle marking a negative object’]
‘anything, nothing’	<i>dim</i> ‘anything’ [ <i>neb ryw dim</i> ‘anything’]	<i>dim</i> ‘nothing’ <i>dim byd</i> ‘nothing’ <i>unrhyw beth</i> ‘anything’ ( <i>rhywbeth</i> ‘something’)
‘anyone, no one’	<i>neb</i> ‘anyone’ <i>dyn</i> ‘person’ > ‘anyone’ ( <i>un dyn</i> > <i>undyn</i> ‘anyone’)	<i>neb</i> ‘no one’ – ( <i>undyn</i> ‘anyone’) <i>unrhyw un</i> ‘anyone’ ( <i>rhywun</i> ‘someone’)

Table 1. Outline of the development of indefinite / negative pronouns and quantifiers.

## 2 TO WHAT EXTENT DO THE TEXTS ALLOW US TO TRACE THESE DEVELOPMENTS?

- printed editions of historical texts (the traditional corpus)
- Rhyddaith Gymraeg o Lawysgrifau'r 13eg Ganrif (Isaac & Rodway 2002)
- [· Rhyddiaith Gymraeg 1350–1425 (Thomas, Luft & Smith 2007)]
- Corpws Hanesyddol yr Iaith Gymraeg 1500–1850 (*CHIG*) (Mittendorf & Willis 2004)
- Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 1700–1800 (printed books only)

## 2.1 Middle Welsh

(1) What is the status of *dim* in different Middle Welsh texts?

- by comparing a translated text with the original, it is possible to get a more detailed impression of the intended meaning of the translation
- do the translations follow the French or the Latin too rigidly?
- *o dim* is used sometimes in *Ystoriaeu Seint Greal* and in 'Rhamant Otuel' (*Ystoria de Carolo Magno*) to translate Old French *de riens*:

(17) 'A unbenn', heb y Galaath, 'nyt anghenreit ytti wrthyf i yma o dim...  
 voc lord QUOT Galâth neg necessity to.you of.1s me here of anything  
 'Lord,' said Galâth, 'you have no need of me here (for any reason)...'  
 (*Ystoriaeu Seint Greal* 939–40) (MW)

- a tradition of copying texts may hide linguistic changes
- many Middle Welsh texts that were copied after the new *dim* developed fail to reflect the new form (*Pedeir Keinc* and other conservative texts)

- copying may be revealing if the scribe introduces linguistic changes as he copies:

(18) A gwr du mawr a wely ym penn yr orsedd ny bo  
 and man black big REL see.pres.2s at end the stage NEG be.PRES.SUBJ.3s  
 llei Llyfr Gwyn: ø no deuwr o wyr y byt honn...  
 Jesus 20: dim  
 Llyfr Coch: o dim  
 less (at.all) than two.man of men the world this  
 '...and you will see at the end of the mound a big dark man who is no smaller (in any  
 way) than two men of this world...'  
 (*Owein* 107–8) (MW)

(2) Do variations reflect dialect differences in Middle Welsh? For instance, is use of *neb ryw* instead of *dim* or *un* to mean 'any' characteristic of any particular dialect in Middle Welsh?

## 2.2 Modern Welsh

- establishment of a standard written language from the 16th century onwards hides developments in the spoken language

Jespersen's Cycle: the new particle *ddim* does not become compulsory in the written lang.  
 the preverbal particle *ni(d)* does not disappear from the written language

When exactly was *ni(d)* lost in speech? When exactly did *ddim* become compulsory? There is definitive evidence of omission of *ni(d)* in the second half of the 18th century, but what about the period before this?

The difficulties are worse for the 19th century:

- earlier sources (interludes, ballads, court case records) come to an end, but:
- novels in Welsh
- personal letters (some migrants' letters before 1820 in *CHIG*, some after in the Wales-Ohio Project)

- *ddim* has become compulsory with a negative pronoun like *dim byd*, except where the negative pronoun would directly follow *ddim* (cf. Borsley and Jones 2005):

- (19) Dyw Ifan ddim yn gwneud dim byd.  
neg.be.PRES.3S Ifan NEG PROG do.INF nothing  
'Ifan isn't doing anything.' (ModW)
- (20) Welodd Ifan ddim byd.  
see.PAST.3S Ifan nothing  
'Ifan saw nothing / Ifan didn't see anything.' (ModW)
- (21) \*Welodd Ifan ddim ddim byd.  
see.PAST.3S Ifan NEG nothing  
'Ifan saw nothing / Ifan didn't see anything.' (ModW)

- pattern (20) continues (more or less) what is found in Middle Welsh
- (19) is new, introducing *ddim* and replacing (22).

- (22) Nid yw Ifan yn gwneud dim byd.  
NEG be.PRES.3S Ifan PROG do.INF nothing  
'Ifan isn't doing anything.' (ModW)

Does (22) replace (19) in speech at the same time as *ni(d)* begins to be omitted? This is what we would expect, but, of course, (22) continues in the literary language.

- the same problem arises with the indefinite pronouns *dim* 'anything, nothing' and *neb* 'anyone, no one'
- these become negative irrespective of context:

- (23) Os oes neb i redeg y râs yna ni fydd Grand Prix  
if be.PRES.3S no.one to run.INF the race then NEG be.FUT.3S Grand Prix  
Prydain yn cael ei gynnal.  
Britain PROG get.INF 3MS hold.INF  
'If there's no one to run the race, then the British Grand Prix won't be held.' (ModW)  
(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/cymru/chwaraeon/erail/101312.shtml>)

- less than 100 years ago *neb* was free to appear in non-assertive environments:

- (24) Oes neb yn y tŷ?  
be.PRES.3S anyone in the house  
'Is there anyone in the house?' (Fynes-Clinton 1913)

- speakers today prefer *rhywun* 'someone' neu *unrhwy un* 'anyone' to convey this meaning
- when did this tendency begin to be felt?

### TO CONCLUDE...

- new technology facilitates research into the history of the language, making research possible on a wider scale than before
- research on Welsh complements / follows historical linguistics that used electronic corpora more and more in other languages (particularly English and German)
- comparing the histories of different languages (whether related or not) can teach us about the process of linguistic change: different languages follow the same paths
- the history of negation in Welsh is a good examples of a series of connected developments where it is possible to trace and explain the details of the changes on the basis of detailed textual evidence
- despite all this, the technology does not really change the nature of the field

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