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Conversazioni Linguistiche



PROSSIMO INCONTRO:

Jespersens Cycle in German: “iht” vs. “niht”

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Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

30 gennaio 2026 | ore 12:00 – 13:30

Aula 421 (E. L. Corner Piscopia) + Diretta Streaming

Dipartimento di Lettere e Filosofia | Via Tommaso Gar 14, Trento

L'incontro potrebbe essere registrato e reso disponibile sul canale YouTube del TreLinLab.

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Jespersen Cycle in German

iht vs. *niht*

Helmut Weiß & Farbod Khouzani

The Jespersen Cycle (JC) is a language change process during which a preverbal standard sentential negation particle is strengthened by a secondary postverbal element, which becomes the new standard sentential negation particle while the former negation marker disappears. The standard German negation particle *nicht* ‘not’ is claimed to be the result of the JC having replaced the original Old High German preverbal negation particle *ni* (cf. e.g. Jäger 2008). In the history of German, *nicht* has competed with other elements, such as its non-negative equivalent *iht*, as a negation marker. While *nicht* grammaticalized as the new negation marker in most of modern German dialects, the indefinite *iht* (< *iowiht* < *wiht*) has become extinct in all of them and has developed into a sentential negation particle of the forms *it* or *et* only in some Bavarian dialects (Schmeller 1872: 30 or 176), southeastern Swabian (Grimm 1890: 714), and northeastern Swiss dialects (cf. Jäger 2008: 119, 2010: 801–802). Yet in Middle High German and – to some extent – Early New High German, it was still an integral part of the indefinite system as a polarity-sensitive indefinite referring to entities. The historical development of *iht* and its uses have been discussed in the literature (cf. Jäger 2008, 2010; Paul 2007). However, a comparative investigation of the diachronic development of *iht* in different dialects has not been carried out yet. Hence, we conducted a corpus study to investigate the occurrence of *iht* in Thuringian and its surrounding dialects in Middle High German corpora to address the following questions: 1) How does the occurrence of *iht* differ in such dialects that have lost this element (*niht*-dialects) in contrast to the abovementioned dialects still using it (*iht*-dialects)? 2) To what extent does *iht* exhibit different functions in these dialects? By doing so and based on our findings concerning the diachronic development of *iht* in Alemannic and Bavarian dialects (cf. Khouzani 2024), we will attempt to examine whether there are facts concerning the behavior of *iht* in the collected data that could be regarded as crucial factors for its extinction in Thuringian and dialects close-by, contrary to the others in which it has survived.

Keywords: Historical linguistics, Jespersen Cycle, Middle High German, Language Change, Negative Polarity Item, Indefinite Pronoun, *iht*

References (selection)

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Corpora

ReA = Zeige, Lars Erik; Gohar Schnelle; Martin Klotz; Karin Donhauser; Jost Gippert and Rosemarie Lühr (2022). *Referenzkorpus Altdeutsch*. Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.
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ReM = Klein, Thomas; Klaus-Peter Wegera; Stefanie Dipper and Claudia Wich-Reif (2016). *Referenzkorpus Mittelhochdeutsch (1050–1350)*, Version 1.0, URL: <https://www.linguistics.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/rem/>.