Using Sermons to Investigate Grammatical Change in German

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Research Questions

Grammatical Change in General
- How do grammatical forms or rules change, if all factors except time are controlled for?
- What mechanisms govern the development of grammatical change?

Grammatical Change in the History of German
- What is the impact of societal and sociolinguistic factors (such as the Reformation or standardisation)?
- What are the concrete dynamics of grammatical change in the history of German, and how was it influenced by geographical, linguistic and other factors?

Design and Structure of the Corpus

Manuscripts table: Number of texts — 68k words
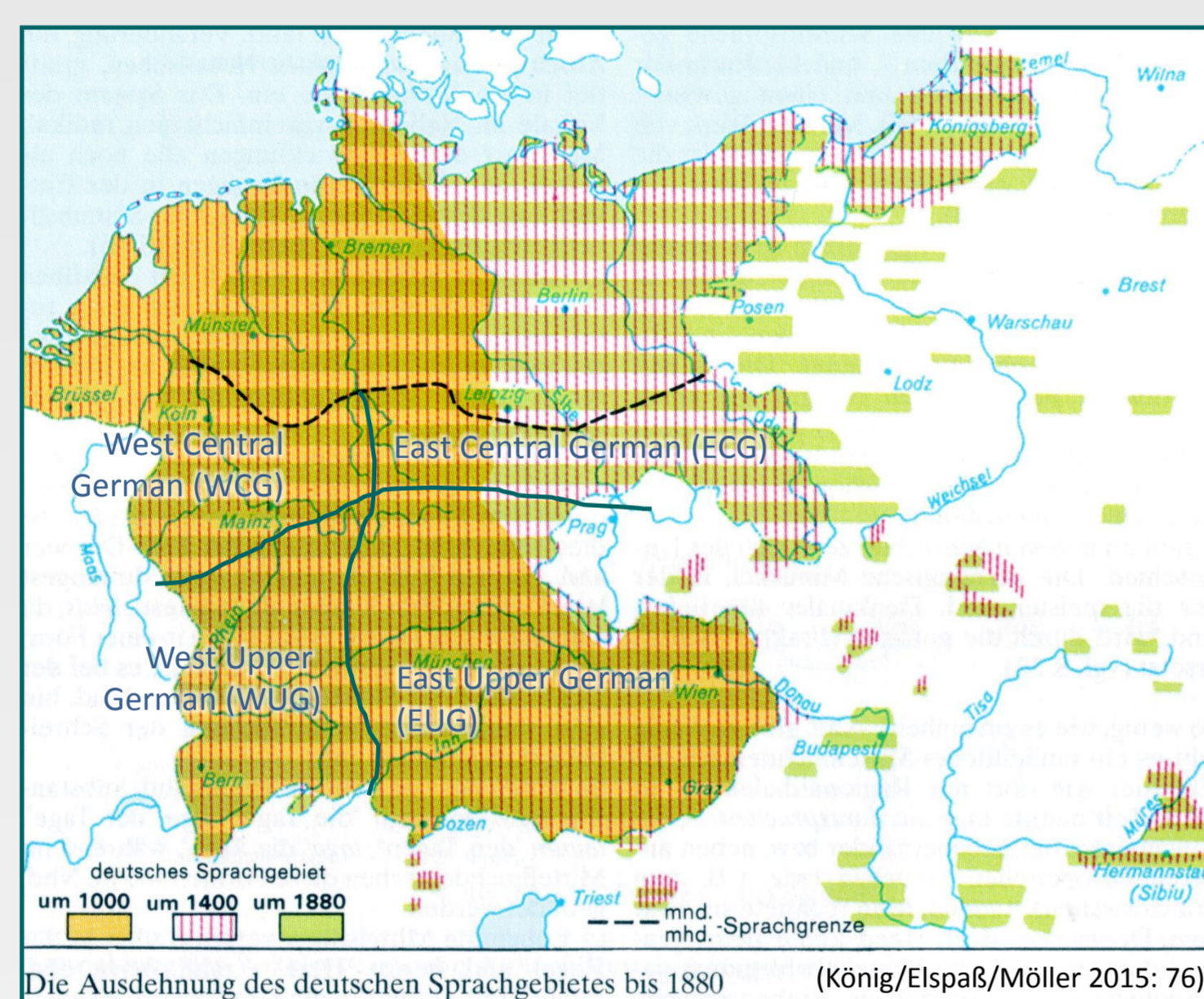
Prints table: Number of texts — 96k words

Corpus Parameters
- **Time**
  time periods of 50 years each from 800 to 1900
- **Region**
  four major High German dialect areas (see map)
- **Medium**
  manuscripts from 800 to 1900
  prints from 1500 to 1900

Additional Parameters (where applicable)
- **Denomination**
  catholic
  protestant
- **Type of Transmission**
  speech-purposed (e.g. drafts)
  speech-based (e.g. transcripts)
  speech-like (e.g. reading sermons)
  (cf. Culpeper/Kytö 2010)
- **etc. …**

Die Ausdehnung des deutschen Sprachgebietes bis 1880 (König/Elspaß/Möller 2015: 76)

The Case for a Single-Genre Corpus: Why Sermons?

With a single-genre corpus, only a glimpse of the vast mass of language production in the past is possible. Why (exclusively) sermons?
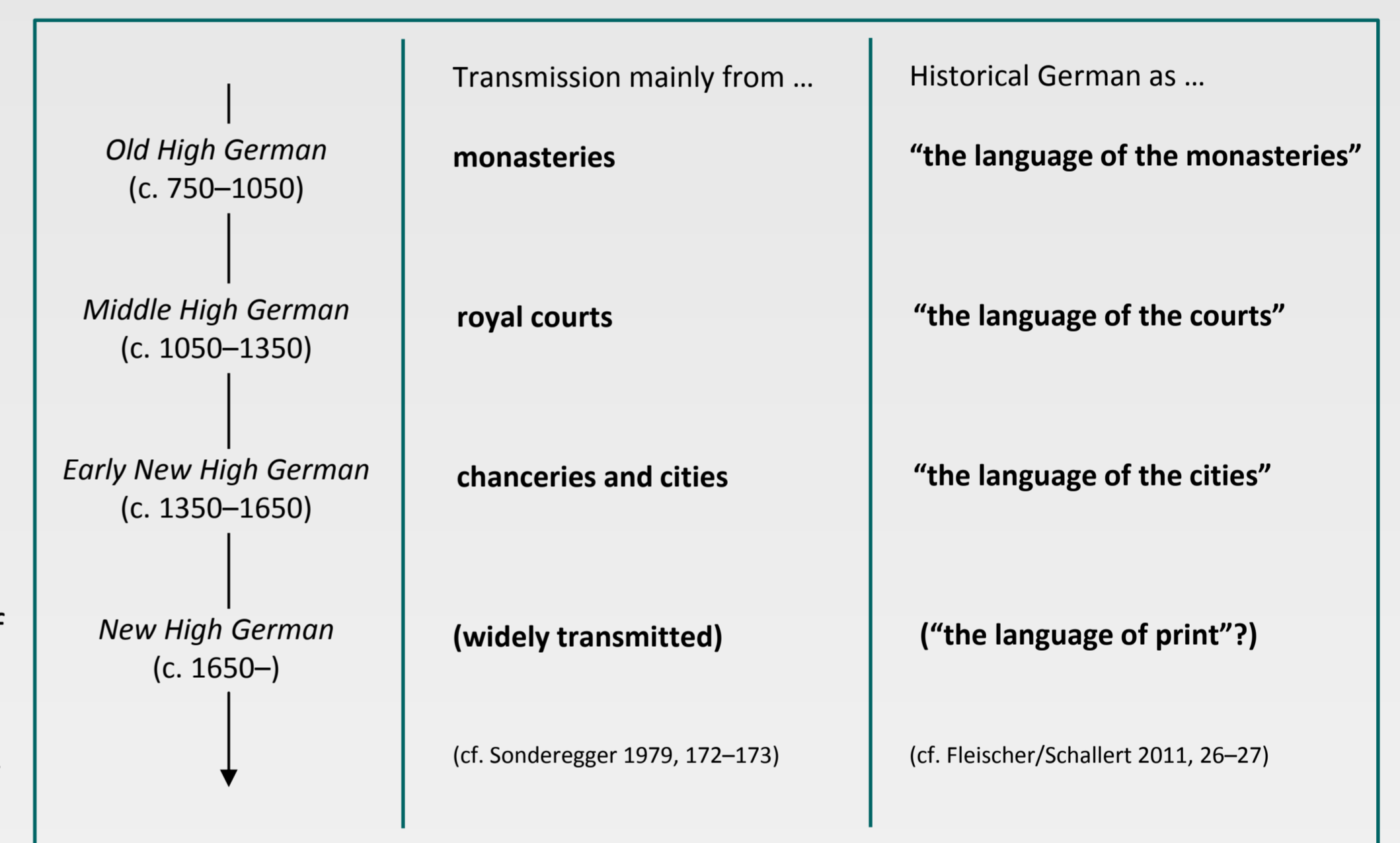
I. Uniformity and continuity
- Sermons are one of the earliest documented (prose) genres in German (from the early 9th century)
- They had to be in the vernacular to be understood by the congregation in an oral communicative setting
- Sermons have a relatively uniform and consistent tradition of transmission
- Function and communicative parameters are practically invariable over time

II. Conceptual Orality
- Sermons represent a specific type of historical orality, even in their written form
- Even reading sermons, which were never 'performed' orally, imitate oral presentation
- Sermons are – in some respects – "conceptually oral" (cf. Koch/Oesterreicher 2012)
- Written sermons are "le 'vestige écrit' d'un procès oral" (de Reu 1993)
- "intended virtual orality" (my translation; "intentionale virtuelle Mündlichkeit", Mertens 1991, 83)
- "orality markers are constitutive for sermons, also for reading sermons" (my translation; "Mündlichkeitssignale sind für die Predigt, also auch für die Lesepredigt, konstitutiv", Wetzel/Flückiger 2010, 16)

Grammatical Change in the History of German and the Problem of Heterogeneous Transmission

- The received history of German 'meanders' with respect to sociohistorical context and genre
- It is not clear which linguistic differences between the periods are due to language change and which are due to social and genre variation
- It can be argued that the periodisation of the history of German says more about the transmission than about the changes in the language itself
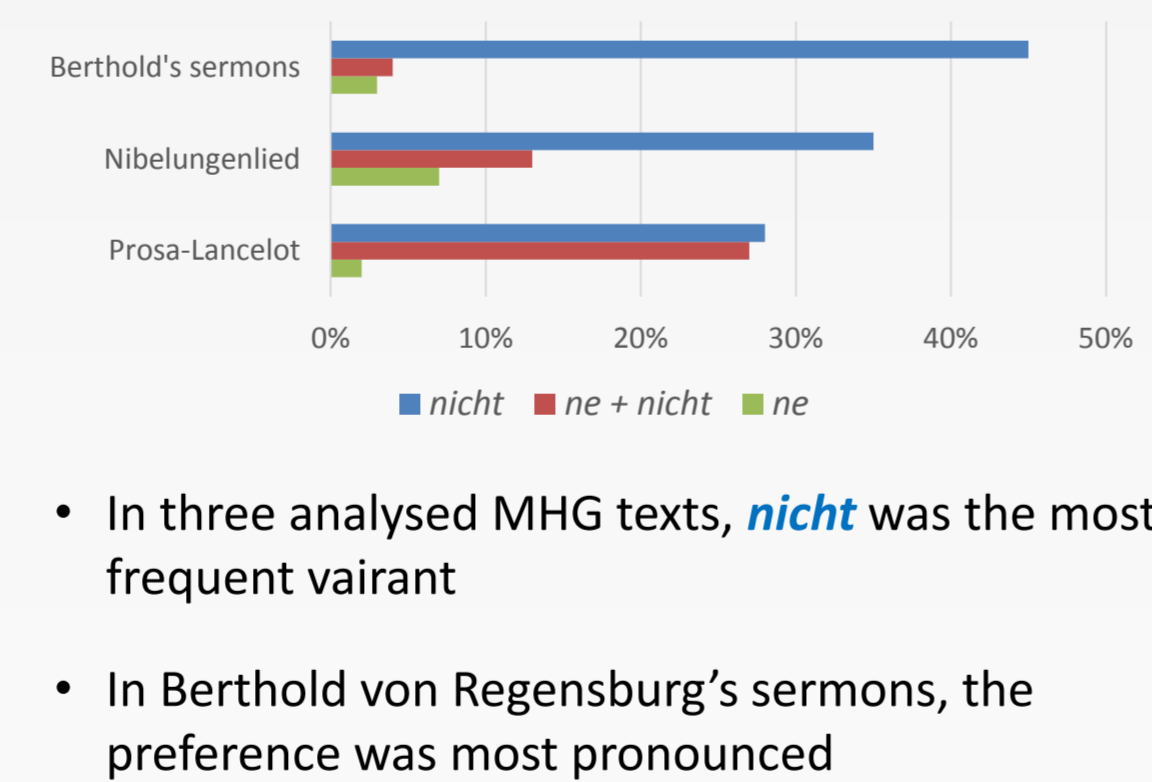
	Transmission mainly from …	Historical German as …
Old High German (c. 750–1050)	monasteries	"the language of the monasteries"
Middle High German (c. 1050–1350)	royal courts	"the language of the courts"
Early New High German (c. 1350–1650)	chanceries and cities	"the language of the cities"
New High German (c. 1650–)	(widely transmitted)	("the language of print"?)
	(cf. Sonderegger 1979, 172–173)	(cf. Fleischer/Schallert 2011, 26–27)

Case Study: The Development of Negation in Upper German
(Pickl 2017)

The Research Context

Textbook Knowledge

Three main types of sentential negation … … usually seen as typical for

- Type I: preverbal negative particle *ne*
  e.g. *Ir ne sculit manslahta tuon*
  'You shall not commit homicide'
  ➤ Old High German (OHG, c. 750–1050)
- Type II: bipartite negation *ne + nicht*
  e.g. *Jo ne minnet er ovch gote niht*
  'So he does not love god either'
  ➤ Middle High German (MHG, c. 1050–1350)
- Type III: negative particle *nicht*
  e.g. *vñ ich bin niht wrdich*
  'And I am not worthy'
  ➤ New High German (NHG, c. 1650–today)

Recent Study by Jäger (2008)

- In three analysed MHG texts, *nicht* was the most frequent variant
- In Berthold von Regensburg's sermons, the preference was most pronounced
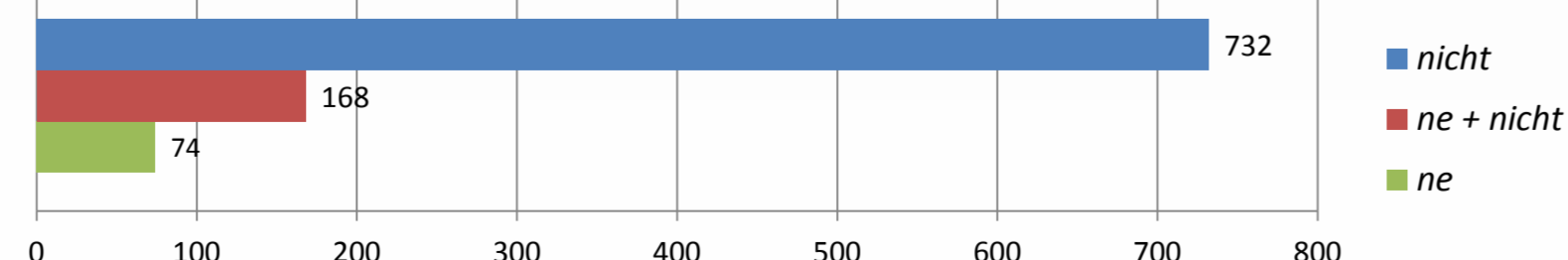
Study Design

Research Questions
- How has sentential negation developed chronologically?
- What linguistic and extra-linguistic predictors can be identified?

Subcorpus
- focus on MHG (manuscripts from 1050–1350 plus 50 years)
- almost exlusively Upper German sources available
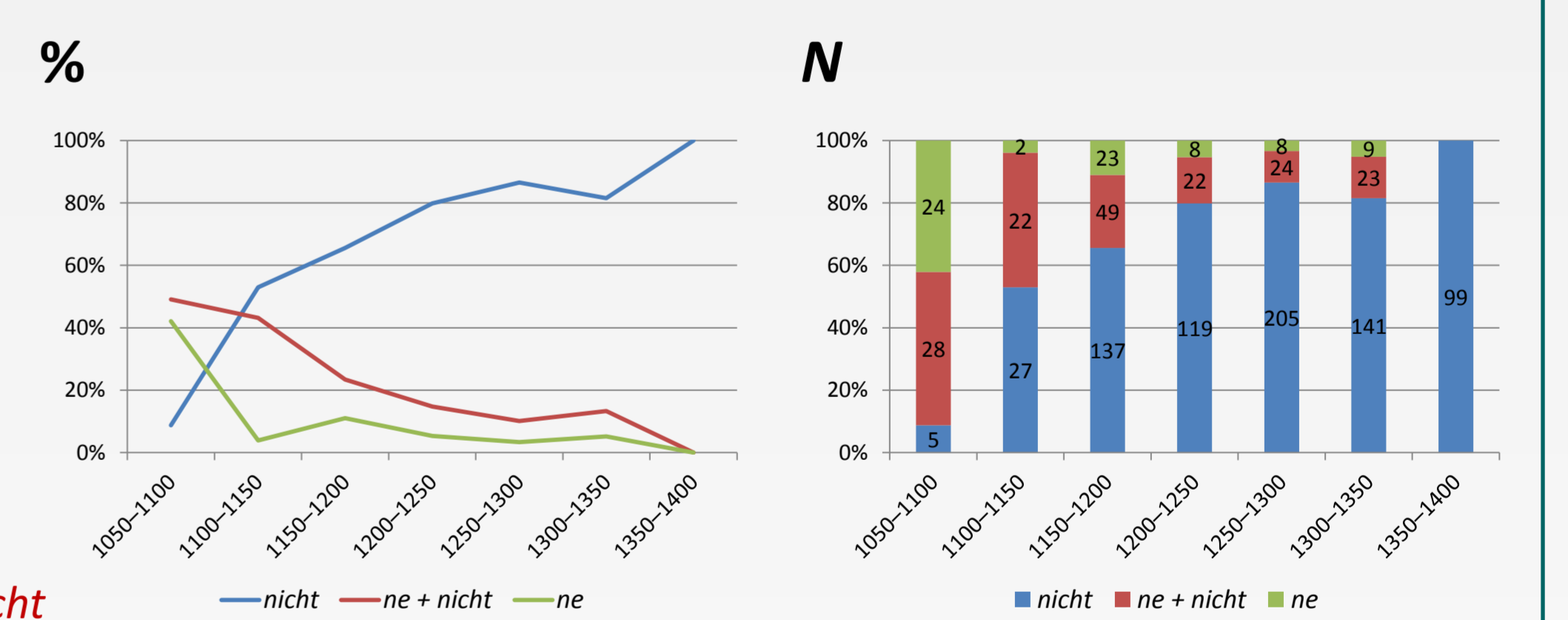- 45 texts (1050–1400) with a total of 974 instances of sentential negation

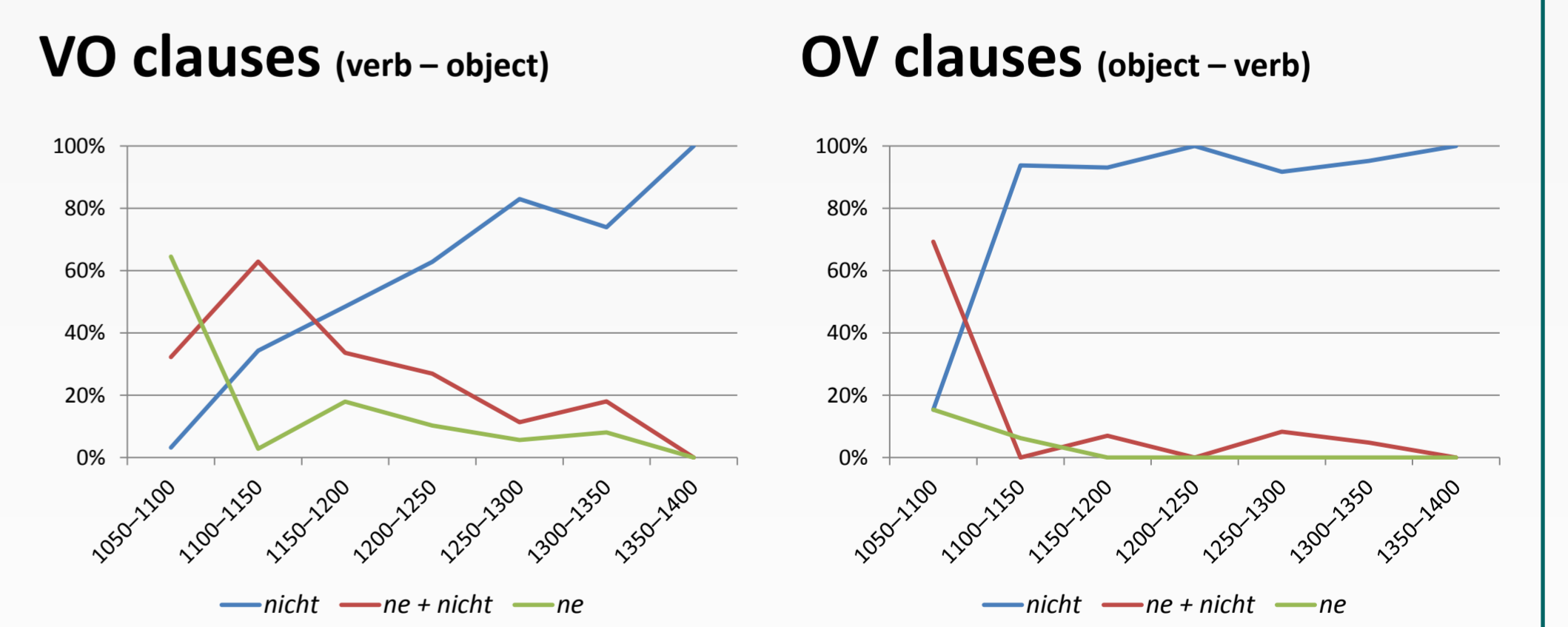- overall distribution of types:

Results

Development in Middle High German
- shift from *ne* and *ne + nicht* to *nicht* much quicker than expected
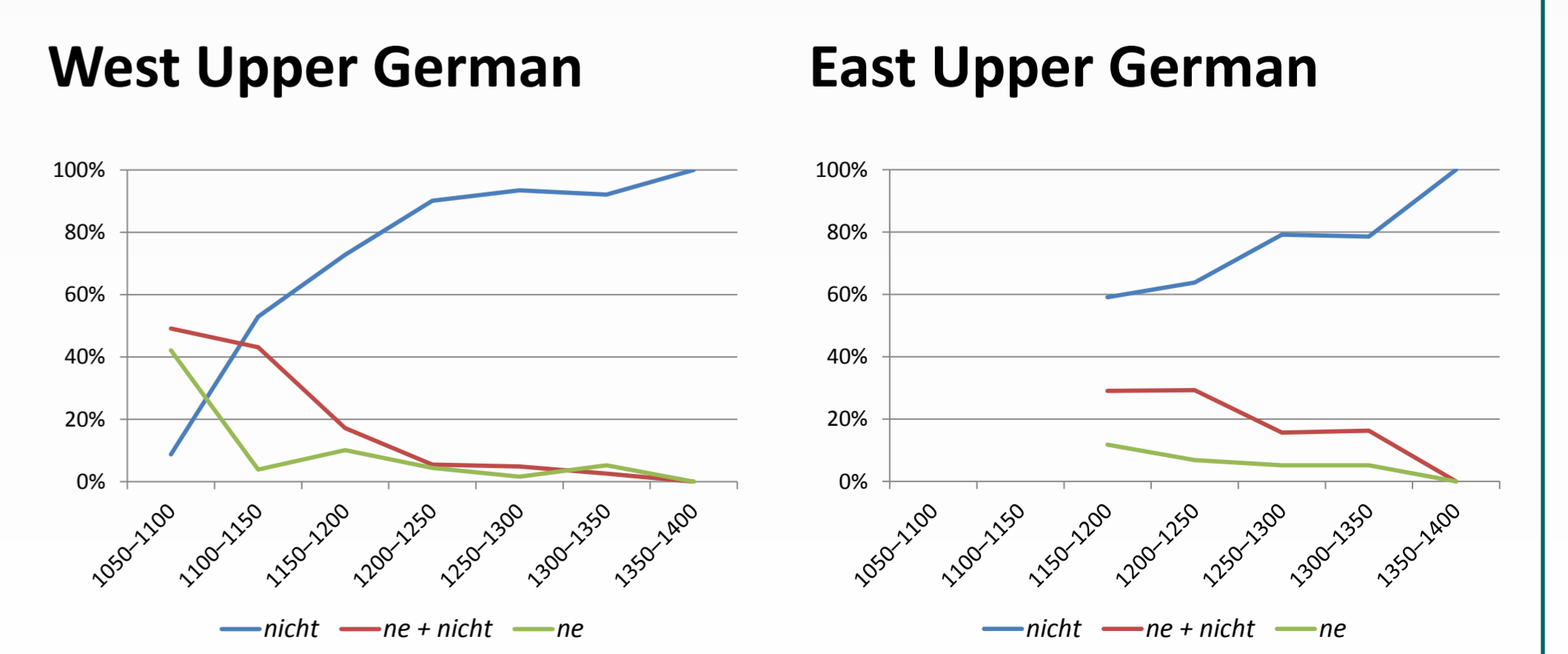- *nicht* most common form throughout MHG, not *ne + nicht*

By Word Order
- distinctly different development in VO and OV clauses
- gradual replacement of *ne* and *ne + nicht* by *nicht* in VO clauses
- rapid shift from *ne + nicht* to *nicht* in OV clauses

VO clauses (verb – object)   OV clauses (object – verb)

By Area
- no East Upper German data from before 1150
- slightly more advanced development in West Upper German by 1150
- shift to *nicht* in East Upper German lags behind initially but gains momentum

West Upper German   East Upper German

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