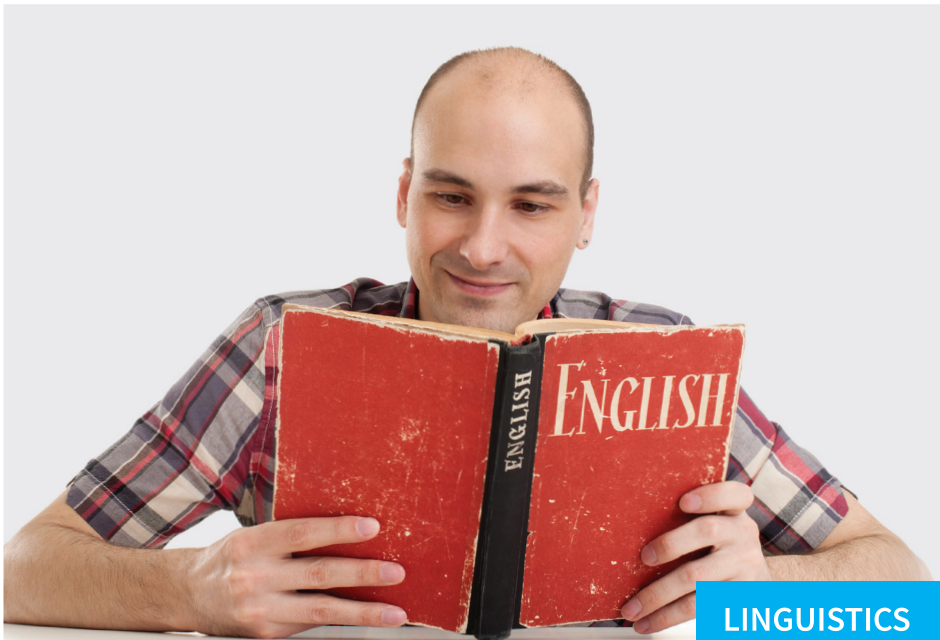


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Multiple negation in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* as a marker of social status. A pilot study

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Abstract

The aim of the following paper is to examine fragments of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, one of the most celebrated specimens of Middle English poetry, with regard to the presence or absence of multiple negation. Negative concord, as the structure in question is often referred to, was firmly ingrained in the language in the Old English period, and, having undergone some formal and syntactic modifications, carried into Middle English. The pattern of its decline in the latter parts of the 15th century is observed to correlate with the social status of the speaker, the change originating in the higher tiers of the society. Disfavoring negative concord possibly had sources in the administrative and legal language, the subtleties of which Chaucer, having held a number of official posts with the court and chancery, would have most likely been versed in. Consequently, the paper proposes to at least partly account for Chaucer's choices as regards negative concord from a sociolinguistic perspective and establish a possible connection between the structure's distributional pattern and the status of the *Canterbury Tales* fictional speakers, who come from very different walks of life. Other factors which may have informed or influenced the author's morphosyntactic choices will also be mentioned.

1. Multiple negation and the history of negation in English

Multiple negation is "clauses with two or more negatives which do not cancel each other out" (Iyeiri 1998: 121). Nevalainen and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2006: 271) observe, after Trudgill, that multiple negation (or negative concord, which

terms they use interchangeably; both will be used with reference to the phenomenon henceforth) is presently among “the socially most marked features” and is completely absent from the modern standard English, which only permits “[s]ingle negation followed by non-assertive indefinites,” so “sentences like *I don’t want none*” are decidedly characteristic of non-standard varieties of English, and their structural counterparts not uncommon in other Indo-European standard languages. These include, among others, Polish, Portuguese, Persian, Russian, Spanish, or Ukrainian. Multiple negation is generally observed to be absent from West Germanic languages, such as German and, as remarked above, English. In Old English, however, multiple negation, though optional, was widespread and encoded no social information about the speaker. The obligatory negative particle of Old English was *ne*, which was a reflex of one of the reconstructed Proto-Indo-European negators, **ne*; this is also visible in Sanskrit, Latvian, Lithuanian, Old Church Slavonic, or Old High German (Forston 2004: 133). Aside from *ne*, which in Old English would immediately precede the verb it negated, “the addition of more negative adverbs to a sentence adds emphasis to its negativity” (Baker 2012), as demonstrated in (1):

(1) *Ne* derode Iobe *naht* **þæs deofles costnung.**

Not harmed Job *not* the devil’s temptation

Job was not harmed by the devil’s temptation

(Fischer and van der Wurff 2006: 157, emphasis mine, translation mine)

According to Fischer and van der Wurff (2006: 157), in time, the usage of the extra negative element to the right of the verb would gain ground until the operation became obligatory in the Middle English period, making the negative concord a rule. In ME, therefore, “sentential negation typically consisted of two parts, *ne* and *not*. Indefinites in negative clauses were also expressed by negative forms, a sentential negator co-occurring with *no*, *never*, *neither*, etc.” (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003: 71). With some variation of *not* (deriving from *naht*, *noht*, or *nawiht*) always present in the post-verbal position, the circumstances conducive to the eventual elimination of *ne*, and, consequently, the negative concord, were in place, and *not* took over as the sole negative particle, with variation

between its original, post-verbal, and new, pre-verbal position (Fischer and van der Wurff 2006: 157). These and the subsequent developments of English negation can be described as follows:

Old English	Middle English	Modern English
ne + verb (other negator)	(ne) + verb + not; not + verb	Aux + not + verb; (verb + not)

(Fischer and van der Wurff 2006: 112)

Nevalainen (2009: 580), basing her findings on the Corpus of Early English Correspondence, places the beginning of the decline of multiple negation “in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries”. The disappearance of pre-verbal *ne* and the replacement of the indefinite negatives with the non-assertive ones were completed by the end of the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003: 71). The real-time dynamics of the change are presented by Fig. 1.

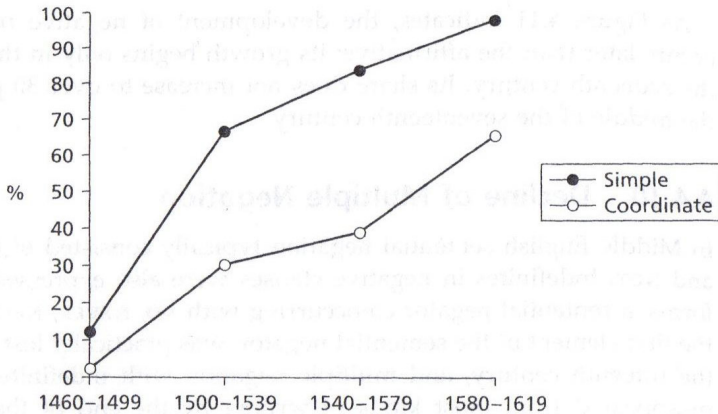


Fig. 1. Single vs. multiple negation with nonassertive indefinites. Percentages of single negation in simple and coordinate constructions. CEEC 1998 and Supplements; adapted from Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (2003: 72)

Nevalainen (2009: 580) then describes the deterioration of negative concord as “a selective process from above in terms of the speaker-writer’s education and social status ... promoted by male professional circles in the middle and upper so-

cial ranks”, and Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (2003: 145) observe that “the lower strata lag far behind in the change from multiple negation to single negation”. The advancing change can therefore be said to have been socially stratified, and though the leadership of the process may have been alternating over decades between the middle and high ranking males, its provenance is definitely in the non-low echelons (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003: 149–50). Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (2003: 150) additionally remark, after Rissanen, that “it is most likely that the model for the non-use of multiple negation derived from administrative language,” and that negative concord was scarce in “early legal English”. In a similar vein, Mazzon (2004: 83), referring to her earlier study, notices that “scientific and legal prose [in Middle English] presented a much lower number of multiple negations as compared to religious or historical prose”. What is more, the trend, “borrowed from the prestigious formal variety,” was possibly catching on also among gentlemen and top chancery officers (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003: 150). Disfavoring the negative concord might have also been additionally informed by “algebraic logic”, whereby two negative elements cancel each other out, resulting in an affirmative statement (“The standardisation,” 2006).

2. Chaucer and negative concord

A number of authors point to Chaucer’s reputation for the “extensive use of double, and even triple and quadruple negatives”, and this particular remark of Pereltsvaig’s (2010) refers to *The Canterbury Tales*; Mazzon (2004: 83) is of the opinion that Chaucer “appears rather isolated among his contemporaries in his heavy use of multiple negation”. However, a closer look at Chaucer’s magnum opus actually reveals rather long passages where single negation visibly outstrips multiple negation, but the latter is indeed strongly represented elsewhere. One possible explanation of this constant alternation is simply through referring to a somewhat general linguistic disarray of the time bracket in question; Mazzon (2004: 83) observes “that this period (and late ME more so than EModE) is one in which individual variation emerged freely” and, for example, “Chaucer’s *Boece* ... showed many more cases of double negation than the earlier *Parker Chronicle* or *Seinte Marherete* ...” Thus, “speaking about the language of Chaucer or the language of Shakespeare is misleading, since there is a considerable amount of variation within the works of these writers”.

However, it stands to reason to assume that Chaucer, who studied law and was professionally connected to the court, would have been aware of the change in the making¹. Although Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg's data clearly show that multiple negation still carried the day for the best part of the 15th century, theirs is a study of personal letters, which are widely considered the most "oral" of written genres, i.e. providing a reliable insight into how the spoken language of the past may have looked like (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003: 29). Negative concord, in its turn, was observed to have most likely spread from above, both in terms of social stratification, as well as the level of perception, i.e. it was a process induced consciously, to have originally appeared in formal writing, and only later made it to more informal discourses. Therefore, it is not impossible that the personal writings from the Corpus of Early English Correspondence would only start recording the change after a time lag. In his considerations on the dynamics of the change in the periphrastic *do* structure, Warner (2009: 63) tries to account for the temporal discrepancies in his data precisely through reference to generic diversity, and remarks that "the onset of the change in evaluation [of periphrastic *do*] takes effect later in personal letters than in the more public types of writing". I take the liberty of invoking a similar line of reasoning in my subsequent attempts to establish a sociolinguistic pattern of the negative concord's distribution in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, penned in the latter parts of the 14th century.

3. Aims

The aim of the following study is to analyze if the distributional pattern of multiple negative structures in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* might mirror the dynamics of the structure's evolution in the Middle English period. According to a number of sources, the incidence of multiple negation tends to decrease with the speaker's/writer's higher education. Consequently, the study samples the fictional speech of selected characters which are chosen on the strength of their varying levels of education to confirm that in his verse, Chaucer might have been informed by the emergent trend.

¹ It has been remarked that the poet was an acute observer of the English language, and this perspicacity of his would often show in his works: it was noticed, for example, with regard to "the third person –s ending [, which] was recognized in the South as a distinctively Northern form. Chaucer puts these forms into the mouths of his north-country students in *The Reeve's Tale* ... , whereas the narrator ... uses *hath* and *speaketh*" (Crystal 2004: 209).

4. Methodology

The textual material selected for analysis is *The Miller's Tale*, which contains 668 verses (ca. 5200 words), and *The Friar's Tale*, containing 364 verses (ca. 2900 words). In the analysis, all instances of and potential context for multiple negation are counted and later analyzed. The following are typical Middle English negative elements, and the co-occurrence of at least two of these within a clause is counted as an instance of multiple negation: negative particles *ne*, *not* (*nat*, etc.) and their contracted forms such as *nys* (*ne is*), *nolde* (*ne wolde*) etc., and negative indefinites *no*, *never*, *neither*, *nothing*, *none*, etc.

I will be working on the hypothesis that Chaucer was aware that higher registers (legal documents, etc.) had already started to discourage multiple negatives, and he may have further imbued the structure with social markedness so the incidence of negative concord be higher among the lower class, essentially uneducated characters than among the non-lower class, essentially educated protagonists. Thus, the speaker's education will be the most important variable considered in this study.

In addition, negative concord is often rhythm-sensitive, which may well obscure the suggested sociolinguistic account. The question is if rhythm should be considered as another (independent or controlled) variable which could influence the frequency of multiple negation in the analyzed material. Chaucer's poem consistently follows decasyllable meter, and alternating between single and multiple negation, and thus removing or adding an element to a verse, would have often had a bearing on the number of syllables. For example, in "*That noon of us **ne** speke **nat** a word,*" scrapping negative concord would have truncated the verse to nine syllables, and in "*That to **no** wight thou **shalt** this conseil wreye,*" attaching the negative particle to the modal would have resulted in the eleventh syllable. Meter, therefore, cannot be ruled out as a possible factor that informed Chaucer's choice. Such explanation, however, will not always hold: in „*This nicholas **no** lenger **wolde** tarie,*” *wolde*, to establish negative concord, could have been easily replaced with its Middle English contracted negative counterpart, *nolde*, with no effect on the meter, while in „*There **nys no** man so wys that koude thence,*” negative concord is in place, but had Chaucer chosen to go for single negation instead, it could have been seamlessly accommodated into the line by substituting *nys*, short for *ne ys* (*is not*), for the non-negated and also one-syllable-long *ys*. Metrical factors, then, would be a good candidate for what Milroy and Gordon (2003) refer to as the “don't count” cases, i.e. the ones that should be excluded right at the study's outset as somewhat skewed (181 and further).

However, for the time being, the assumption is that Chaucer, widely considered one of the greatest English poets, would have been able to come up with an alternative phrasing of a verse if he was indeed informed by the emerging social markedness of negative concord – and since *The Canterbury Tales* is built around the idea of a story-telling context, whose entrants come from very different sorts and try to assert their individualities, it is not untenable to postulate that Chaucer saw to it that the language of his characters would conform to their respective backgrounds. Under such working assumption, the analysis, intended merely as a pilot study, will tentatively disregard the obvious caveats briefly outlined above, and adopt a sociolinguistic perspective in an attempt to explain the apparently erratic behavior of negative concord. Therefore, the meter-sensitive contexts for negation are included and treated on a par with the remaining cases (although they receive occasional attention as a possible departure point for a future, more comprehensive study).

Toward the proposed sociolinguistic perspective, it is, to be sure, far from a straightforward task to decide on the model of class division for a rather dynamic period of societal changes that the late Middle Ages in England certainly was. However, the case of negative concord may be less problematic in that with regard to the choice of the structure, it is the level of one's education and administrative position that would somewhat superimpose on the social rank as such (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003: 150). Consequently, the *Canterbury Tales* "speakers" were selected for this pilot study precisely on the strength of these criteria. From *The Miller's Tale*, they are the eponymous miller, the tale's narrator, and a carpenter named John as the representatives of the uneducated circles. There are two other characters in the story whose speech is considered: one is Nicholas, John's tenant, a young scholar, who convinces his host that the second Biblical deluge is imminent, and while the gullible tradesman is hiding, has sex with the carpenter's wife, Alison; the other is Absalom, a parish clerk, who is also attracted to Allison, but not as lucky in his advances as Nicholas. Both are considered essentially educated, with Absalom additionally holding an administrative post. The incidence of negative concord would be therefore expected higher for the first pair of characters.

The Friar's Tale is the story of a summoner on his way to collect a fictional debt from a woman. As he travels through the land, he is joined by a yeoman, who soon reveals that he is a demon, and, toward the story's end, takes the crooked summoner to hell. Friars were typically well-educated, and summoners

held posts in ecclesiastical courts – negative concord is therefore expected to be less prevalent in the speech of the story’s narrator and its main villain. Women were generally denied any educational opportunities in the Middle Ages, so the bent officer’s victim would likely prefer negative concord. As for the yeoman, his status seems problematic – on the one hand, he represents a group of literate, but not necessarily educated landowning farmers, but on the other, this is just his earthly incarnation, while in fact, he is a demon, acts as such, and makes no secret of his provenance right from the story’s outset. His speech is considered, nevertheless.

In accordance with Labov’s principle of accountability, wherever double negation is expected, its occurrences, as well as non-occurrences are counted, and vice versa. As regards Middle English negation, it is either multiple or non-multiple, so the condition of the existence of what Labov (qtd. in Milroy and Gordon, 2003: 180–181) refers to as “a closed set of variants” is met, which allows for adopting the occurrence vs. non-occurrence model, instead of reporting the variant’s “frequency of occurrence in some globally defined section of speech”.

5. Results

In the analysis of *The Miller’s Tale*, four characters were considered: Miller (432 lines), John (41 lines), Absalom (58 lines), and Nicolas (110 lines). Allison and some minor characters also “speaking” in the story are not included in the study, showing too few contexts for negation for a quantitative analysis. Table 1 presents the global figures for multiple and single negation for the story’s speakers as considered collectively within the educated/uneducated categories (percentages rounded off).

Table 1. The incidence of single and multiple negation in “The Miller’s Tale” by the character’s education

	single	multiple
educated	23 (82%)	5 (18%)
uneducated	17 (65%)	9 (35%)

Table 2 presents the individual breakdown of single and multiple negation in all the characters considered (percentages rounded off).

Multiple negation in Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales...

Table 2. The incidence of single and multiple negation in "The Miller's Tale" by individual characters

	single	multiple
Miller (uneducated)	11 (65%)	6 (35%)
John (uneducated)	6 (67%)	3 (33%)
Absalom (educated)	5 (71%)	2 (29%)
Nicholas (educated)	18 (86%)	3 (14%)

It transpires that single negation is generally preferred by both educated and uneducated speakers, but the scales tip in its favor more visibly among the former group. Absalom the clerk uses single negation in five out of seven possible contexts. On the other hand, John, the cuckold husband, presented throughout the tale as a crude simpleton, scores 67% for single negation, which puts him almost on a par with Absalom's 71% from a similar number of contexts (six out of nine). However, a more qualitative perspective would possibly lend some support to the working hypothesis. For example, in the passage where Nicholas urges John to keep quiet about the impending disaster, the carpenter is apparently happy to have been taken in young academic's confidence and rejects the notion that he could ever be so stupid as to even flirt with the idea of going public with such confidential intelligence he probably is honored to have been entrusted with; actually, it is where John's stupidity and naivety are at their most prominent, as he unknowingly dances to the cunning scholar's tune. It may have been intentional on Chaucer's part to put double negation in John's mouth here:

*Quod tho this sely man, I **nam no** labbe
 Ne, though I seye, I **nam nat** lief to gabbe
 [Said then this simple man: I am no blab
 Nor, though I say it, am I fond of gab]*

Similarly, Nicholas, describing the upcoming deluge, informs John

*That half so greet **was nevere** noes flood*

and uses single negation in the process. On a side note, all three contexts are meter-independent: *nam* could have been replaced with *am*, and *was* changed for *nas*, to discard negative concord in John's and insert it in Nicholas's respective parts,

and the fact that it was not may be regarded as somewhat supporting Chaucer’s alignment to the sociolinguistic pattern of the structure’s distribution. To be sure, this is a two-edged sword: some cases were discovered which had double negation where single was expected, and vice versa, and also occurred in the rhythm-independent contexts. A case in point could be the following from the miller:

For curteisie, he seyde, he wolde noon

Wolde could have easily been substituted for *nolde* to establish negative concord in the speech of a character expected to use it. Furthermore, the overall incidence of single negatives for the miller is higher than that of multiple negation (eleven to six). However, it was suggested to me that the miller could be seen as a somewhat intermediary character, or even a social aspirer, and going into *The Canterbury Tales* one interpretative layer deeper, it turns out that *The Miller’s Tale* comes right on the heels of *The Knight’s Tale*; it is therefore possible that the miller, entering the contest immediately after a more sophisticated character, wanted himself to come across as such, or more unconsciously accommodated to the previous, higher-ranking speaker (Patrick Maiwald, personal communication). This interesting observation requires further research. Finally, Nicholas, an up-and-coming scholar, who can be essentially classified as the story’s main hero and the ultimate opposite to John, a simple carpenter, employs multiple negation on three occasion only, the remaining eighteen being in tune with the advancing change.

In *The Friar’s Tale*, four characters are analyzed as well, and they are the friar (134 lines), the summoner (88 lines), the woman (30 lines), and the yeoman (103 lines). Table 3 presents the figures for single and multiple negation for individual speakers in the story:

Table 3. The incidence of single and multiple negation in “The Friar’s Tale” by individual characters

	single	multiple
Friar (educated)	9 (75%)	3 (25%)
Summoner (educated)	9 (82%)	2 (18%)
Woman (uneducated)	2 (33%)	4 (67%)
Yeoman (unclear)	12 (86%)	2 (14%)

The tale's two educated characters, its narrator and the summoner, prefer single negation in nine contexts out of twelve and eleven respectively, while the proportions are reversed in the speech of the woman, who employs it in two out of six possible contexts. Again, this might suggest that the distribution of the structure is not entirely random if a sociolinguistic explanation is put forward. It is also noteworthy that out of three instances of triple negation in the tale (the remaining multiple negatives being double), two are uttered by the woman, and thus account for half the multiple negatives she uses:

*Ne was I **nevere** er now, wydwe **ne** wyf,*

[Never was I, till now, widow or wife]

*Ne **nevere** I **nas** but of my body trewe*

[Nor ever of my body was I untrue!]

As regards the fourth character under scrutiny, the yeoman, he shows a clear preference for single negation, which outnumbers negative concord at twelve to two. Although his status, as hinted earlier, seems unclear, Chaucer portrays him as a figure held in somewhat high regard by both the summoner and the tale's narrator – under the assumption, therefore, that the distribution of the negative structures is to reflect one's societal status, the author would have sooner intended for the demon to sound in keeping with how he was perceived. The decidedly higher incidence of single negatives in his speech may thus not necessarily go against the working hypothesis. Should the demon be tentatively considered as a representative of the “educated”, the distribution of negatives among the characters falling within their respective “educated” and “uneducated” circles would be as follows:

Table 4. The incidence of single and multiple negation in “The Friar’s Tale” by the character’s education

	single	multiple
educated	30 (81%)	7 (19%)
uneducated	2 (33%)	4 (67%)

5. Concluding remarks

Mazzon's (2004: 83) remark on Chaucer's "heavy use of multiple negation" seems barely to hold for *The Miller's Tale* and *The Friar's Tale*. Single negation dominates in the analyzed fragments, and as it alternates with negative concord, the pattern may not be entirely random, which randomness was elsewhere observed to be generally characteristic of later Middle English (Mazzon 2004: 83). Instead, the incidence of negative concord might be related to the status that Chaucer endowed each of his fictional characters with, and the pattern may be in keeping with other findings pertaining to the direction of the structure's development, but based on the later material gathered from real-life speakers (private correspondence). A number of caveats definitely merit further research, such as the verse-specific metrical constraints on negative structures, not considered in this pilot study in favor of a purely sociolinguistic interpretation. Fuller immersion into the world depicted by Chaucer to consider the relations between the characters he brought to life could result in a more comprehensive and convincing picture of the sociolinguistic patterning of the distribution of negatives.

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