From Head to Spec. Negation in First Position in Swedish

This talk is concerned with the diachronic development of negative preposing in Swedish, i.e. the possibility of topicalizing negation, as illustrated in (1a). The assumed structure for Modern Swedish (MS) is given in (1b).

Although negation in [Spec,CP] is syntactically possible, Westman (1974) shows that it is relatively infrequent: only 3 (out of totally 724) negations were found in first position, in a corpus study of MS extending beyond 87 000 words. In contrast, clause initial negation occurs more frequently in Old Swedish (OS); see Jörgensen 1987. In this talk, we argue that this difference can be traced back to the syntactic status of the negative element. In MS, negation is a maximal projection; in OS, it is a syntactic phrase head. The head status of negation in OS is supported by the disclosed preverbal placement in (2) and the cliticization to the finite verb in (3).

We propose that negation has undergone a change from Head to Spec in the history of Swedish. The direction of this development seems to be contra that of van Gelderen’s (2008) negative cycle, according to which negatives develop from maximal projections to heads. However, we argue that the change in syntactic status is not due to a syntactic reanalysis (from Head to Spec), but instead results from a lexical change of the negative marker — from the syntactic head ey in OS to the maximal projection icke and inte (< angin) in (Early) MS. Thus, the proposed development is in fact compatible with van Gelderen’s proposal.

According to our analysis, there are no syntactic restrictions on negative preposing in MS: the status of maximal phrase allows the negative adverb inte to undergo topicalization from its base position in NegP to [Spec,CP]. The relative infrequency of negative preposing in MS is instead attributed to pragmatic factors, more specifically c-linking (see Molnár 2003, 2006 and Molnár & Winkler 2009). Negation may only undergo topicalization provided it functions as a cohesive device, either by creating contrast or continuity. The situation in OS is the exact opposite. Naturally, the head status of negation syntactically prohibits it from moving to [Spec,CP]. Instead, negation cliticizes to the finite verb. As C⁰ is not associated with any pragmatic properties, there are, however, no pragmatic restrictions on negative preposing in OS. This, in turn, accounts for the relatively high frequency of clause initial negation in OS compared to the situation in MS.
(1a. Inte har Sven köpt den boken på nätet.
not has Sven bought that book.on web.DEF
‘Sven hasn’t bought that book on the web.’
b. [Spec,Cp Inte [Spec,TP Sven [NegP inte [VP har Sven köpt …]]]]

(2a. hwat ey giordhe iak thin wilia fiurtan aar
what not did I your will fourteen years
‘Why didn’t I do your will in fourteen years?’
b. hwat ey gräth thu saarlika […] tha thu saa oc hörde thän wnga da ran
what not cried you painfully […] when you saw and heard the young fool
‘Why didn’t you cry painfully […] when you saw and heard the young fool?’
(Söderwall 1884–1914:218)

(3) tordey, hadey, villey, aktadey (Söderwall 1884–1914:218)
dared.NOT had.NOT wanted.NOT respected.NOT

References