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DISCUSSION NOTE

Negative Contraction, Dialect, and the AB Language: A Note on Levin 1958

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Contemporary discussions of preverbal negative incorporation usually note Levin's 1958 claim that incorporation is a Western and Southern dialect feature in Old and Middle English. In his Middle English data, Levin reports only two unincorporated forms, both in AB texts. This note demonstrates that these two examples appear in the editions Levin used, but not in the manuscripts now thought to be closer to the original AB language. The conclusions are: 1. Levin's claim still has merit; 2. it would worthwhile to revisit his data with an improved understanding of scribal practices, access to facsimiles, and to electronic searches; and 3. researchers should consider editorial "interference" in manuscripts.[*]

1. Introduction.

In Old English and Early Middle English, the usual form of clausal negation is the preverbal particle *ne*. Certain verbs, namely *witan* 'know', *willan* 'want', *beon* 'be', *habban* 'have', and *agan* 'own', allow the negative particle to incorporate into the verb so that *ne is* (3rd pres. ind. singular of *beon*) is equivalent to *nis*. Similarly, *ne habbe* becomes *nabbe* and *ne wulle* becomes *nulle*. This is a process similar to the present-day English incorporation of contracted *not* in forms of auxiliary verbs such as *isn't, won't*, etc. However, although it is apparent that, in present-day English, contraction occurs in more informal contexts and the full forms in formal situations, the reasons Old English and Early Middle English writers used these forms are not so clear. Recent studies of negative contraction, focusing mainly on syntax and meter in poetry, include Fulk 1992; Blockley 1988, 1990; Jack 1999; and Iyeiri 2001. This discussion centers on the work of Levin (1958), who suggests that

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negative contraction in Old English and Early Middle English is a dialect feature. In Old English, West Saxon texts have more contraction than Mercian and Northumbrian texts. The West Saxon texts he examined have 306 contracted forms and only 9 uncontracted forms. For Early Middle English, the results are even more striking, and for texts of Southern and West Midland origin, he reports 495 contractions but only two uncontracted examples, one in *Ancrene Wisse*[1] and the other in *Hali Meiðhad*. In this note, I show that these two uncontracted forms do not occur in all the manuscript versions of these works and propose that the AB language was consistent in the use of negative contraction.

Levin points out that in Early Middle English, the appearance of uncontracted forms in Southern and Western Midland texts is "a virtual freak," while East Midland and Northern texts are likely to contain uncontracted forms. He comments that the important feature of Northern/Eastern texts is the fact that they do contain uncontracted forms and puts no significance on the degree to which contraction is favored or not. In some texts, for example *Vices and Virtues*, about half (65) are contracted and half (63) not, while in *Cursor Mundi* there are no contracted forms. In the eleven Southern and West Midland texts he examined, the total is 495 contracted forms and 2 uncontracted. He concludes that a text that has only contracted forms is likely to be Southern or Western while "the fact that usage is not practically one hundred percent in favor of contraction" (500) indicates an Eastern or Northern text. Levin qualifies his statement about his Southern and West Midland data with the word "practically" because of the exceptions in *Ancrene Wisse* and *Hali Meiðhad*. These two works, along with three Saint's legends, *Katherine*, *Margaret, Juliene,* and the homily, *Sawles Warde*, are texts of the AB language. The "A" manuscript is Cambridge Corpus Christi College 402 (henceforth Corpus), which contains a version of the *Ancrene Wisse*. The "B" manuscript is Oxford Bodleian Library Bodley 34 (henceforth Bodley), which contains *Hali Meiðhad, Katherine*, *Margaret, Juliene,* and *Sawles Ward*. The remarkable similarity between the language of A and B, first noted by Tolkien

[1] For consistency I use this title throughout. Morton (1853) was responsible for the title *Ancren Riwle,* which later scholars emended to *Ancrene Riwle*. All three titles continue to be used although, as Dahood (1984) points out, only the title *Ancrene Wisse* has "ancient authority."

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(1929), has led scholars to designate it the "AB language" and to propose that it represents a very early literary standard. Levin draws data from various editions of the other AB texts, all of which contain no uncontracted forms. It is surprising, then, that exceptions are found in *Ancrene Wisse* and *Hali Meiðhad*, when the AB texts, unlike most texts of this period, are ones in which forms are used particularly consistently. Therefore, these two exceptions deserve further scrutiny.

Since Levin only reports figures for Early Middle English and does not quote examples, conclusions about which manuscripts the data comes from have to be drawn from his bibliography. There are only two surviving versions of *Hali Meiðhad*, one in Bodley and one in London BL Cotton Titus D (henceforth Titus). Levin cites Colborn 1940, a parallel text, with Titus and Bodley on facing pages. Therefore, he could have used either version for his data. *Ancrene Wisse* survives (in English) in eight medieval manuscripts, including Titus and Corpus, but Levin cites Morton's 1853 edition, based on London BL Cotton Nero A (henceforth Nero). This was, for a long time, the only edition available and the one on which most early scholarship was based before the importance of the Corpus manuscript was realized. Since Levin's study, Laing and McIntosh (1995) have subjected the dialects of the Titus manuscript to detailed scrutiny, and Dobson (1962) has investigated the relationship between the various manuscripts in which *Ancrene Wisse* is found. The conclusions are that the AB manuscripts represent remarkably consistent language forms, influenced by some school or authority centered in the West Midlands, and, in Titus and Nero, the AB language has been subject to so many scribal alterations that these manuscripts no longer are written in what could be termed the AB language. It is possible, then, if Levin based his data on the Nero version of *Ancrene Wisse* and the Titus version of *Hali Meiðhad*, that the uncontracted forms he reports are in those manuscripts but not in the Bodley and Corpus manuscripts.

Recent scholarship in scribal practices (most notably Laing and McIntosh 1995) reveals that manuscripts can incorporate a mixture of dialect features introduced by various scribes from different dialect areas. Texts that were once thought to be the product of careless scribes who "confused" the language have been found to incorporate layers of dialect features introduced systematically by different scribes as the manuscript was copied and recopied. I find that the uncontracted forms occur in Nero and Titus, but not in all versions of *Ancrene Wisse* and *Hali Meiðhad*, and suggest that the two uncontracted forms Levin reported

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could be Northern and Eastern scribal emendations, introduced when copying from manuscripts that had no uncontracted forms.[2] In the following, section 2 compares the exceptions I found in Nero and Titus with their forms in different manuscript editions. Section 3 discusses the relevant manuscripts, explaining why the results are not surprising given what we now know about these manuscripts.

2. Results.

I searched the editions Levin used in order to retrieve the uncontracted forms he reports. I then examined all the available editions for the relevant forms.

2.1. Hali Meiðhad.

With *Hali Meiðhad* the search for differences between the two manuscripts is relatively simple. An electronic edition of both manuscripts is available from the University of Michigan Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse, based on Furnival 1922. I also used the Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English (PPCME), an electronic version of *Hali Meiðhad* based on the edition of the Bodley manuscript edited by d'Ardenne (1997), and concordance programs TACT© and MonoConc©. A search of the two texts reveals there is a difference between an uncontracted negative in Titus and a contracted one in Bodley. The texts read:

(1) Þe flurs þat beoð idrahe þron, ne þe ȝimstanes þrin, te tellen of hare euene, **ne is** na monnes speche (Titus folio 119)

(2) þe flurs þe beoð idrahe þron, ne þe ȝimmies þrin, ne tellen of hare euene. **Nis** na monnes speche
'The flowers that are depicted thereon, nor the jewels therein do not tell about their quality, it is not man's speech.' (Bodley folio #61)

Thus, the one example that Levin reported is in Titus and not in Bodley. Since Levin was working with a parallel text, he possibly decided to err on the side of caution, though, surprisingly, he does not note the difference.

[2] Although Iyeiri's data show 100% contraction in a North Midland text, Gawain and the Green Knight, which Levin did not analyze, the Titus ms. was written at least 100 years earlier than Gawain.

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Since Levin used Colborn's edition and not Furnivall's (on which the electronic version is based) I also checked a hard copy of Colborn's edition. Page 20 gives the Bodley version, showing the contracted form and page 21 the Titus version and the uncontracted form. The facsimile of Bodley 34 was also checked and the punctuation and capitalization are as in 2. It is not surprising that the Bodley version is more consistent than Titus since, as discussed in section 3, it is considered to be closer to the source manuscript than Titus.

2.2. Ancrene Wisse.

As mentioned above, Levin consulted Morton's edition of the Nero manuscript for his data on *Ancrene Wisse*. Since I did not have access to an electronic version of Nero, I found this example by reading Morton's edition. However, Morton also consulted two other manuscripts, Titus and London BL Cotton Cleopatra C (henceforth Cleopatra), and gives the variations in footnotes, which made the search a little easier. As Dahood (1984) comments, most of the early scholarship concentrated on Morton's edition and it has been so influential that all the Early English Text Society (EETS) editions of the *Ancrene Wisse* give references within their texts to Morton's page numbering.

The discussion now involves several manuscripts, which are shown in table 1. The dates are as given by Dahood. The table also gives the different forms I found in the various manuscripts for what I believe to be the uncontracted forms Levin found. They are quoted in full following the table.

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Ancrene Wisse **Manuscripts**	**Editor**	**Date**	**Form of neg**
Cambridge Corpus Christi College 402 (Corpus) (A)	Tolkien (1962:90)	ca. 1230	nawhit nute
London BL Cotton Cleopatra C (Cleopatra)	Dobson (1972:132)	ca. 1225–1230	nawicht nute
London BL Cotton Nero A (Nero)	Morton (1865:172)	ca. 1225–1250	ne wute
Oxford Bodleian Library English poet (Vernon)	Zettersten and Diensberg (2000:62)	late 14th century	nout nute
London BL Cotton Titus D (Titus)	Mack (1963:52)	ca. 1230–1240	nawt ne wite
London BL British Royal 8 C (Royal)	Baugh (1956)	15th century	(missing)
Cambridge Magdalene College Pepys 2498	Zettersten (1976)	2nd half of 14th century	(missing)
Cambridge Gonville and Caius College 234/120 (Gonville)	Wilson (1954:54)	ca. 1250–1300	naðhit ðite (nawhit wite)
Hali Meiðhad **Manuscripts**			
London BL Cotton Titus D (Titus) (as above)	Millet		Ne is na
Oxford Bodleian Library Bodley 34 (B)	Furnival (1922) Colborn (1940) Ker (1960)		Nis na

Table 1. Manuscripts of *Ancrene Wisse* and *Hali Meiðhad*.

The Nero version reads:

(3) Holde hire et home, ine Jerusalem, þet heo nowhit ne wute of the worldes baret

The other editions are:

(4) halde hire ed hame i ierusalem þt ha nawhit nute of þe worldes baret (Corpus)

(5) halde hire ed hame in Ierusalem þ ha nawicht nute of world baredt (Cleopatra)

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(6) halde hire at hame in ierusalem þ ha nawt ne wite of þe worldes be-ret (Titus)

(7) holde hire at home in Ierusalem. þat heo nout nute of worldes baret (Vernon)

(8) halde hire at hame i ierusalem. þat he naþhit þite of þorþdes baret (Gonville)[3]
'Keep her at home in Jerusalem so that she may know nothing of the world's turmoil.'

The Royal and Pepys manuscripts do no contain the relevant passage.

As can be seen, three of the six manuscripts, Corpus, Cleopatra, and Vernon have negative contraction in this example, and the other three, Titus, Gonville, and Nero, do not. Therefore, the two AB manuscripts are consistent in following Levin's rule for contraction in texts of Western origin, and the two exceptions he reported do not exist in the original AB language. This is not surprising in light of Dobson's (1962) suggestion that the Corpus and Cleopatra manuscripts are the closest to the source manuscript of *Ancrene Wisse*, and Laing and McIntosh's (1995) investigation of the Titus manuscript, which suggests influences by various scribes from more Northern dialect areas. These findings are explained below.

3. The AB Language and the Manuscripts.

As mentioned above, Tolkien (1929) first recognized the significance of the similarity between the A and B manuscripts. Such a situation, where two different manuscripts share exactly the same language, is unprecedented in Early Middle English manuscripts. After observing the remarkable constancy of forms in the two manuscripts, Tolkien suggested three possibilities: 1. that either A or B or both are originals, which he thought unlikely; 2. that they are accurate translations from another dialect; or 3. that they were copied from exemplars that originated at the same time and place. He favored the third explanation, as does Dobson. According to Dobson (1962), whose detailed collation of the various manuscripts shows the complex relationship they bear to one another, the Corpus manuscript "is a close copy of the author's own

[3] Ker's introduction to Wilson 1954 discusses scribal practice, and why <w> was often substituted for <þ>. Here, however, <þ> seems to be substituted for <w>.

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final and definitive revision of his work" (163), and it stands apart from the other manuscripts that contain *Ancrene Wisse*. Many scholars have searched for the identity of the author of *Ancrene Wisse* and sought to locate the center where the AB literary standard could have originated.[4] Dobson (1976) makes a strong case that the place of composition is Wigmore Abbey in Herefordshire. Most scholars agree that the evidence points to a center in the West Midlands and a composition date between 1200 and 1222. Since the Corpus manuscript and the Bodley manuscript, which contains *Hali Meiðhad*, are the versions of these two works in which the AB language is consistent, these manuscripts are the ones in which West Midland forms are most likely to appear. This is consistent with the findings in the previous section.

In the other manuscripts, the AB language has been altered. Due to the considerable variation in dialect between geographical areas and the rapidly changing language, scribes would almost always copy from manuscripts that varied to a greater or lesser extent from their own dialect. In such a situation, as Laing and McIntosh (1995) point out, there are three strategies a scribe may adopt: 1. he[5] may be a copier by habit, making no or few changes to the exemplar; 2. he may be a translator, reproducing the text in his own dialect; or 3. he may do something in between. In Early Middle English there is a strong tendency for scribes to be copiers, whereas the second type, translators, are more often found in later Middle English. However, the third type of text, with a mixture of forms, is very common. Another important factor in the transmission of texts is how different the exemplar is from the scribe's own dialect and from that of the targeted audience. A habitual copier may not always copy exactly what he has in front of him; he may happily reproduce forms from his own dialect and familiar forms from neighboring dialects but is more likely to make substitutions when faced with totally unfamiliar forms, especially if he fears his audience will find them equally unfamiliar. Even a translator, who, to be accurate, must be fairly familiar with the dialect he is translating from, as well as the one he is translating into, may find it difficult to be consistent, particularly when both forms are part of his active repertoire. It is, therefore, not surprising that most of the available texts show a mixture of forms, not

[4] For a summary, see Dahood 1984.

[5] Or she. Dobson makes a case that the Cleopatra scribe was a woman, one of the anchoresses for whom the treatise was originally written.

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unsystematic from the scribe's point of view, but sometimes difficult for modern scholars to disambiguate.

Laing and McIntosh's detailed analysis of the Titus manuscript shows how complex the situation can be. It will be recalled that in the Titus manuscript, which contains *Ancrene Wisse* and *Hali Meiðhad*, both negative examples under discussion are uncontracted. The five Early Middle English works in the manuscript are in this order, *Ancrene Wisse*, *Sawles Ward*, *Hali Meiðhad*, *Þe Wohunge of ure Lauerd* , and *Katherine*. They are all in the same hand, although the language is not homogenous. Laing and McIntosh argue that the Titus scribe copied from an exemplar in which the language of *Ancrene Wisse* and *Þe Wohunge of ure Lauerd* was different from that of *Sawles Ward*, *Hali Meiðhad*, and *Katherine*. Moreover, *Ancrene Wisse* contains stretches of text that are more AB-like and that alternate with stretches in a different dialect. Apparently, it was not unusual for two scribes to alternate copying a text, and this would account for the differences in *Ancrene Wisse*. These two scribes differed in that one was a translator and introduced a NW Midland dialect into the parts he copied, while the other scribe was more of a copyist and preserved the AB character. However, even the copyist introduced NW Midland forms into *Ancrene Wisse* so that its more AB-like parts still differ from *Hali Meiðhad*, *Sawles Ward*, and *Katherine*. In all, Laing and McIntosh suggest there are at least four different language layers in the Titus manuscript: 1. the original AB element, NW Midland forms introduced by the two scribes responsible for the exemplar; 2. North Midland elements in the *Þe Wohunge of ure Lauerd* text, which has a different source than the AB texts; and 3. the language of the Titus scribe himself. As this brief description shows, manuscripts can be extremely complex in their textual history. In this case, the contracted forms we are concerned with were most likely changed by the Northern scribes to the more familiar uncontracted ones.

The other manuscripts that this discussion focuses on have not been subject to such a detailed analysis in terms of dialect as Titus. However, Dobson's (1962) stemma traces the relationships between the eight English *Ancrene Wisse* manuscripts and two French and one Latin versions. He suggests that the Corpus manuscript is copied from one text, designated α, and all the other texts have a common ancestor, β. α and β are derived from a common ancestor, the original, written in the AB

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language. Of the β texts, Cleopatra[6] and Gonville are closer to the original than the others, which are divided into the "Titus type" (Titus, Pepys and Royal) and "Nero Type" (Nero and Vernon). Since the Nero manuscript is central to this discussion, it is worth quoting Dobson's comments: "Nero, on the other hand, though often regarded in some sense as the basic text of the work (doubtless because it was the text chosen by Morton for his edition), is an innovating manuscript, written by a fussy and interfering scribe, constantly archaizing the accidence, attempting to improve the syntax, word order, and sentence construction (almost invariably with unhappy results), and padding out the phrasing" (133). As far as I am aware, no one has analyzed the dialect area of the Nero scribe(s), but given Dobson's comments it is not surprising that Nero cannot be considered an AB text. Again we see that the manuscript from which Levin drew his data, Nero, was not the most consistent AB dialect but, just like Titus, subject to scribal interference.

4. Conclusion.

In this brief discussion I have given some additional support for Levin's original suggestion of a relationship between negative contraction and dialect. I have also shown how important it is, when evaluating claims such as this, to pay attention to the editions and manuscripts consulted, as each version of a text has its own history. Although Levin covered a large amount of data, it is much easier, 50 years later, with the benefits of electronic searches and the abundance of scholarly editions made available by the EETS to compare data. His idea that negative contraction is regionally restricted deserves further attention, especially in light of recent suggestions, for example, Hogg (1998), that we should reconsider the traditional dialect divisions of Old English. Revisiting the data for Old English as well as Middle English may be in order, both quantitatively, with attention to the relative text size in relationship to the number of contractions in each text, and also qualitatively, with attention to which particular verbs are involved.

Not only in dialectology could further research into Old English and Middle English negative contraction be productive. Syntactically, negative incorporation is the result of head movement of the verb assimilating with the negative head *ne*. Although the Neg(ation) Phrase with *ne* as its head has been extensively researched in modern languages

[6] For an interesting and detailed account of the scribal history of Cleopatra see Dobson 1972.

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(e.g., Haegeman 1995), there is relatively little historical work on negative incorporation, especially in prose. It is, however, intriguing that those verbs that incorporate negation as a prefix in Old English and Early Middle English develop into present-day English auxiliaries, which incorporate negation as a suffix. Whether the dialect differences Levin notes indicate different verb movements in the different dialect areas, or that some other process is at work (such as the modern English restriction on contraction in formal genres), also merits investigation.

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