



Middle High German: Syntax

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1. Introduction to Historical Linguistics and Middle High German
2. Phonology I
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5. Morphology II
6. **Syntax**
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Phonological erosion

A—not tremendously helpful—metaphor stemming from the field of geology (very influential in the C19th across the humanities)

Not a special mechanism of change—general phonological change

May have diachronic *consequences*

Refers to phonological reduction or lenition ('weakening')



Phonological reduction / lenition

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Refers to phonological reduction or lenition ('weakening')

- Segmental weakening or—at most extreme—total loss ($\rightarrow \emptyset$)
- Loss of prosodic features/structures/constituents (stress, tone, syllables)
- Loss of phonological autonomy (can lead to assimilation, cliticisation)

Phonological reduction / lenition

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Possible weakening / reduction processes:

Voicing > affrication (e.g. /t/ > /tʃ/) > spirantisation (e.g. /k^h/ > /x/) / gliding (e.g. /g/ > /j/) > vocalisation (e.g. /l/ > /o/) > deletion

Debuccalisation (losing place features), e.g. /s/ > /h/

Vowel reduction, e.g. /i/ > /ə/

Shortening, i.e. V: → V or degemination

Rhotacism, e.g. /z/ > /r/

Flapping, e.g. /t/ > /ɾ/

Synthetic to analytic

Synthetic constructions use morphology (e.g. affixes, vowel alternations)

Inherited tenses/moods: subjunctive, present, preterite

Analytic constructions use separate (function) words (e.g. auxiliaries, prepositions)

New tenses/moods: *werden* future, perfect, passive, conditional

Periphrasis: ‘a phrase of two or more words used to express a grammatical relationship which would otherwise be expressed by the inflection of a single word’ (OED)

☞ In the history of German, we see a movement from **more synthetic** → **more analytic** constructions, beginning with OHG (even Gmc) and continuing into NHG

Function words

FNCs closed class of words: determiners, prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, particles and auxiliaries

Play important role in syntax & often head phrases (e.g. PP or DP)

Treated as weaker units in the phonology (cf. Selkirk 1996)

‘Strong’, focused forms → contrast with ‘weak’ forms

Weak forms are sub-minimal (reduced) and ‘cliticise’ (lean on) the nearest full prosodic word, usually an unreduced lexical word (e.g. noun or verb)

[habıçs] (< habe=ich=es ‘I have it’)

[hastəs] (< hast=du=es ‘you have it’)

[hates] (< hat=er=es ‘he has it’) &c.

Cliticisation

Gmc has always preferred left-leaning prosodic structures
i.e. *en*cliticisation is preferred over *pro*cliticisation

it's, (s)he'll, gonna, ain'tcha [ɛnʃə] >> *'tis*, willy-nilly (< *ne=will=I/he/ye*)



Cliticisation

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i.e. *en*cliticisation is preferred over *pro*cliticisation

Even if this goes against the syntactic phrasing!

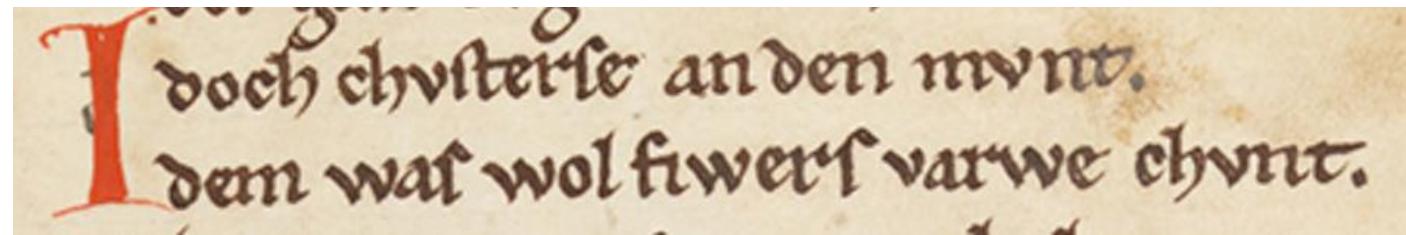
e.g. *drink a pint of milk* vs. [drink [a [pint [of milk]]]]

→ Almost all Germanic inflexion is suffixal

enclitic > phonologically bound form > morphologically
bound form / suffix



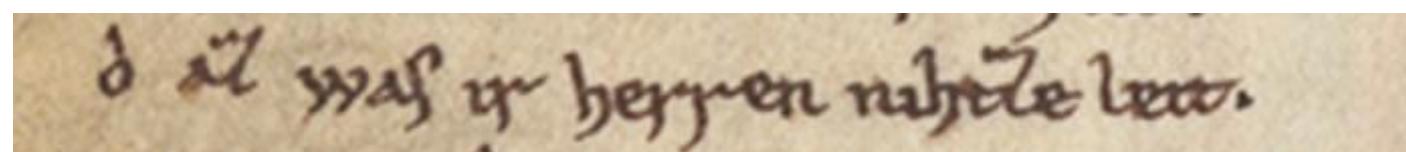
Clitics in MHG



Idoch chvsterse an den mvnt. 176.09

‘kiss-PRET=he.NOM=she.ACC’ <*kuste er si*

St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 857

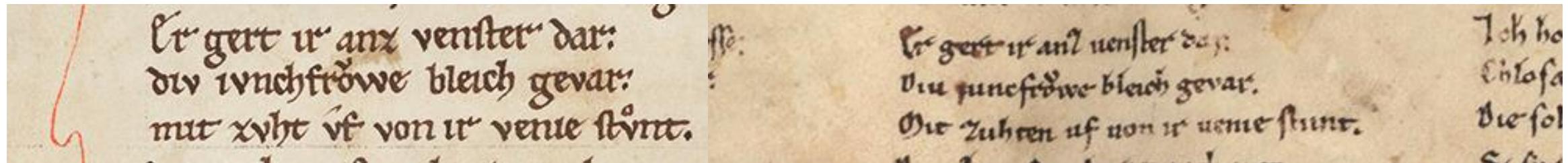


daz waf ir herren nihtze leit. 59.20

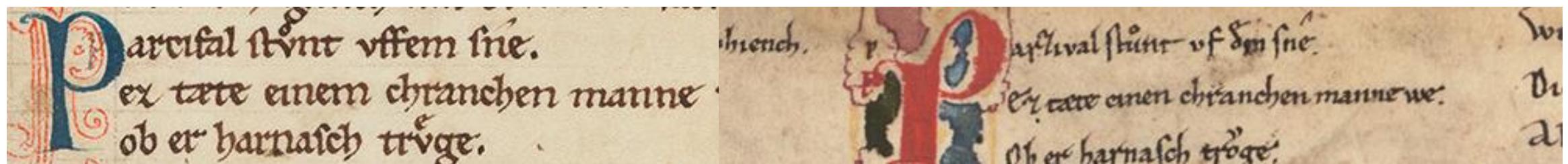
‘not=too’ <*niht ze*

München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cgm 19

Clitics in MHG



437.19 Er gert ir **anz** venster dar.
 'to=DET.N.ACC' < *an=daz*



59.20 Parcival stvnt vff**em** snê.
 'on=DET.M.DAT' < *ûf=dem*

Clitics in MHG

swaz wildeſ vnderem lyſte lebt.
er fliege oð löſſe vnt dax ſwebt.
der riterlichen brüderſchaft.

Swaz wildeſ vndir^m lyſte lebet.
er fliege oð löſſe vñ dail ſwebet.
der riterlichen bröder ſchaft.

437.19

Swaz wildef vndir**m** lyfte lebet.
'under=DET.M.DAT' < *under=dem*

Grammaticalisation

Coined by Meillet (1912)

The movement from a (more) lexical (LEX) to a (more) grammatical (GRAMM) meaning/word/form (cf. Kuryłowicz 1965)

e.g. from LEX verb to auxiliary, or from a derivational to an inflectional affix.

Movement in the other direction is very scarce

→ the very existence of 'degrammaticalisation' is controversial

- *-ish*
- *-ism*
- *-s*

Grammaticalisation

Grammaticalisation is a gradual process involving movement along a continuum (or ‘cline’), with purely lexical content at one end and purely functional content at the other:

Content word > function word > clitic > affix > phonological material > Ø

Semantic ‘bleaching’

Phonological reduction

Reanalysis

Newmeyer (2001):

We need a theory/model for these three, but does grammaticalisation need a unified theory? Does it have any properties beyond those of bleaching, reduction and reanalysis?

English *will* ('want') > *will* (auxiliary: FUT) > 'll (clitic)

Is grammaticalisation really a *process*?

Grammaticalisation

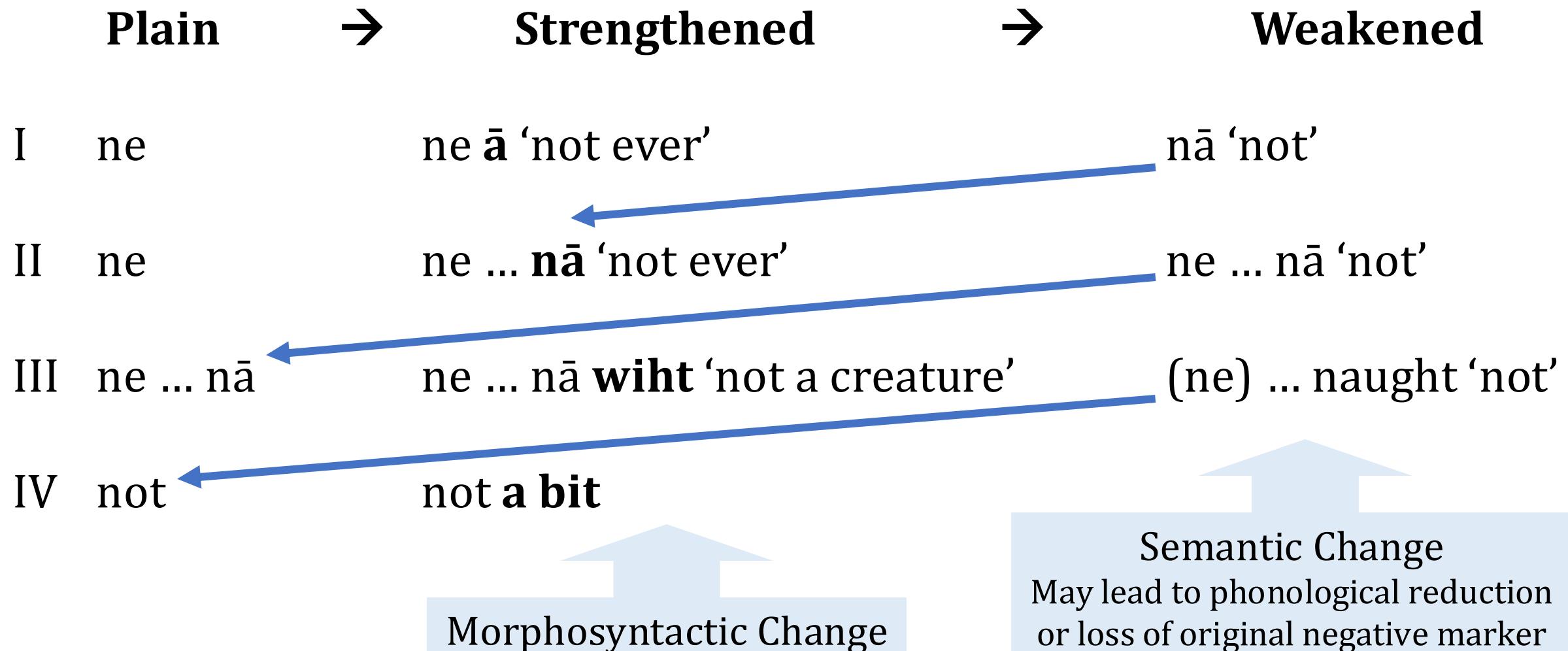
It is often regarded as being related to the competing drives for ‘**economy**’ (saying something as ‘easily’ and briefly as possible) and ‘**clarity**’ (being easily understood) (cf. Geurts 2000)

→ In this way, gradual phonological reduction generally accompanies grammaticalisation, until clarity is impaired and periphrastic material is added to counter this, eventually becoming subject to erosion itself (cf. ‘**Jespersen’s Cycle**’)

The history of negative expressions in various languages makes us witness the following curious fluctuation: the original negative adverb is first weakened, then found insufficient and therefore strengthened, generally through some additional word, and this in its turn may be felt as the negative proper and may then in course of time be subject to the same development as the original word (Jespersen 1917: 4).

*For more information on clines and cycles (including the grammaticalisation cline and Jespersen’s cycle), see Hock (2021: 351–366)

Jespersen's Cycle in English



Grammaticalisation in Gmc: The dental PRET

Weak verbs could not undergo ablaut (inherited, synthetic past)

→ Periphrastic construction comprising weak verb and inflected form of *did* (< PGmc. auxiliary **ded-* 'do.PRET' < PIE **dhe-dheH₁-*)

ROOT + SUFFIXES + *DO-TNS.PRS.NMB*

There is debate over which form of the verb *do* was added to; the root was followed by an extension /j/ and a suffix which might have been infinitival, adjectivalising, nominalising, resultative etc.

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ROOT + SUFFIXES + *DO-TNS.PRS.NMB*

- **Periphrasis**

Initially two independent words (ROOT-SUFFIXES) (*DO-TNS.PRS.NMB*)

- **Bleaching, phonological reduction & reanalysis:**

did grammaticalises, becoming a clitic (ROOT-SUFFIXES)=*DO-TNS.PRS.NMB*

- **'Univerbation'** → creation of suffixes from enclitics (ROOT-*d_{PRET}*-PRS.NMB)

Further grammaticalisation: /d/ ultimately reanalysed as a past tense morpheme
(for more detail, see Lahiri 2000, Kiparsky 2009, Lahiri & Plank 2010)

Grammaticalisation in MHG

Development of *werden* as an auxiliary in **periphrastic constructions**:

- ☞ Future tense
- ☞ Passive voice
- ☞ Later: conditional meaning

e.g. weak verbs where the PRET.SUBJ and PRET.INDIC forms were identical

Contrasts with the inherited (synthetic) tenses and moods, e.g. the PRET, PRES and SUBJ, which were marked via verbal inflexion.

- ☞ OHG > MHG > NHG: Movement from (more) synthetic to (more) analytical language

*For a detailed overview of syntactic changes, see Wright (1955: 60f.), Paul (2007) and Jones & Jones (2019, 2024)

Note that analytic constructions can *become* synthetic, as with the dental PRET

Tense: Future

More markedly different from NHG

Gmc: Just uses the present tense

OHG: Develops periphrastic constructions with modal verbs:

wish, obligation, possibility → futurity

MHG: Lots of variation—various modal verbs competing

Can still simply use the present:

☞ *bin ich gnislīch, sô genise ich* ‘if I am curable, I shall recover’

In the same way, the **PERF** can be used for the future perfect:

☞ *daz ist schiere getân* ‘that will soon have been done’

Similar patterns are observed in the other Germanic languages

e.g. OE, ON

Tense: Future

However, the modal strategy had become very successful

Competing forms:

sol + infinitive (*oldest: appears in OHG*)

swaz der küneginne liebes geschiht, des sol ich ir wol gunnen

NL 1204,2f.

muoz + infinitive (*rarer: better retains modal sense*)

des muoz ich zer werlde immer schande hân

NL 1248,3

wil + infinitive (*mostly modal, but unambiguous future readings*)

[...] ich sol iv sagen mer, waz iv min lieber herre her enboten hat

(Nibelungenlied B 1195,2f., C13th)

[...] so wil ich sagen mer, waz iu min lieber herre her enboten hat

(Nibelungenlied I, 1323)

Tense: Future

Very rare (in both OHG and MHG) is *werden* + **infinitive**

Ultimately wins out over the modal verbs, but only firmly established by C16th

Origins disputed, but proposed to have come from *werden* + **PRES.PTCP**

Inchoative (start of state/action) > temporal (future event)

Jâ wirt ir dienende vil manic wætlicher man
1210,4

NL

Paul (2007): Get *werden* + **INF** from 2nd half of C14th

Seems to be a mix of the PRES.PTCP and the (initially inflected) INF.

Tense: Future

Questionable whether there was ever an original construction with the INF.

Could be due to (i) reduction or (ii) analogy to the modal constructions (or a mix)

e.g. *-ende* > *-enne* > *-ene* > *-en*

sô wirt er sprechen (B)

sô wirt er sprechende (H)

Flore 4656 (both C15th MSS)

Tense: Preterite

Can convey any past action

Finer-grained delineation of the past is less observable than in later stages of the language

The PRET form can have perfective meaning (where the past event has a bearing on the present, or is viewed subjectively)

ich liez ein lant dâ ich krône truoc

Pz 441,06

Especially for verbs with an inherently perfective meaning

In successive, related clauses, the PRET can follow a periphrastic PERF form with the same meaning

*ôwê frowe unde wîp, wer hât benomn mir dînen lîp? erwarp mit rîterschaft
mîn hant dîn werde minn, krôn und ein lant?*

Pz 302,07-10

Tense: Preterite

Can often have pluperfect meaning, particularly in:

- a. Forms prefixed with *ge-*

*Als der künic Gunther die rede vol gesprach, Hagene der küene den guoten
Rüedegêren sach* NL 1181,3f.

- b. Subordinate clauses

dô du von ir schiede, zehant sie starp Pz 476,26
'she died immediately after you had left her'

Tense: Perfect

Rarer in OHG than MHG

Fully-formed as an analytic construction in OHG (with minor differences)

MHG has much the same form as today:

Inflected form of *hân* or *sîn* + PST.PTCP

Ordinary meaning is perfective

The PRET is also often used to express the perfect (as we have seen)

Can sometimes convey a future perfect meaning (due to the present form of the auxiliary):

is rother dar under, den have wir schire wnden

Ro 3914

i.e. 'If Rother is below, we will soon have found him!'

The pluperfect is formed as the PERF, but with the PRET form of *hân/sîn*

dô sî ditz hâten vernomen, dô sprach der rîter mittem leun

Iw 6108

Tense: The *ge-* prefix

Unlike NHG, the prefix *ge-* can be added to almost any verb and gives it perfective force

→implies completion of the action

e.g. *sitzen* 'be sitting' vs. *ge-sitzen* 'sit down'

Unlike NHG, when the meaning of the verb is already perfective, it forms its PST.PTCP without *ge-* in MHG

e.g. *brâht, komen, worden, vunden, troffen* (not **gebrâht, gekommen, geworden* etc.)

cf. NHG *gebracht, gekommen, geworden, gefunden, getroffen*

Tense: The *ge-* prefix

Added to the PRES, *ge-* often results in a future perfect meaning:

swenne iuwer sun gewahset ‘when your son has (=will have) grown up’

With the PRET, it has pluperfect meaning:

dô ich in gesach ‘when I had seen him’

Tense: Present participle

The PRES.PTCP can also indicate continuous action when combined with *sîn* (like in English):

daz er im bitende wese ‘that he may continually pray for him’

Mood

MHG uses the subjective in many more contexts than NHG, e.g. after:

☞ Imperatives

nu sehet wie genæme er ê der werlte wäre
to

‘now see how pleasing he was
the world before’

☞ Generalising indefinite pronouns

swer daʒ tuo

‘whoever does that’

☞ Comparatives

und wirde werder danne ich sî

‘and I shall become more
worthy than I am’

☞ Wishes (*müeze* = NHG *möge*)

din sêle müeze wol gevarn

‘may thy soul fare well’

Mood

The PRET subjunctive expresses unreal conditions in both the present and past:

du vertrüegest doch wol mînen tôt

‘you would easily bear my death’

und sæhe eȝ niht her Hartmuot

‘if Sir Hartmuot had not seen it’

The periphrastic construction with *würde* + INF does not exist in MHG

However, the subjunctive form *wolde* can be combined with the perfect infinitive to form a construction like English ‘would have X-ed’

er wolde in erslagen hân

‘he would have slain him’

The perfect infinitive is used generally with the PRET forms of the modal verbs (*mugen, suln, müezen, kunnen, durfen, wellen*) to express unreal past events. This is a MHG (C12th development), following an older construction with a plain INF.

Voice

Formed analytically from the outset (cf. Gothic)

→ Even in OHG, it is formed much like NHG

Relevant only for transitive verbs

The passive turns a transitive verb into an intransitive one

Eventive (*werden* + past participle) vs. stative (*sîn* + past participle)

Not quite as consistent as in NHG

Many examples of *sîn*-passive to express eventive passive:

mir ist noch vil selten gescenket bezzer wîn

NL 2116.3

Such cases can often be ambiguous: perfect tense or eventive passive?

Voice

Very rarely find three-part passives in MHG (only occasionally from C13th)

e.g. *Ich bin/war gesehen worden*

Just as rare with *sîn* as *werden*

nu wasez ouch über des jâres zil, daz Gahmuret geprîset vil was worden dâ ze Zazamanc Pz 57,29–58,01

in senender nôt bin ich begraben gewesen lange stunde KvW, Troj Kr 16948f

Often find *sîn*-passive used in the perfect & past perfect, whether eventive or stative:

Pres.	ich wurde gelobet
Pret.	ich wart gelobet
Perf.	ich bin gelobet
Past perf.	ich was gelobet

i.e. referring to an earlier event which resulted in a given state

Case: Genitive

The MHG genitive has a number of uses not found in NHG:

- Verbal complement
- ‘Genitive of cause’
- ‘Partitive genitive’

ich wil des mit wârheit jehen	208
daz tuot der man, [...] des man geniezen sol	539-41
Möht et ers erbîten ('survive'), / er giltet mir mit houfen	1134-35
sô got der râche wil selbe phlegen	1650

Case: Genitive

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- Verbal complement
- 'Genitive of cause'
- 'Partitive genitive'

nû volge mîner lêre, / **des** hâstu frum und êre

287-88

Des erschrac der wirt vil sêre

769

Case: Genitive

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- Verbal complement
- ‘Genitive of cause’
- ‘Partitive genitive’

waz [sie] wunders mit ir kraft / worhten gegen der heidenschaft	65–66
der niuwen site weiz ich vil	912
sît ich niht wînes tranc	1118
ich hân voller secke drî	1329
dannoch der râche niht was genuoc	1689

Negation

- MHG has a negative particle, ***ne*** (< OHG *ni*)
- Often reduced and usually cliticised:
*en*clitic ***-n*** & *pro*clitic ***en-*** (particularly phrase initially)
dû sprichest immer 'dê ûs sal' / da3 ich enwei3 zwiu e3 sal (755–6)
- *ne* may appear with a reinforcing *ni(e)ht*
< OHG *niowiht* / *neowiht* < *ni-eo-wiht* 'not ever a creature' (cf. non-standard English *I didn't do nothing*)
ich enmac niht genesen / welt ir mir ungenædic wesen (1773–4)

cf. Jespersen's Cycle!

Original *ne* was strengthened with a focused indefinite pronoun (*niowiht*), followed by semantic bleaching and reduction (ultimately losing the original negative marker in NHG), just as in English

Subordinating Conjunctions

MHG

dô

ê daz

sît (daz)

unz daz

die wîle

swenne

wan(de), sît, umbe daz, die wîle

sô, ob, unde

sô

daz, durch daz, umbe daz

swie

NHG equivalent

als

bevor

seitdem

bis

während

immer wenn

weil

wenn

wie, sowie

sodass, damit

obwohl, wie auch immer

Coordinating Conjunctions

MHG

beidiu...unde
alde
niuwan, wan
weder...oder
sunder
wan(de)

NHG equivalent

sowohl...als auch
oder
außer (dass)
entweder...oder
sondern
denn

Summary

Tense

Changes in expressing the future tense

Use of the preterite vs. *hān/sîn* + past participle

sîn + present participle for continuous action

Mood

The subjunctive is much more widely used in MHG

e.g. after indefinite pronouns: *swer daz tuo* 'whoever does that'

Case

Much more widespread use of the genitive

e.g. following the comparative, impersonal verbs, interjections, in a predicative sense (*sît si des goteshûses sint*) etc.

Trends: Synthetic to (more) analytic

Syntax steps in to compensate for an impoverished inflectional system

OHG → MHG

Articles emerge and become increasingly important:

- indicate gender, person, case and number (compensating for syncretism in nominal & adjectival inflection)

Periphrastic tenses emerge (due to syncretism in the synthetic tenses)

MHG → NHG

Genitive loses out to analytic prepositional phrases (e.g. *von* + DAT)

Some senses of the subjunctive are taken over by modal verbs (will, obligation)

Periphrastic *würden* + INF conditional

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