



# Middle High German: Syntax

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# Michaelmas Term 2024

1. Introduction to Historical Linguistics and Middle High German
2. Phonology I
3. Phonology II
4. Morphology I
5. Morphology II
6. Syntax
7. Lexis & Language Contact
8. Verse & Metre

# Phonological erosion

A—not tremendously helpful—metaphor stemming from the field of geology (very influential in the C19<sup>th</sup> across the humanities)

Not a special mechanism of change—general phonological change

May have diachronic *consequences*

Refers to phonological reduction or lenition (‘weakening’)



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Refers to phonological reduction or lenition (‘weakening’)

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

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## Possible weakening / reduction processes:

**Voicing > affrication** (e.g. /t/ > /tʃ/) > **spirantisation** (e.g. /k<sup>h</sup>/ > /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)

[**habɪçs**] (< habe=ich=es ‘I have it’)

[**hastəs**] (< hast=du=es ‘you have it’)

[**hatəs**] (< 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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**Even if this goes against the syntactic phrasing!**

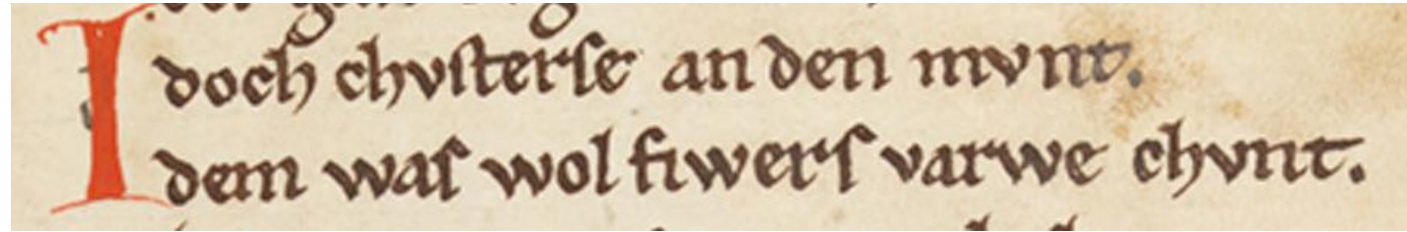
e.g. *drinka pinta milk* vs. [drink [a [pint [of milk]]]]

→ Almost all Germanic inflexion is suffixal

enclitic > phonologically bound form > morphologically  
bound form / suffix

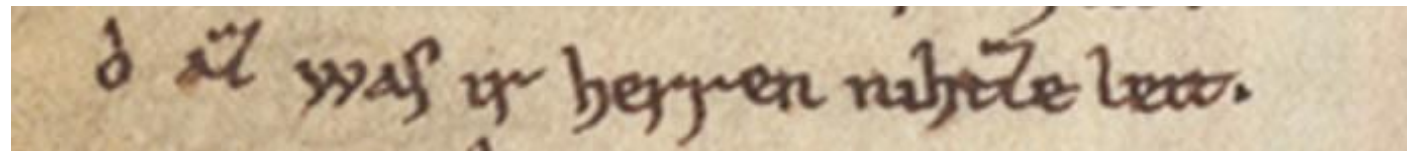


# Clitics in MHG



Idoch chvst**erse** an den mvnt. 176.09

‘kiss-PRET=he.NOM=she.ACC’ < *kuste er si*  
*St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 857*



daz was ir herren niht**ze** 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*



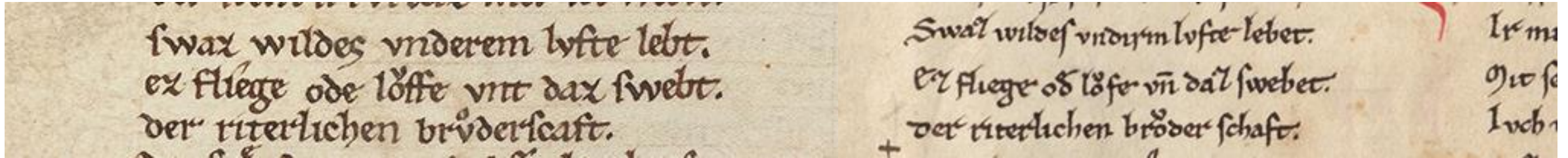
59.20

Parcival stunt vffem snê.

‘on=DET.M.DAT’

< *ûf=dem*

# Clitics in MHG



437.19

Swaz wildeg vndir **m** lvfte 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

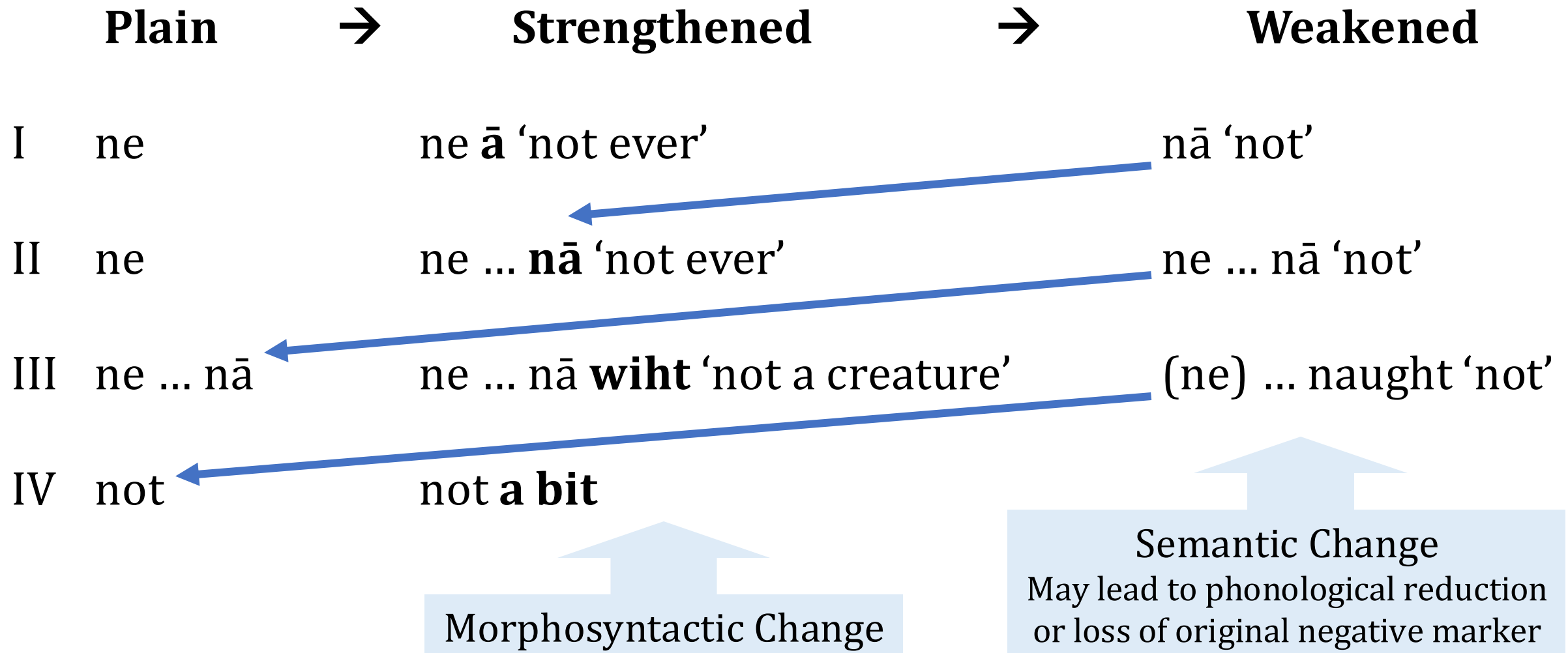
It is often regarded as being related to the competing drives for ‘**economy**’ (saying something as ‘easily’ and briefly as possible) and ‘**clarity**’ (being easily understood) (cf. Geurts 2000)

→ 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-dheH<sub>1</sub>-*)

**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*<sub>PRET</sub>-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

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

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

# 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., C13<sup>th</sup>)

[...] *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 C16<sup>th</sup>

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 2<sup>nd</sup> half of C14<sup>th</sup>

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 sprech<sup>en</sup>* (B)

*sô wirt er sprech<sup>ende</sup>* (H)

Flore 4656 (both C15<sup>th</sup> 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 dô 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 künec 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*, \**gekomen*, \**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 subjunctive in many more contexts than NHG, e.g. after:

## ☞ Imperatives

*nu sehet wie **genæme** er ê der werlte wære*  
to

‘now see how pleasing he was  
the world before’

## ☞ Generalising indefinite pronouns

*swer daz **tuo***

‘whoever does that’

## ☞ Comparatives

*und werde 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:

<i>du <b>vertrüegest</b> doch wol mînen tôt</i>	‘you would easily bear my death’
<i>und <b>sæhe</b> ez niht her Hartmuot</i>	‘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’

<i>er <b>wolde</b> in <b>erslagen</b> hân</i>	‘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 (C12<sup>th</sup> 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** bezzet 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 C13<sup>th</sup>)

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

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nû volge mîner lêre, / **des** hâstu frum und êre  
**Des** erschrac der wirt vil sêre

287-88

769

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- ‘Genitive of cause’
- ‘Partitive genitive’

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

# Negation

- MHG has a negative particle, **ne** (< OHG *nī*)
- Often reduced and usually cliticised:
  - en*clitic **-n** & *pro*clitic **en-** (particularly phrase initially)
  - dû sprichet immer 'dê ûs sal' / daz ich **en**weiz zwiu ez 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 **en**mac **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. *hân/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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