

The Genitive of Negation in Old-Norse Icelandic

The genitive of negation (GenNeg) is a typologically rare morpho-syntactic phenomenon (Miestamo 2014) whereby the direct object of a transitive verb and the subject of an intransitive existential verb receive the genitive case *exclusively* under negation. In Europe, the phenomenon is a common trait of the so-called “Circum-Baltic” area (Koptjevskaja-Tamm & Wälchli 2001), and, as such, it appears in various modern Balto-Slavic (BSl.) and Balto-Finnic (BFin.) languages (Arkadiev 2015). It was long assumed that Old Church Slavonic texts of the 10th c. contained the first historical records of GenNeg (Lunt 1974). Recent investigations (Bucci 2020) showed, however, that traces of GenNeg can be found also in the Gothic Bible, translated in the 4th c. CE (text attested from the 6th), as well as in other Early Germanic (EG) languages (7th-14th c. CE), such as Old High German, Old Low Franconian, and Old English.

In Old Norse-Icelandic (henceforth, ONI), examples¹ of GenNeg can be found in three specific constructions, namely 1) [transitive verb + *ekki* + dir.obj_{gen.}], 2) [*hafa* + *ekki* + dir.obj_{gen.}], and 3) [*vera* + subject_{gen.} + *ekki*]:

1 **né** vinna þess **ekki**
 nor obtain.INF **this.GEN-SG** **NEG**
 ‘nor obtain [lit. ‘of’] this’, *Atlamál 22*

2 og hafði **ekki** **orða** við hann
 and have.PAST **NEG** **word.GEN-PL** with him
 ‘and didn’t speak to him’ (lit. ‘didn’t have of words with him’),
 Grettis saga Asmundarsonar

3 þar var **ekki** inni **manna**
 there be.PAST **NEG** inside **man.GEN-PL**
 ‘there were no men inside’ (lit. ‘there was not of men inside’),
 Fóstbróðra saga

The ONI situation is rather puzzling: on the one hand, the examples of GenNeg found so far conform not only to the rest of the EG data, but also to a well-known typological cline affecting GenNeg (Kagan 2013), by which, after a period of obligatoriness, GenNeg becomes gradually more restricted to a few low-transitivity contexts, namely negated possessive and existential constructions (as in (2) and (3)), before disappearing completely.

¹ Mostly retrieved via *IcePaHC* (the Icelandic Parsed Historical Corpus), *MIcePaHC* (Machine-parsed IcePaHC) dependency-parsed corpus), and the *Saga Corpus* (Steingrímsson *et al.* 2018).

On the other hand, ONI had already restructured its expression of negation, which caused the shift from the preverbal negator *ni* to the postverbal negator *ekki* (Grønvik 1997: 9); this renewal in the expression of negation, which has occurred (virtually) in all EG languages (and is popularly known as Jespersen Cycle, cf. Breitbarth 2014), calls into question the presence of the genitive under negation: does it depend on the GenNeg or was it (originally) a complement of *ekki* ‘not, nothing’ (< **eit-ki* ‘not one’)? If the latter hypothesis is correct, why does it conform to the environments that are common for the other EG languages as well, and why does it still disappear after a period?

By providing examples from EG, Slavic and Balto-Finnic data, my presentation will try to answer all the preceding questions and formulate an analysis of GenNeg in Germanic able to reflect the contribution presented by ONI. I will reflect, in particular, on a) the effect of the expression of negation on argument selection and case marking, and b) the (disappearance of) genitive arguments in the EG languages.

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References

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