

# Revisiting the etymology of the Norse negative enclitic *-a/-at*<sup>1</sup>

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In this paper I present and discuss the etymological hypotheses that have been put forth through the years for Norse *-a/-at* ‘not’, a negative particle suffixed to finite and imperative verbs, found primarily in Old Icelandic and Old Norwegian. The four main etymologies that I will evaluate are: (i) the connector/generalizing particle PGmc *\*(u)h<sup>w</sup>* (cf. Go. *-uh*), (ii) the numeral for ‘one’: PGmc *\*aina/\*ainat-* (cf. Go. *ain, ainata*), (iii) a reinforcer associated with various pronouns: PGmc *\*-ã* (cf. runic *eka, ika*, etc.) or perhaps PGmc *\*-õ* (cf. Go. *þat-a, þan-a, in-a*, OE *þon-e, hin-e*, etc.), and (iv) the (negative) indefinite phrases ‘(n)ever’ and ‘(n)ever a thing’: PGmc *\*(n-)aiwa-/\*(n-)aiwa-weht-*. As we shall see below, each etymology has its share of support from scholars. However, some ideas have aged better than others. Nevertheless, it is useful to discuss all of the proposals in the literature since there are conceptual overlaps and interrelated assumptions weaving their way through the hypotheses in (i-iv). The goal of this paper is to critically assess each of these etymologies, thereby giving an overview of their respective advantages and disadvantages.

## 1 Introduction

NI war die ursprüngliche und wahre negation; in der goth[ischen] sprache hat sie noch den weitesten spielraum, in den übrigen nimmt sie allmählich ab, wiewohl auf verschiedene weise; heutzutage ist sie vor dem verbo überall verschwunden und den partikeln gewichen, die anfangs bloss zu ihrer verstärkung hinter das verbum gestellt wurden und zum theil mit ihr selbst zusammengesetzt sind.<sup>2</sup>

(Grimm 1890 [1831]: 690)

The passage above was written by Jacob Grimm almost a century before Jespersen’s seminal work on the negative cycle (Jespersen 1917). Although Jespersen extended the idea to languages outside of Germanic, such as French, it is clear that Grimm had a good understanding of the phenomenon, despite rarely receiving credit for this in the literature (though see Kock 1879: 18-19 for some discussion).

What we today call Jespersen’s Cycle (as it was dubbed by Östen Dahl) can be illustrated using Old Norse as in (1-4).

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<sup>2</sup> “*Ni* was the original, true negation; in the Gothic language it had the widest range, in the rest [of Germanic] it is narrowed down gradually, though in different ways; these days it has disappeared in its pre-verbal position everywhere and given way to particles that at first were placed post-verbally only for the sake of reinforcement and are in part made up of it [= the original negation *nī*].”

- (1)  $ne V_{fin} \rightarrow ne V_{fin-a/-at} \rightarrow V_{fin-a/-at}$
- (2) mani þat **ne** vissi / hvat hann megins atti  
 moon that neg knew what he power.gen had  
 ‘The moon didn’t know the power he had.’  
 (*Völuspá* 5)
- (3) er þv at grati **ne** fqr-at  
 which you to crying.dat neg say-neg  
 ‘which for crying you cannot say’  
 (*Hamðismál* 8)
- (4) sécc-a ec þann Volvndi / til smiþio borinn.  
 see.1sg-neg I it Volund.dat to smith borne  
 ‘I don’t see it carried to the smith for Volund.’  
 (*Völundarkviða* 18)

In the earliest stage of the cycle, preverbal *ne* (Indo-European \**ne*) was the sole marker of negation; this stage survived here and there in the Old Norse texts, one example being (2). In the next stage of the cycle, a reinforcing particle *-a/-at* with postverbal placement arose, creating a configuration in which the verb was flanked by two negative elements, as seen in (3). In the final stage of the cycle (before it potentially repeats), preverbal *ne* disappears completely and *-a/-at* takes over, as illustrated in (4). Preverbal *ne* was archaic already in the earliest poetry and essentially gone by 800 AD (Eythórsson 2002). As we will see below, Jespersen’s Cycle was completed in Nordic far earlier than in West Germanic.

Before I enter into the etymological discussion, I present some basic facts about *-a/-at* (see also Eythórsson 2002). Firstly, the particle could be suffixed not only to finite verbs but also to imperatives. Infinitives, however, used another negation (*eigi*). Second, the particle appears to be a West Norse innovation, with no convincing evidence of the particle having existed in East Norse varieties (though the material is of course limited).<sup>3</sup> Finally, the vowel

<sup>3</sup> Delbrück (1910: 40) writes: “Es ist merkwürdig, daß dieses *-a* sich nur im Westnordischen findet. Ob es einst auch im Ostnordischen vorhanden war, dort aber durch die synonymen *eigh* und *ekke* verdrängt wurde, wage ich nicht zu entscheiden.” [“It is remarkable that this *-a* is found in West Norse only. Whether it once existed in East Norse also, but was replaced by the synonyms *eigh* and *ekke*, I dare not decide.”] Interestingly, a search on the *Samnordisk runtextdatabas* shows us that all the occurrences of *eigi* and *ekki* from the Viking Age (9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries) are found in inscriptions from Denmark and Sweden (i.e. East Norse), while all the occurrences of *eigi* and *ekki* from the Medieval period (11<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries) are from Norway (i.e. West Norse). As always, it is wise to remember that there is an unequal geographic distribution of Viking Age inscriptions (Norway having fewer than Sweden or Denmark). Nevertheless, the facts as they are suggest that *eigi* and *ekki* took root in East Norse early, at a time when West Norse still had *-a/-at*. As *-a/-at* declined in West Norse, *eigi* and *ekki* spread into this branch from the east.

in *-at* was subject to a simple phonological rule of deletion after a short vowel (e.g. *eigu-t* ‘they didn’t have’ vs. *má-at* ‘shall not’). There are a handful of exceptions to this rule, mostly involving the subjunctive ending *-i* (e.g. *skríði-at*, *renni-a*, *kæmi-a*, etc.) (Cleasby 1874: xxvi).

Four main etymologies have been proposed over the years. I refer to them as the AND, ONE, REINFORCER, and (N)EVER (A THING) etymologies. Each one is described in (5).

(5) Etymologies to be assessed

(i) *AND etymology*

ON *-a* is cognate with Go. *-uh* (< PGmc *-(u)h<sup>w</sup>* < PIE *-k<sup>w</sup>e*), a generalizing/connector particle most easily glossed as ‘and’, while *-at* is cognate with Go. *-upþan* (< *-uh* + *þan*) (Cleasby 1874).

(ii) *ONE etymology*

ON *-at* < *\*ainat-* ‘one’ (neuter singular, long-form) (originally going back to Kock 1879). Some scholars also consider ON *-a* to be derived from the neuter singular (short-form) *\*aina* ‘one’. Cf. Go. *ain*, *ainata*.

(iii) *REINFORCER etymology*

ON *-a* can be identified with the pronominal reinforcer *-a* (e.g. runic **eka**, **ika**, etc. < PGmc *\*-ã*), or perhaps the particle found in Go. *þat-a*, *þan-a*, *in-a*, OE *þon-e*, *hin-e*, etc. < PGmc *\*-ō̃*. See below for etymological references. This is an original hypothesis for the etymology of the Norse enclitic negation, and it hypothesizes that *-at* was derived from *-a* by a specific analogical process that can be tested in various ways.

(iv) *(N)EVER (A THING) etymology*

The (negative) indefinite phrases ‘(n)ever’ (< PGmc *\*(n-)aiwa-*) and ‘(n)ever a thing’ (< PGmc *\*(n-)aiwa-weht-*) give rise to ON *-a* and *-at*, respectively, paralleling West Germanic forms like OE *n-ā* ‘no, not’ and OE *n-ā-wiht* ‘nothing’ > *nāht* ‘nothing, not’ (Grønvik 1997, building on earlier work; see below).

I will take one etymology at a time and discuss its pros and cons. It will be shown that the ONE and (N)EVER (A THING) etymologies are the most plausible options, while the AND and REINFORCER etymologies have serious problems. Importantly, the (N)EVER (A THING) etymology fits coherently with what we know about the negative cycle in the history of Northwest Germanic. The (N)EVER (A THING) etymology also gains a slight edge over the ONE etymology when it comes to the ‘gravity diagnostic’ of Nielsen (1983).

## 2 AND etymology

There can be little doubt of the identity, by way of assimilation, of the Goth. *-uh* or *-uþ-þan* and the Scand. *-a* or *-aþ (-at)* ... The negative and affirmative frequently take the place of one another in different dialects ... so *eyvit* etymologically = *ought*, but in fact used = *naught*[.] (Cleasby 1874: xxviii)

The Gothic connector/conjunction (and even generalizer) *-uh* is famously cognate with Skt. *ca*, Lat. *-que*, Gk. *te*, etc., all meaning ‘and, also, etc.’ (PGmc \*-(u)h<sup>w</sup> < PIE \*-k<sup>w</sup>e, ultimately part of the indefinite/interrogative pronominal paradigm of PIE \*k<sup>w</sup>i-/\*k<sup>w</sup>e-/\*k<sup>w</sup>o-). One obvious similarity between Go. *-uh* and ON *-a/- (a)t* is their tendency to be attached to a clause-initial finite verb: for example, Go. *qepun-uh* ‘And they said...’, *in-uh-sandedun* ‘And (they) sent in...’. In ON, moreover, it was quite common for *-a/-at* to appear early in the clause too (Eythórsson 2002: 197-198 and earlier work).

However, there are a number of problematic sound correspondences in Cleasby’s hypothesis, as was recognized only a few years later by Kock (1879: 15). First, Cleasby’s chronology for “*-aþ (-at)*” – where the variant *-aþ/-að* is assumed to be the primary or older form, with *-at* being a later, secondary variant of some kind – is wrong: *-at* is the older form, and *-aþ/-að* comes later, which we know from observing quite regular lenition of final *-t* in the course of development of various Scandinavian varieties (e.g. *þat* > *það*, *hús-it* > *hús-ið*, etc.). This means that Go. *-uþþan* (< *-uh-þan* ‘and then’) must be compared not with ON *-aþ/-að* but with ON *-at*, giving the completely unexpected correspondence of Go. *þ* : ON *t*. On top of that, the vowel correspondence Go. *u* : ON *a* can be considered equally as mysterious.

Cleasby also makes an attempt at drawing similarities in the morphosyntactic distribution of *-uh* and *-at*, stating that “further proof” for the cognate status of these two elements is that “neither the Goth. nor the Icel. suffix was used with nouns” (Cleasby 1874: xxviii). This is a decidedly odd way of formulating a generalization, however, and it does not capture the facts in a very satisfactory way. On the one hand, ON *-a/-at* was found *exclusively* on finite verbs and imperatives. In Gothic, on the other hand, Go. *-uh*, in addition to verbs, was also found on pronouns (often forming indefinite pronouns from interrogatives), adverbs, and prepositions, as illustrated in (6) below.

- (6) *hvaz-uh* ‘who(so)ever, every’  
*hvarjiz-uh* ‘every one (of them)’  
*ainhvarjiz-uh* ‘each other’  
*immuh* ‘and to him’  
*sumsuh* ‘and another’  
*þan-uh* ‘and then...’  
*hvan-uh* ‘and when...’  
*fram-uh* ‘and from...’

So even though *-uh* and *-a/-at* both happened to avoid nouns (though not *pronouns* for *-uh*, clearly), this obscures the fact that *-uh* had a significantly wider distribution and more functional uses than *-a/-at*.

It might be relevant at this point to mention Go. *-hun* (e.g. *ni hvas-hun* ‘no one’, *ni hvan-hun* ‘never’, etc.) since it seems to be derived from (some variant of) the PIE pronominal item *\*-k<sup>w</sup>V-* plus the negative particle *\*ne* (cf. Ved. *caná*) (Delbrück 1910: 8-12). Go. *-hun* is cognate with (Vernerized) NWGmc *\*-gen/\*-gin*, which in North Germanic gives *-ge/-gi* (*engi* ‘no one’ < *\*(ne) einn-gi* ‘no one **at all**’; assimilated to *-ki* in *ekki* ‘not’ < *\*(ne) eitt-ki* ‘nothing **at all**’; see Grønvik 1997 for discussion) and in WGmc gives *-gen/-gin* (OE *hwergen*, OS *hwargin*, OHG *iowergin* ‘somewhere’, etc.). See Feist (1939 [1923]: 275 s.v. *-hun*) for examples and references. Interesting as it is, the relation between *-hun* and *-gi(n)* does little, of course, to revive the specific hypothesis that Go. *-uh/-uppan* and ON *-a/-at* are cognate.

### 3 ONE etymology

Negationen *-at* torde kunna härledas af *aitt*, yngre *eitt* (ett, något)[.]<sup>4</sup>  
(Kock 1879: 16)

#### 3.1 Basic version

The development hypothesized by Kock for ON *-at* (for Kock’s view on *-a* see below) is uncontroversially attested in Latin *nōn* ‘not’ (< Old Latin *noenum* ‘not one (at all)’), but as we shall see there is some debate about the Germanic evidence. In any case, Kock’s hypothesis from 1879 has since been accepted in some form by a number of scholars over the years (see Kock 1879: 16-19; 1896: 194-196; Jespersen 1917: 8; Noreen 1923: §54,3; de Vries 2000 [1962]: 17; Lundin Åkesson 2005: 238, among others).

One rather common version of the etymology states that short-form (n.acc.sg) PGmc *\*aina* (cf. Go. *ain*) gives ON *-a*, while long-form/pronominal (n.acc.sg) PGmc *\*ainat-* (n.acc.sg) (cf. Go. *ainata*) gives ON *-at* (cf. de Vries 2000 [1962]: 1 s.v. *a*, 17 s.v. *at*). The stages of development are provided in more detail in (7).

- (7) short-form                    *\*aina* > *\*ān* > *\*ā* > ON *-a*  
long/pronominal                *\*ainat-* > *\*ānt* > *\*āt* > ON *-at*

In contrast to Cleasby’s AND etymology, the ONE etymology as sketched in (7) poses no problems as far as sound changes go, as outlined in more detail in (8); see Haugen (1976) as a general reference on the sound changes in (8).

- (8) a.        secondarily stressed *\*ai* > PN *\*ā* (Noreen 1923: §54,3), see below  
b.        syncope of unstressed vowels (*\*dagaz* > ON *dagr*, Gallehus **horna** > *horn*)  
c.        loss of final *n* in unstressed words (*\*an* > ON *á* ‘on’, *\*in* > ON *í* ‘in’)  
d.        nasal assimilates to following stop (*\*ein-t* > ON *eitt*)  
e.        unstr. *\*ā* shortens to *a* (Noreen 1923: §151,1, Brøndum-Nielsen 1950: §104,2)  
f.        reduction of *tt* to *t* is observed in e.g. *eyvétt* > *eyvit* (Kock 1879: 18)

<sup>4</sup> “The negation *-at* could be derived from *aitt*, younger *eitt* (one, something)[.]”

All of the changes in (8) are attested elsewhere in Scandinavian and are (relatively) well understood.

As alluded to above, there is some debate concerning the appropriateness of the AND etymology for Germanic (as opposed to Latin, for instance, where the development *ne oenum* > *noenum* > *nōn* ‘not’ is obvious enough). Ottar Grønvik, discussing de Vries (2000 [1962]: 1) specifically, writes that going back to a pre-Nordic form like the short-form neuter.sg \*ain- in the sense of ‘nicht irgendetwas’...

synes meget betenkelig, da det ikke finnes spor av noen slik bruk av \*aina i andre germanske språk. Delbrück (1910:31) legger også vekt på att heller ikke \*ainata lar seg støtte ved noen tilsvarende bruk i gotisk; han kunne ha tilføyd: heller ikke i vestgermansk.<sup>5</sup>  
(Grønvik 1997: 19)

In a very strict sense, Grønvik is correct. It is true, for instance, that there is no ‘neuter singular’ restriction on *-a* or *-at* (Grønvik 1997: 19). But there are a number of cases throughout Germanic that are relevant enough to bolster the credibility of (at least some version of) the ONE etymology. To take four cases where \*ain- is used to build a negative(-related) element in Germanic:

- (i) the focus/polarity item \***aina**-gaz ‘only’ > Go. *ainaha* (weak m.sg.nom) ‘only’; OE *ānig*, OS *ēnig*, OHG *einīg*, ON *einigr* ‘any’
- (ii) \*ne **ain**- > OHG *ni ein* (later *nein*), OE *nān*, ON *neinn* (and *neitt*)
- (iii) \*neh<sup>w</sup>-**ain**- > OHG *nihein(ig)*, *nehein* > G. *kein* (cf. also Du. *geen*) (cf. Braune & Reiffenstein 2004: 254, 151)
- (iv) Scand. \***einn**-gi / \***eitt**-ki > ON *engi* ‘no one’, *ekki* ‘nothing, not’, OSw. *ængin*, *ækki* (> *icke* ‘not’), *ænktti* (> *inte* ‘not’), etc.

Some forms without a doubt postdate *-a/-at*, but these are still relevant for demonstrating the plausibility of the ONE etymology. *Ekki*, for example, can be considered a renewal of Jespersen’s Cycle. And since *ekki* unquestionably has a ‘one’ etymology (< n.sg \**eitt*-ki), this makes it all the more conceivable that the older negation *-a/-at* could have been based on ‘one’ as well. It is not necessarily the case, of course, that the negative cycle has to reuse the exact same element (such as ‘one’) over and over again, but I think the potential for building ‘one’-based negative elements in Germanic cannot be denied. In other words, the ONE etymology is stronger than Grønvik’s objection. As discussed above, it is also semantically and phonologically credible (though the final word has not yet been said).

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<sup>5</sup> “appears suspicious, since there is no trace of such a use of \**aina* in other Germanic languages. Delbrück (1910:31) also emphasizes that \**ainata* does not support any corresponding use in Gothic; he could have added: not in West Germanic either.”



There are other possibilities not only in the first person (e.g. PIE \*eǵ-oH-ǵe > Gk. ἐγώγε ‘I for my part, as for me’; Fortson 2004: 135) but also the second (2.sg.nom PIE \*tuH-(H)om > Skt. *tvám*, OAv. *tuuām*; 2.sg.acc PIE \*tu-ǵe > Go. *puk*, Hitt. *tuk*; Kroonen 2013: 549). Going back to (11), some relevant items in Germanic are now provided in (12).

- |      |             |   |   |
|------|-------------|---|---|
| (12) | PIE *eǵ(H)  | > | str. *ek > Gallehus <b>ek</b> , unstr. *ik > Go. <i>ik</i>  |
|      | PIE *eǵ-Hóm | > | *ekon > *ekō > PGmc *ekā > Runic (East) Norse <b>-ika</b> ,<br><b>-eka</b> , <b>eka</b> , <b>-ka</b> ‘I’ > East Norse <i>iak</i> (breaking) |
|      | PIE *eǵ-oH  | > | *ekō > WGmc: OHG <i>ihha</i> , Du. <i>ikke</i>  |

Here we might also add the “particle of obscure origin” PGmc \*-ǝ seen in Go. *þan-a*, *þat-a*, *in-a*, *hvan-a*, OE *þon-e*, *hin-e*, *hwon-e*, etc. (Ringe 2006: 85), perhaps from something like PIE \*-oH-(H)om (also Skt. *id-ám* ‘it’, *iy-ám* ‘she’).

## 4.2 The hypothesis

The original hypothesis to be entertained and tested in this section is that the *-a/-at* enclitic has its origins in one of these reinforcers. If we take PGmc \*ekā > PN \*eka, the idea is that in East Norse the final *-a* triggers breaking (> East Norse *iak*) and then deletes. This much is uncontroversial. In West Norse, on the other hand, the hypothesis to be suggested is that *-a* in \*eka is in some sense ‘morphologized’ rather than being deleted, and it is for this reason that it does not trigger breaking in the 1.sg.nom pronoun (> West Norse *ek*). The development of *-a* as a separate morpheme would, on this hypothesis, be inseparable from the origins of the 1.sg.nom marker *-k* (e.g. ON *em-k-a-k* ‘am-1sg-neg-1sg’). Consider the configuration in which the finite verb takes an enclitic *-(i)ka* as seen in various East Norse runic inscriptions (e.g. Ög KJ59 U **raisidoka** ‘I raised’). The interpretation of *-k* as a 1sg marker would give a morphological partitioning that leaves *-a* on its own (*raisidō-k-a*), followed later by the possibility of a pleonastic *-k* marker, resulting in *-a* being flanked by *-k* markers (*raisidō-k-a-k*, like *em-k-a-k*). Negative force could, moreover, have been imparted to *-a* by a preverbal *ne* which later falls away but leaves the reinforcer particle with a negative meaning (as must be assumed for various other elements in ON, e.g. *ekki* ‘nothing, not’ < pre-Norse \**ne eitt-ki* ‘not one (thing) at all’, *ey/ei* ‘ever, always’ but sometimes ‘not’ < PGmc \**ne aiwa* ‘not ever’; see Grønvik 1997 for discussion).

To be more precise, the development sketched here can be cast only as a one-way generalization with regard to presence/absence of breaking and presence/absence of *-a/-at*. As Eythórsson (2002: 195-196, also fn.11) points out, the particle *-a/-at* is a West Norse innovation: it is found in Old Icelandic texts, and there are two Norwegian runic inscriptions (N284, N171) in which the negative enclitic attested; moreover, the Karlevi inscription, showing **munat** ‘shall not’, is found in East Norse territory (Öland) but assumed to be linguistically West Norse due to its containing a stanza of skaldic *dróttkvætt*. It is equally clear that breaking of ‘I’ did *not* happen in West Norse. However, just because there is no breaking in \*eka does not necessarily entail that *-a/-at* *must* have developed: some East Norse varieties had no breaking of \*eka (Jutland), but also (as far as we can tell) lacked *-a/-at*. The



best we can do, then, is to formulate the generalization as unidirectional: if *\*eka* breaks, then *-a/-at* must be absent (since *-a* gets deleted under breaking and thus has no chance of morphologizing). If *\*eka* does not break, there are no guarantees: on the one hand, *-a* has the possibility of morphologizing into a negative enclitic as sketched above; or, on the other hand, *-a* could end up being lost anyway.<sup>6</sup>

As for *-at*, the hypothesis is that it was formed on the model of *-a* (thus resembling Kock's [1879: 16, 1896: 195-196] idea – *\*mák-at-k* > *\*mák-ak-k* > *mák-a-k* – in reverse). We start with the form *em-k-a-k* 'I am not', with *-a* flanked by two 1sg markers *-k*. Interestingly, Eythórsson (2002: fn.8, citing an MA thesis by Axelsdóttir 2001: 9) mentions that the configuration *\*em-k-at-k* is not attested, possibly suggesting that *-at* is incompatible with dual *-k* marking (though definitely not impossible with one *-k* marker: *em-k-at* (*ek*) and the like are attested). Imagining that this restriction is ancient, we might propose the analogical equation in (13).

$$(13) \quad \begin{array}{l} em-k : em-k-a-k \\ \text{am-1sg-neg-1sg} \end{array} \quad :: \quad \begin{array}{l} er-t : er-t-a-t \\ \text{are-2sg-neg-2sg} \end{array}$$

Crucially, *-t* is the regular 2sg ending in the strong preterite (and in some irregular presents, such as *ert* '(you) are'). If the second *-t* marker is reanalyzed as a part of *-a*, we can then end up seeing phrases like *er-t-at þu*, *er-t-at-tu* (which are attested). Eventually, at a later stage, the *-t* marker on *-at* would lose its association with 2sg and become combinable also with 1<sup>st</sup> person, resulting in *em-k-at ek*, etc.

### 4.3 Testing the hypothesis

One positive aspect of the REINFORCER etymology is that it is highly testable. The list in (14) comprises the oldest poems in the Edda according to Lundin Ákesson's (2005) dating (which is based on a quantitative study of negative elements in the Poetic Edda, making it quite relevant for our purposes).

- (14) *Réginsmál*  
*Brot af Sigurðæqviða*  
*Guðrúnarqviða in fyrsta*  
*Hamðismál*  
*Fáfnismál*  
*Völundarqviða*  
*Hymisqviða*  
*Guðrúnarqviða þriðia*  
*Sigdrífomál*  
*Völuspá*  
*Helgaqviða Hundingsbana 9nnor*

<sup>6</sup> Or perhaps *-a* was never present, with the *ek* of some varieties just going back to non-reinforced PN *\*ek*.

*Guðrúnarhvöt*  
*Guðrúnarqviða 9nnor*

The assumption here is that the oldest poetry has the best chance of preserving the hypothetically ancient analogical equation of *-a* : 1sg :: *-at* : 2sg. I searched these poems for negative *-a* and *-at* in Guðni Jónsson's *Eddukvæði (Sæmundar-Edda)* (1949-1954) (online at [heimskringla.no](http://heimskringla.no)), which conveniently separates out the negative enclitic where it appears. Since this text is in normalized spelling, I cross-checked against Bugge's (1867) *Norræn fornkvæði* (online at <http://etext.old.no/Bugge/>) in order to circumvent problematic editorializations. When the two disagree, the Bugge text takes precedence.

Out of the 84 instances of *-a/-at* in the oldest poems, 9 are found on plural or dual verb forms, leaving us with 75 attached to verbs in the singular. These 75 are the ones I focus on here. At first glance, the results are promising for the REINFORCER hypothesis.

Table 1. Use of *-a* vs. *-at* with 1st and 2nd person singular verbs

Verb	<i>-a</i>	<i>-at</i>	Totals
1sg	15 (79%)	4 (21%)	19
2sg	5 (31%)	11 (69%)	16

As seen in Table 1, 1sg verbs with the negative enclitic choose *-a* over *-at* 79% of the time, whereas 2sg verbs with the negative enclitic choose *-at* over *-a* 69% of the time. This tendency might be interpreted as evidence for the analogy component of the REINFORCER hypothesis, where the *-t* in *-at* is originally a 2sg marker.

However, there is a further prediction made by the analogy component of the REINFORCER hypothesis. Consider the partial paradigms in Table 2 below.

Table 2. 2sg *-t* vs. unmarked 1sg/3sg

	'was/were'	'bit'	'won'	Prediction for neg
1sg	<i>var</i>	<i>beit</i>	<i>vann</i>	<i>-a</i>
2sg	<i>var-t</i>	<i>beit-t</i>	<i>vann-t</i>	<i>-a-t</i>
3sg	<i>var</i>	<i>beit</i>	<i>vann</i>	<i>-a</i>

In the strong preterite, *-t* is the regular marker in the 2sg. This was mentioned above. Note, furthermore, that 1sg patterns with 3sg in being unmarked. Thus we would predict – since the analogy hypothesis crucially relies on the strong preterite as the main source of *-t* as a salient marker of 2sg – that 3sg should prefer *-a* over *-at* in the oldest Eddic poems, in the same way that 1sg prefers *-a* over *-at*. This prediction, however, is not borne out, as seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Use of *-a* vs. *-at* with 3rd person singular verbs

Verb	<i>-a</i>	<i>-at</i>	Total
3sg	17 (42.5%)	23 (57.5%)	40

There does not seem to be any preference for 3sg negated verbs to choose *-a* over *-at*; in fact, 3sg verbs appear more frequently with *-at* than with *-a*, running completely counter to the prediction made in Table 2.

The very small corpus of runic inscriptions with *-a/-at* present further problems for the REINFORCER etymology.

- (15) a.     **sikat**  
*sé-kk-at*  
 ‘I see not’  
 (Trå III, N 284 , c. 900-950)
- b.     **munat : raiþ:uiþur**  
*mun-at Reið-Viðurr*  
 ‘never shall Reið-Viðurr...’  
 (Karlevi, Öl 1, late 900s)
- c.     **era \* fenbra=uhþum \* flahþa \* fa=lnr**  
*er-a feiknbrogðum flagða fallnir*  
 ‘[The ships] are not felled by trickery/sorcery’  
 (Vinje, N171, 1190s)

As seen in (15), two out of three of these inscriptions (and the two older ones, no less) are counterexamples to the hypothesis: (15a) shows 1sg with *-at* (we would expect *-a*) and (15b) 3sg with *-at* (we would expect *-a* again); only (15c) shows expected third person with *-a*, but this inscription from Vinje is at least 200 years younger than the Trå and Karlevi inscriptions, making its relevance as evidence for the REINFORCER etymology dubious.

Finally, recall that the hypothesis presented in this section sets up a parallel between *em-k-a-k* and *er-t-at*. Surprisingly, however, there are no ‘pure’ cases of the latter configuration (i.e. verb-*t-at*) in my sample. Instead, the 2sg verbs I found typically ended with the sequence *-t-at-tu* with enclitic pronoun *-tu* (*-ðu*, *-du*) (e.g. *gaft-at-tu*), or imperatives ending in *-a-þu* (e.g. *lát-a-þu*). In the latter category of cases, of course, the negation *-a* is a counterexample to the REINFORCER hypothesis, since we would expect *-at* in the 2sg imperative. As for the former category, I think it is likely that there is a (stylistic) tendency to use *-at + -tu*, given how common this morphological construction is throughout the Edda. If I am correct about *-at-tu* being a stylistic preference, many of the instances which were counted as evidence in favor of the REINFORCER/2sg-reanalysis etymology are suddenly unclear. That is, it becomes questionable if instances of *-at-tu* (of which there are six, out of a total of 11 cases of *-at* used with a verb in the 2sg) can really be considered evidence pointing to an ancient history implicating 2sg in the emergence of *-at*.

#### 4.4 Addendum to the REINFORCER hypothesis

In the study of OHG and OE, it has become common to assume their 2sg verbal ending *-st* to be derived from a process like the one seen in (16).

- (16) /giloubis+**thu**/ > *giloubistu* → /giloubist+**thu**/  
 (from Fertig 2017)

The pronoun *thu* when cliticized to the 2sg verb with the (older) ending *-s* appears as *-tu*. The sequence *-st-*, moreover, can then potentially be reanalyzed as an underlying */-stþ-/* according to a rule of OHG phonology (i.e. *-stþ-* > *-st-*). This reanalysis allows for an extra, non-etymological *t* to surface, which is then interpreted as part of the verbal ending. See Fertig (2017) for critical discussion.

Using this well-known hypothesis as a model (but also taking Fertig's skeptical stance to heart), we could imagine putting a twist on the REINFORCER etymology that looks something like (17).

- (17) *-a-tu* (e.g. *skal-a-tu*) → */-at-tu/*  
 (e.g. *vilt-tu* > *viltu*, *kannt-tu* > *kanntu*, *reist-tu* > *reistu*)

In other words, much like the hypothesis for OHG and OE, we have a phonologically based reinterpretation of surface *t* as underlying */tt/*, the extra *t* potentially being resegmented with the negation, resulting in *-at* from *-a*. This hypothesis can be easily dismissed, however, considering that the expected form of the enclitic 2sg pronoun after a vowel (as in the first stage in (17)) was *-ðu* (e.g. *slá-ðu*, *boða-ðu*, *fannt-a-ðu*), not *-tu*. The origins of *-a-tu*, then, must look something like (18), with *-tþ-* assimilating to *-tt-* which is then weakened to a single *-t-*.

- (18) *-at-þu* > *-at-tu* > *-a-tu*

In other words, the sequence *-a-tu* (in cases like *skal-a-tu* and the like) already presupposes the existence of *-at*, and therefore it cannot simultaneously serve as the explanation for the genesis of *-at*.

## 5 (N)EVER (A THING) etymology

Die verstärkung der verneinung ist doppelter art. Entweder wird durch anwendung zweier negierender partikeln ein größerer nachdruck hervorgebracht, oder **der negierende sinn durch zufügung eines positiven wortes gehoben, das die negation begleitet. Hierbei ereignet sich dann nicht selten, daß die eigentliche negativ-partikel untergeht und ihre verneinende kraft ganz von dem positiven wort angezogen wird.**<sup>7</sup>

(Grimm [1831] 1890: 701, my bold)

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<sup>7</sup> “The reinforcement of the negative is twofold in nature. Either a greater emphasis is put forth through the use of two negating particles, or the negative sense is elevated by a positive word accompanying the negation. In this way it happens not infrequently that what is actually the negative particle declines and its negating force gets entirely drawn in by the positive word.”

Wie, wenn das suffix, als dessen vollständige form *at* erscheint, selbst aus einem anfänglichen *vätt, vætt* hervorgegangen wäre?<sup>8</sup>  
(Grimm 1890 [1831]: 693)

One theme of this paper is that some incisive insights from Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Grammatik* (specifically volume III, chapter 9 on negation) have in more recent years gone unnoticed. Grimm clearly had a good understanding of the negative cycle, minimizers (e.g. *niht ein blat*, compare Fr. *pas* 'not' < Lat. *passus* 'step'), and more. For our specific purposes, we should note that Grimm correctly identified the cognate pair of OHG *niwiht* and ON *vætr* 'nothing', suggesting that he (at least on some level) understood the following process, already mentioned above: ON *vætr* (n.) 'nothing' < \**ne wëttR* (f.) 'not a thing', cf. Go. *ni waiht(s)* (see also Kock 1879: 19, Delbrück 1910: 19-22).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, he specifically mentions "Dem altn. *vætr* kann keine negation praefigiert werden" (Grimm [1831] 1890: 696) while also observing that WGmc does show the possibility of contraction or prefixation with *ne* (e.g. OE *nis* 'is not', *nāt* = *ne wāt* 'know(s) not', ME *willy nilly* 'will he, won't he'; Grimm 1890 [1831]: 687-689). Thus he reasons that *ne* must have fallen away early in Nordic (Grimm 1890 [1831]: 689-690).

As for the precise development of *-at* from "*vätt, vætt*" (where the form with long *â* is pure wishful thinking), Grimm (1890 [1831]: 693) imagines that *v-* can easily drop (providing support from *Norvegr* > *Noregr* 'Norway') and that *-r* is "unwesentlich" (providing *vætt-ki* 'nothing'), thus: *-vætr* > *-æt*. As should be clear at this point, Kock (1879: 14-15) was rightly worried about the vowel correspondence in *væt-* or *vëtt-* : *-at*.

Grønvik (1997: §6.2) has provided the updated, contemporary version of Grimm's etymology. But whereas Grimm supposed that *-a* was just a shortened form of *-at* ("*-at*, oder bloßes *-a* verkürzt" [Grimm 1890 [1831]: 713]), Grønvik provides two separate etymologies, the one for *-a* building on Scherer (1890 [1868]: 476)<sup>10</sup> and the one for *-at* building on the above-mentioned discussion from Grimm. Grønvik's etymologies are summarized in (19) (NB: I write *ne* instead of *ni* and *wehti-* instead of *wihti-*).

- (19) a. \**ne aiwa-* 'not ever'  
> ON *-a* (cf. ON *á* 'always', OE *n-ā* 'never, not, no', Go. *ni aiw*)

<sup>8</sup> "What if the suffix, in its complete form appearing as *at*, itself was derived from an original *vätt, vætt*?"

<sup>9</sup> Even in Gothic, Coombs (1976: 67-68) mentions one clear instance of the indefinite pronoun *ainshun* without the negator *ni* but still in a syntactically negative context: *sai, jau ainshun þize reike galaubidedi imma aiþþau Fareisaie?* 'Lo, has **any** of the rulers or the Pharisees believed him?' (John 7:48, and commented on in the *Skeireins*). Danielsen (1968: 73, fn.) also provides *þata anþar ni wait ei ainnohun daupidedjau* 'on the other hand, I don't know if I baptized **any other**' (Cor.I 1:16). Cf. also Go. *ni in waihtai waninassu* 'no want/lack **at all**' in the *Skeireins* (Coombs 1976: 63).

<sup>10</sup> And later endorsed by Kock (1879: 16) and Delbrück (1910: 23, 38).

- b. \*ne **aiwa-wehti-** ‘not ever a (single) thing’  
 > ON *-at* (cf. OE *n-ā-wiht* ‘nothing’)

Grønvik makes the observation that ON *á* ‘always’ can be considered an unreduced version of the enclitic negation *-a* (though de Vries [2000 [1962]: 1, s.v. *a*] explicitly considers this “weniger wahrscheinlich” than the ONE etymology). For both (19a) and (19b), the negative meaning of both *-a* and *-at* derives from a configuration in which preposed *ne* was still present (i.e. ‘not ever/always’ > ‘never’ > ‘not’ and ‘not ever a single thing’ > ‘never a single thing’ > ‘not’), just as in OE *n-ā* ‘never, not, no’, OE *n-ā-wiht* ‘nothing’ > *nāwht* > *nāht* > PDE *not*, Go. *ni aiw*, where the old negation is still present. Cf. also ON *ei(gi)* ‘not’ < \*ne *æi-gi*, *aldri(gi)* ‘never’ < \*ne *aldre-gi*, etc. (though some cases preserving the older indefinite-generalizing interpretation of \*-k<sup>w</sup>e, e.g. *hvergi* ‘whoever’; Delbrück 1910: 16).

Grønvik’s etymology is in many ways a *tour de force*, but there are, as always, certain refinements that can be made. Consider the development of *-a*, for which Grønvik simply provides \*(ne) *aiwa-* > \*(n)-*ā* > ON *-a*. To fill in some details here myself, we can first assume that secondarily stressed \**ai* monophthongizes to \**ā* (Noreen 1923: §54,3c) quite early,<sup>11</sup> followed by loss of unstressed *-a*. Word-final *-w* in \**āw* is then susceptible to deletion (Kock 1898: 259), giving \**ā* (ON *á* ‘always’) > ON *-a* ‘not’.<sup>12</sup> This development is quite smooth and gradual. As for ON *-at*, however, I do not think we can assume the same kind of gradual phonological development from \*(ne) *aiwa-wehti-*, despite what Grønvik appears to suggest in (20).

- (20) \**-ā-weht-* > \**-ā-(u)ht-* > \**ätt* > ON *-at* (Grønvik 1997: 20)

I would contend that we should be thinking in terms of syncope here, rather than Grønvik’s more gradual, step-wise reduction. Assuming for now that the first component \**-ā-* has the development sketched above for *-a*, we would in fact expect the sequence \**-ā-weht-* to give ON \**ávett* or \**ávit* (cf. *eyvit* ‘nothing’), with retention of the labial, just as in ON *ávalt* ‘always’ < \**āw-allt* (cf. Go. *aiw allata*) or *ævi*, *ævin-* ‘life, age, eternal’ (Kock 1898: 258-261), also *æva* ‘(n)ever’ < \**aiwō-*. Thus (20) should be written instead as (21).<sup>13</sup>

- (21) \**ā-weht-* > \**ätt* > ON *-at*

<sup>11</sup> If Versloot’s (2017) conclusions about the dating of *stressed* \**ai* > \**ā* / \_\_ {h, r} is any indication.

<sup>12</sup> It is worth mentioning that the regular outcome of \**aiwa* (with *stressed* \**ai*) may have been \**øy* (i.e. \**ei* with *u*-mutation from \**w*): \**fraiwa* > \**freiū* > \**frøy* > dialectal Sw. *frøy* ‘seed’, as well as \**aiwa* > \**eiū* > \**øy* > OIcel. *ey* ~ unstressed *ei* ‘ever, always’ (Brøndum-Nielsen 1950 [1928]: §106; see also Noreen 1923: §77,15).

<sup>13</sup> Directly relevant to (21) would be \**þew-ern-ōn* > *þerna* ‘maid’ (Kroonen 2013: 585) and Gallehus **tawido** i.e. *tawiðō* > (unattested) ON \**táða*.

This sort of phenomenon is in fact attested nearby: consider modern Sw. *något* ~ *nåt*, *någon* ~ *nån*; the extremely similar alternation in OE *nōwiht* ~ *nōht* ‘nothing’ found in the Vespasian Psalter (c. 750) (Campbell 1959: §393, fn.1); or ON *æ* ‘always’ as a truncated form of *ævi* (i.e. *\*aiwī\**) (Brøndum-Nielsen 1950 [1928]: §106, Anm.2).

Interestingly, once we accept the need for syncope of *-wV-* in *\*āwa-weht-* or *æwi*, it becomes necessary to reconsider the gradual development leading up to *-a*. As Kock (1898: 260-261, especially fn.1) discusses, we might expect *u*-mutation in *\*āw* > *\*ō(w)* ‘always’, which could explain the initial vowel in the variant *ofalt* (which in turn gave way to reanalysis as prepositional phrases of the sort *of(v)alt* → *um alt*) ‘always’. If we assume syncope of the sequence *-wa-* right off the bat, however, then we have a principled explanation for the lack of *u*-umlaut in the old forms *á* and *-a*, as seen in (22).

(22) *\*aiwa-* > *\*āwa-* > *\*ā* > ON *-a*

Not only do we avoid the risk of *u*-mutation this way, but the syncope of the labial-vowel sequence puts *-a* in line with ON *-at* (< *\*ai-weht-* or even *\*aiwa-wehti-*), ON *æ* ‘always’ (< *\*aiwī\**), OE *nōwiht* ~ *nōht*, etc.<sup>14</sup>

The (N)EVER (A THING) etymology makes sense of the larger NWGmc picture. In the NWGmc dialect continuum there were the same raw materials (*\*ne*, *\*aiw-*, *\*wehti-*) to work with, giving a number of different possible combinations, as in (23).

(23) *\*ne* + *\*aiw-* = never  
*\*ne* + *\*wehti-* = nothing  
*\*aiw-* + *\*wehti-* = anything, aught  
*\*ne* + *\*aiw-* + *\*wehti-* = nothing

These compositional, highly transparent forms were then subject to phonological reduction and semantic bleaching (e.g. ‘nothing’ or ‘never’ → ‘not’) over time, but at different rates depending on the (sub-)branch. Nordic, clearly, is first, since we have a completely opaque item *-a/-at* already by 800. In WGmc the process took much longer, as summarized in (24).

(24) OE *nāwiht* > *nāwuht*, *nāwht* (Alfred, 9<sup>th</sup> c.) > *nāht* (Ælfric, 10<sup>th</sup> c.) (Clark Hall 1916)

OS *niowiht*, *neowiht* > ODu. *niewiht* > MDu. *niwet*, *nit*, *niet* (13<sup>th</sup> c.)  
 (Philippa *et al.* 2003-2009 s.v. *niet*)

OHG *niowiht*, *neowiht* > *nieweht* > late OHG *nieht* ‘not’ (11<sup>th</sup> c.)  
 (Braune & Reiffenstein: §299)

<sup>14</sup> It is also worth mentioning that prefixing anything but the completely reduced *\*ā* form to *\*wehti-* would result in unexpected forms: *\*āw-wehti-* with *-ww-* would predict sharpening in ON, and *\*āwa-wehti-* would have the labial-retention problem (see discussion above on *ávalt*) times two. Thus wholesale syncope of the labial-vowel sequence shows itself once again to be the preferable analysis.

After this, moreover, there is evidence that the cycle was seeing a renewal in Nordic, where compositional forms are observed once again: ON *ey-vit* ‘not at all’, *ey-vit eitt* ‘nothing at all’ (Zoëga 2004 [1910]) (unstr. *vit* < *vétt-*), *n-einn*, and the like appearing in the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Grønvik 1997: Table 1). Similar redux forms like OE *nān-þing* are seen in WGmc at various stages too.

## 6 Phonological conditioning?

In this section I explore an interesting tendency which has by various scholars (e.g. Cleasby 1874: xxvi, Kock 1879: 14 citing Gislason) been claimed to hold. It is given in (25).

- (25)  $-a / \_ C$   
 $-(a)t / \_ V$

That is, *-a* is preferred when a consonant follows, while *-at* is preferred when a vowel follows (somewhat on a par with English *a ~ an*). I have brought the Eddic data to bear on this point, and my findings, as we will see, indicate that the phonological conditioning in (25) was not always the case, but rather that it gradually developed and became more consistent over time. This strongly suggests that *-a* and *-at* are historically separate (i.e. we need one etymology for *-a* and another etymology for *-at*).

Once again I have made use of Lundin Åkesson’s (2005) negation-based dating of the poems in the Edda.

Table 4. Dating of poems in the Edda according to Lundin Åkesson (2005: 251, Table 5)

Oldest	Medium	Youngest
Gðr.II	Am.	Hlr.
Ghv.	Háv.	Od.
HH.II	Sg.	HHv.
Vsp.	Þrk.	Grm.
Sd.	Ls.	Skm.
Gðr.III	HH.	Hrbl.
Hym.	Grp.	Vm.
Vkv.	Alv.	
Fm.	Akv.	
Hm.		
Gðr.I		
Br.		
Rm.		



Again using Jónsson's and Bugge's editions of the Poetic Edda (with the latter once again taking precedence when forms disagree<sup>15</sup>), I checked all cases of *-a* and *-at* (NB: all instances of *-(a)b* are counted as *-(a)t*, with all of the environments in (26) considered to be in alignment with the alleged tendency/generalization in (25).

- (26) *-a* / \_\_ (#) C  
*-(a)t* / \_\_ (#) V  
*-a* / \_\_ pausa  
*-(a)t* / \_\_ pausa

Any instance of *-a* before a vowel or *-at* before a consonant was counted as a 'violation' of the generalization/tendency.

The results are summarized in Table 5, with three possible scenarios provided (depending on how we want to understand the generalization). The symbol ☑ means 'in line with the phonological conditioning generalization', while ☒ means 'not in line with the generalization'.

Table 5. Three ways of dividing up the data for the conditioning generalization

	☑	☒	
<b>Oldest</b>	36 (43%)	48 (57%)	
<b>Middle</b>	68 (53%)	61 (47%)	<i>Scenario 1 (basic version)</i>
<b>Youngest</b>	19 (63%)	11 (37%)	
<hr/>			
	☑	☒	<i>Scenario 2</i>
<b>Oldest</b>	39 (46%)	45 (54%)	• <i>-at + hV- or jV- are not considered violations</i>
<b>Middle</b>	75 (58%)	54 (42%)	
<b>Youngest</b>	21 (70%)	9 (30%)	
<hr/>			
	☑	☒	<i>Scenario 3</i>
<b>Oldest</b>	45 (54%)	39 (46%)	• <i>-at + hV- or jV- are not considered violations</i> • <i>-at-tu is not considered a violation</i>
<b>Middle</b>	81 (63%)	48 (37%)	
<b>Youngest</b>	25 (83%)	5 (17%)	

In Scenario 1, the data have been divided up according to (26), such that *any* instance of *-at* before a consonant or *-a* before a vowel counts as a violation. In Scenario 2, I have not counted cases of *-at* plus an *h*-vowel sequence or *-at* plus a *j*-vowel sequence as a violation. Since the glottal fricative *h* and the glide *j* are not necessarily 'true' consonants (cf. that the definite article suffix *-inn, -in, -it* in ON is historically a cliticized form of the demonstrative

<sup>15</sup> Pausas, however, are based on the commas, dashes, and periods of Jónsson's edition.

*hinn, hin, hit*, or ‘aitch-dropping in the history of English; the semi-vowel status of *j*, usually written <í> in manuscripts, needs no comment), we can disregard *h* and *j* before a vowel, giving us instances that essentially amount to *-at* plus vowel. In Scenario 3, finally, in addition to the *hV*- and *jV*- exception, I have made an additional exception for the sequence *-at-tu*, since (as discussed above) there seems to be a stylistic tendency for using *-at* (rather than *-a*) with *-tu*, which would suggest that it should not be counted as a violation as such.

Now, as seen in Table 5, no matter how we slice the data (i.e. Scenario 1, 2, or 3), the tendency gets stronger the younger the texts get. If we take Scenario 3 – the most nuanced version of the generalization – then we can see that the phonological conditioning in the oldest poems is not much better than chance (54% in line with conditioning vs. 46% not). The obvious explanation for this fact is that *-a* and *-at* are etymologically distinct, and therefore they started out in competition with one another (rather than in complementary distribution) (see Grønvik 1997: 18-19 for some discussion). As time goes on, however, phonological conditioning gradually increases, to the point where the youngest poems are 83% in line with the generalization. My explanation for this fact is that *-a* and *-at* had developed from separate morphemes into allomorphs of a single morpheme ‘not’. However, before conditioning can run its full course (i.e. before reaching 100% in line with the generalization), *-a* and *-at* are ousted in favor of *eigi, ekki*, etc. Thus phonological conditioning of *-a* vs. *-at* could never be called more than a tendency (though it seems certainly to have been a stronger tendency in the later poems than in the earlier ones).

My findings concerning phonological conditioning lend support most clearly to the (N)EVER (A THING) etymology. Insofar as *\*aina* and *\*ainat-* are considered to be separate forms, the findings could also be construed as support for the ONE etymology of, among others, de Vries (2000 [1962]: 1, 17). It is quite clear, however, that the hypotheses positing only a single etymological source find no support here. Thus neither Kock’s version of the ONE etymology nor the REINFORCER etymology benefits, since they claim that one of the two forms is the original (*-at* for Kock and *-a* for the REINFORCER hypothesis), with the other one derived through some process of analogical resegmentation.

## 7 Concluding remarks

### 7.1 The gravity diagnostic

As the reader will have noticed for the ONE and (N)EVER (A THING) etymologies, scholars have made abundant use of the monophthongization of *\*ai* to PN *\*ā* under secondary stress (Noreen 1923: §54,3). Secondary stress is only one of the environments conditioning the change from *\*ai* to PN *\*ā*. The diphthong *\*ai* monophthongizes to PN *\*ā* also before *\*h* (Noreen 1923: §54,1) and *\*r* (Noreen 1923: §54,2), with examples including *\*taihwō-* (cf. OE *tā(he)*, OHG *zēha*) > ON *tá* ‘toe’ and *airu-* (cf. Go. *airus*, OE *ār*) > ON *árr* ‘messenger’ (examples from Kroonen 2013: 505, 13).

In an attempt to understand how *\*h*, *\*r*, and secondary stress can be understood as a coherent set of conditioning factors for the change *\*ai* > PN *\*ā*, Nielsen (1983: 161, citing Davidsen-Nielsen & Ørum 1978) makes a reasonable case for the Jakobsonian feature

[gravity]. Gravity is defined as low acoustic pitch, essentially amounting to [–coronal] for consonants and [+back] for vowels. According to Nielsen, gravity can be seen as the relevant organizing feature for \*h, \*r, and many of the consonants following long *ā* in Noreen’s examples involving secondary stress (*Ūfāgr*, *Þorlákr*, *Óláfr*, *Monámr*, with only a couple of minor counterexamples):

If in principle we are right in attributing the monophthongization of *ai* in weakly accented syllables to regressive ‘gravity’ assimilation, it is only to be expected that a vowel with less accent should fall more easily prey to the economy of (acoustic) energy than a vowel with a greater amount of accent – this is to explain why the distribution of  $\bar{a} < ai$  is not so restricted in weakly accented syllables as it is in strongly accented ones.

(Nielsen 1983: 161)

Thus, gravity can be used as a diagnostic for judging those etymologies appealing to monophthongization of \*ai to PN \*ā under secondary stress. The reader will recall from above that both the ONE and (N)EVER (A THING) etymologies make use of this sub-rule. These two etymologies also happen to be the strongest explanations for the origins of *-a/-at*, so an additional diagnostic would be useful in deciding between them.<sup>16</sup>

As for the ONE etymology, the forms at stake are the following: \*ain- > ON *-a*, \*ain-t > \*aitt > ON *-at*. The diphthong is followed by the consonants *n* and *t*, which are both coronal and thus [–grave], making this a point *against* the ONE etymology. The (N)EVER (A THING) etymology involves the forms \*aiwa- > ON *-a* and \*aiwa-wehti- > ON *-at*. The diphthong here is followed by the consonant *w*, which is non-coronal and therefore [+grave], satisfying Nielsen’s gravity requirement.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the gravity diagnostic provides us with a subtle quality check that the ONE etymology does not pass but the (N)EVER (A THING) etymology does.

## 7.2 Conclusion

Summing up, I have investigated four main etymologies for the ON negative enclitic *-a/-at*. The first was the AND etymology of Cleasby (1874), the idea being that ON *-a/-at* and Go. *-uh/-uppan* are cognate. This hypothesis is too confused, both phonologically and distributionally, to be true. The second etymology, going back first to Kock (1879), is that ON *-at* can be identified with \*aitt ‘one’ (for many scholars, short-form neuter singular \*ain- > ON *-a*, long-form neuter singular \*ainat- > ON *-at*). The ONE etymology is certainly credible, but it does not satisfy the gravity requirement on \*ai > PN \*ā as set up by Nielsen

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Delbrück (1910: 31, 40) vacillates on *-at* < \*ainata vs. cognate with Go. *waiht*.

<sup>17</sup> It is generally accepted (see e.g. Noreen 1923: §54,3 or Haugen 1976: 157) that ON *nakkwarr* ‘someone’ derives from a phrase like \*ne-wait-ek-hwaz- ‘not-know-I-who’. But whereas Brink (1991/2009: 26) puts monophthongization of \*ai *before* the assimilation of \*tk to \*kk (i.e. \*nwajtk- > \*najtk- > \*nātk-), which violates the gravity rule since *t* is coronal, Brøndum-Nielsen (1950: 147) gives the order \*naitk- > \*naikk- > \*nāk-, where gravity is not violated since monophthongization occurs after assimilation of \*tk > \*kk, putting \*ai before non-coronal *k*.

(1983). The third option, dubbed the REINFORCER etymology, is an original hypothesis with the merit of high testability. When the hypothesis is tested, however, the results come up overwhelmingly negative, giving us quite some certitude that it is wrong. The last etymology has its origins in Grimm (1890 [1831]) and Scherer (1890 [1868]), fairly recently synthesized by Grønvik (1997). The idea here is that ON *-a* and *-at* are the result of the same grammaticalization process that resulted in OE *n-ā* (cf. ON *-a*) < \*(ne) aiwa- ‘not ever’ and OE *n-ā-wiht* (cf. ON *-at*) < \*(ne) aiwa-wehti- ‘not ever a (single) thing’. Not only does the (N)EVER (A THING) etymology place ON *-a/-at* into a coherent picture of Jespersen’s Cycle in NWGmc, but it also – unlike the ONE etymology – fulfills the gravity requirement. This makes the (N)EVER (A THING) etymology the best explanation on the market for the Norse negative enclitic.

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