The present paper proposes an analysis for exceptive clauses with a negation particle in Middle Low German (MLG), which express a meaning equivalent to unless-clauses in English. In these clauses, the finite verb, in subjunctive mood, appears in second position, preceded by the inherited preverbal negative particle ne/en, (1).

(1) vnde dar moste numment yn, he ne gheue V mark vp dat minste
and there must no one in he NE give.SUBJN five marks on the least
‘and no one shall enter there, unless he give/pay at least five marks’

These clauses pose a challenge on several levels. First, while exceptive clauses are usually treated as a special type of conditional clauses, though different from if...not-type conditionals (for English e.g. Geis 1973, Dancygier 1985, 1998, von Fintel 1991, 1993), and while this particular type of subjunctive verb-second clauses with a preverbal negative particle have been called conditional clauses themselves (Holmberg 1967, Härd 2000), they are rather different from ordinary (negated) conditionals. Only focussing on the expression of negation, they are the only context where preverbal ne/en continues to be used on its own long after the initiation of Jespersen’s Cycle in MLG. In all other clause types, including (regular negative) conditionals, MLG has either bipartite negation with ne/en … nicht/n-indefinite, or, much more frequently, nicht/n-indefinite alone. Furthermore, the negative particle ne/en does not seem to express sentential negation in the exceptive clause, an impression supported by the fact that none of the exceptive clauses in the corpus on which this study is based contains NPIs, nicht, or n-indefinites, as would be expected if ne/en were a (clausal) negative marker. On the other hand, the apodosis always seems to contain an expression of sentential negation in the corpus used for the present study, viz. (ne/en)...nicht/n-indefinite, cf. (1). The exceptive clause therefore appears to express a positive exception to the negation in the main clause, despite the presence of ne/en.

Exceptive clauses in MLG are also remarkable from a syntactic point of view. While in Old Saxon (OS) the exceptive meaning was expressed by a negated ‘dummy’ main clause ne sî/uuari ‘NEG be.SUBJN/were.SUBJN’ taking a complement that-clause containing the actual exception, (3),

(3) that thu giuuald obar mik hebbian ni mohtis ne uuari that it thi helag god selbo fargau
that you power over me have NEG can.PAST NEG be. SUBJN that it you holy God self gave
‘that you could not have power over me, unless the holy God himself gave it to you’

the MLG exceptive clauses do not generally exhibit the expected continuation of this pattern, viz. a negated main clause with an expletive pronoun and a that-complement. Rather, the former main and embedded clauses seem in most cases to have ‘fused’ in the sense that a (pro-)nominal constituent, which can be the subject (4a) or an object (4b), from the former that-clause comes to occupy the clause-initial position, and the formerly embedded verb comes to occupy the second position, taking the subjunctive morphology and the negative particle originally associated with the former matrix verb sî/uuari ‘be/were.SUBJN’, (4).

(4a. It en scal nement enne nyen stenwech setten eder hoghen, de rad en si darbi.
it NEG shall no one a new stone.way set or make.higher the council NE be.SUBJN thereby
‘No one shall build a new stone way or make one higher, unless the council agrees.’
These monoclausal structures are shown not to be amenable to an analysis in terms of a negative marker licensed by an NPI and an elliptical comparative clause, as proposed by O’Neill (2011) for French ne...que. Rather, it is argued that the negative particle ne/en underwent a lexical split at the point when the language entered stage II of Jespersen’s Cycle. In ordinary negative clauses, ne/en is gradually replaced by nicht as the sentential negative marker (taking scope within IP) during the MLG period. In exceptional clauses, on the other hand, it is reanalysed as part of the C-layer, above the scope position of sentential negation. More specifically, ne takes scope over a world operator situated in the C-domain (e.g., Kempchinsky 2009). This operator is lexicalized by the subjunctive morphology the verb takes. This analysis accounts for the fact that ne/en in exceptional clauses has an effect similar to the one of Romero & Han’s (2004) preposed negation in yes-no-questions (6a), where they argue it scopes over the epistemic operator VERUM (cf. also Höhle 1992), or of Cormack & Smith’s (1998, 2002) EchoNeg (6b): it generates a positive epistemic implicature.

(6)a. *Isn’t Jane coming too? = [CP Q not [ VERUMF [IP Jane is coming too]]] (R&H 2004)
   b. *Shouldn’t you be in school? = You should be in school, shouldn’t you? (C&S 2002)

Like English n’t, ne/en, a clitic, needs a host at PF, as does the subjunctive morphology of the world operator, which is affixal. The paper argues that both are phonetically realised on the finite verb, argued to be in Fin in MLG exceptives, even though their LF-scope positions are higher (cf. also Cormack & Smith 2002). The paper further argues that there is an empty exceptive operator in the highest C-projection, ForceP, operating on the quantification introduced by the negation of the main clause (von Fintel 1994, Leslie 2009). The present paper proposes that the MLG exceptive construction developed out of the OS construction in the steps outlined in (5).

   b. [ForceP OP exc ne [WP W [FinP [SpecFinP ] [Fin ] [… [VP XP V YP]]]]] MLG

This reanalysis can be argued to be triggered by structural ambiguity; the OS embedded complementizer that could under the new structure in (5b) occupy the matrix Fin-position. Once the embedded complementizer can occupy matrix Fin, the embedded verb can, too, as in any verb-second clause. The particle ne/en and the subjunctive morphology continue to be spelled out on the finite verb, now the originally embedded verb moved to matrix C, as they need a host. A possibly significant parallel to English ‘Echo’-n’t is the fact that this affects a phonetically reduced negation particle without sentential scope.

Interestingly, Dutch took a different path from the same starting point. The former ‘dummy’ matrix clause as a whole was reanalysed as the exponent of the exceptive operator itself, giving rise to the exceptional complementizer tenzij < ‘t en zij lit. ‘it NEG be.SUBJN’, now a full-fledged subordinating conjunction inducing clause-final verb placement, (6):

(6)Wij zullen het halen, tenzij de trein te laat aankomt.
   we will make it unless the train too late arrives
   [ForceP [OP exc tenzij] [WP W [FinP [TP de trein te laat aankomt ]]]]