From minimizing to modification: diachronic evolution, variation, and change of *alig*, *aligha* 'hardly, probably (not)'

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The present corpus study examines the development of an epistemic-inferential modifier during the Middle Hungarian and (Early) Modern Hungarian Periods, focusing on its structural and semantic features. The word *alig* 'hardly' exhibited various uses during the 16th–18th centuries, expressing meaning such as low intensity, obstruction, attitude, simultaneity, and probability. In the latter case, *alig* appears as a compound with the conditional conjunction *ha* 'if', forming *aligha* 'hardly, probably not', which emerged during the Middle Hungarian period. In Modern Hungarian, *aligha* indicates negative polarity, an exceptional feature for modifiers (Kugler 2009, 2013, Tubau–Ingham 2015). *Aligha* 'hardly' encodes the denial of the predicate, paraphrased as "the speaker thinks it is probable that it is not p". In Middle Hungarian, *aligha* was used in two distinct constructions and meanings: in an assertive construction, it encoded low probability (1a), but in structures containing negation, it indicated high probability (1b).

(1a)   ***aligha***   *élete*   *is*   *megmarad*
       hardly   his-life   too   remains
       'His life is also hardly remains = probably will not remain' (Letter to Pál Teleki, 1696)

(1b)   *Urunk*   ***aligha***   *le*   ***nem***   *megyen.*
       our-lord   hardly   down   no   goes
       'Our lord hardly does not go down = probably goes down' (Kár. 32., TMK, 1705)

The positive polarity of the latter construction can be explained as a combination of *alig* 'hardly, not really' and negation, that is, as a case of double negation (Gugán 2021). This presentation examines the variation in the distribution of *aligha* construction with the meanings 'probably not' and 'probably' across historical periods, as well as the factors that may influence the ratio of these variants, such as the presence of negation or the semantics of the predicate. The analysis is based on corpus data from the Old and Middle Hungarian corpus of informal language use (abbreviated as TMK), the Corpus of Middle Hungarian Dramas and Memoirs (abbreviated as KED), and manually collected data (altogether, the Middle Hungarian period is represented by more than three million tokens). The Modern Hungarian Period has been studied using the Hungarian Historical Corpus (abbreviated as MTSZ), which contains 30 million tokens. Preliminary findings show that even in the first half of the 19th century, *aligha* occurs in negated constructions expressing high probability. Nevertheless, the assertive construction with the negative meaning 'probably not' has become increasingly common. At the same time, the use of *aligha* 'hardly' to express conviction and high probability has not disappeared. Presumably the negative marker from the earlier structure has been incorporated into the compound *alighanem* 'probably, likely', which has positive polarity. Although the first occurrences of this variant can already be observed in Middle Hungarian (2), it has become fully lexicalised only in the late 19th century (Simonyi 1881).

(2)   *ki*   *tudja*   ***alig***   ***ha***   ***nem***   *ott*   *kelletik*
       who   knows   hardly   if   not   there   must.PASS.3S
       magadnak   *megnyomorodnod*
       yourself.DAT   to-break-down.2S
       'who knows, you probably must break down there' (Letter of János Kemény, 1658)

The origin of the compound *aligha* also requires investigation. This presentation studies the collocational patterns of *alig* 'hardly' and its functional variants in order to identify the possible source structures. It is assumed that *aligha* was lexicalized from a complex sentence: *alig van / lehet / lehetséges, hogy* 'it hardly is /can be / possible that' (cf. Klemm 1928/1942, Kugler 2009). This analysis argues that *alig van / lehet* 'It hardly is / can be' does not occur with a conditional *ha* 'if'-clause and (expletive) negation in the studied historical sources (see also Gugán 2021, 2022). Simonyi (1881) suggests that the formation of *aligha* ('hardly + if') may be explained in a manner similar to *alighogy,* a compound of *alig* 'hardly' and the conjunction *hogy* 'that'. However, the typical function of *alighogy* in Middle Hungarian is avertive, expressing an imminent but unrealized event. Furthermore, the original biclausal structure and the grammaticalization process of *alighogy* can be observed in historical texts (cf. Gugán–Varga 2025). The present study proposes that, in a plausible source structure, *alig* was used to modify verbs expressing mental states, such as *hisz* 'believe'. In Middle Hungarian, *alig hisz* 'hardly belives' also occurred in subordinate clauses with expletive negation, unlike its functional variant *nehezen hisz* 'hardly belives'.

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