Never Not A Negative Concord Item

Background: In the West Germanic languages, there are several so-called optional Negative Concord (NC) languages, like West Flemish (Haegeman 1995). In all of them, Negative Concord involving a Neg-Marker can only occur between a higher Neg-Word and a lower negative marker. In the reverse order, the Negative Concord reading is absent:

(1) a. da Valère niemand (nie) gezien oat
that Valère nobody not seen had
'that Valère had not seen anybody' *DN/NC
b. da Valère nie niemand gezien oat
that Valère not nobody seen had
'that Valère hadn’t seen nobody' (= seen somebody) DN/*NC

There are many strict NC languages (such as Serbian) which have both Neg-Word > Neg, and Neg > Neg-Word NC; and there are many non-strict NC languages (such as Italian) which have Neg > Neg-Word NC only; but the only languages with Neg-Word > Neg NC are the West Germanic optional NC ones. Theories like Zeijlstra (2008) and Haegeman and Lohndal (2010, 2011) have a hard time accounting for these facts.

Proposal: West Flemish NC is not NC, but rather Expletive Negation (EN). In Expletive Negation (van der Wouden (1994), Yoon (2011), among many others), a negation with no apparent semantic negativity is licensed by the introduction of alternatives (Makri 2013). Eilam (2009), Preminger (2010), and Chierchia (2013) analyze EN as a domain widener homophonous to regular negation, which is a good fit for the semantics of West Germanic EN. Domain-widening also accounts for the fact that a Neg-Word > Neg construction will be perceived as a stronger alternative than a single negation:

(2) a. # ’k een niemand nie gezien, sterker nog, ’k een niemand gezien
I have nobody not seen, stronger even, I have nobody seen
I haven’t seen anybody at all, precisely, I haven’t seen anybody.

b. ’k een niemand gezien, sterker nog, ’k een niemand nie gezien
I have nobody seen, stronger even, I have nobody not seen
I haven’t seen anybody, precisely, I haven’t seen anybody at all.’

Finally, Dutch and German both have domain-widening Neg-Word > Neg constructions (Zeijlstra 2010) that can be analyzed as grammaticalizations of the EN described above.

(3) Ich habe niemand nicht gesehen
I have nobody not seen
I didn’t see anybody

These constructions also show identical behavior with respect to focus on the negation triggering a Double Negation reading:

(4) a. da Valère niemand NIE gezien oat
that Valère nobody not seen had
'that Valère hadn’t seen nobody' (=had seen somebody) West Flemish
b. Ich habe niemand NICHT gesehen.
I have nobody not seen
'I didn’t see nobody.' (=I saw somebody) German

I conclude that there is strong evidence that West Flemish Neg-Word > Neg phenomena are in fact not NC, but EN.