

The negative existential cycle through the lens of comparative data
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The evolution of negation is often discussed in terms of a grammaticalization process dubbed by Dahl (1979) Jespersen Cycle. Within this process, negation markers are seen to originate from emphatic elements in the negative phrase which gradually lose their sense of emphasis and are eventually interpreted as general verbal negators. Croft (1991) has suggested negative existentials, e.g. words meaning ‘not exist’ such as Russian net, Turkish yok, Hungarian nincs, as another source for negation markers. This latter author presented his hypothesis under the name Negative Existential Cycle (hereafter NEC). Despite recent renewed interest in cyclical processes in language change and negative cycles in particular cf. (van Gelderen 2008; van Gelderen 2009), the cycle suggested by Croft (1991) has received relatively little attention. Typically, it is quoted at face value, cf. Mosegaard Hansen (2011) for a relatively recent reference. I have devoted a number of articles to a critical examination of the NEC based on data from several different samples, cf. (Veselinova 2014, Veselinova 2015, Veselinova 2016).

In these works, I test the model by applying it to a sample of 95 genealogically and geographically independent languages and also to comparative data from six families around the globe: Slavonic, Uralic, Turkic and Dravidian (Eurasia), Berber (North Africa), and Polynesian (Oceania). In this talk I summarize the findings of my recent work and also outline a book project on this topic where other scholars are involved as well.

To put it briefly, the main findings of my work can be summarized as follows:

(i) Negative existentials tend to take over very specific parts of verbal negation, that is they can come be used as verbal negator for a specific TAM category or other well delimited context. These partial take-overs of verbal negation tend to last for very long periods of time. Conversely, a complete take-over of verbal negation by the negative existential occurs very seldom within the time span for reasonable reconstruction.

(ii) Common ways whereby negative existentials break into the verbal domain include their uses with nominalized verb forms, predicate concatenation, direct inheritance of a construction, and finally reanalysis of an external negator to a negator internal to a proposition.

(iii) Negative existentials have greatest chance to change into general negators in languages where standard negation is expressed by means of a complex clause.

(iv) The cross-linguistic and likewise the historical-comparative data show that negative existentials are extremely wide-spread in the languages of the world. This has implications for the cyclical processes where they enter. As the data indicate, negative existential cycles tend to stretch over long periods of time and if completed, they immediately start anew. In (Veselinova 2013) I provide evidence that negative existentials are better seen as a functional domain of their own. The distinction between negation of actions and negation of existence is cognitively basic and consistently maintained. Consequently, I suggest that the extended duration of the transitional stages in the NEC as well as its perpetual renewals are cognitively motivated.

References