

A typology of negation in African languages

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In this talk, I investigate negation patterns in West-African languages, which were elicited during fieldwork in 2024 and 2025. Starting from one of the hallmark hypotheses of the SFB NegLaB that negation interacts with the functional projections along the clausal spine, I identify such interactions at three syntactic levels, thus, interactions with (i) the agreement system, (ii) tense and aspect, and (iii) the operator systems.

The first interaction is illustrated with Adele (Kwa) where negation blocks the realization of the tonal aspect marker on the adjacent person marker, thus, a typical intervention effect. As a last resort strategy, a morphological aspect marker appears isolated below negation.

- (1) a. Adam è-é dɔrɔ. b. Adam è-n taa dɔrɔ. *Adele*
Adam 3SG-PROG sleep Adam 3SG-NEG PROG sleep
'Adam is sleeping.' 'Adam is not sleeping.'

Interactions of negation with tense and aspect are manifold in the languages under discussion and can be typologically classified in at least two domains, suppletion and suppression. Suppletion is observed with the negative future across the language sample, e.g. Buli (Mabia, Schwarz 1999) *ali_{FUT}* → *kan_{FUT.NEG}* or Dagaare (Mabia) *na_{FUT}* → *kong_{FUT.NEG}*. The suppletive element appears to be larger in the sense that it expresses two (adjacent) syntactic heads. Suppression of TAM related markers under negation leads to neutralization of the relevant information and hence to massive temporal or aspectual ambiguity. Consider Krobo (Kwa) where the negative marker *we* suppresses the progressive marker *ɲe* creating ambiguity with the perfective aspect. That aspectual information is lost can be seen from the fact that the progressive OV-order (2a) is suspended in favor of the basic VO order of the language (2b).

- (2) a. John ɲe wé ma. b. John ma we wé. *Krobo*
John PROG house build John build NEG house
'John is building a house.' 'John isn't building a house.'

Finally, I investigate the interaction of negation with the higher A'-systems. I show that negative dependencies may interfere with agreement relations of higher operators leading to various rescuing strategies. An example is Shupamem (Grassfields Bantu), where negation makes an additional pronoun in the base position of the subject topic obligatory, (3b).

- (3) a. Í pí jùn ndàp. b. Í pí mâ ɲ-ʒùn ì ndàp. *Shupamen*
3SG PST buy house 3SG PST NEG PFX-buy 3SG.NEG house
'He bought a house.' 'He did not buy a house.'

In Adele, wh-movement triggers a special negation marker, which, in combination with the anti-agreement marker appearing with wh-movement (Banafo 2024), leads to a total neutralization of any TAM information.

In sum, African languages provide ample evidence that negation is not a monolithic element but interacts in many interesting ways with other functional categories along the sentential projection line. The resulting effects exhibit variation across the African languages leading to a new kind of negation typology.

References

- Banafo, Adelaide (2024) Verbal Agreement in Adele. MA thesis, University of Ghana, Legon.
Schwarz, Anne (1999) Preverbal negative makers in Buli. *Cahiers Voltaïques / Gur Papers* 4: 91-98.