
Making sense of the asymmetry between affirmation and negation

Matti Miestamo
University of Helsinki
matti.miestamo@helsinki.fi

Donnerstag
 09.03.2017
 10:00 – 10:30
 B4 1, 0.26

AG5

Negation and affirmation are known to show asymmetric morphosyntactic behaviour across languages. According to all classical markedness criteria – structural coding, behavioural potential and frequency, to use Croft’s (2003) terms – negation appears as marked vis-à-vis affirmation. In Miestamo (2005), the asymmetry between affirmatives and negatives was examined in a broad typological perspective. A distinction was made between symmetric and asymmetric negation according to whether the only difference between affirmatives and negatives is the presence of the negative marker(s) (symmetric negation) or whether affirmatives and negatives differ in other ways, too (asymmetric negation). The asymmetry between affirmation and negation can manifest itself in the construction or in the paradigm: constructional asymmetry is about the structural differences between a negative clause and its affirmative counterpart, whereas paradigmatic asymmetry is about the paradigmatic choices (e.g., TAM distinctions) available in negatives vs. affirmatives. Furthermore, asymmetric negation can be divided into subtypes according to which grammatical domain is affected by negation and how. These subtypes include A/Fin in which the finiteness of the verb(s) is affected, A/NonReal in which negatives are obligatorily marked with non-realis categories, and A/Cat/Neutr in which grammatical category distinctions are neutralized under negation, i.e. some categories (e.g., TAM, person, number) available in the affirmative are blocked under negation.

Possible explanations for the cross-linguistically recurring asymmetries were discussed in Miestamo 2005. For the asymmetry affecting finiteness (A/Fin), in which negative clauses are typically construed as stative predications, the proposed explanation lies in the stative character of negation. For the asymmetry in the marking of reality status (A/NonReal), it is natural to seek the explanation in the unreal semantics of negation. Finally, for the neutralization of category distinctions (A/Cat/Neutr), a possible explanation is found in the discourse context of negation: negatives are typically used in contexts in which the corresponding affirmative is somehow present for the discourse participants (cf. Givón 1978) and the pragmatic need for the explicit marking of

the properties of the event (e.g., TAM) is thereby reduced. An additional or alternative motivation for the neutralization of distinctions can be found in the properties of non-events: regarding tense, for example, it is not always easy or relevant to place a negated event in time. Finally, motivations can be sought in the effects of frequency: negatives being much less frequent in discourse than affirmatives, languages do not as easily grammaticalize and preserve distinctions in negatives as they do in affirmatives (cf. Haspelmath 2008). These motivations are relevant as alternative/additional motivations for Types A/Fin and A/NonReal as well, to the extent these involve reduced marking of grammatical distinctions under negation.

The asymmetry between affirmation and negation has many different manifestations and different factors can be recruited to explain them. For some aspects of the asymmetry we can propose alternative explanations that can also be seen as working simultaneously towards a similar effect. In this talk, I will discuss the different motivations and their relationship in explaining the cross-linguistic patterns. I will also make reference to diachronic developments in individual languages or language families to see whether we can find concrete support for the proposed motivations. Furthermore, I will use corpus data to evaluate the proposed effects of the discourse context of negation on the structure of negatives.

References: • Croft, W. (2003): *Typology and universals*. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press. • Givón, T. (1978): Negation in language: Pragmatics, function, ontology. In: *Syntax and Semantics*. Vol. 9. Pragmatics, Peter Cole (ed.), 69–112. Academic Press. • Haspelmath, M. (2008): Frequency vs. iconicity in explaining grammatical asymmetries. In: *Cognitive Linguistics* 19(1), 1–33. • Miestamo, M. (2005): *Standard negation: The negation of declarative verbal main clauses in a typological perspective*. Mouton de Gruyter.