

Language Documentation & Linguistic Theory 2

Mapping negation in conceptual space

Oliver Bond, *School of Oriental and African Studies, London*

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Semantic maps and multidimensional scaling are modes to represent the contextual and conventionalised meaning relationships underlying the multi-functionality of grammatical constructions. As such they provide a way to geometrically formalise meaning relations that are proposed to be of a universal nature. For some (e.g. Kemmer 1993, Croft 2001, Croft & Poole 2008), this geometric space is a representation of conceptual reality in so much that it is proposed to reflect the cognitive arrangement of these concepts in the speakers' mind.

Increasingly, semantic maps are being used in a wide number of applications, beyond purely semantic domains. Significantly, their use has widened to address pragmatic and discourse-oriented phenomena, raising questions about what kinds of patterns such maps represent and – specifically - whether they correspond to cognitive reality (Sansò 2009).

In this paper I examine the multi-functionality of strategies for expressing linguistic negation, the cover term for a concept or group of concepts encoded grammatically in every language. Using a corpus of original fieldwork data from Eleme (Ogonoid, Benue-Congo; Nigeria) and a micro-sample of discourse data from ten genetically and areally diverse languages, I begin by delimiting a broadly construed domain of linguistic negation. I then examine variation across the sample in terms of the functional domains covered by negative strategies that meet the requirements of the broad definition. From a purely functional perspective (and thus avoiding the structural trappings associated with earlier typological work on negation), I examine which analytic primitives are important for mapping out negation systems using the classical semantic map method (Haspelmath 2003). In doing so I consider how this information might be exploited to determine distance matrices for the creation of a 'second generation' semantic map. I propose that the 'conceptual' space in which negation systems exist appears to be structured differently from the organisation of affirmative conceptual space. This is because negation models a direct contrast between a state of affairs in some alternate reality (the concept(s) expressed by a counterpart affirmative) in relation to the real world or a different alternate reality. Empirical data from the sample demonstrates that in the domain of negation, functional splits are in part determined on the basis of differences in the speaker-hearer-expectation about the alternate realities modelled. Conversely, in affirmatives no direct contrast between alternate realities is modelled, and thus the functional splits associated with the negative domain are immaterial in the affirmative conceptual space.

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