

Towards a canon for negation

Oliver Bond

The study of negation within the language documentation rubric (e.g. Woodbury 2003) involves the analysis of data from a stratified corpus of discourse. The data in such corpora are most representative of actual language use and provide the firmest empirical foundation on which to base a linguistic analysis (and subsequent hypotheses for theoretical consideration). However, there are both clear benefits and limitations on such an approach when investigating the concept of negation. In this paper I advocate a canonical approach to negation (cf. Corbett 2006) in order to calibrate cross-linguistic variation within a theoretical space of possibilities. Establishing a canon for negation aims to provide a ‘starting point’ for the analysis of negation and guidelines to the documenter/describer/theorist based on typologically informed observations.

Unlike grammatical categories such as past tense or feminine gender, which are determined in relation to other distinctions encoded in a particular language (e.g. non-past and masculine gender), negation is structurally defined by the presence or absence of a morpheme or morphemes (either negative or non-negative or both). It is therefore necessary to identify the structural properties of negatives in relation to ‘counterpart’ affirmatives (Miestamo 2005). However, the semantics and scope of negation are determined by a more abstract set of discourse principles that cannot be adequately captured by a singular categorical definition or the strictly logical opposition between p and $\sim p$. As a consequence, linguistic definitions of negation are frequently too vague to be usable or so restricted as to be inaccurate. The linguist is left with a paradox between the semantico-pragmatic independence of negation and the structural asymmetries that define the formal marking of the category. As a consequence, there is a danger that those involved in language documentation and description will determine negatives in terms of their translation equivalents in the lingua franca of fieldwork, or through introspection of their native language(s). They may inadvertently ignore peripheral instances of negation or include constructions that are best described in some other way. Previous attempts at formally treating this issue in (mainly) European languages have concerned the formation of negation diagnostics (de Haan 1997). Yet, in determining the canonical properties of negation, I show that diagnostics cannot easily be remodelled for under-described languages for a number of structural and semantic reasons, leading to an apparent impasse for the linguist. To address this issue I demonstrate how diagnostics, elicitation and discourse data relate to the canon of negation, allowing for a central (canonical) and peripheral view (canonical) view of this linguistic phenomenon independent of the hard boundaries usually associated with negation.

Corbett, Greville G. 2006. *Agreement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

De Haan, Ferdinand. 1997. *The interaction of negation and modality: A typological study*. New York and London: Garland.

Miestamo, Matti. 2005. *Standard negation: The negation of declarative verbal main clauses in a typological perspective*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Woodbury, Tony. 2003. Defining documentary linguistics. In *Language documentation and description, Volume 1*, ed. Peter K. Austin. London: HRELPL.