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Negatives without negators

The Raritätenkabinett at <http://ling.uni-konstanz.de:591/universals/introrara.html> features the following rarum concerning the expression of clausal negation (number 33): "negation expressed negatively, by omission of material present in affirmative clause". Well-known instances of this so-called zero-negative construction are found in some South and Central Dravidian languages. In these languages, negation can be signalled without an overt marker of negation by the mere absence of tense marking. Schematically, the affirmative verb forms can be rendered as ROOT-TENSE-PERSON and the negatives as ROOT-PERSON. Thus in Old Kannada, we find the affirmative-negative correspondences in (1).

(1) Old Kannada (Pilot-Raichoor 1997: 79)

a. *noːḍ-uv-em*	b. *noːḍ-id-em*	c. *noːḍ-em*
see-FUT-1SG	see-PST-1SG	see-1SG
'I will see'	'I saw'	'I do/did/will not see'

It should be noted that this construction does not go against the well-established markedness pattern that negation as the marked category is expressed by at least as many morphemes as the unmarked affirmative – there are no languages where affirmation receives overt marking while negation is zero-marked; in Old Kannada it is tense, not affirmation, that is overtly marked.

In a recent study of clausal negation (Miestamo 2003), not a single language in an areally and genealogically representative sample of nearly 300 languges shows this type of construction. That tense marking is dropped in negatives, is by no means exceptional in the world's languages as shown by Miestamo's study, but the absence of an overt marker of negation in a negative construction is rare. Some African languages (e.g. Igbo and Degema) have verbal constructions where negation and other meanings relevant to the verb (e.g. person, tense, aspect, mood) are expressed with the interaction of tonal and segmental changes but no single element can be identified as the negative marker. These constructions are different from the Dravidian ones, but they both share the feature of lacking an overt, clearly identifiable negator. In this paper, I will take a closer look at the two rare types of negatives without a negator, discuss the functional motivations for the existence of these types, and make some observations on the diachronic developments behind them. Some other languages have also been claimed to possess a negative construction without an overt negator; the Raritätenkabinett mentions Achumawi and Malakmalak. I will discuss both cases, argue that they do not constitute parallels to the Dravidian zero-negatives, and show some problems in the analysis proposed for the Achumawi negative construction by Forest (1993). I will also briefly address the question what the rarity of a phenomenon tells us about its complexity.

References

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