

## NEGATION IN EXISTENTIAL SENTENCES: A CROSS-LINGUISTIC STUDY

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The purpose of this paper is to investigate the expression of negation in existential sentences in (i) *There are no ghosts in the attic*. Cross-linguistically oriented surveys of negation, for instance (Dahl 2010, Dahl 1979) and (Miestamo 2003/2005) tend to cover a domain usually defined as standard negation (SN). e.g. the negation of simple indicative sentences with an overt verb predicate as in (ii) *Mary doesn't sing*. Normally, sentences like (i) are excluded from the domain of SN because in many languages they are negated by a special strategy. Apart from the collection of articles in Kahrel and van den Berg (1994) which present detailed accounts of negation in specific languages and only as a side topic in Stassen (1997), a systematic survey of the strategies used for the negation of existential predications does not yet exist. The work of Croft (1991) draws attention to negative existentials from a diachronic perspective, discussing their possible re-analysis as markers of SN.

The current study is both synchronically and diachronically oriented. For the synchronic part I designed a cross-linguistic sample of 95 genealogically and geographically diverse languages. For the diachronic part, I use comparative data from 3 language families, Slavic, Uralic and Polynesian.

Using a special strategy, (a negative existential) for the negation of existential sentences, illustrated in (1)d below, is cross-linguistically extremely common. Negative existentials are observed in 67 languages (70.5%) that is, in greater part of the languages under study. Geographically, they are spread all over the world. In fact, there are two large areas where negative existentials are markedly absent, North-West Europe and Central-Southern South America. Further on, negative existentials world-wide show a number of common features. Morphologically, they are often of indeterminate word class status, occasionally, with some verbal characteristics. Syntactically, negative existentials are used as predicates; they tend to replace the affirmative existential they are supposed to negate, cf. (1)c-d. Negative existentials are typically described in grammars as being used for the negation of locative, existential and possessive predications. However, their most important semantic feature is that they predicate the absence of an entity in a very categorical way. For instance, in Bulgarian, locative predications can be negated either by the SN marker *ne* as in (2)a or by the negative existential *njama* as in (2)b. When SN is used, there is a presupposed contrast, that is, the speaker knows that the subject is at another location, regardless of whether they choose to say it or not. With (2)b, such presupposition does not exist; the absence of the subject is stated in absolute terms, no contrast is possible. Similar data can be shown from many different languages. Negative existentials are frequently used as general words for 'No'. It is also very common that they interact with SN in that they are used as SN marker for a specific tense-aspect or mood category. In a situation of language contact negative existentials are easily borrowed. To me, this fact indicates a strong lexical and conceptual status and also a relatively high frequency of use.

Historically, negative existentials appear to evolve from either univerbations that result from fusions between a negative element and an item associated with affirmative contexts cf. (3) for some examples or lexical sources that mean 'absent', 'lack', 'poor', cf. (4), some of them are still used with those senses on occasion. Generally, univerbations of the kind shown in (3) are widely assumed to be the most common way whereby negative existentials evolve, cf. also Croft (1991). However, what is less known, and less discussed is the fact, that negative existentials evolve equally frequently from the re-analysis of words with an inherently negative content.

Given their high cross-linguistic frequency and striking similarity of structural, syntactic, semantic and diachronic characteristics, it appears justified to describe negative existentials as a separate functional domain, which I call the DOMAIN OF ABSENCE rather than a negation marker proper.

*(examples follow)*

## Examples

(1) Turkish (Altaic, Turkic)

- a. *Gel-ecek*  
come-FUT  
'(she) will come'
- b. *Gel-me-yecek*  
come-NEG-FUT  
'(she) will not come' (Van Schaaik, 1994: 38, 39)
- c. *Su var-di*  
water exist-PST  
'There was water'
- d. *Su yok-tu*  
water NEG.EX-PST  
'There was no water' (Van Schaaik, 1994: 44-5)

(2) Bulgarian (Indo-European, Slavic) (Maria Avgustinova, p.c.)

- a. *Todor ne e tuk*  
Todor NEG is here  
'Todor is not here'
- b. *Todor go njama*  
Todor 3.SG.OBJ.M NEG.EX  
'Todor is not here'  
(given a proper context, also 'Todor is dead')

(3) Negative existentials which are clear univerbations between SN and another word

- a. Ket *bən's'əŋ* < *bənj* 'SN' + *us'əŋ* 'there'
- b. Samoan *lēai* < *lē* 'SN' + *ai* 'exist'
- c. Ukrainian *nema/nemae* < *ne* 'SN' + *mae* 'have.3SG.PRS'

(4) Negative existentials which are formally distinct from SN and are still associated with a lexical meaning

|    | LANGUAGE  | SN           | NEGATIVE EXISTENTIAL | LEXICAL SENSE FOR THE NEGATIVE EXISTENTIAL |
|----|-----------|--------------|----------------------|--|
| a. | Bagirmi   | <i>(e)li</i> | <i>gwoto</i>         | absent                                     |
| b. | Khalkha   | <i>-güj</i>  | <i>al̥ya</i>         | absent                                     |
| c. | Nez Perce | <i>wééʔu</i> | <i>cáʔya</i>         | absent                                     |
| d. | Turkana   | <i>ni-</i>   | <i>a-mamaka-ɔ̄</i>   | lack                                       |

## Abbreviations

|     |             |     |           |     |        |    |                   |
|-----|-------------|-----|-----------|-----|--------|----|-------------------|
| EX  | existential | M   | masculine | OBJ | object | SG | singular          |
| FUT | future      | NEG | negation  | PST | past   | SN | standard negation |

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