

## **A minimal definition of linguistic negation**

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In this paper I illustrate the complexity of defining concepts for cross-linguistic comparison by considering linguistic negation, a phenomenon that is manifested grammatically to some effect in every language. In particular, I consider which components of meaning are required in a basic definition of linguistic negation within Canonical Typology (cf. Corbett 2006, 2007).

The canonical approach to typology first involves devising a minimal formal characterisation of the field of inquiry and then the development of various criteria that point to the ‘best’ or ‘most canonical’ instances of it. Criteria relevant to Canonical Typology take the form of property hierarchies, such as  $a > b$  meaning ‘*a is a more canonical property of phenomena X than b*’; Canonical instances (those that have the canonical properties of each criteria) need not be frequent cross-linguistically, but will have converging properties that make them easy to identify as the phenomenon in question. By instantiating multiple criteria around a basic definition, a theoretical space of possibilities is created in which cross-linguistic variation can be calibrated. Of particular interest is the frequency with which instances of a phenomenon deviate from the canon, and along which criteria.

In Canonical Typology, basic definitions are minimally built around a specific form of contrast. For instance, in a Canonical Typological account of suppletion, the basic definition details that a contrast exists between two related signs that have *maximally regular* semantics and *maximally irregular* forms (Corbett 2007). I argue that for linguistic negation, the relevant contrast is between an explicit unrealised world and the real (or some other unrealized) world:

*Negation is a superordinate grammatical category that models a direct contrast between a state of affairs in some unrealized world (the concept(s) expressed by a counterpart affirmative) in relation to the real world or a different unrealized world, projected as a perception or belief of the speaker.*

Crucially, the basic definition suggested here does not make reference to the scope, form or logical entailments of negation, as is the norm in theoretical, philosophical and typological work on the subject to date (e.g. Klima 1964, Horn 2001, Miestamo 2005). Rather, the concept of ‘direct contrast’ is employed to convey the bilateral and contradictory conflict between the possibility of the two situations in a negation relationship holding at the same time.

The empirical benefit of this position is that it accounts for the core similarity in meaning between the concepts expressed using ‘standard negation’ strategies (in the sense of Miestamo 2005) and ‘non-standard negation’ strategies such as those used to express prohibitions (which do not have truth values) and constructions in which negation is indicated by the use of a negative pronoun (with different scopal properties to the ‘standard negation’ strategy). Differences between the various subtypes of negation are dealt with in 21 criteria for negation concerning form, scope, applicability and pragmatics. Each criterion is proposed to contribute to a meaningful multidimensional space for the purposes of cross-linguistic and cross-constructural comparison. The criteria that indicate the properties of canonical negation (which has many of the characteristics of ‘standard negation’) allow all other negation strategies to be calibrated along the various property hierarchies identified through cross-linguistic observation.

While undoubtedly controversial for the study of negation in general, I propose this is the most appropriate methodological stance on negation to take within typology because it provides a framework in which to carry out inductive research that is not restricted by the need to predefine subtypes of negation.