

Possessives as negative markers in Bantu languages: history and functional motivation.

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In Bantu languages negation is mostly marked verb-internally. However, when looking at a geographically diversified sample of Bantu languages (e.g., Nurse 2008), we see that in 33 languages negation also includes a post-verbal element. Due to their uneven distribution throughout the Bantu domain and their divergence in shape post-verbal elements are generally considered recent innovations (Nurse 2008, Güldemann 2008, Güldemann 2011). However, some shapes are recurrent.

This paper looks at post-verbal negative markers that can be related to possessive stems. First, we investigate whether their current distribution mainly in Western Bantu languages but also outside of Narrow Bantu, i.e., Grassfields Bantu (Mihas 2009) and Adamawa-Ubangi (Tucker and Bryan 1966) is indicative of some time depth or whether they indeed are recent innovations that occurred independently or rather, at least in Western Bantu languages, spread through contact.

Next, we investigate how common it is for a possessive stem to become a negative marker. Possessives are not mentioned as sources of negative markers in the grammaticalization literature. However, as pointed out by König and Vezzosi (2008:202) possessives are recurrent sources of intensifiers in the languages of the world and new negative markers are often claimed to have an emphatic function before they become obligatory negative markers (cf. a Jespersen cycle). In Mbundu the use of possessive stems as negative markers can indeed be linked to their use in a so-called emphatic conjugation (Chatelain 1889/1890). However, since evidence for such an emphatic intermediate stage is scanty, we look more generally at the use of possessives in Bantu verbal morphology (e.g., as relative markers, as immediate present tense markers) to better understand possible semantic changes leading to their use as negative markers.

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