

Vera Wilhelmsen, Uppsala University
Post address: Box 635, 751 26 Uppsala
Visiting address: Humanistiskt centrum, Thunbergsvägen 3H Room number: 9-2033 E-mail:
vera.wilhelmsen@lingfil.uu.se Phone number: + 46 18-471 1345

Post-verbal negation in Rangi (F33) and Mbugwe (F34) –a Jespersen cycle?

In Rangi and Mbugwe, which are closely related Bantu languages (F33 and F34 respectively), there is a post-verbal negative marker, transcribed as *tuku* or *toko*. It is accompanied by a negative pre-fix on the verb itself, so it is a case of double negation. In Rangi it appears to be mandatory in most negative utterances, but in some longer utterances it tends to disappear (Hannah Gibson, p.c.). In Mbugwe it is not mandatory, and functions more like emphasis or reinforcement of the negation. The marker is also used as the interjection meaning “no”, and is often translated into Swahili as “hapana” .

According to the theory behind the ‘Jespersen’s cycle’, it is likely that the post-verbal negation started as an emphasis marker, as it still is in Mbugwe, and then developed into an obligatory negative marker, as in Rangi. It is however not attested that the negative marker on the verb drops off, which would be the next step in the Jespersen’s cycle. I will look at the examples I have found of the use of the forms, their position, and search for historical data on the two languages, in order to determine the origin and development of the post-verbal marker.

The function and form of the negative marker does not seem to be of Bantu origin. Both languages are in close contact with non-Bantu languages, specifically Burunge, Alagwa and Iraqw (all Cushitic languages), Maasai (Nilo-Saharan) and Sandawe (Khoisan). Kiesling et al., 2008 show that the area of Kondo, where Rangi is mainly spoken, can be considered a sprachbund. I will investigate whether this post-verbal marker or a similar structure is to be found in any of the surrounding languages, and whether it could be a case of borrowing.

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