
Eliciting negation: Negative indefinites in African languages as a fieldwork case study

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This presentation examines methodological challenges in eliciting data on the expression of negative indefinites in African languages, focusing on Grassfield-Bantu and Kwa. While negative indefinites are well-studied in Indo-European languages, fieldwork in African languages reveals that elicitation strategies commonly used in European contexts often fail. In particular, direct translation tasks are problematic (Matthewson 2004), when asked to translate sentences such as “nobody came to the market”, speakers frequently rejected the task, claiming that their language lacked a word for “nobody”. These responses reflected the influence of English rather than the target language system.

Once elicitation was reframed in terms of meaning-based contexts rather than translation equivalents, speakers produced natural expressions. Depending on the language, these involved either universal quantifiers combined with sentential negation or existential quantifiers combined with sentential negation.

- (1) Waai an jam yaba (Buli)
somebody NEG come market
‘Nobody came to the market.’
- (2) Obiara a-m-ma dwa mu (Akan)
everybody PERF-NEG-come market inside
‘Nobody came to the market’

Crucially, the relevant patterns only emerged through carefully designed contexts and systematic follow-up questioning, highlighting the importance of context-building in fieldwork.

The case studies show how elicitation strategies can shape the data obtained and thus the resulting theoretical generalizations. Methodological adjustments not only made it possible to document the strategies used in these languages but also opened up new questions about the interaction between morphosyntax, semantics, and information structure in the domain of negation. This presentation therefore highlights how the design of fieldwork methodologies directly impacts the ability to uncover typologically significant patterns and to integrate African languages into broader theoretical debates on negative indefinites.

Reference: • Matthewson, L. (2004). On the Methodology of Semantic Fieldwork. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 70(4): 369–415.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/429207?seq=4>