The Negative Existential Cycle in Indo-European: Is a rational approach enlightening?

Shahar Shirtz, University of Oregon and Annemarie Verkerk, Saarland University
shahar.shirtz@gmail.com, annemarie.verkerk@uni-saarland.de

This paper examines the Negative Existential Cycle (NEC, Croft 1991) in a broad sample of Indo-European languages, testing its validity both quantitatively and qualitatively. The NEC is a typological hypothesis on the diachronic relationship between different types of negative existential constructions and their relation to standard verbal negation. It recognizes six construction types and posits a unidirectional pathway across them. Recent work (Veselinova 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016) finds that the NEC often does not take the form of a cycle: the six stages of the NEC do not necessarily follow each other, languages can have different constructions belonging to different types, and there is variation in stability of the stages.

We first present a phylogenetic comparative analysis testing whether Croft’s NEC explains the attested distribution of negative existential construction types better than alternative models. We discuss the requirements that Bayesian MCMC methods (Multistate in BayesTraits, Pagel and Meade 2004) impose on the sample size and the amount of crosslinguistic variation. Then, we discuss the modeling of languages with multiple negative existential construction types and the interaction between the definition of NEC construction types and models of change.

Combining quantitative and qualitative perspectives, we then ask whether our ancestral state estimations match “traditional”, analytic approaches to morphosyntactic reconstruction (following, e.g., Barðdal & Gildea 2015). We ask whether we can find evidence for the origins of special negative existential constructions in older stages of languages as well as in contemporary relatives. Further, we ask whether the pathways to certain stages and construction types can be motivated by processes external to the NEC, such information-structure or interactional principles (e.g., prominence of negative quantifiers and interjections). We test whether these principles can explain instances where historical change seemingly “skips” stages in the cycle, or whether there is evidence for a rapid burst of morphosyntactic change. We then assess how well the quantitative results stand up in the face of the qualitative findings, and discuss whether a rational approach is indeed enlightening or not.

References