

On the Diachrony of Negative Concord in Mari

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Languages employ different strategies to combine indefinite pronouns with negation. One strategy which has received repeated attention is Negative Concord. The elements partaking in Negative Concord, Negative Concord Items (NCI), are commonly described as combining two characteristic properties: they must appear in the scope of negation and yield only one negation meaning, but can express negation in fragmentary or elliptic contexts *without* overt negation (e.g. Giannakidou 2020; Penka 2011; Zeijlstra 2022), for example in Russian:

- (1) *Ja *(ne) vižu nikogo.*
1SG NEG see.1SG nobody.GEN
'I do not see anybody.'
- (2) *Kogo ty vide-l? – Nikogo.*
who.ACC 2SG see-PST nobody
'Who did you see? – Nobody.'

A large part of the discussion about NCIs has revolved around how to reliably differentiate them from other strategies, as NCIs often share properties with the related Negative Polarity Items (e.g. English *any*), and even the characteristic fragmentary contexts appear to be conventionalized, language-specific, and to some degree independent of the other licensing contexts of NCI in a given language (e.g. Etxeberria, Espinal, and Tubau 2024; Haspelmath 1997, pp. 194–199; van der Auwera and Van Alsenoy 2016, pp. 476–478).

This variation of licensing contexts has been approached from a diachronic point of view, and some of the contexts without negation have been shown to be remnants of a previous stage of NCI as NPIs in some languages (e.g. Romance), or arise through external effects (e.g. the L1 of the first learners of Modern Hebrew) (Breitbarth, Lucas, and Willis 2020). In my talk, I focus on the external effects, and argue that even the fragmentary contexts characteristic for NCIs can appear as

result of syntactic borrowing. As case study, I trace the development of Negative Concord in Mari.

Mari is a Negative Concord language which has borrowed the prefix *ni-* for the formation of NCI, ultimately from Russian (Hirvonen and Bradley to appear). As expected, these NCI are ungrammatical without negation (3). However, NCI in contemporary Mari can be used in some contexts without overt negation such as negative fragment answers, a negative existential construction (4), in the complement of so-called verbs of paratactic negation, and as standard of comparison (5):

- (3) *Tə ver-əm nígunam og-əna mondo / *monde-na.*
 this place-ACC never NEG-1PL forget.CNG forget-1PL
 ‘We will never forget this place.’
- (4) *Tugeže malanem təšte nímo-m əšt-aš.*
 so 1SG.DAT here nothing-ACC do-INF
 ‘So there is nothing for me to do here.’
- (5) *Tudo nígö deč saj-ən paša-m əšt-a.*
 3SG nobody from good-ADV work-ACC do-3SG
 ‘S/he works best of all (lit. better than nobody).’

Juxtaposing data from spoken Mari varieties from the early 20th century and contemporary Mari, I show that there is microvariation in a subset of the fragmentary contexts in which NCI occur in contemporary Mari: The genesis of some usage contexts already predates the early 20th century oral records (NCI in the complement of some verbs of paratactic negation, and as standard of comparison), others are still restricted to the language of individual speakers at that time (the negative existential construction and a special fragmentary usage), and some do not appear in the older data at all, but are readily produced by contemporary speakers (negative fragment answers). I attribute this variation to different degrees of syntactic copying from Russian.

The attested diachronic variation in Mari contributes to the empirical landscape of attested types of Negative Concord. Furthermore, the variation encountered opens up a discussion about the definition of NCIs, and how to reliably diagnose Negative Concord.

References

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