

Sharing the load – the interplay of verbal and gestural negation in Savosavo

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Non-Austronesian language spoken on Savo Island, Solomon Islands

6h of narratives, procedural texts and interviews (monologic, dyadic, group constellations), 15 speakers



Existing literature on the interplay between gestural and explicit verbal negation seems to suggest that they co-occur frequently. However, our research shows that, at least for Savosavo, this is misleading. In fact, we find rather few instances of gestures associated with negation co-occurring with explicit verbal negation. In addition, a cross-linguistically well documented gesture associated with negation, the “sweeping away” gesture, is used mostly with implicit (lexical or pragmatic) negation/negativity and only rarely accompanies explicit verbal negation.

Don't look for negation gestures where verbal negation is used

Introduction

A growing body of research underlines a tight relation of gestures with different types of verbal negation and postulates the idea that, in particular, explicit negation imposes positional constraints on co-speech gestures. But how tight is it really? Do they co-occur as frequently as seems to be suggested?

Methods

Based on a corpus of about 6h of video data of Savosavo, a Non-Austronesian language, we studied the relation of verbal and gestural negation from two perspectives:

- 1) How is the “sweeping away” gesture, a frequently documented negation gesture across languages, associated with explicit and implicit verbal negation (Table 1)?
- 2) Does explicit verbal negation co-occur regularly with any kind of negation gesture, including head movements?

explicit				implicit	
<i>oma/ghoma</i>	<i>sika</i>	<i>baigho/baighoza</i>	<i>pono</i>	lexical	pragmatic
'not'	'don't'	'not existent'	'only'	'finish', 'remove', 'forbidden'	rejection, refusal, denial

Table 1: Savosavo lexemes considered in this study as expressing explicit negation and categories of implicit negation.

Conclusion

Gestural negation only rarely occurs with explicit verbal negation, while most occurrences of gestural negation accompany implicit verbal negation, corroborating findings on Israeli Hebrew. All of these composite utterances express negation/negativity – but the functional load of expressing it is shifted from one modality to the other (Figure 3).

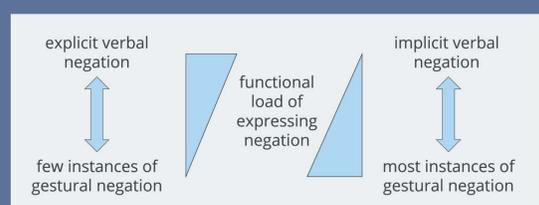


Figure 3: Illustration of the interplay of verbal and gestural negation. When explicit verbal negation is used, it bears the main functional load. When explicit verbal negation is absent, negation/negativity is emphasized and made visible through gestures. The encoding strategy might correlate with different aspects of negativity.

Results

- 1) We found a strong tendency of “sweeping away” not to occur with explicit verbal negation. Instead, it is found mostly with utterances containing implicit (lexical or pragmatic) negation, for example with lexemes like *zui* ‘end’ or *tabu* ‘forbidden’, or utterances that only implicate a negation (Figure 1, Examples (1) and (2)).

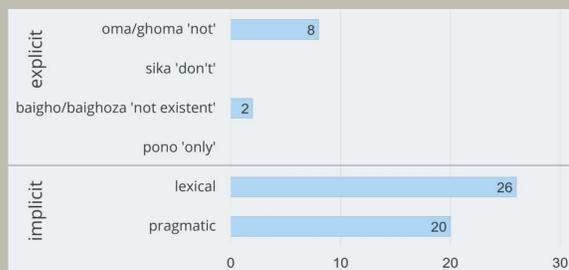


Figure 1: Distribution of “sweeping away” tokens across contexts with explicit and implicit negation.

(1) Lexical negation

...ghanaghana lo-va **zui** t-aju-ghu=e
thought 3SG.M-GEN.M end 3SG.M-finish-NMLZ=EMPH stroke
'(those) things [associated with a volcanic eruption] were completely finished' (ak_biti_054)

(2) Negation in implicature

no gheza verevere=no pala
2SG[GEN] own talking=2SG.NOM make-3SG.M.O stroke
'your own conversation you can make[, but don't mention the fish]' (si_kurao_347)

- 2) Most instances of explicit verbal negation are not accompanied by any gestural negation, confirming the pattern observed with the “sweeping away” gesture (Figure 2).

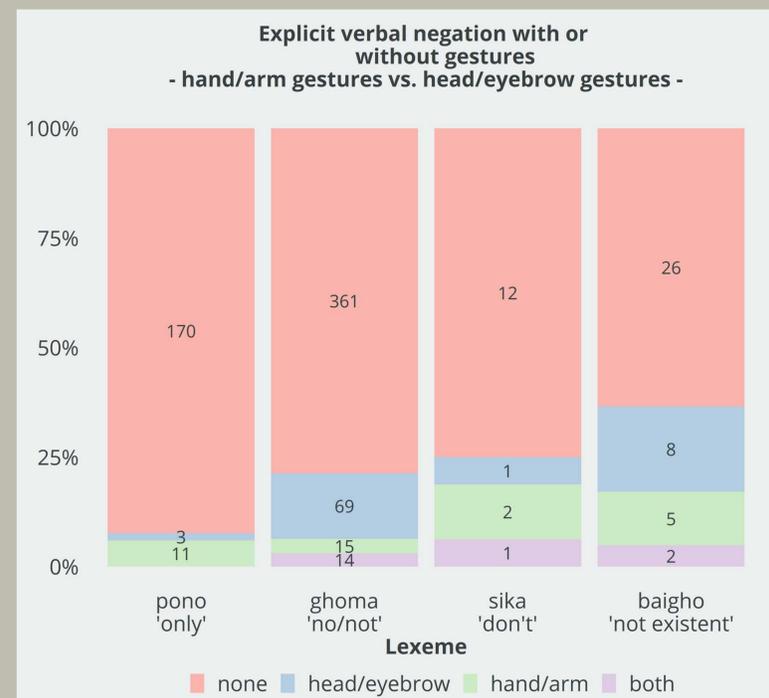


Figure 2: Proportion and total numbers of occurrences of four lexemes expressing explicit negation **without** any accompanying gesture, with a **head/eyebrow** gesture (head shake or eyebrow raise), with a **hand/arm** gesture (“sweeping away”, “holding away” or hybrid), or with **both** types of gestures.

Further questions

- What functions are fulfilled by gestures co-occurring with explicit verbal negation?
- Is the documented distribution specific to Savosavo or is it found cross-linguistically?

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