

Affirmative markers: A case study of “overspecification”

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This project investigates the distribution of “affirmative” markers, i.e., elements that encode the opposite of standard negation and that are in complementary distribution with standard negators in non-emphatic, declarative main clauses with a verbal predicate. Claims in the literature suggest that affirmatives are very rare (Lehmann 2004: 1845) or non-existent (Dixon 2012: 90), but no large-scale cross-linguistic study of such markers previously existed. In response to this gap, I present the results of a search for affirmatives in reference grammars of 602 languages from 179 families. Nine languages were found to have a total of 10 affirmatives, though even some of these markers are dubious in terms of their function. Hence, affirmatives are indeed very infrequent and arguably “rara” (Cysouw & Wohlgemuth 2010).

The affirmatives show several interesting properties. While they all come from unrelated languages, five are found in eastern Africa and three in western Asia. Also, nine of the ten affirmatives are affixes, and seven of the affixes are prefixes. This suggests that there may be areal and/or analogical effects involved, but neither the geographical nor the morphological preference can be satisfactorily explained based on the data available.

One factor that seems to inform the existence of affirmatives is what McWhorter (2005: 268) calls “overspecification,” i.e., the overt expression of meanings that are not necessary for communication. Affirmatives are a prime example of overspecification because the only meaning they contrast with, negation, is never zero-marked (Dryer 2005: 454), and hence the affirmative meaning could always be zero-marked without causing ambiguity. In order to test whether overspecification really predicts the presence of affirmatives, this concept was operationalized in terms of two logically independent parameters, both in line with McWhorter’s (2005) general argument. The first parameter is the degree of verbal synthesis, and the second is the total number of overtly coded functions that are typologically unmarked. It emerges that languages with affirmatives are highly synthetic (with more than four prefix and suffix slots each, on average), which suggests that overspecification may manifest itself as a general tendency within individual languages, leading to many paradigms and large templates. Meanwhile, some of the relevant languages do express usually unmarked meanings such as nominative, present tense, and third person by overt means, but these results are less straightforward. Overall, however, languages with affirmatives appear to favor explicitness over economy, which opens up a number of questions that go beyond morphology.

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